



# The Apostles of Jesus Christ Instructed (Part 2)

## Matthew 10:11-15

### 1. The Strategy of the Apostles (verses 11-15)

#### 2. Our Application Today

In our exposition of the gospel of Matthew, we have come to this section where we find Jesus Christ instructing His apostles. He is preparing to send them out to communicate to the Jewish world the nearness of the kingdom of God. Last week, we examined Matthew 10:5-6 which provides us with information concerning where Jesus instructed His apostles to go. He told His apostles not to go to the Gentiles or the Samaritans. Instead, he directed them to go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. In verse 7, we read of Jesus' instruction regarding what the apostles should say. They were to preach, saying, "The kingdom of heaven is at hand." In verse 8, Jesus told the apostles what to do. They were to exercise the authority given to them to heal the sick and raise the dead and cast out unclean spirits (verse 1). In verses 9 and 10, Jesus told them what to bring. He said, "Bring nothing!" Rather, they were to trust the Lord to provide for them.

This week, we will look closely at Matthew 10:11-15. In these verses, Jesus describes the strategy that the apostles should use when they enter the cities of the lost sheep of the house of Israel.

### 1. The Strategy of the Apostles (verses 11-15)

In an effort to pick up the context, I want to begin reading in verse 5. Jesus said:

Matthew 10:5-15

"Do not go in the way of the Gentiles, and do not enter any city of the Samaritans; but rather go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. And as you go, preach, saying, 'The kingdom of heaven is at hand.' Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons; freely you received, freely give. Do not acquire gold, or silver, or copper for your money belts, or a bag for your journey, or even two tunics, or sandals, or a staff; for the worker is worthy of his support. And into whatever city or village you enter, inquire who is worthy in it; and abide there until you go away. And as you enter the house, give it your greeting. And if the house is worthy, let your greeting of peace come upon it; but if it is not worthy, let your greeting of peace return to you. And whoever does not receive you, nor heed your words, as you go out of that house or that city, shake off the dust of your feet. Truly I say to you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah in the day of judgment, than for that city."

Their strategy was really quite simple. It consisted of three steps. They were to (1) Inquire (2) Greet, and (3) Evaluate. Verse 11 begins, "and into whatever city or village you enter." Some of these "cities or villages" would have been large such as Jerusalem, Capernaum, or Chorazin. But the majority of them would have been pretty small. You could easily compare them to our rural farm communities which dot our countryside -- scattered abroad and lightly populated. As the apostles came to one of these towns, the first thing they were to do is to inquire.

#### a) Inquire

The text says they were to "Inquire who is worthy in it" (verse 11). They were to go into the town and begin speaking with the people, asking them for information about the people who lived there. They were to find someone who is "worthy." In this case, "worthy" probably meant that they were able and willing to receive two traveling preachers into their home. For, when they found this "worthy" person, they were to "abide there until you go away" (verse 11).

When searching for such a worthy person in the larger cities, perhaps they would have inquired at the local synagogue where the Jewish people often gathered together. When they inquired, they would likely find someone with whom they could stay. It might have been a leader in the synagogue, or maybe a family in the synagogue who was known for their hospitality. Suppose someone came to Rockford and inquired into our church about who could put up a few people for a few nights? Perhaps you can picture some families in our church who would be willing to receive such people. This is Biblical hospitality -- loving strangers. Being willing to take some people who are relatively unknown to you into your house for a time demonstrates Biblical hospitality.

In the smaller towns, there probably would not be a synagogue. Yet, the task would not have been so difficult. In a small town everybody knows everybody. Reputations get around easily in small towns. People know the character of others, especially in the communities where families remain from generation to generation. A townsman might point down the street and tell you, "this one owns the grocery store in town." Or, "this one is a school teacher." Or, "that person works in the post office." Or, "that one is a doctor." It would be easy to identify the hospitable people in such a town. I grew up in DeKalb, IL. The population of DeKalb is about 35,000, yet I knew many people there. In the early years of our marriage, Yvonne and I lived in DeKalb. Yvonne used to be amazed at how small this town was. I kid you not, almost every time that I went out into the town whether to buy groceries, go to the post office, go to the hardware store, or to play in the park, I would see someone that I knew. In a small town, the apostles could inquire of anyone because everybody knows everybody.

