



Matthew 4:18-23
ECO Values
“We Are Evangelical”

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This morning we draw to a close our brief three-Sunday series looking at three core theological values that our church and our denomination hold: that we are Reformed, Egalitarian, and Evangelical. There is some inherent tension between these values, but together they work to keep us on the path of following Jesus. So, although there’s some complexity with them because they don’t always fit together neatly, and some people might wonder how we hold it all together, these three things really help keep us close to God and on mission for him. Today we are looking at the value of being “Evangelical” and if you missed either of the other two messages, I would highly encourage you to visit www.rosehill.church to get up to speed.

The theological value of being Evangelical is right in the name of our denomination: A Covenant Order of Evangelical Presbyterians. To be honest, sometimes I wish that word wasn’t a part of the name of our denomination. It’s not that I’m anti-Evangelical, or embarrassed by it...It’s an important theological value that is extremely Jesus-centered. But so often I feel like I need to define what we mean by the word, so as to eliminate a bunch of preconceived ideas other people have of who evangelicals are and what we’re about. If I’d been consulted about what the name of our denomination should be, I would have chosen A Covenant Order of Presbyterians – COP for short. Maybe that makes us sound like we’re a church that’s only for police officers...though ECO sounds like were a church for environmentalists...and while we do support and encourage stewardship and care for the Creation, we’re not an environmentalist church.

So...with that, let’s talk about what it means to be Evangelical, some obstacles we have to overcome, and some possible solutions. We’re going to look at a number of Bible verses and passages today, but let’s turn to **Matthew 4:18-23** to start with. This is God’s word to you and me this morning....Pray.

Let’s start with what we mean by “Evangelical,” because it comes right out of this passage and so many others in the New Testament. **The word**

“evangelical” comes from the Greek word “euangelion,” which means “good news” or “gospel.” So, the evangelical faith focuses on the “good news” or the “gospel” message of Jesus. “Euangelion” appears 77 times in the New Testament, plus other forms of the word. In spite of its prevalence, Scripture doesn’t give us a nice, neat, one sentence dictionary definition of what Euangelion is. The closest comes from the gospel of Mark:

Mark 1:1 reads, “**The beginning of the *good news* (euangelion) about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God...**” This is really the only place in the New Testament where the word is presented and a complete definition follows. But the definition is the rest of the Gospel According to Mark! Not exactly a nice, neat dictionary-ready definition. However, when I took JD to school this last Friday, I saw a guy with a sweatshirt, that on the back said, “See front for good news.” The front said, “Jesus loves you.” That’s a pretty good three-word definition of what Scripture means by the gospel, or the good news, the euangelion. I told him I liked his sweatshirt, though I didn’t tell him it was going to end up in a sermon. 😊

Here are some other places that Euangelion appears in the New Testament: **Matthew 4:23** from today’s passage, “**Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the *good news* of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people.**” Mark 1:15, “The time has come,” he said. “The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the *good news*!” Romans 1:16, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel (euangelion), because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile.”

The list goes on, obviously – there are 73 other instances. But the point is: **When you read the biographies of Jesus and then the rest of the New Testament as well, we see that the “good news” is what Jesus was about; in fact, Jesus *is* the good news – his birth, life, death, and resurrection.** This is what we are about. We believe that Jesus really lived, really died, really rose from the grave, and that confessing and repenting of our sin, and trusting in Jesus really matters and makes a difference. We take the Bible seriously – we may debate some whether it’s inerrant or infallible – but we take the whole Bible seriously either way. We see Jesus as the fulfillment of the Old Testament religious law and prophets as he himself says he is, so that

in the end our faith is completely centered on him. We believe that this euangelion, this gospel, this good news, really IS good news and we want others to hear it and know it as well. *This* is the good news. And it's not just good news, it's great news, Amen?

