



LESSON 36

Open-Air Preaching, Part 1

“One of the earliest things a minister should do when he leaves college and settles in a country town or village is to begin open-air speaking.”

CHARLES SPURGEON

Kirk’s Comment

Open-air preaching gave me a whole new perspective on what it was like when Jesus, Paul, Peter, and the others preached the gospel to the unsaved. Hearing a well-done open-air is like watching Paul preach on Mars Hill in Acts chapter 17. What a rush!

QUESTIONS & OBJECTIONS

“Do you sin, as a Christian?”

If a Christian sins, it is against his will. One who is regenerate *falls* rather than *dives* into sin; he resists rather than embraces it. Any dead fish can float downstream. It takes a live one to swim against the flow. Christians still experience temptations and can sometimes fall into sin, but they are no longer slaves to sin (Romans 6:6). They have God’s Holy Spirit within them to help them say no to temptation, and to convict their conscience of wrongdoing when they do sin.



Perhaps the topic of open-air preaching seems irrelevant to you. You could never see yourself standing up among strangers and preaching the gospel to them. However, John the Baptist was an open-air preacher. Jesus was an open-air preacher. He preached the greatest sermon of all time, the Sermon on the Mount, in the open air. Peter preached in the open air at Pentecost and Paul chose to stand on Mars Hill and preach open-air to the Athenians.

If we are serious about reaching this world, let us follow in the footsteps of Jesus and the apostles and preach where sinners gather. In thirty minutes, a good open-air preacher can reach more sinners than the average church does in twelve months.

Thank God that the disciples didn't stay in the upper room. They didn't carpet the building, pad the pews, then put a notice on the front door saying, "Tonight: Gospel outreach service, 7 p.m.—all welcome." They went into the open air.

The gospel is for the world, not the church. That's why we are commanded to "go into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature" (Mark 16:15). One-third of the word "gospel" is "go." Two-thirds of "God" is "go"; but like King Og, we seem to have it backwards. We take sinners to meetings rather than meetings to sinners. The church prefers to fish on dry land rather than get its feet wet. Charles Finney put his finger on the reason why: "It is the great business of every Christian to save souls. People complain that they do not know how to take hold of this matter. Why, the reason is plain enough; they have never studied it. They have never taken the proper pains to qualify themselves for the work. If you do not make it a matter of study, how you may successfully act in building up the kingdom of Christ, you are acting a very wicked and absurd part as a Christian."

He who loves his neighbor as himself will be concerned for his eternal welfare. He who couldn't care less that every day multitudes of living people are being swallowed by the jaws of hell has a heart of stone indeed.

Perhaps you lack the courage to preach open-air. Congratulations—you have just qualified for the job. If you consider yourself to be a "nobody" with nothing to offer God, you are His material. When you submit yourself to Him for His use, He promises to do "exceedingly abundantly



above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us” (Ephesians 3:20). Now all you need is a compassion that will swallow your fear and a conscience that will give you no rest until you break the sound barrier.

Open-air preaching is not without its difficulties, however. The first is how to draw a crowd to hear the gospel. Today’s society has been programmed to want immediate action, and open-air preaching isn’t too attractive to guilty sinners. Therefore we have to be as wise as serpents and as gentle as doves. A serpent gets its heart’s desire subtly. Our desire is for sinners to gather under the sound of the gospel.

Here is one way to get attention: Ask people passing by what they think is the greatest killer of drivers in the U.S. This stirs their curiosity. Some begin calling out, “Alcohol!” or, “Falling asleep at the wheel!” Tell them it’s not and repeat the question a few more times, saying that you will give a dollar to the person who gets the answer. Tell them that they will never guess what it is that kills more drivers than anything else in America. A few more shouts emit from the crowd. People are now waiting around for the answer. What is it that kills more drivers than anything else in the United States? What is it that could be the death of you and me? You won’t believe this, but it is “trees.” Millions of them line our highways. When one is struck, the tree stays still, sending the driver into eternity.

Then tell the crowd that you have another question for them. Ask what they think is the most common food on which people choke to death in U.S. restaurants. Over the next few minutes, go through the same scenario. People may call out, “Steak!” “Chicken bones!” Believe it or not, the answer is “hard-boiled egg yoke.”

By now you have a crowd that is enjoying what is going on. Ask them what they think is the most dangerous job in America. Someone calls out, “Cop.” It’s not. Someone else may name another dangerous profession like, “Firefighter.” Say, “Good one . . . but wrong.” Give a suggestion by saying, “Why doesn’t someone say ‘electrician?’” Someone takes the suggestion and says, “Electrician!” Say, “Sorry, it’s not electrician.” The most dangerous job in the United States . . . is to be the president. Out of forty or so, four have been murdered while on the job.