## **b) Greet**

After inquiring as to where they might stay, the apostles were to go and greet the people of that house. The text says, "And as you enter the house, give it your greeting" (verse 12). This greeting they gave to the home was certainly one of "peace." The Jewish custom of the day was to greet people by saying, "Shalom." This is the Hebrew word for "peace." On another similar occasion, Jesus sent seventy disciples out to do the same thing that these apostles were to do. He told them, "And whatever house you enter, first say, 'Peace be to this house'" (Luke 10:5). It was a matter of being polite and kind. It was a matter of bringing God's blessing upon those in the house. It was a matter of being charitable, just like in today's society when people say "God bless you." Jesus wanted them to give it their greeting and give it their blessing.

Whatever particular house they entered would become the central place from which all of their ministry to the city or to the village was to take place. They would probably spend the night in the home and spend much of their time during the day abroad in the city, ministering to those in the city and village. At the end of the day, they would return to the same household that received them.

As they went out and ministered, they certainly would have brought attention to themselves as they would seek out the sick and heal everyone that they found. Even without phones and televisions, the news of the apostles would have quickly spread to those in the town. People would be talking, saying, "Did you hear? Martha was cured of her leprosy!" And someone else might add, "I also heard that Samuel's son, who was born blind, can now see!" Someone might exclaim, "Have you heard about Aaron? His paralysis has been healed! He no longer needs to use crutches! And I heard that they even raised Amaziah's sickly daughter from the dead!" Yet another person might be talking to his neighbor, saying, "Do you know Ishbah, the demon-possessed man that moans in the street all night long? I actually saw him talking with the elders at the gate in his right mind!" The neighbor would be amazed and say, "This is remarkable, let's go see what is going on!" The apostles would naturally have huge crowds coming to them. The apostles would preach to these crowds, proclaiming what Jesus had told them to say: "The kingdom of heaven is at hand! As Jewish people, all of us have waited and waited and waited for the Messiah to come! We have found Him! It is Jesus Christ of Nazareth! We are followers of Him, and we invite you to be followers also. He is the one who gave us power to heal your sick, raise your dead, and cast out these unclean spirits. This is not by our power that we have done these things. Jesus gave us the power and told us to come and help you. Isn't this what Isaiah prophesied would happen when the Messiah came? This is the dawning of a new age for Israel. Jesus, the Messiah, will redeem us at last! You ought to repent of your sins and follow Jesus just as we have done! Perhaps He will come to your town someday. Then you will see him for yourself! When He does come, receive Him as the Messiah sent from God who will finally free us from our oppression at the hands of the Romans."

This was the apostles' ministry to people. They were healing their hurts. They were preaching the nearness of the kingdom. Sometimes, they would be received gladly. Sometimes they would be rejected whole-heartedly. This leads us to Jesus' final instruction to the apostles.

## **c) Evaluate**

After inquiring, greeting and ministering, they were to evaluate their reception. Their evaluation was to be based on the criteria found in verse 14.

"And if the house is worthy, let your greeting of peace come upon it; but if it is not worthy, let your greeting of peace return to you. And whoever does not receive you, nor heed your words, as you go out of that house or that city, shake off the dust of your feet." (Matt. 10:13-14)

The apostles were to evaluate their reception. The criteria is right there in verse 14. Did they receive the apostles? Did they heed, listen, and obey their words? There would be some villages the apostles entered in which they would be received, welcomed, embraced. There would be other villages in which they would be rejected, hated, and despised. In some of these places even the most worthy of houses would reject the apostles. After inquiring into the village to find a worthy house, they would not even be allowed entrance into the house. Some houses may have received them for a time, but when those in the house understood their message, the apostles were turned away.

