Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. 36 When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. 37 Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. 38 Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.”

10:1 He called his twelve disciples to him and gave them authority to drive out evil spirits and to heal every disease and sickness. 2 These are the names of the twelve apostles: first, Simon (who is called Peter) and his brother Andrew; James son of Zebedee, and his brother John; 3 Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; 4 Simon the Zealot and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him. 5 These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: “Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. 6 Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel. 7 As you go, preach this message: ‘The kingdom of heaven is near.’ 8 Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you have received, freely give. 9 Do not take along any gold or silver or copper in your belts; 10 take no bag for the journey, or extra tunic, or sandals or a staff; for the worker is worth his keep. 11 “Whatever town or village you enter, search for some worthy person there and stay at his house until you leave. 12 As you enter the home, give it your greeting. 13 If the home is deserving, let your peace rest on it; if it is not, let your peace return to you. 14 If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake the dust off your feet when you leave that home or town. 15 I tell you the truth, it will be more bearable for Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for that town.

Introduction

“Space: the final frontier.” That’s how the TV show Star Trek began. Man always needs a frontier. With no place to boldly go, things go badly. With no purpose, no task, no mission or mandate humanity shrivels and dies. We were made in God’s image to do something.

But last week we ended by ruminating on the ultimate scandal of Jesus – that he says, “Because of what you’ve done and the ruin you’ve made of this world, salvation has to mean you do nothing. If you touch it, it will fall apart.” But when we’re not ruining the world, we want to save the world, don’t we? Not be saved. And that’s really at the bottom of any resistance to the real Jesus.

Okay, so does this message of salvation by the finished work of another then lead us to idleness? Does it suck the purpose out of life to find out that you can’t contribute to your salvation? Does it leave us with no motivation, no passion, no direction, no place to go, nothing to do? Hardly! I’ve tried to show many times how when you realize that God does not need your good works then you’re free to give them to your neighbor in
genuine love through your vocations (callings) in the world as butchers, bakers, and candlestick makers.

But even more the great all-encompassing task of the Christian now becomes the spread of the gospel – telling the news of the finished work of Christ on behalf of sinners. First, the spread of the gospel into the unreached recesses of the Christian’s own heart. The human heart is a wild and endless frontier of darkness that you will never this side of death reach the end of. If the papers of unconditional surrender have been signed in the capital city of your heart, there is still a massive expanse of territory left out there that needs to hear the news and you will never run out of places to go with the announcement in the time you have left. This is what we call sanctification (which is what C.F.D. Moule called “a strangely relaxed kind of strenousness”). Sanctification gives you purpose in life. It’s the stuff that Jesus was laying out before his disciples in the Sermon on the Mount – letting the gospel of grace transform the root that behavior like reconciliation, faithfulness, reliability, un-self-protectiveness… is the fruit of. There’s always more to explore here. You’ll never grow bored in this task. So there’s something to do: preach the gospel to yourself.

And then secondly there’s another element: preach the gospel to others. The grand, inspiring, challenging yet joyous task of the Christian also includes the spread of the gospel into the unreached places of this world (not just our own hearts). So the unreached people of our families, neighborhoods, cities, countries, and planet need to hear the good news of what Jesus has done. This is the topic that Matthew closes his book with (the Great Commission in ch. 28) and the one he introduces today: the mission of the church. There is a vast sum of people who have not yet heard, let alone accepted the news of the gospel. As long as this remains the case (and it will until Jesus comes again) there is a grand purpose, a collective objective for God’s people. I don’t want to be insensitive or anything, but there’s really no excuse for feeling a lack of purpose in this world. What’s my life about?? If you’re a Christian, as long as there are unbelievers, you have a grand, noble, exhilarating, mission. Seeing this reality is the ultimate antidote to aimlessness.

I’m burdened for our generation that feels with the completion of manifest destiny and victory in the Cold War and the end of the Shuttle Program, that there’s really nothing left to aspire to and who sink into the morass of directionlessness. Again, if we see the places where the light of the gospel hasn’t shown, both in our own hearts and around our world, there is absolutely no way we can feel as if we’ve run out of stuff to do or there’s no challenge or nothing big to live for. I couldn’t help but think of the incredible story of the Japanese soldier Hiroo Onoda who hunkered down in the jungles of the Philipines for 30 years after the end of World War II because he didn’t know it had ended yet. True story. The war was finished, but the news hadn’t been heard and accepted by Onoda. To me that’s a great picture of evangelism. We’re not fighting a war, but we have a task – get the news out that the war is over, pardon is available, peace can be experienced. Christians get to go out with King Jesus’ authority and tell everyone that his kingdom has come, the battle has been won.