Here are some additional questions to use for crowd drawing:

- Who wrote, “Ask not what your country can do for you. Ask what you can do for your country”? (*President Kennedy’s speechwriter*)
- What is the only fish that can blink with both eyes? (*A shark*)
- Who was John Lennon’s first girlfriend? (*Thelma Pickles*)
- How long does it take the average person to fall asleep: 2 minutes, 7 minutes, or 4 hours? (*7 minutes*)
- How long is a goldfish’s memory span: 3 seconds, 3 minutes, or 3 hours? (*3 seconds*)
- How many muscles does a cat have in each ear: 2, 32, or 426? (*32*)

Once you’ve asked three or four questions and captured the crowd’s attention, tell them you have another question. “Does anyone in the crowd consider himself to be a ‘good person?’” By now you will have noted who in the crowd has the self-confidence to speak out. Point to one or two and ask, “Sir, do you consider yourself to be a good person?” The Bible tells us that “every man will proclaim his own goodness” (Proverbs 20:6), and he does. He smiles and says, “Yes, I do consider myself to be a good person.” Ask him if he has ever told a lie. Has he stolen, lusted, blasphemed, etc.? That’s when all heaven breaks loose. There is conviction of sin, sinners hear the gospel, and angels rejoice.

Crowd Etiquette

If other Christians are with you, have them form an audience and look as though they are listening to your preaching. This will encourage others to stop and listen. Tell the Christians to never stand with their back to the preacher. I have seen open-air meetings when a fellow laborer is preaching for the first time, and what are the Christians doing? They are talking among themselves. Why then should anyone stop and listen if those in front of the speaker aren’t even attentive? It is so easy to chat with friends when you’ve heard the gospel a million times before. I have found myself doing it, but it is so disheartening for the preacher to speak to the backs of a crowd.



Also, instruct Christians not to argue with hecklers. That will ruin an open-air meeting. I have seen an old lady hit a heckler with her umbrella and turn the crowd from listening to the gospel to watching the fight she has just started. Who can blame them? Remember, the enemy will do everything he can to distract your listeners. Don't let him.

Give Yourself a Lift

If you are going to preach in the open air, elevate yourself. For eighteen months, I preached without any elevation and hardly attracted any listeners. As soon as I got a "soapbox" to stand on, people stopped to listen. Their attitude was, "What has this guy got to say?" They had an excuse to stop.

Also, elevation will give you protection. I was once almost eaten by an angry 6'6" gentleman who kept fuming, "God is love!" We were eye to eye... while I was elevated. On another occasion, a very heavy gentleman who had a mean countenance placed it about 6" from mine and whispered, "Jesus said to love your enemies." I nodded in agreement. Then he asked in a deep voice, "Who is your enemy?" I shrugged. His voice deepened and spilled forth in a chilling tone, "*Lucifer!*" I was standing beside my stepladder at the time so he pushed me backwards with his stomach. He kept doing so until I was moved back about 20 feet. I prayed for wisdom, then said, "You are either going to hit me or hug me." He hugged me and walked off. That wouldn't have happened if I had been elevated.

Elevation will also give you added authority. Often hecklers will walk right up to you and ask questions quietly. This is an attempt to stifle the preaching, and it will work if you are not higher than your heckler. If they come too close to me, I talk over their heads and tell them to go back to the heckler's gallery. They actually obey me because they get the impression I am bigger than they are.

When Ezra preached the Law, he was elevated (Nehemiah 8:4,5). John Wesley used elevation to preach. Jesus preached the greatest sermon in history on a mount (Matthew 5-7), and Paul went up Mars Hill to preach (Acts 17:22). So if you can't find a hilltop to preach from, use a soapbox or a stepladder.



QUESTIONS

1. What are some reasons why you should preach the gospel open-air?
2. What is the solution if you lack the courage to preach open-air?
3. What are some ways you can draw a crowd to hear the gospel?
4. If other Christians are with you, what should you have them do?
5. Why should you elevate yourself to preach?

FEATHERS FOR ARROWS

“One night when [Dwight L.] Moody was going home, it suddenly occurred to him that he had not spoken to a single person that day about accepting Christ. *A day lost*, he thought to himself. But as he walked up the street he saw a man by a lamppost. He promptly walked up to the man and asked, ‘Are you a Christian?’



“Nor did Moody find soul-winning easy. In fact, even Christians often criticized him for having ‘zeal without knowledge.’ Others called him ‘Crazy Moody.’ Once when he spoke to a perfect stranger about Christ, the man said, ‘That is none of your business... If you were not a sort of a preacher I would knock you into the gutter for your impertinence.’

“The next day, a businessman friend sent for Moody. The businessman told Moody that the stranger he had spoken to was a friend of his. ‘Moody, you’ve got zeal without knowledge: you insulted a friend of mine on the street last night. You went up to him, a perfect stranger, and asked him if he were a Christian.’

“Moody went out of his friend’s office almost brokenhearted. For some time he worried about this. Then late one night a man pounded on the door of his home. It was the stranger he had supposedly insulted. The stranger said, ‘Mr. Moody, I have not had a good night’s sleep since that night you spoke to me under the lamppost, and I have come around at this unearthly hour of the night for you to tell me what I have to do to be saved.’” —*Harry Albus*

WORDS OF COMFORT

When I was in my late teens, my younger sister asked me to change the tire on her car. It was good that she asked me to do it, because every sister needs a big brother to take care of her. It gives them a “safe” feeling. This was a unique opportunity to cultivate the protective big brother image.

Two weeks later, as she was going around a corner, the wheel fell off!

Last Words

Lew Wallace (1827–1905), author of the remarkable book *Ben Hur*, had a sentence from “The Lord’s Prayer” on his lips as he died:

“Thy will be done.”

Memory Verse

“If you shall confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus, and shall believe in your heart that God has raised him from the dead, you shall be saved. For with the heart man believes to righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made to salvation.”

ROMANS

10:9,10