Given this good news that we believe can transform lives here and now and for eternity, I can't help but notice, and maybe you've noticed it too, that: **Evangelicals have a problem with getting that message across positively.** Many people don't perceive us as having good news to share. We can blame the media for the reporting they choose to do on evangelicals, and therefore how evangelicals are portrayed. We can blame secular culture that has pushed the Bible and the Christian faith to the margins. And undoubtedly there's some truth in those two pieces. But, there is a third problem. Maybe more than that...but a third one that I can think of and want to highlight. And that third problem is *us*. We evangelicals are, I believe, the biggest stumbling block to the gospel of Jesus Christ being presented as "good news" to a world that desperately needs Jesus. Let me share a couple ways I believe we are an obstacle. **First, we have, unfortunately, not done a good job of being united together.**

The roots of this go back centuries...a few thousand years, even...into the Old Testament. But it's gotten worse in the last several decades – ECO, our denomination, did not exist a dozen years ago; we split from another Presbyterian denomination, because of their wandering from Scripture! But we Presbyterians are not as bad at splitting as the Baptists, so there is that. 😊 And I say that in love, because I have Baptist friends, and I'm referencing a Baptist pastor in just a moment in this sermon. But there's well over 200 denominations in the U.S., over 45,000 globally, and of course thousands and thousands of non-denominational churches as well. Doesn't look too unified, does it. Now, we are all unified by Jesus and our belief that Scripture is the only written word of God. So, there is a core unity, but it doesn't appear that way to the outsider. And this is not just Evangelical Christianity, by the way. It's throughout the Protestant branch of the church. But Evangelicals are particularly good at division. And while the differences do help us reach different people, for sure, and God works through them all...we're all on the

same team...it also is an obstacle because our unity is not very unified from an outsider's perspective.

Second, we have turned evangelical Christianity into a subset of the Republican party, and worse, we have inverted the relationship between faith and politics. Evangelicals definitely do not have the corner on the market when it comes to propagating a message of “you have to think and believe a certain way on all kinds of topics before we’ll accept you as a follower of Jesus” – progressive liberal Christians have their issues as well. But evangelicals have a theology that tends to be a little more counter-cultural, and a way of merging politics and faith that really draws attention to it. Unfortunately, it takes attention away from Jesus. Now, there is nothing wrong with our theology impacting our politics, in fact, it should. I’m not saying we should be a-political. The problem is that Evangelicals on the whole have elevated politics above the gospel.

In fact, “Evangelical” is now seen as a political ideology, getting more and more divorced from Jesus. Ryan Burge is a Baptist pastor (he’s one of us!), and a professor of political science at Eastern Illinois University, and he wrote a guest opinion article for the New York Times three years ago, titled, “Why ‘Evangelical’ is becoming another word for Republican.” In fact, he was quoted in a Seattle Times Article yesterday about this very topic of faith and politics. But in the NYT article I read three years ago, he writes about how more and more people who are not Jesus followers, actually identify as “evangelical” in politics – we’re talking about Muslims, Hindus even. This is how much of America views evangelicals: as a political entity. And that’s a problem we’ve created.

The result is: we have made particular political views the gateways to knowing Jesus rather than introducing people to Jesus and letting their politics get shaped by Him. People who might be open to finding out about Jesus are turned off because they think in order to be a Christian, they have to first vote a certain way. That’s getting the cart before the horse. We’re essentially asking people to have a Biblical worldview when they haven’t even read the Bible or know diddlysquat about Jesus. Politics have become a

gate to coming to faith in Jesus, and I'm still struggling to find that verse in the Bible. It's backwards.

The upshot of all this is that when we talk about being evangelical in our church and our denomination, we *don't* mean this political use of the word. Please, please let that stick with you today. **By “evangelical” we mean gospel-centered, historic, orthodox, Biblical Christianity, where Jesus really is good news (euangelion).** Our beliefs and our politics flow out of that, and while there are some theological differences within Evangelicalism, there is a core unity centered around Scripture, Jesus, and a desire to share the good news with others. (If you want to dive into this more, you might consider reading *The Kingdom, the Power, and the Glory*, by Tim Alberta.)

So, now I believe we have to ask: **How can God work through us to change the narrative and the perception, so that the euangelion would be received as Good News?** This is where the rubber meets the road for each of us. How can we be part of leading people toward Jesus, rather than building walls and roadblocks to him? It sounds daunting (we're talking about a whole country!), because the odds of any one of us getting a platform that reaches the masses of the U.S. so we can educate them about who evangelicals *really* are...what we're really about...the odds of that are kind of remote. It could happen, and I pray that God would raise up someone, or a few people, who can have that kind of platform. But we *can* change how a *few* people perceive Evangelicals one at a time, or a few at a time. We do it with our own lives that are Jesus-centered and with a willingness to humbly but firmly critique bad evangelical examples...to distance ourselves from evangelicals who raise things up above Jesus such as politics – or it could be other things like financial wealth or hobbies or whatever. And then, we can share with them how the good news really is good news, how God has changed our lives, so people who are far from Jesus might be led to the waters and drink from the well that is Jesus.

