

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
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A Trustworthy Messenger

Proverbs 13:12-19

Imagine a world where messages travel not by fiber optics but by foot. A world without cell phones, or any kind of phone for that matter. A world without text messages or email. A world without Facebook, Instagram, or Snapchat. A world without the postal service, your cable provider, or your favorite streaming service. A world without encryption or telecommuting. This morning I want you to power down your devices and come with me to the ancient Near East, where networking often happened via scrolls and scribes. They didn't have algorithms or on-screen alerts. But they did have roads and relay stations for messengers.

That's why it was important to choose the right person to transport your message from point A to point B. This was especially true if you were someone in a place of political, legal, or military authority. Getting accurate and timely information into the hands of the right people was crucial. But the same could be true for ordinary folks as well. They too used messengers as go-betweens for more routine, daily matters. Put these things together, and you can begin to see why human messengers were such a critical part of how societies functioned and nations interacted.

In the ancient Near East, some messengers belonged to the highest strata of society, such as the royal family or court. They might serve as an ambassador, or as a conveyor in some other state capacity. In some cases, they transported large sums of tribute, and were accompanied by armed guards. It's easy for folks like us, who are so accustomed to sending word back and forth by clicking a mouse or tapping a screen, to comprehend the importance of flesh and blood human messaging as it was practiced in ancient Israel.

No wonder the choice of a messenger appears as an example of wise decision making in this morning's Scripture passage. In Proverbs 13:17, we hear: "A wicked messenger falls into trouble, but a trustworthy envoy brings healing." Remember that the sayings contained in the book of Proverbs are more than just an ancient version of tweets, dispensing advice for right living in 140 characters or less. No, Proverbs goes much deeper. It aims to help people become wise and godly. It invites us to walk the path of wisdom, grounded in "the fear of the Lord."

Because Proverbs gathers much of Israel's wisdom, taken from many spheres of life, and helps transmit that wisdom from generation to generation, the book continually stresses the importance of listening to instruction and receiving counsel. In other words, the wise person is the person who is receptive to sound advice that will help them follow the path of godliness. Today's text is a good example of sound counsel. In this case, the instruction is pretty simple: Choose your messenger carefully. Make sure that the person to whom you entrust your message is reliable and faithful.

With election season well underway, you may have noticed how the term "campaign surrogate" gets used a lot. A campaign surrogate is a person who speaks or acts on behalf

of a particular candidate, particularly at public events like campaign rallies or press conferences. Though the campaign surrogate's work can involve multiple duties, his or her job is basically to make the candidate look good. You want to help the candidate, not hurt them. That's why it's crucial for the campaign surrogate to stay on message, and especially not to say anything careless or foolish that could end up as part of an attack ad against the candidate he or she is representing. I'm not sure how many of the candidates are consulting the Scriptures, particularly the book of Proverbs, but if they somehow came upon this morning's text, they would hear a reminder to choose your messenger wisely.

Messengers matter. The ancient Israelites knew this. They knew that being a messenger entailed considerable responsibility, as well as a measure of freedom. On the one hand, a messenger could transmit news faithfully and accomplish the mission successfully. On the other hand, a messenger might report information inaccurately, or misstate the intentions of the person they're representing. So relying on human beings to relay the word could produce both good outcomes and bad outcomes. A good messenger can help make things better. A bad messenger can end up making things worse. "A wicked messenger falls into trouble, but a trustworthy envoy brings healing."

An envoy represents the one who sent them. It's an image or model that sometimes gets applied to the Christian life as well. Recall, for instance, what Paul says to the Corinthians in the Scripture reading from earlier in our service. In Christ, God has reconciled the world to himself. "And he has committed to us the ministry of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf. Be reconciled to God" (2 Cor. 5:19b-20). This means that we as Christians, both individually and together, are representatives who bear the message from God, that he has taken the initiative to overcome our alienation from and hostility to him and to restore us to peaceful relationship with himself.

One translation says that God is "entrusting the message of reconciliation to us." This certainly captures part of what Paul is saying, but it may not go deep enough. The Greek in this text says literally that God is "placing in us the word of reconciliation." Paul may therefore mean that the word is implanted in us in such a way that we not only announce it but also come to embody it.¹

And one of the keys to both announcing and embodying the message is our trustworthiness. Notice that in our Proverbs text, this element is key. "A wicked messenger falls into trouble, but a *trustworthy* envoy brings healing." The term translated as "trustworthy" can also be rendered as "reliable" or "faithful." This means that effectiveness as a messenger is inseparable from faithfulness and trustworthiness. God has entrusted the gospel to us, has implanted it in us, and it's crucial that we demonstrate trustworthiness, in our relationships within the church and our relationships beyond the church.