The apostles spoken words of peace will remain upon the house who received them. But their words of peace will be removed from the house that rejected them (verse 13). For those villages who received the apostles, peace and prosperity would be upon them. But if the people of the town did not receive them but spurned their words instead, the apostles were to shake off the dust of their feet as they left that house or city (verse 14). This is a strange practice! We normally shake the dust off of our feet before we enter a house, not afterwards! Our mothers often tell us, "Wipe your feet before you walk in the house." My mother is particularly attentive to this. When you enter into her house, you are immediately confronted with a sign that says, "Please wipe your feet."

What does it mean for the apostles to shake the dust off their feet as they were leaving? It was the practice of ancient Jews when they traveled from Gentile territory to Jewish territory to shake the dust off of their feet and clothes of the pagan land that they left behind. Listen to one ancient Jewish writer named Bartenora. He wrote, "all dust which comes from the land of the Gentiles, is reckoned by us as the rottenness of a dead carcass." Therefore, he said that any touching or carrying "the land of the Gentiles" defiles a Jew (see John Gill's commentary on Matthew).

The Jews were accustomed to this practice. So, when the apostles would do this, it would be a bold statement to those in the house (or the city) in which they left. It meant that the apostles considered the people of the city as Gentiles, and it would be clearly understood to the people. Today, if we saw someone do this we would be puzzled and wonder, "What are they doing?" But the people of the Jewish town would have understood. These people had rejected the message of the coming Messiah. They had witnessed the miracles of the apostles, yet their hearts remained hard. From the standpoint of the apostles, the ground upon which they lived was so stained and infected with the sin of these people that the apostles should not carry any of it with them! The apostles were saying, "I do not want to have any part of you! Not even your dirt! Lest, when the Lord comes to judge, I might have no part in you."

This judgment would be severe. Look at verse 15,

"Truly I say to you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah in the day of judgment, than for that city."

(Matt. 10:15)

If you read the account of Sodom and Gomorrah, you will see that it is not a happy situation. The people of Sodom and Gomorrah were very wicked. We hear first about Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 13:13, when Lot chose to move there to dwell in it. We are told, "Now the men of Sodom were wicked exceedingly and sinners against the LORD" (Gen. 13:13). Five chapters later, we hear a similar indictment. The LORD said, "The outcry of Sodom and Gomorrah is indeed great, and their sin is exceedingly grave" (Gen. 18:20). It might be worth observing that this sounds a lot like many of our cities in America today.

Abraham heard that the LORD was planning on destroying Sodom and Gomorrah, so he began to pray for the LORD's mercy upon the city. He prayed, "Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city; will You indeed sweep it away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous who are in it?" (Gen. 18:24). God said, "If I find in Sodom fifty righteous within the city, then I will spare the whole place on their account" (v.26). Abraham, then prayed for the LORD not to destroy it if He found forty-five righteous people there. The LORD said, "I will not destroy it if I find forty-five there" (v.28). Then Abraham prayed for mercy if there were forty righteous people found there. Again, the LORD promised that He would be merciful to the city if there were forty righteous people there. Then Abraham prayed for mercy if there were thirty righteous in the city. Then Abraham prayed for mercy if there were twenty righteous in the city. Then Abraham prayed for mercy if there were ten righteous in the city. And in every case, the LORD said that he would spare the city. Yet, their sin was so great, that the LORD was still going to destroy the city, because there were fewer than ten righteous people within it.

In His mercy, the LORD sent a few angels to rescue Lot and his family. Yet, when these angels came into Sodom, the men of the city wanted to use them as objects of sexual pleasure (Gen. 19:5). The people of Sodom surrounded Lot's house (Gen. 19:4) and demanded that he give them these men for their pleasure. They were quite upset when Lot refused, even trying to break Lot's door down (Gen. 19:9). Such a response is typical of those enslaved by lusts of the flesh. Nothing will stop the one intent upon sinning unless the LORD sends blindness upon the people, as He did to confuse them. Even in their blindness, these wicked men "wearied themselves trying to find the doorway to the house" (Gen. 19:11).

