

Romans 10:17
19th Sunday After Pentecost
Speak, Lord, Your Servant is Hearing

Shepherd of the Hills Lutheran Church
Winchester, VA
Vicar Jared Natsis
October 15, 2017

Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word about Christ.

Did you hear? Seriously, have you heard? Okay—hear me out.

If someone started a conversation with you like that, what is your natural reaction? You want to *hear* what they have to say, right? If someone excitedly comes up to you and asks you those kinds of questions, it puts you on the edge of your seat. You want in on the action. You want to *hear*, because obviously what they've got is something worth hearing.

Our message this morning is based on Romans 10:17, where Paul tells us that there is a message that is definitely worth hearing. This message is not just the latest news or last night's football score. It's not the new Taylor Swift single, and it's not a spoiler for *Stranger Things* season 2. This message is far more important, interesting, and *vital*. It's the message of Jesus Christ, the message that changes hearts and renews lives and gives faith. So when God comes to us in the Bible and says, "Have you heard?" We sit down at his feet and respond, **Speak, Lord! Your servant is hearing!**

When Paul writes the words before us today, he's in the middle of talking about bringing his fellow Jews to faith. Chapter 10 begins, "**Brothers and sisters, my heart's desire and prayer to God for the Israelites is that they may be saved.**" Paul knew that many Jews were rejecting the truth of Jesus Christ and his saving work, and he desperately wanted them to believe in Jesus and be saved. They were his people! At one point, he even says that if he could be condemned so that the Jews could be saved, he would take that deal. Paul wanted to reach out to these people. He wanted the gospel to touch their hearts. With those thoughts in mind, Paul gives us this explanation of how people come to faith: **Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the Word about Christ.** If Paul wants the Israelites to come to faith, what is the only thing that can accomplish that? *Hearing the message.*

We talk about this word a lot—*faith*. But I think it's important to clarify exactly what we mean when we talk about faith. In modern English usage, "faith" is little more than a sentiment— "Just have faith!" basically means "You need to have confidence!" Or "I have faith in you" basically means "I think you can do it." If we use the word faith like this when reading the Bible, like it's just a sentiment or a feeling of confidence or determination, we are really missing the point. When faith is just made into a feeling or thought, where does faith come from? In that case, "faith" comes from within *us*, doesn't it? So when the Bible says that *we are saved by grace through faith*, or that *faith is credited to us as righteousness*, and we think that Faith is something that we come up with or feel on our own...we're led to think that we somehow decide to be saved, or that we play some role in our righteousness. But the Bible says otherwise—the Bible says that we are sinful, and that **the sinful mind is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's will, nor can it do so.**

But when we understand where faith comes from, we understand who is really responsible for our salvation. Paul says that **faith comes from hearing the message.** It doesn't come from within us. It's not a decision we made, and we don't play a role in having it. Faith is a

free gift of God. Faith is not just a sentiment or an idea or feeling that we have; faith is how the Holy Spirit enables us to believe and receive the forgiveness of sins that comes through Jesus Christ. And we don't have faith in a human being who can let us down, or faith in a sports team who could choke in the fourth quarter...we have faith in Christ, the perfect and dependable God who has accomplished our salvation. The object of our faith is what makes our faith so real and important. We are saved by grace, through faith—and that faith comes from hearing the message. And that message is heard through the Word about Christ! That is why we Christians respond like Samuel when God's Word is before us: we say **Speak, Lord! Your servant is hearing!**

"Wait a second, Vicar," you might be thinking right now. "We listened to the Old Testament lesson today. Didn't Samuel say 'Speak Lord, your servant is *listening*'? Why do you keep changing it to *hearing*?" Good catch! The reason I've been focusing on the word *hearing* is because that is the word that Paul uses when he writes Romans 10:17. He could have used a word that means *listening*, but instead, he uses a specific word for *hearing*, and he does it deliberately *twice*. We can learn something from Paul's word choice here. *Listening* implies some amount of active participation on our part, right? When you listen, you have to engage and focus and understand, and only after you do all of that can you catch the meaning. So if faith came from *listening* to the gospel, that would imply that there's some amount of engagement or focus or understanding on our part that participates in our faith. But when God speaks of converting sinners to having faith, he does not say that we play a role. Instead, when a sinner is converted, it's entirely because God has converted him. So when Paul says that **faith comes by hearing**, he means to say just that—the Holy Spirit works through the powerful Word of God to enter our ears and our hearts to create and strengthen faith. It's not a magic spell or some kind of sorcery, but it is God's almighty Word working as it is preached and taught.

