

God's Perfect Sales Plan

Mark 7:31-37

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, I am going to do things slightly differently this morning. I am going to step out of the pulpit and stand out front. I used to preach in this manner more often. Standing in the pulpit I feel like a chimpanzee in the zoo. The pulpit is my cage and the chancel the area in which to move around, while you, the parishioners, are the visitors to the zoo watching me from a distance.

Standing here, closer to you, is also more comfortable to my preferred style of preaching. I think of myself as more of a storyteller than a preacher. I like illustrations, lots of them. I sprinkle them throughout my sermon. I believe they help me get my point across.

Every preacher has a style with which he feels most comfortable. During the past year, you have experienced many styles. I have heard through the grapevine that some of you appreciate a different style from week to week. I think of Pastor Oren, before his retirement, as a representative of the theological style. His doctrine is solid and obvious in his preaching, but he uses few illustrations. Pastor Nickel represents the "hellfire and brimstone" style. He has one point in mind and speaks from the cuff; when he makes a point no one can fail to hear. Pastor Anderson represents the teacher style. He usually starts with an illustration but from there on proceeds with an organized, logical sermon.

That is my analysis. Can I get an "Amen"? C'mon, try it! You are permitted to smile in church, even if you are a Lutheran. As King Solomon wrote in Proverbs, "A happy heart makes the face cheerful (15:13)." Now, can I get an "Amen"?

Here is my opening illustration and I am going to stretch it throughout the length of this morning's message. Imagine you are the CEO (Chief Executive Officer) of a huge, well-known corporation. Your company has just developed its greatest product ever, one you believe will change the world and people will clamor to own once they recognize their need. The product is ready to be released, now! It exists; it is not vaporware. What is your strategy for releasing your product to the public and educating them about their unrecognized need? Following are the steps and factors I think you must consider.

First, how much lead time do you need? Before releasing the product you must define and identify the need. You must advertise and build interest. This will include branding the product and providing a solid lineage.

Second, you must gather and train salespeople. The product may sell itself but enthusiastic, prepared salespeople will improve the chance of success. Third, anticipate resistance and questions. There is resistance to every new idea, every change. Few things are more embarrassing than receiving an intelligent question and failing to have a good reply.

Fourth, define success and determine your ultimate goal. If your product is successful, what will success look like? What are your metrics? How will you determine if the cost to the

company is in line with the results?

Fifth, determine your launch date or most favorable circumstances for release.

Have you got all that? Now, imagine you are God and you have something everyone (the world) needs, desperately needs -- the forgiveness of sins, often called salvation. Would you go through much the same process as the chief executive officer of a large corporation introducing a world-altering product? Let us consider it. I am going to go through the steps while conducting a tour of the Bible. Here goes!

First, lead time. God foresaw our need in eternity.

The need became immediately obvious in the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve disobeyed God. They ate from the tree in the middle of the Garden, the tree that they were forbidden to touch. They immediately recognized they were naked and vulnerable. They hid from God. They lied and blamed each other. But that was just the beginning! Again and again, through the ages, it was apparent all people were and are sinners, dead in their sin. Death is all around us. Sin is rampant. The blood of Able cried from the ground (Genesis 4:1ff). "Everyone did what was right in his own eyes (Judges 21:25)." The need became shockingly and horribly obvious. "There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Romans 3:22-23)." "Everyone has turned away, they have together become corrupt; there is no one who does good, not even one (Ps. 53:3)." From this point going forward, I will not give you chapter and verse. See if you can determine the source.

Starting in the Garden, God introduced his solution to the problem. "So the Lord God said to the serpent, 'Because you have done this ... I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you shall strike his heel' (Gn. 4:14-15)."

Moving forward, God promised Abraham that the world would be blessed in his seed. "...and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed...(Gn. 22:18)." God promised David an eternal heir. "A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; and from his roots a Branch will bear fruit. The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him -- the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and power, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord - and he will delight in the fear of the Lord (Isaiah 11:1-2)"

God established a vigorous and never-ending advertising campaign using his prophets. "The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and you will call him Immanuel (Isaiah 7:14)." "For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time and forever (Isaiah 9:6-7)."

However, how will the world recognize the real thing when it comes? God provides some identifying marks. "But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans

of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will rule over Israel, whose origins are from old, from ancient times ... He will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God (Micah 5:3-5)." "Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion! Shout, daughter of Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey (Zechariah 9:9)."

And here is an example of the Savior's effectiveness. "Surely he took our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him and afflicted. But he was pierced for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed... (Isaiah 53:3-5)."