By the LORD's mercy, Lot and two of his daughters escaped death when the LORD "rained on Sodom and Gomorrah brimstone and fire ... out of heaven" (Gen. 19:23). When Abraham "looked down toward Sodom and Gomorrah, ... the smoke of the land ascended like the smoke of a furnace" (Gen. 19:28). Sodom and Gomorrah got it pretty bad. They can only expect worse on the day of judgment, when they along with anyone else whose "name was not found written in the book of life" will be thrown into the lake of fire! (Rev. 20:15). As bad as it will be for those who lived in Sodom and Gomorrah, it will be worse for the Jews who did not receive these apostles whom Jesus sent. Jesus said, "It will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom & Gomorrah in the day of judgment than for that city" (Matt 10:15). Why will it be more tolerable for Sodom and Gomorrah? The reason is based on a simple Biblical principle, "From everyone who has been given much shall much be required" (Luke 12:48).

**The Jews had been given much.** For centuries, Israel had been looking for their Messiah to come to them. They were given the Scriptures which testified to His arrival. They studied these scriptures, seeking to know when the Messiah would come and who would He be. They knew that the Messiah would be the Son of David. They knew that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. They knew that the Messiah would bring incredible miracle-working power with Him. So when Jesus came on the scene, Israel ought to have recognized Him. The apostles of Christ were sent to these cities to tell them of the credentials of Jesus for the very first time. These apostles would stay in the homes of respected Jewish people. They would go out into the streets to testify of Jesus. In their unbelief, many of the people in the cities of Israel would reject their Messiah. Their condemnation will be great, because they were given much.

**Sodom was given little.** We only know that Sodom was given one righteous man, named Lot (2 Pet. 2:7), who, by the way, was not so righteous. Lot attempted to give his own daughters to be molested by the city rather than the angels who came to stay in his house. We know that Lot was tormented in his soul day after day with Sodom's lawless deeds (2 Pet. 2:8). We know that he preached a little bit to the city, as he was accused of "acting like a judge" (Gen. 19:9). Yet, the people were destroyed with fire and brimstone, and the city was reduced to ashes and smoke. Their destruction stands today as an example to those who would live ungodly of what the Lord will do to evil-doers (2 Pet. 2:6). You have been given much more!

The Jews were given much. Sodom was given little. How much have you been given? **You have been given much more!** You have no excuse to claim ignorance of the gospel. This past week, on the TV program *Larry King Live*, John MacArthur as well as Bob Jones III made the gospel very clear. America has no excuse. We have the entire gospel before us. We have no excuse to claim ignorance of the gospel.

We live in a day and an age in which you can know about whatever you want to know about without ever having to purchase a single book. Information of any kind is freely available by way of the Internet. Some of our neighbors have been gone on vacation the last week or so. They asked us to watch over a few things of theirs while they were gone. They gave us their pet lizards and an African Violet flower. Well, we killed the flower already, and we are very concerned about the lizards. But Yvonne went out on the Internet and learned all about lizard care, including feeding, lights, water, colors, and looks. She read all about caring for African violet flowers. In her searching, she actually found out that we had killed a Primrose, not an African Violet flower.

Pages and pages of information are freely available on many different subjects. The same is true for religious material. As I prepare my sermons each week, over half of the material that I read by way of research is available on the Internet. I read John Calvin's commentaries. I read Matthew Henry's commentaries. I read John Gill's commentaries. I consult Treasury of Scripture Knowledge. I read a bunch of sermons that other men have preached upon this passage. You want to know about God? You can read all of the greatest Christian works ever written, including Augustine, Calvin, Luther, Bunyan, Edwards, Whitefield, Wesley and others.

You might not be much of a reader and you might not have Internet access. Here in Rockford, there are several Christian radio stations that broadcast here all day long. Everyday, you can hear from our nation's most gifted pastors. You can hear sermons everyday for free on the radio, sermons that will blow away my feeble attempts to open God's word to you. You say, "But, I'm not home when the good shows are on."