Jesus’ identity has been established, now his community is starting to take shape and that community, from very early on we see today has a mission. It’s neat to recognize that the theme in last section was people opening their mouths and the news spreading. Now this very next section is explicitly about mission. In short, what we see
today from Matthew 9:35 – 10:15 is just this: **Christians want everybody to know the real Jesus and what he has done.**

*Let’s pray…*

**How to View the Lost**

Last week we saw that some people venomously resisted Jesus – v. 34 (ouch!). Yet even though some people rejected him, even saying some pretty nasty things about him, he continued to do good. “Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness” (v. 35). That’s essentially repeating verbatim what it said earlier in Mt. 4:23 about Jesus’ activities. The point is that he doesn’t immediately defend his honor (he will give a reason why the accusation is ludicrous later on), but really Jesus just puts his head down and keeps plugging away at what he came to do. “People hate me? Okay. I love people.” That’s who Jesus is. He’s the guy who prayed for the very people who were nailing spikes through his hands and feet (Lk. 23:34). This is the very essence of the Christian message: a man willingly, gladly dying for his enemies.

It’s a shame when Christians are seen fighting and bickering and lashing back against their despisers. It’s un-Christlike. The heart of Christ wasn’t vindictive. He didn’t get easily offended and defensive. He didn’t get caught up in fighting. He wasn’t there to fight the Romans or to fight the guys who wanted him to fight the Romans. He did not come to condemn the world but to save the world (Jn. 3:17). And so Jesus kept on task; he stayed on mission – helping people, showing compassion, and announcing in word and demonstrating in deed the good news that the long-anticipated kingdom had come in him and calling people into it.

Too often Christians are seen as culture warriors instead of compassionate bearers of good news. Look at v. 36 – “When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.” Jesus didn’t get rattled by the resistance, but kept looking out at all the people who were (in the non-derogatory sense of the word) pathetic. He was driven by compassion for hurting people, wrecked by sin. He didn’t try to stay away from them. He didn’t cast aspersions on them. He didn’t demand they clean themselves up before coming to him. He didn’t fear them. He loved them. His heart went out to them. If you’ve been found by Jesus, do you look at ‘lost’ people around you with an air of superiority and a sense of disgust or with pity?

The image of shepherd-less sheep is a familiar one from the OT (i.e. Nu. 27:17-18; 1Kngs. 22:17; Ezek. 34; Zech. 10:2-3, 13:7). It generally refers to people who have a lack of good spiritual leadership, people who are exploited or just left in the dark as to what the real truth of God is. Sheep provide a great picture. “Sheep,” one commentator points out, “are defenseless animals. Without a shepherd they are vulnerable to any attack. Even without predators they are in trouble if they have no shepherd, for they are not good foragers. They need a shepherd to lead them in green pastures and beside still waters (Ps. 23:2).”² People are, on their own, helpless sheep who have all gone astray (Is. 53:6). We’re in a predicament.

This language is usually an indictment on the religious leaders of God’s people. In Jesus’ day it was the Pharisees and teachers of the Law who were, as one pastor...
explains, “burdening the people with legalistic niceties instead of seeking them out and wooing them with the gospel of God’s grace. They were encumbering the people with laws about the Sabbath, fasts, clothing, and tithes.” So many people who fill churches across this country this morning are not getting the gospel. They’re getting advice, stuff to do, pep talks, seven steps towards self-improvement instead of the infinite steps that God took in Christ to rescue them. That breaks my heart. So many churches are led by egotistical pastors preaching health and wealth to make a buck themselves or preaching moralism; how to take back America for God, how to raise good kids, how to ______. Not the gospel. And it’s an utter tragedy.

