

The “Economy” of Grace

Acts 9:10-19

Main Point:

Jesus builds His church by calling *unlikely servants* to a (humanly) *impossible mission* by using *unorthodox methods* and resourcing them with *His own power*.

Introduction:

Good morning! Please open your bibles to Acts 8. If you are new to the Bible, you can find Acts 5 following the gospel accounts (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John).

According to many business leaders, the blueprint for building an economically successful business follows along the following “best practices”:

1. Get the right people hired
2. Set SMART goals
3. Use cutting edge methodology
4. Demand competence from your employees

This is the world’s way of building what we might call an economy of success. It’s highly competitive, demands competent, skilled (sometimes educated), people in order to make it work. There is great pressure to perform (which we call “stress”). Now, none of this is bad of course, and one of the reasons that our country has had the economic success that it has over the centuries is because of these principles. In fact, in some respects, there is wisdom in following these best practices, some of which even churches themselves adopt. However, as we will see in today’s text, the Lord Jesus doesn’t always follow this same blueprint for building His church. In fact, in many respects, as we shall see, Jesus does the exact opposite! This morning we are going to see how Jesus prepares His servants for mission by inviting them into an economy of grace by...

*Calling unlikely servants,
To an impossible mission
By using unorthodox methods,
(And) teaching them to rely on His power, not their own.*

My hope friends, is that this message will be not only practical, but also an encouraging reminder that God can use anyone, anywhere, anytime, for anything, regardless of their own personal weaknesses and limitations. And that includes all of us! Lets pray...

Orienting the Text: Where we are in the story

Last week we saw how Saul of Tarsus, a young, zealous Pharisee was given authority to seek out followers of Jesus, arresting them and putting them to trial (possibly executions). Luke describes Saul as a raging animal, a hungry wolf seeking out his next victim. So determined was Saul to stamp out this Jesus-movement that he seeks out official permission to go as far as Damascus to find and arrest Christians in that city (over a hundred miles away). However, along the way to Damascus, Jesus interrupts Saul’s journey, knocking him off his horse and blinding him with the light of His glory.

You would think that Jesus’s confrontation with Saul would lead to Saul’s own judgement and execution, for defying the living God the way he had been. But instead, Jesus asks him a simple question: “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” Of course, Saul has no real answer to this, so he simply asks, “Who are you, Lord?”, maybe hoping it wasn’t Jesus. But Jesus introduces Himself, and then tells Saul that He has another plan for His life. Today, we get see what that plan actually entails...

Exposition of Acts 9:10-19:

Acts 9:10-13 - *Jesus calls unlikely servants*

Saul is a different man now – he’s encountered Jesus; specifically, Luke tells us that he is “praying”. Last week I made a suggestion that Saul is praying the Psalms (most first century Jews would have been familiar with the Psalter). Regardless, Saul is seeking the Lord – he is seeking the Lord Jesus. One commentator suggested that Saul was repenting (forgiveness), asking for wisdom as to what to do next (vocation), and for the power to do it.

What Saul (might) have been praying about:

- 1) God’s forgiveness (repentance/devotion)
- 2) God’s wisdom (for how to live out his repentance/devotion)
- 3) God’s power (ability to live out his repentance/devotion)

(Mini) application:

If this is correct, then I suggest this gives us a simple way to begin each day. What do we need most, each day, practically speaking, to live our lives for Jesus? If you are here today, and you are new at following Jesus, here is a great place to start. If you are in a season of wandering, and you aren’t sure what to do, how to do it, and sensing anxiety or fear – just start here. Go back to the basics and begin right here. Every day we can start afresh with this simple prayer – Lord, forgive me & direct my heart to be wholly yours; Lord, give me wisdom to know how to live for you this day; finally, Lord give me power to do it, for I have none within myself.

Acts 9:13-15 - *Jesus calls His unlikely servants to a (humanly) impossible mission*

We are not told much about how the church in Damascus started or the background of Ananias. The fear of Saul’s reputation came even to them, so Ananias was familiar with him. Imagine the surprise and fear he would have had! But Jesus assures Ananias that this unlikely Servant is going to be called to do something impossible, but completely in line with what Ananias knows the will of God to be: advancing the gospel to the ends of the earth. This is impossible, both for Saul and for the rest of the Apostles, and for all of us!

But all throughout the biblical story – and throughout history – God always calls his people to seemingly impossible tasks, things they can’t do on their own power in order. Think about it:

- Noah, built the ark and started the created order over again.
- Moses, lead thousands of Israelites out of slavery by crossing the red sea.
- Joshua, tore down the wall of Jericho by marching around it seven times.
- David, took down Goliath with a single stone.
- Esther, saves the nation by joining the king’s harem.

Hudson Taylor, the famous British missionary to inland China (one of my historical heroes) once said: “God’s work goes in three stages: first, it’s impossible; then it’s hard; then it’s complete.”

(Mini) application:

Friends, what are you trusting God for right now – that, humanly speaking – looks impossible? What is the Lord stirring in your heart, and maybe even calling you to, that, again, humanly speaking, cannot be done on your own strength, wisdom, and power – that only He can do! Will you trust Him? Will you keep following Him? Ananias says, “Yes” and goes to minister to Saul. As we’ll see next week, Saul himself will say “yes” and begin preaching about Jesus. What about you?