Have someone record them for you off of the radio. I remember a time when I was not around to listen to a radio show that I wanted to listen to. I bought 5 cassette tapes and labeled them "Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday." Yvonne was diligent in simply putting them in everyday, so that we would always have 5 hours of radio preaching to listen to at any time. I think also of Rock Valley Bible Church. We are all about knowing what the Word of God says. You come here Sunday in and Sunday out. We talk about God's Word. We talk about the marvelous grace of Jesus Christ, who gave up intimate fellowship with God the Father in order to come and suffer upon the cross for your sins. If you want to know God's word, it is easy to do that in America. You have no excuse not to know the Bible well. You have no excuse to be ignorant of God's Word and His saving plan through faith in Jesus Christ. Remember this: "From everyone who has been given much shall much be required" (Luke 12:48).

Jesus taught degrees of punishment in hell. For people who know little and do not repent, punishment will be little in comparison to people who know much and still do not repent. Their punishment will be great! (This observation alone ought to convince you that the Bible does not teach annihilation. How can one form of annihilation be worse than any other?)

Perhaps you have heard of *Dante's Inferno*. It is a book that gives an account of hell, and it was written by Dante Alighieri. He describes what he thinks hell will be like. He rightly picked up on this concept that there will be degrees of punishment in hell. He certainly embellished upon reality, and went far beyond what God has revealed hell to be like. But he did make some useful observations. He pictured hell to be an inverted cone, which is broad at the top, but comes down to a single point. The broad part of the cone was just below the surface of the earth. The point of the cone was in the center of the earth, where it burns red-hot. Those who are placed at that level in hell receive the greatest condemnation. To use Jesus' scale, in Dante's hell, Sodom and Gomorrah would be placed higher than the Jews who rejected Jesus' apostles. Do you know who is at the bottom of Dante's inverted cone of hell? Do you know who is at the center of the earth, receiving the greatest punishment? It is Judas Iscariot. He walked with Jesus intimately for three years. He knew of Jesus' power. He was privileged to hear of Jesus' teaching. He was able to ask Jesus questions. Yet, He denied Jesus for 30 pieces of silver. Jesus tells us, "Woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been good for that man if he had not been born" (Mark 14:21). Where will those be who reject the gospel today? I believe that many of those who reject the gospel today do it under great light, and it will be worse for them than for the Jews.

When I think of these Jews who rejected Jesus' apostles, I tremble at what lays in store for them. They had everything going for them. They were God's chosen people. They had the Scriptures. They were waiting for the Messiah. But they failed in the one thing that will ultimately destroy them. They failed in faith in Jesus Christ. Notice what these Jews did to merit such great eternal destruction (2 Thess. 1:9-10). Their fault was that **they did nothing**. They did not "receive" the apostles (verse 14). They did not "heed the words" of the apostles (verse 14). It was not as though they were actively and openly defiant to Jesus' apostles. They were simply passive. They simply did not respond to the apostle's preaching or message. Such inaction was worthy of greater suffering than the wicked souls of ignorant Sodom. J. C. Ryle said it well. He said,

Men are apt to forget that it does not require great open sins ... to ruin a soul forever. They have only to go on hearing without believing, listening without repenting, going to church without going to Christ, and by and by they will find themselves in hell! We will all be judged according to our light; we will have to give account of our use of religious privileges: to hear of the 'great salvation' (Hebrews 2:3) and yet neglect it, is one of the worst sins man can commit (John 16:9). (pp. 72-73 of Ryle's commentary on Matthew).

Think about your life. You have been coming to Rock Valley Bible Church for some time. You hear God's word opened and exposed week in and week out. As God's word is let loose, I know that it is doing its work of opening your heart and laying it bare before "the eyes of Him with whom we have to do" (Heb. 4:13). Have you embraced Jesus with your whole heart? (verse 14) Have you taken heed to the word preached? (verse 14) Are you finding that you love Jesus more and more, as you hear of His wonderful grace? Or, is your love for Him growing cold? If Jesus were here today and instructing His apostles to go out and preach, perhaps verse 15 might read, "Truly I say to you, it will be more tolerable for the Jewish people who rejected My apostles, in the day of judgment, than it will be for those in America who reject the grace offered in the gospel of Christ today." These are sobering words.