A couple members of our church who recently moved down south have been having a heartrending experience trying to find a church down there in the ‘Bible-belt’. They say the gospel is practically absent. A lot of people go to church though. I ask, “Why?” They say probably because it fills a need in the community for something to do – there’s not much happening down there so the church offers endless programs to fill a need for entertainment. It’s no wonder that when mass media infiltrates these regions more and more, less and less of the younger generations find church remotely appealing anymore. The churches that often find some success are the ones that try to ape the MTV culture. But eventually people will figure out that the church can’t really compete with that or see the vacuity of it all.

I recently visited a large evangelical church in the suburbs of Detroit on a Sunday morning to watch a pastor on a video feed briefly misinterpret a Bible text and then spend the next 30 minutes exegeting a survey they had done of the members, essentially excoriating them for not doing enough, being committed enough. Harrased and helpless. The church needs to be evangelized! Christianity needs the gospel! (And I need the gospel to remind myself that I can’t turn gospel-centeredness into a work that makes me better than others; I’m no better than these people myself, just an unlikely recipient of lavish grace.)

Now it’s roughly the same tune being played outside the church. People are gullible and ideas and gurus and fads and books and movements and products come along, sweep in, and give people something to do in exchange for grand promises of reward. But in the end leave people empty and broken. Whether it’s the housewives who follow all the tips for looking young in Good Housekeeping but can’t really stay aging or the yuppie smothered in success and well dressed but empty or the college girl looking for love in a culture of hook-ups but just getting used. Get-rich-quick schemes, diets, self-help books, sports fans who think Theo-logy has something to do with Theo Epstein. People are clueless as to what the good news is. “Good News” becomes an add campaign for Gillette razors. The real gospel is completely foreign to people. Law is innate. You don’t have to go on a mission to tell people that they should love others or that they should be doing better; that there’s something wrong with them that needs to be fixed. They know this already at some level. What they don’t know and will never know from reflection or an inner voice is that God loves sinners and has sent his Son to prove it; they could never save themselves by their effort, but God has fully provided a way of salvation. Without hearing of this and really seeing how God’s love is what their hearts desperately need and long for people will remain in a pitiable state. Christians should look out on the world with compassion.
What to Do About the Lost

Jesus saw this reality and continued preaching the good news of the kingdom but he also made a remark to his disciples. “He said to [them], ‘The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few.’” In other words, “There are a lot of people out there who need to hear about the forgiveness of sins in me, who are ripe for such a message, but there are very few people telling them about it.” At that time, just Jesus. So he starts by telling his disciples – probably the larger crowd of people who had coalesced around Jesus at this time – to pray. “Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field” (v. 38).

Ask. Pray. Jesus says it starts with prayer. And prayer is care, expressed to God. “God, please raise up, call, and send people that will penetrate into all the cultures and subcultures in our world that are oblivious to the gospel.”

Christians want everybody to know the real Jesus and what he has done. And this desire is expressed first and foremost in prayer. We beg God for the salvation of the harassed and helpless people we see, on the bus, on the street, in our office, at our school, on the television, in National Geographic. “Oh God, they need to know you, ‘the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent’ (Jn. 17:3). So send more people to tell them. Send people in among the Libyan Berbers with the gospel (their savior is not ultimately the UN). Infiltrate the academy with winsome spokespeople for the gospel. Bring more workers to share the gospel at the UIC campus; those students walking along Halsted at night are like sheep without a shepherd. Call someone who can take the gospel into the gated off section 8 housing tracts like Barbara Jean Wright Courts and the troubled African-American youth there with nothing really to do and no real future. Father, please orchestrate things so that the hipsters who have never ridden a horse but love Honky Tonk in Pilsen see that there is something infinitely better than cool in Christ. Juvenile Detention center, Cook County, Arts District, University Village/Commons... Oh Lord, it’s such good news, you are so glorious, you deserve to be seen, they are so clueless as to what’s really reality... Send out workers into your harvest field.”

Is this something like your prayer life? We don’t often think much about prayer. Again, partly because we have an incurable desire to do. But prayer is where it should all start. We find it useless. But it’s hugely strategic. Great revivals of people coming to Christ have almost always been preceded by intensive and unified prayer. Here’s a scenario to imagine. Imagine you are bedridden with a crippling disease, just waiting to die but it works slowly. You can’t go out, you don’t go to work, you just see your family and the hospice care worker who is already a Christian. Society may say you’re worthless, but are you removed from your role in the kingdom of God? What can you do? You can pray! You can pray extensively and focused for strategic fronts for the gospel.