Remember that we carry out our ministry of reconciliation at a time when people are more and more distrustful of traditions and institutions, including religious ones. Granted, the picture is mixed. For example, several years ago a report from Pew Research concluded that younger generations tend to have more positive views than their elders of a number of institutions that play a big part in American society. But there are two institutions where that doesn't hold true—the news media and churches. Consider that in 2010, nearly three out of four (or 73 percent to be exact) Millennials agreed that churches have a positive impact on the country. As of 2015, only 55 percent of Millennials said that churches are having a positive impact. Views among older generations have changed little over this time period.²

Recent years have confirmed the lack of trust that many people, especially young people, feel toward the church. One organization surveyed more than 10,000 Americans ages 13 to 25 (Generation Z) about their religious views and involvement. Over half of those who claimed to be affiliated with a mainstream religion, for example Judaism or Catholicism, said, “even though I checked the box, I don’t trust organized religion.”³

Clearly, people’s perception of the church isn’t what it used to be. Many folks simply don’t view Christian congregations with the level of trust that once prevailed in our society. One person tells about a pastor she knows who went to the local fire chief and proposed that his neighborhood church and the fire department team up on a particular community event. The fire chief responded: “No . . . you see, people *trust* the fire department.”⁴

A few years ago, Karl Vaters, who authors a blog about leadership from a small church perspective, wrote a piece called “Five Massive Changes Coming to Your Church (If They’re Not Here Already).” He summarizes some critical shifts that are taking place that will shape how we proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ. These include changes in the way people earn an income, the way people give, the way people attend church, the way people commit, and lastly, as well as most importantly, the way people trust. Vaters says, “People used to trust the church and clergy until we gave them a reason not to. But we’ve given them plenty of reasons not to. And we’ve lost their trust. Now, people don’t trust the church or clergy until we give them plenty of reasons to trust us. We have to earn it. Then we have to work hard to keep it. Of all the changes affecting today’s church, this is the biggest, by far.”⁵

That’s sobering, and challenging, isn’t it? While we in the church are so busy thinking about how to build bridges to the culture, how to build interest in our activities, how to build up our programs, how to build up commitment, how to build up the budget, how to build up attendance, we also need to focus significant attention on how to build up trust. The erosion of trust is partly a matter of changes taking place in the larger culture, but also a matter of things that we in the Christian community have done, or not done. Financial scandals, sexual misbehavior, self-righteous attitudes, patterns of hypocrisy, divisive infighting, and silence on matters of injustice. All these, and many other factors, have contributed to the skepticism and distrust with which many people view Christians and our congregations.

The good news is that even though our own attitudes and actions have often relayed a message other than the one that our Lord intends, he hasn’t changed his plan for spreading the word of his reconciling love in Christ. We the church are still God’s chosen messenger. Now that doesn’t mean that God isn’t also present and speaking and working in a multitude of ways outside and beyond the life of the church. But it does mean that the church remains God’s primary instrument for sending forth the news of salvation in Christ, accompanied by the call for repentance and faith. And what matters is that we not only be messengers, but trustworthy messengers whose character is consistent with the Lord who has sent us.

One of the ways we do that is by embodying trustworthiness toward those with whom we engage outside the life of our church, or those who are visitors or newcomers to our congregation. Whatever form our ministry to them takes, it needs to be relational and personal. It needs to be grounded in listening, transparency, integrity, care, and the love of Christ.

Another way we gain the trust of others is by continually cultivating the blessing of trust among ourselves, within our own fellowship. In other words, in order to display

trustworthiness beyond our walls, we have to nurture trustworthiness within our walls. The more we work at faithfulness toward one another, the more we're able to exhibit faithfulness to the world. Years ago, I was at a meeting where a fellow pastor, who was preparing to retire, approached me to learn more about me and our congregation. During the conversation, he asked, "Now how long have you been with your church?" I told him about five years. "Well congratulations," he replied. "Now you've reached a stage where you've earned their trust, and you can build on that in your future ministry together." "Wow," I thought to myself. "Five years of trust building, just to get to this point where we can take that mutual faithfulness and develop it into further work together."

Trust is critical in the life of God's people. It's critical in my relationship with you. It's critical in your relationships with one another. It's critical in our relationships with others beyond our congregation. Trust can take years to build and only moments to break or destroy. That's why we need to continue to cherish it and cultivate it and embody it, not only for our own internal cohesion but especially for the sake of our witness in the world. "A trustworthy envoy brings healing," says today's proverb. That's what our congregation is called to be and what we're commissioned to do. We're representatives of Christ, envoys for God, couriers of the gospel of peace. And as we practice faithfulness and deliver this healing word of the Lord, may others see what matters most, that he himself is trustworthy.

¹ See Richard B. Hays, "The Word of Reconciliation." Faith & Leadership website. July 19, 2010. Accessed May 19, 2010 < <https://www.faithandleadership.com/sermons/the-word-reconciliation>>.

² Hannah Fingerhut, "'Millennials' Views of News Media, Religious Organizations Grow More Negative," Pew Research Center (January 4, 2016).

³ Jana Riess, "Gen Z is lukewarm about religion, but open to relationships." Religious News Service (December 21, 2020).

⁴ Susan Cotrell, "Do You Trust the Church?" Patheos website. December 17, 2014. Accessed May 19, 2016 <<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/freedhearts/2014/12/17/do-you-trust-the-church/>>.

⁵ Karl Vaters, "Five Massive Changes Coming to Your Church (If They're Not Here Already)" Pivot website. April 17, 2016. Accessed May 19, 2016 <<http://www.christianitytoday.com/karl-vaters/2016/april/5-massive-changes-coming-to-your-church.html?paging=off>>.