God further lists the characteristics and quality of the genuine product so that people will seek the genuine, the only truly effective product. "Say to those with fearful hearts, 'Be strong, do not fear, your God will come, he comes with vengeance ... Then the eyes of the blind will be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then the lame leap like a deer, and the tongue of the dumb shout for joy. Water will gush forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert (Isaiah 35:4-7)." Now compare this to our Gospel lesson for this morning. "After [Jesus] took the deaf man aside, away from the crowd, he put his fingers into the man's ears. Then he spit and touched the man's tongue. He looked up to heaven and with a deep sigh said to him, 'Ephthah!' (which means 'Be opened').' At this, the man's ears were opened, his tongue was loosened and he began to speak plainly (Mark 7:33-35)." And, of course, we could return to my previous citation from Zechariah and read in Mark 11, verse 7, "When they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks over it, he sat on it. Many people spread their cloaks on the road ... and shouted, 'Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord' (Mark 11:7-9)."

And what about the sales staff of which I spoke? God gathered and trained his staff, in this case, a forerunner and disciples. "John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, 'Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world' (John 1:29)." "As Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew. 'Come, follow me,' Jesus said, 'and I will make you fishers of men' (Matthew 4:18)." And a little later Jesus promised his disciples, "But when he, the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth ... He will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you' (John 16:12)."

Remember, I also told you we need to anticipate resistance and questions. Having endured the last 18 months with a pandemic, listening to the arguments for and against masks, for and against vaccination, we realize that an important aspect of any sales strategy involves anticipating questions and resistance. Why would we think that it would be any different for God? He deals with the same ornery, independent people. He foresaw resistance and questions and wove them into his divine, delivery strategy. Psalm 22:12-17 provides us an example. "Many bulls surround me; strong bulls of Bashan encircle me. I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint. My heart has turned to wax; it has melted away within me. My strength is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth; you lay me in the dust of death. Dogs have surrounded me; a band of evil men has encircled me, they have pierced my hands and feet. I cannot count all my bones; people stare and gloat over me. They divide my garments among them and cast lots for my clothing." God turned the world's

resistance and Jesus' crucifixion into our salvation. And Jesus declared, "It is finished (Jn. 19:30)." The promise is fulfilled, the product is delivered.

Whew! are you tired of strategizing yet? Hang in there! We have two more, very crucial steps to consider before we wrap up our divine sales plan.

Determine the product launch date. Apple Incorporated has this down to a science. The company begins years and months in advance building up excitement for their newest products. Currently, we await the announcement of the newest phones and watches. There will also be the announcement of a new operating system sometime this month. But how about God? How did he determine his launch date? How did he generate enthusiasm and interest? I think we have some indications.

We know that God chose the time. There were some conditions. John the Baptist was the last of the Old Testament prophets. We read in Mark, "After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. 'The time has come,' he said, 'The kingdom is near. Repent and believe the good news' (Mark 1:15)." Paul tells us in his letter to the Romans and again in his letter to the Galatians, "You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly (Romans 5:6)." "But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, that we might receive the full rights of sons (Galatians 4:4)." And the Apostle Peter adds, "The Lord is not slow in keeping his promises, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, (*pay close attention to this*), not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance (2 Peter 3:9)." God, however, had one immense advantage over Apple, besides being God, he did not need to create the need. It has always been there. The psalmist writes, "As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul thirsts for the living God (Ps. 42:1-2)."

Now, let us put this illustration to bed. The last thing we must accomplish is to determine how we would describe success. Apple describes success as every person on earth using an Apple phone. But how does God describe success? I would argue that God desires something very similar to Apple. Once again, the Apostle Paul indicates, "This is good, and pleases God our Savior, who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Jesus Christ, who gave himself as a ransom for all men -- the testimony in its proper time (1 Timothy 2:4)." And again in Philippians, chapter 2, "Therefore God exalted [Jesus] to the highest place and gave him a name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (verses 10-11)."

Rejoice! This is not a special offer for some people; this offer is for all people. This is not an offer for rich people or important people or powerful people or famous people, but for all people. "For I am not ashamed of the Gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes, first for the Jew, and then for the Gentile (Romans 1:16)." "Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned ... Consequently, just as the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men, so also the result of one act of righteousness was justification that

brings life for all men (Romans 5:12, 18).”

And so, that brings us to the end. I pray that we have a better understanding of God's plan. And I pray that if I am a storyteller, I want to present over and over again, the greatest story ever told. This is the one message we all need. Can I get an "Amen"?

May the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

Soli Dei Gloria!