Going to the Lost

I don’t know if you’ve noticed this, but often times the way prayer works is that God will call us while we’re praying to be part of the answer to our own prayers. Jesus tells the large crowd of disciples to pray to the ‘Lord of the harvest’ to send out workers and then, starting in ch. 10, Jesus sends out a subset of his disciples – the Twelve – to do just that. As William Hendriksen puts it, he placed “the very men who had been urged to
pray that the Lord of the harvest might thrust out laborers into his harvest... in the forefront of these laborers."

By the way, pray to the ‘Lord of the harvest’ to send out... and then Jesus sends out. What does that imply? Jesus is the Lord of the harvest that we pray to! Yet another indication of the divine identity of Jesus.

“He called his twelve disciples to him and gave them authority to drive out evil spirits and to heal every disease and sickness” (v. 1). Jesus vested twelve men with his authority. In v. 2 they are called ‘apostles’. ‘Apostle’ literally means ‘sent out one’ and it connotes a type of ambassador, an envoy of the kingdom. We’ve just finished two larger sections demonstrating Jesus’ unique authority: in his teaching and in his miracles. So Jesus has authority. Now he confers his authority on these men. It’s a derived or borrowed authority to be carried out with integrity, like an ambassador of the United States to a foreign country. The ambassador doesn’t make up policy decisions or represent his own will. He simply passes on the message of his sending government.

We get here an official list of the twelve apostles: “first, Simon (who is called Peter) and his brother Andrew; James son of Zebedee, and his brother John; Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddeaus; Simon the Zealot and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him” (vv. 2-4). Some observations to make from this list:

1. The apostles are listed in pairs probably because they were sent out in these pairs (cf. Mk. 6:7).

2. This list differs in some regards from other listings of the Twelve (compare with Mk. 3:16-19, Lk. 6:14-16, Acts 1:13), like order or which name to use (people often went by a couple different names; i.e. Matthew/Levi, Thaddeus/Judas son of James), but despite the differences Peter always comes first (he’s even called the ‘first’ in this listing) and Judas Iscariot who betrayed Jesus always comes last. So we see something even in the way the names are listed of Peter’s leadership and Judas’ infamous failure.

3. Notice the rag-tag nature of the group. You have a supreme optimist like Peter and then a pessimist like Thomas (doubting Thomas; cf. Jn. 20:25). You have a tax collector like Matthew in community with a Zealot like Simon who would have come from a background of nationalism and utter hatred of tax collectors. Isn’t the Jesus community awesome? And then you have men who wrote major books of the NT as well as people we never hear from again. Leon Morris notes: “When Jesus chose his Twelve he did not choose supermen; God does not need outstanding people to do his work, and it seems that, while some of the Twelve were very able men, others were very ordinary.”

4. There’s definitely something to the number 12. Remember that there were 12 tribes of Israel. Craig Keener says, “Jesus’ disciples were the leaders of the true remnant of God’s people (19:28). The spiritual community built on this foundation of the twelve leaders of Israel’s remnant represents the true heir of God’s ancient promises.”

Now that last observation brings up another important point that we must keep in mind if we are to understand this section. These twelve are the foundation of the church. In a certain sense they are a microcosm of the whole church for the church is always to be a rag-tag group, with leaders and some who are imposters, given the communal task of proclaiming the gospel. It’s like we can look at these twelve and in some ways draw immediate connections to us today as members of this church. But in other ways we can’t. The official designation of the Twelve represents a unique group. In one sense
we’re all sent out ones, but in another sense these twelve were special. There are apostles and then there are Apostles. As Ephesians 2:20 explains – the church is “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone.”

So what that means is that what we read of here in Matthew 10 is in some ways a model for our living on mission today and in some ways a non-repeatable historical event. You see it right away starting in v. 5 – “These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: ‘Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel’ (vv. 5-6). In this specific initial foray into missions with this specific group of twelve they were expressly told just to go to Jews. This was to be a local Galilean mission. They were to avoid the Gentile territories. Does that mean Jesus doesn’t have “other sheep that are not of this [Israelite] sheep pen” (Jn. 10:16) or that he doesn’t care about Samaritans (cf. John 4)? No. In fact, later he will make clear that his mission is to expand into all nations (Mt. 28:19). It’s just this particular mission.