## 2. Our Application Today

How much of this message should we apply today? When we enter a village or a city for missions work, should we inquire into a worthy house to stay? Whenever someone rejects the gospel, should we shake the dust off of our feet and clothes in protest against them? Last week, we saw that these instructions were given to a specific group of people at a specific time for a specific purpose. I believe that these circumstances are impossible to duplicate. As they say, "You only have one chance to make a first impression." This was Jesus' opportunity to make His first impression upon Israel, who prided themselves on their knowledge of and love for the Scriptures. As much as they knew, many refused to believe.

You simply cannot duplicate this. What city or village in the world has not yet heard the gospel? There are about 3,000 unreached people groups in this world today. There are many people who are excluded from the gospel because of the political situation in which they live (for instance, a Muslim nation). None of the unreached people groups are looking to the Scriptures for counsel and advice, because the Scriptures has not even been translated into these languages yet. Many of the cities excluded from the gospel for political reasons are not looking to the Scriptures either. There is no way that you can come into a city today with the gospel to those who are expecting it. That situation cannot be repeated. So, I think that much of this business of showing up to a city and inquiring into a worthy house for a few days, while you preach, cannot apply to us today.

What about shaking the dust off of our clothes in protest against a city? We know of two occasions in which the apostles later practiced this. The first occasion comes in Acts 13. If you remember the situation, Paul came to Pisidian Antioch. He preached Jesus in the synagogue. The Jews were very interested in Jesus' message. We pick up the account in Acts 13:42:

And as Paul and Barnabas were going out, the people kept begging that these things might be spoken to them the next Sabbath. ... And the next Sabbath nearly the whole city assembled to hear the word of God. But when the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy, and began contradicting the things spoken by Paul, and were blaspheming. And Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly and said, "It was necessary that the word of God should be spoken to you first; since you repudiate it, and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we are turning to the Gentiles." ... And the Word of the Lord was being spread through the whole region. But the Jews aroused the devout women of prominence and the leading men of the city, and instigated a persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and drove them out of their district. But they **shook off the dust of their feet** in protest against them and went to Iconium. (Acts 13:42-51)

There is another occasion where we know the apostles shook the dust off their feet. It is found in Acts 18 which records the story of Paul's activities in Corinth. When he came to Corinth, he began working as a tent-maker during the week.

And he was reasoning in a synagogue every Sabbath and trying to persuade Jews and Greeks. But when Silas and Timothy came down from Macedonia, Paul began devoting himself completely to the word, solemnly testifying to the Jews that Jesus was the Christ. And when they resisted and blasphemed, he **shook out his garments** and said to them, "Your blood be upon your own heads! I am clean. From now on I shall go to the Gentiles." (Acts 18:4-6)

In each of these two cases, the apostles protested against the Jews who had demonstrated that they did not want anything to do with the gospel. They heard the preaching of Paul, but rejected what he was saying. In each case, they resisted Paul and blasphemed God in their unbelief. In the case of the Jews at Corinth, we get the picture that this took place over several weeks or months. For Paul, it was appropriate for him to shake the dust off of their feet "as a testimony against them" (Mark 6:11). They were "beyond hope." As Jews, they understood the meaning of Paul's actions. You try that today, and people will ask you, What are you doing?

I do believe that there reaches a point, when people have so demonstrated their hostility to the gospel, that we can consider them as beyond hope. It is a terrifying thought. It does grip my heart. But isn't this what Jesus instructed these apostles to do? Isn't this what the apostle Paul did when these Jews rejected his message?

Let me show you another instance in which the apostle Paul did a similar thing (though without shaking off literal dust from his clothes and shoes). It is found in Acts 28. At that point in the life of the early church, we find Paul in Rome. He had survived a dangerous journey from Caesarea where he was being charged with disturbing the peace. He appealed his case to Caesar in Rome. Along the way, the ship on which he was traveling encountered a tremendous storm. To preserve their rations, they fasted for 14 days until they finally were shipwrecked upon the island of Malta. Eventually, he made it to Rome.