So, how do we do this? How can you and I begin to make a dent in the world's views about us Evangelicals, so we might win the opportunity to share the good news with them? Let me share three brief thoughts. **First, we have to keep allowing ourselves to be evangelized and led to Jesus over**

and over again, while humbly confessing the things *we* try and elevate above him. We have to keep coming to the foot of the cross and the empty tomb and the teachings of Jesus and the rest of the New Testament, and keep centered on Jesus, rather than other stuff – be it politics or anything else. My daughter, Hailey, is a senior at NYU, and about a year ago she said to me, “I love the church I’ve found, but I feel like for the last couple months, that the sermons haven’t once really just reminded me of the good news of Jesus. They’ve been about other things that are Biblical and good...but *I need the simple gospel message sometimes, too.*” That’s solid preaching and discipleship advice from a now 21-year-old gal. Let’s stay centered on him, and nothing else. It’s like the guys invited by Jesus in today’s passage from Matthew: He invited them to follow, they left their fishing nets, their stuff, even family, and followed him. Simple, and centered on Jesus.

Second, and closely related to the first: we have to be willing to acknowledge that we are evangelical (I have actually come to appreciate this word being in our denominational name), **and humbly speak up and correct the evangelical narrative when we have the opportunity.** This flows right out of the first point about being centered on Jesus, because none this other stuff that people are using to define “evangelical” should ever rise above Jesus, and we need to call it out where we see it happening. We need to name bad Christian behavior, and bad elevation of politics above the gospel, when we see it, while acknowledging that we are Jesus followers, and evangelical ones at that. (And it’s not that we’re perfect...so have humility.) Evangelicals critiquing evangelicals is a powerful witness. We need to be able to say something like this, **“That cruel treatment of others by that Jesus follower...that inhumane policy they’re pushing for...that behavior...that language...that attitude...that’s not what Jesus was about. I’m not perfect in my own discipleship, but that behavior is not how he calls us to be.”** That kind of correction from within the walls of the church needs to happen more, because we follow and worship the lamb of God and not the donkey or the elephant. We want to lead people to Jesus, not a political perspective. So, keep Jesus first, claim your evangelical faith, and speak out when other believers elevate politics above the faith.

A third thing to do to change perceptions about Christians: **Third, we need to love and serve the people in our lives.** We need to value non-believing people like our neighbors or co-workers...and value them coming to know Jesus as Lord and Savior more than valuing them agreeing with us politically. We just need to be about Jesus. Jesus is the door, right? He doesn't have another door in front of him, so let's lead people to *that* door, and not a series of other doors in order to get to him. We do that by simply being available for our neighbors and the other people in our lives so we can listen, come along side them, serve them, encourage them in the midst of the challenges of life, celebrate the joys, etc. That alone can have a huge impact in changing the narrative about who evangelicals are and what we stand for, as we listen to our neighbors rather than judge them, and serve them in their places of need just as Jesus has served us through his death on the cross. Let God then do the work of transforming them. And if you're here this morning or watching online, and you're not a Jesus-follower, we would invite you to join with us on this journey, and you can come just as you are. No judgment or condemnation, just Jesus.

So, keep coming to Jesus; acknowledge and own your own evangelical faith and your own mis-steps, while humbly critiquing others who distort what it means to follow Jesus, and then love and serve your neighbors so they'd encounter the euangelion, the good news, about Jesus. This gospel-centered focus, this Biblical value of being evangelical, is a core part of who we are, because it was core to Jesus. His ministry is defined by these things, and he invites people to follow him, to experience the euangelion, the Good news. We also cling to the value of Egalitarian church leadership and ministry roles, because men and women are equally created in the image of God, and Jesus held that value. And the third and final core value is that we are Reformed theologically: we place an emphasis on God's sovereignty, his rule over creation, the Bible as the only written Word of God and the authority in our lives, and we want everything we do to be for the glory of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Jesus held that value, too. I pray that Rose Hill collectively would be guided by these values, including in your own life, so we would each be drawn closer to Jesus, and others would come toward him with us, as well. Let's pray...Amen.