Acts 9:16 - *Jesus uses unorthodox methods to grow His servants and prosper their mission*

I think there are a couple of different ways to look at this. On the one hand, Jesus’s description of how Paul’s mission will play out might have given Ananias some level of comfort, for Paul himself will undergo the same

suffering from others that he inflicted on them. On the other hand, this is also Jesus's appointed means for how the mission will eventually succeed! It's Jesus's chosen method for success: suffering.

Now, to us and our human way of thinking, this notion of success by suffering is totally counter-intuitive and does not make sense. But again, throughout the Bible, and throughout church history, we find that it is through the hardships, trials, and endurance that God's people come out as victors. You have probably heard the famous quote: "the blood of martyrs is the seed of the church".

(Mini) application:

I don't know what hardships or trials your faith in Jesus is bringing you personally right now. But we do see it in broader society – that identifying as a Christian, a follower of Jesus who holds to historic orthodoxy and the truth of the scriptures, is to put yourself in an increasingly socially isolated position. Many of you feel this in your current work environment. Our students feel this tension at school and with their friends. We will be returning to this theme more and more as we continue our study in Acts but let me say here simply this: the Lord knows. The Lord knows. And the Lord has appointed you, and all of us, to walk as He walked, and as His apostles walked, and as the church walks in many places throughout the world even today: in hardship, in rejection, in cultural isolation – not to punish or because the Lord somehow delights in making His servants miserable – but in order to help us cling more closely to Him, and to make us fruitful for His (not our own!) kingdom. You know the slogan "Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely". Historically speaking, the church (and Christians) are most corrupt and least fruitful, when they are in positions of privilege and power. Conversely, when the church and Christians are most desperate, the most needy, the most dependent on God, is oftentimes when they are the most fruitful. Cling to Jesus, and let's aspire to what Paul himself aspired to as recorded in Philippians 3:

"I want to know Him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead."

Acts 9:17-19 - *Jesus resources His unlikely servants with His own power and presence*

Like the Samaritans, the other Jewish converts, and the Apostles themselves, Saul is baptized and filled with the Holy Spirit. The filling of the Spirit not only signifies that Saul will have God's power operating within Him, but coupled with the baptism, that he now belongs to Jesus. He is the property of God the Father, and Jesus the Son. So, what this means is that Jesus will now take personal responsibility to ensure that Saul, His chosen vessel has all the resources, energy, and assurances that he needs in order to fulfill God's will for his life.

I want you to think about this for a moment, but this is also true of us who have put our trust in Jesus Christ, been baptized, and filled with the Spirit: just as Jesus now takes on responsibility for Paul's spiritual well-being and mission and life, so He does with us. As a Christian, a professing follower of the Lord Jesus, you can be assured that He takes on personal responsibility for resourcing you with everything you need to be a fruitful follower of His.

In Paul's own words: 1 Thess. 5:23-24; Phil. 1:6; and to the wacky Corinthian group: 1 Cor. 1:4-9

Why would Paul say this? Because it's true! It was true in his life, and he was convinced that what Jesus did for him, He would do for all. Isn't this the promise of the gospel, friends? We sometimes forget this don't we? We wrongly default back to a human way of thinking that it's all up to me to figure it out, to make it work, to get my act together, while God waits on the sideline to see if we'll figure it out. That's not true: in baptism, and the giving of the Spirit, which you receive at your conversion, Jesus takes it upon Himself to give us all we need to live for Him; in other words, Jesus gives us Himself. Now, we respond of course – we do have to make choices and trust and obey, yes – but we respond because everything we need is already given to us.

Main Point:

Jesus builds His church by preparing *unlikely servants* for a (humanly) *impossible mission* by using *unorthodox methods* and resourcing them with *His own power*.

Application:

To recap, Saul's commissioning reminds us just how radical and counter-intuitive the kingdom of God really is, and what an economy of grace really is about. Again, to repeat:

*Calling unlikely servants,
To an impossible mission
By using unorthodox methods,
(And) teaching them to rely on His power, not their own.*

Luke's re-telling of Saul's conversion and commissioning, is not just to tell us what happened (it did happen, thank God!), but it's to remind us of what can happen, what does happen, and what will happen, when we too experience the love and grace of God in Jesus Christ, the Lord and Savior of the world! In short, what we find in this text is how Jesus "shows off" His ability to convert anyone, change anyone, and use anyone for His glory and His fame.

But this is hard for us to sometimes grasp, since we live and operate in an economy of success (at least by worldly terms). Complicating the matter even more is our human default to self-reliance and self-righteousness. But worse of all is the misguided perception of Jesus as a harsh master, who constantly demands, demands, demands, and never actually gives.

Friends, that's not the real Jesus. Jesus does make demands of us – don't get me wrong! He is making demands of Saul, as He does with all of His followers. But He does not demand anything that He first doesn't give. A famous church father, St. Augustine, once put it like this: "*Give what you command, command what you will.*" – St. Augustine

If you are not living in an economy of grace, under the lordship of Jesus, who loves you, died for you, lives within you, supplying you with everything you need to live for Him, then friend, you have not really understood the gospel, and what Christianity is all about. For every command we have from God is backed up with a promise that He will supply us what we need to fulfill that command!

Listen to His words:

All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. ²⁸ *Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.* ²⁹ *Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.* ³⁰ *For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.*"

I invite you to come to Him today, drink deeply from the well of His grace, be filled with the Spirit again, and go forth in His power, to serve Him in whatever He is calling you to do and be for the sake of His glory in the world and the advancing of the gospel. It seems impossible for us, but nothing is impossible for Him. Will you trust Him today?

Lets pray...