In verse 16, we pick up the story, "And when we entered Rome, Paul was allowed to stay by himself, with the soldier who was guarding him." He is under house arrest, meaning that he is free to receive his friends and speak with them and counsel with them and preach to them. But, he cannot leave the house. We read in the very last two verses of Acts 28, "And he stayed two full years in his own rented quarters, and was welcoming all who came to him, preaching the kingdom of God, and teaching concerning the Lord Jesus Christ with all openness, unhindered" (Acts 28:30-31). Though Paul is under house arrest, he is still entertaining profitable ministry. In verse 17, we find Paul calling together the Jews in Rome to speak with them.

And it happened that after three days he called together those who were the leading men of the Jews, and when they had come together, he [began] saying to them, "Brethren, though I had done nothing against our people, or the customs of our fathers, yet I was delivered prisoner from Jerusalem into the hands of the Romans. And when they had examined me, they were willing to release me because there was no ground for putting me to death. But when the Jews objected, I was forced to appeal to Caesar; not that I had any accusation against my nation. For this reason therefore, I requested to see you and to speak with you, for I am wearing this chain for the sake of the hope of Israel." (Acts 28:17-20)

The Jews' response was this:

And they said to him, "We have neither received letters from Judea concerning you, nor have any of the brethren come here and reported or spoken anything bad about you. But we desire to hear from you what your views are; for concerning this sect, it is known to us that it is spoken against everywhere." (Acts 28:21-22)

So, picture it. Paul has just come into Rome. He wanted to gather the Jews and explain to them why he was sent as a prisoner to Rome.

And when they had set a day for him, they came to him at his lodging in large numbers; and he was explaining to them by solemnly testifying about the kingdom of God, and trying to persuade them concerning Jesus, from both the Law of Moses and from the Prophets, from morning until evening. And some were being persuaded by the things spoken, but others would not believe. And when they did not agree with one another, they began leaving after Paul had spoken one parting word, "The Holy Spirit rightly spoke through Isaiah the prophet to your fathers, saying, 'GO TO THIS PEOPLE AND SAY, "YOU WILL KEEP ON HEARING, BUT WILL NOT UNDERSTAND; AND YOU WILL KEEP ON SEEING, BUT WILL NOT PERCEIVE; FOR THE HEART OF THIS PEOPLE HAS BECOME DULL, AND WITH THEIR EARS THEY SCARCELY HEAR, AND THEY HAVE CLOSED THEIR EYES; LEST THEY SHOULD SEE WITH THEIR EYES, AND HEAR WITH THEIR EARS, AND UNDERSTAND WITH THEIR HEART AND RETURN, AND I SHOULD HEAL THEM.'" Let it be known to you therefore, that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will also listen." And when he had spoken these words, the Jews departed, having a great dispute among themselves. (Acts 28:23-29)

By quoting these verses from Isaiah, Paul was essentially or virtually shaking off the dust of his clothes and feet, in protest against these unbelieving Jews. I believe that there may come a time in your witnessing to people, that you will likewise reach a point when you think that it is useless to continue on. Perhaps you might not shake the dust off your clothes and feet to witness against their unbelief, but you might quote from Isaiah 6, like Paul did to these unbelieving Jews. You might make some similar comments.

You need to be careful in giving up on people, however. There is always hope for people in the gospel of Jesus Christ. All who come to Jesus with humility and brokenness over their sin and belief in the justifying work of Jesus upon the cross, will be accepted by Him. I do not care how bad you have been. I do not care of the greatness of the sins that you have committed. The criminal on death row is not too great a sinner for Jesus to forgive. Jesus forgave the criminal on the cross, who justly received the death sentence for his crime (Luke 23:39-43). The one who blasphemes against God, persecutes the church, and is physically aggressive against righteous people is not too great a sinner to be forgiven. Jesus forgave Saul of Tarsus, who willingly orchestrated the murder of many Christians and persecuted the church of God (Acts 9:1-19). The prostitute (or sexual pervert or child molester) is not too great a sinner for Jesus to forgive. Jesus forgave such a woman, when he dined at the house of the Pharisee (Luke 7:36-50). The drugged up demon worshiper is not too great a sinner for Jesus to forgive. Jesus forgave the demoniac in Gadera, who was possessed by a Legion of demons (Mark 5:1-20). The CEO of a large corporation, who embezzles millions of dollars through false accounting is not too great a sinner for Jesus to forgive. Jesus forgave Matthew, the greedy tax-collector, who extorted much money from his fellow citizens (Matt. 9:9). In fact, when the apostles dusted off their feet in protest against people, it was not against the notorious sinners. Rather, it was against those who professed themselves to be righteous -- the righteous Jews!

