

Going in Circles



Sermon Text

Gen 8:13–22; 9:8–17



Big Idea

The surprise of the gospel is that it is often going around in circles with people in love for them, patiently persisting with them, even through initial rebellion and rejection, that actually moves them forward along the line towards repentance and faith!

I am certainly not opposed to the line—if by the line we’re talking about more direct forms of evangelism: knocking on doors, passing out tracts, preaching on street corners, and so forth. I’m simply saying with this circle idea that, especially in our post-Christian culture—where most people already have bad associations with and preconceived notions about Christianity—we need to be ready and willing to go around in circles with people, to be patient and longsuffering with them in their rejection and skepticism. The first couple go-rounds, we may just be breaking through stereotypes and baggage from childhood experiences or whatever. And then, only later, perhaps, they will open more to it as they see we are the real thing, that we love them, that Jesus has really transformed us and He’s here for them.

(1) The Basis for It

God puts His commitment to go around in circles with us in covenantal form with Noah. Notice 3 things:

(1) Man Is Still Sinful—In Gen 8:21 we read of God saying: “I will never again curse the ground because of man, for the intention of man’s heart is evil from his youth” (cf. Gen 6:5).

(2) God Gives Time—He is essentially saying in this covenant: “I will keep you all going in circles round the sun. I will give you stability and blessing.” The changing of seasons, the agricultural cycle, the ongoing interchange of day and night, the good gifts of God in creation—while the earth remains, God has covenanted Himself to keep that going for us. But what we can really conclude at the end of all this is that, while God is keeping us in circular motion round about the sun, He is, in that, showing His commitment to go round about in circles with us in love—though our hearts are evil, and our intentions are against Him, and we deserve nothing but His wrath.

(3) Jesus Is Coming—It is because of God’s commitment to not deluge the world again that makes room for the unfolding of redemptive history. If God had ended things, washed the world out every time men’s hearts were inclined towards evil, well, history would have gone nowhere. There would be no Abraham, no Israel, no Moses, no David, no Christ, no cross, no church, no salvation, no mission, no heaven. What He’s doing here, then, is not only making room for us to come to the cross, He’s making room for the cross to come to us. The idea of the rainbow, in particular, foreshadows this. After the flood, when God sees that humanity is still in rebellion against Him, He does the most unthinkable thing: He turns the bow of His righteous anger on Himself! He will let the arrow of His wrath sink deep into His own heart, if it means saving us. And, of course, that is what we see ultimately worked out at the cross.

(2) The Outworking of It

Reflection Questions



- To this point, have you been more prone to see evangelism as a line or a circle? Why would it be important to begin conceiving it more as a circle? How do the two work together?
- Consider again how God saved you. Was it by means of a line (i.e. a passing evangelist) or a circle (i.e. a friend committed to loving and sharing with you over time)? Explain.
- Are you going around in circles with anyone right now? At work? In the neighborhood? In the living room? With extended family? Are you patient and loving to your own hurt? Who might God be calling you to move towards in this way?
- Read Rev 4:1–3. Why do you think the rainbow shows up again here around the throne of God in heaven?

Go in circles. With this I simply mean to say: Persevere with those you are trying to reach with the gospel!

Often we think of evangelism as a line. We get into relationships with people in an effort to bring the gospel to them. We will put up with the typical relational niceties. We will talk about the weather, go to the dinner parties, and so forth . . . but we will only go so far. There comes a point where we must get to what we've really been after all along. We must share the gospel. So we share and, to our dismay, they are uninterested. They push back. We quickly counter. Things get awkward. What now?

We often don't know how to proceed. Our whole purpose in this relationship was to share the gospel and we didn't "close the sale." Evangelism was a line. It was point A to B to C and things didn't progress as planned. So the relationship ends. But should it?

Now, don't misunderstand me, certainly it is not wrong to pursue relationships with unbelievers in hopes of bringing the gospel to them. Such efforts can be the very essence of love. And, what's more, there certainly are times when Jesus calls us to move out on His mission in straight lines. We might think of the time where He sends out the seventy-two and instructs them to stay and minister in those towns that receive them but to move right on past those towns that reject (Luke 10:1-12). We might think of those seemingly harsh words in the Sermon on the Mount: "Do not give dogs what is holy, and do not throw your pearls before pigs . . ." (Matt 7:6a).

So I know that there are certain missions that call for lines. And I know that there are certain relationships that must eventually be moved on from. But I also think that most of our everyday evangelistic efforts will play out like circles. We will draw near to people, ask to hear more of their story, listen and engage, serve them as best we are able, share the good news of Jesus with them . . . and they will reject it.

But the relationships, the friendships we are forming, don't have to end. In love, in patience, in perseverance, we simply bend that line back and go around again. We continue to draw near, we ask for more, we listen and care, we love and serve, we pray and pray, and, as God opens doors, we share the hope of Jesus once more.

We go in circles. And we get somewhere.