We have *heard* the message and God has granted us faith; now he gives us the power to *listen* to his Word as children of God. Like children sit on their parents' laps to eagerly hear a bedtime story, we children of God look up to our Father and desire to listen to what he says. So since we've *heard* the message and God has given us faith to believe it, let's *listen* to our message verse another time: **Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the Word of Christ.**

Is Paul being a little redundant, perhaps? Is there a difference between *the message* and *the Word about Christ*? Isn't that basically the same thing? I think there is a slight difference, and when Paul speaks in this way, he is teaching us an important lesson about Scripture. The Bible is the Word of God—it is God's very words as written and recorded by human authors. This Word of God, or as Paul refers to it here, "The Word about Christ," is what conveys the message of salvation and sins forgiven. That gospel message, that good news, is what the Word about Christ brings to the table!

So let's look back at the chain that Paul is linking together with these words. *Christ* is the object of our *faith*. *Faith* comes from hearing the *message*. The *message* is heard through the *Word*. *Christ, Faith, Message, Word*. Do you see what Paul is teaching us here? How do we become connected to *Christ*? We become connected to *Christ* through the *Word about Christ*. Our bond in Christ is created and strengthened purely by God's Word. The Word is what connects us to Jesus—which is why it is so important for us to stay in that Word.

If you want to fill up your bathtub, what do you do? You turn on the faucet. So if I go to the hardware store, buy a faucet, and hold it over my bathtub, what is going to happen when I turn the handle? Well...nothing. That faucet isn't connected to anything at all. That faucet is

completely useless because it doesn't have any pipes, its pipes aren't connected to a water tank, and that water tank has absolutely no way of making water flow into our bathtub. There needs to be a connection between the tank of water and our faucet for anything to happen.

Why, then, do we sometimes think that we can stay connected to Jesus without the Word? It's pretty easy to let that Bible-reading time slip further and further down the list of priorities. It's pretty hard to get into a devotion routine with the family. It's pretty comfortable to go through the motions of worship and communion. But brothers and sisters, it's pretty dangerous to neglect the Word of God, because the Word of God is what connects us to Christ. Severing that connection to the Word of God has devastating effects on our faith, which has devastating effects on our connection to Christ, which has devastating effects on our salvation.

But the water tank never runs dry. The Word of God never returns empty. The Bible never stops being God's eternal Word. And Jesus never stops being our perfect substitute. When God the Father looks at you, he doesn't look at our spotty devotion schedule or that time we let our mind wander during church. Instead, he looks at you and sees his Son who studied the Word of God diligently even when he was a 12-year-old boy in the temple; his Son who taught the Word with perfect authority; He sees his Son who prayed so hard in the garden that his sweat fell like drops of blood; His Son who lived out the Words and Commands of God like we never could.

Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the Word about Christ. So we Christians gladly say, **Speak, Lord! Your servant is hearing!** And—**Speak, Lord! Your servant is listening!** Through faith, the beautiful gospel message of Jesus and his forgiveness is now rooted deep in your heart. You *are* connected to Christ by the Word of God, because that is what Jesus has made you to be. Now that you *are* connected to Christ by the Word, *continue to be connected to Christ by the Word.*

There are so many opportunities to do listen to the Word and connect to Christ at Grace; you're experiencing one of them right now, as you sit in Church and hear his word proclaimed. Students and teachers at Grace get the privilege of hearing this word even more regularly in this building. Bible studies like Bible Café and Women's Bible Study meet regularly so that we can dig into the Word with brothers and sisters at various times in the week. And with our new Grace Groups program, we hope to provide still another opportunity for our Grace Church Community to gather around the Word, getting to know one another on a personal level and getting to study God's Word together as Christians gathering together in Christ's name. However you choose to do stay in God's Word, the Holy Spirit is working through that Word to connect you to Christ and the message that creates and strengthens faith.

Did you hear? Have you heard? Christ Jesus has a message for you, and it's all about his perfect life, innocent death, and free forgiveness of sins. That message is here for us. **Speak, Lord! Your servant is hearing.** Amen.