When can you give up in your evangelism of certain people? I think it is when they meet three conditions. First, they are **self-professed righteous people**. The difficulty these Jews had in grasping the Messiah is that they did not grasp their own sin. The Pharisees, time and time and time again, failed to see how they had broken the law, because they thought that they had kept it so well. Jesus even turned Himself away from such people, saying, "I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners" (Matt. 9:13).

The second condition is that they are **thoroughly knowledgeable of the Scriptures**. These Jews knew their Bibles inside and out. From their youth up, they were trained in the Scriptures. The Scriptures were central to their religious and political life. Their problem is that they did not believe the word of God when it testified to Jesus. Jesus said to them,

"You search the Scriptures, because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is these that bear witness of Me. ... Do not think that I will accuse you before the Father; the one who accuses you is Moses, in whom you have set your hope. For if you believe Moses, you would believe Me; for he wrote of Me. But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe My words?" (John 5:39, 45-47).

The third condition of when it is appropriate to give up attempts at evangelism is when they **refuse the clear message of the gospel**. These Jews that heard the testimony of the apostles who had went out and proclaimed the kingdom of God, saw God's wonderful grace to heal "every kind of disease and every kind of sickness." Their healing power was beyond debate. There was no question. Yet, they failed to believe. In Acts, we are told that these people were blaspheming (Acts 13:45; 18:6) against the truth that Paul brought to them. Paul said, "You repudiate [the word of God] and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life" (Acts 13:46). The Jews that Paul spoke to (Acts 28), saw in his life, a changed man. These Jews heard the clear testimony given from the Scriptures, that Jesus was the Messiah. They refused to believe it.

Do you know anybody who is like this? Do you know people who are self-professed righteous people, thoroughly knowledgeable of the Scriptures, and refuse the clear message of the gospel? I think that it describes many people who are in cults today. All cults seek to work their way to God. And thus, those involved would profess themselves to be righteous. Many cults are focused upon the Scriptures. They do not understand the Scriptures, but they value the Scriptures. As you share the gospel with them, they remain unconvinced of the message. In their misunderstanding of the gospel, these cults blaspheme the saving work of Jesus Christ. Perhaps this is why when dealing with Jehovah's Witnesses, I often will rebuke them. I will often tell them that Jesus Christ is God and that those who deny such a fact are really blaspheming God. My heart goes out to such people. I think of how they will face the Lord someday and only then will they realize that they have been prophesying falsely of Jesus. They will spend an eternity in hell. But it is worse than that. Their hell will be worse than the hell of Sodom and Gomorrah. Their hell may even be worse than the hell of these Jews, who rejected the apostles, who came to minister to them.

Perhaps another such group of people that meet the above conditions would be those who are unrepentant over their sin and who have been disciplined by the church. Perhaps for years, they sat in church, hearing the Word of God expounded, but have come to neglect the clear gospel. Often, those disciplined by the church would maintain their innocence with regard to their sin. If they maintain such arrogant denial of their sin, there is no hope for them. Perhaps this is why Paul delivered the sinning man in the Corinthian congregation to Satan for the destruction of his flesh (1 Cor. 5:5). He was arrogant in his sin and unrepentant.

I must confess that my message this week has been sobering. I have been sobered this week as I have thought about the terrible suffering that awaits those who know so much about the gospel and about the Scriptures, but believe so little of what the Bible speaks and profess themselves to be righteous. For such people there is no hope.

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on March 16, 2003 by Steve Brandon.  
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