And there are also things (I think) that Jesus intends to be done by just these particular people, and not necessarily us. Verse 7 – “As you go, preach this message: ‘The kingdom of heaven is near. Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons’” (vv. 7-8a). I don’t think every believer is commissioned to go around raising dead people, but we do have record that some of the Apostles doing such things (i.e. Peter with Dorcas in Acts 9). That’s not to say that God can’t do these ‘sign gifts’ still today. God can do whatever he wants and I think at times he has done such stuff like this, but he doesn’t have to. His gospel message has been authenticated already through Christ’s resurrection and the miracles of his Apostles.

The case could even be made in the book of Acts that as the Apostles start dying off the sign gifts begin to wane. But what I believe is also clear from the book of Acts, and here’s the real point, is that the proclamation of the kingdom, of the forgiveness of sins in Jesus, of the unique finished work of Christ for our eternal salvation called the gospel is not limited just to the official eye-witness, commissioned Apostles of Christ. It’s extremely interesting that in Acts 8:1-4 where we read that because of the persecution that broke out in conjunction with Stephen’s death “all except the apostles were scattered.” And then we read that it’s the non-Twelve, the church scattered that “preached the word wherever they went.”

Jesus’ sending out of the Twelve is a unique event, but it’s also a model, for he would later send out 72 (Lk. 10:1) and I believe that in some way he has sent out everyone who believes in him. At the very least you have to pray that people would be reached with the gospel and then be willing to be the answer to your prayer. You can’t go everywhere nor are you called to, but I do think that as you are in a mindset of prayer often times the Spirit will call you to walk across a room or go share the gospel with the helpless and harassed in your neighborhood. **Christians want everybody to know the real Jesus and what he has done.**

And in what follows in Jesus’ instructions to the twelve we have helpful guidelines for our witness bearing. First of all we’re bringing good news in the name of Jesus, not waging a war. We are, therefore, to offer it freely. We’re not selling indulgences like John Tetzel. “Freely you have received, freely give” (v. 8b). The gospel is a gift, it’s all about free grace. You don’t buy God’s favor with money or with
anything. The Christian isn’t offering a bargain – “Do this and you can get this.” We’re simply announcing – “Jesus has done this!”

The next detail about not taking along provisions is another aspect that is unique to that particular Galilean mission. In Luke 22:35-36 Jesus rescinds these instructions about provisions for his disciples. Each setting requires discernment. Nevertheless the point remains that Christians should go about their mission with reliance on God and trust that he will provide their needs.

The next instructions have to do with relying on people’s hospitality for lodging. Again these are specifics for a specific culture, but the general principle is that we should trust that there will be open doors some places and we should knock until we find them, walk into them, and stay there. And if doors are locked or slammed in our faces we shouldn’t impose ourselves. We shouldn’t even be too bent out of shape. We simply move on. They are not rejecting us, but Jesus.

However, we should note the gravity of v. 15 and keep this in mind – “I tell you the truth, it will be more bearable for Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for that town.” There is a judgment. God sent Jesus to provide an escape from judgment and we are to flee there and tell others of the refuge, but there will be an end to this opportunity for repentance. People’s eternal destiny turns on how they respond to Jesus. As one person has said, “We should not miss the christological claim that is implied. If the punishment of those who rejected Jesus’ followers who brought his message was greater than that of notorious sinners of old, then how great must we understand Jesus to be?”

Conclusion

Have you fled to Jesus? Have you placed your trust in him and in his finished work for you on the cross? If you haven’t, think about what you are trusting in and whether it’s working… and whether it will work on that day when God judges.

If you have, you have a new purpose in life. Christians want everybody to know the real Jesus and what he has done. This gives you an overarching purpose to your life. Pray strategically and answer the Lord’s call on your life for how you are to be involved in getting this message out.

The Lord’s Table

And really the greatest impetus to evangelism is being re-evangelized every Sunday. Being fed, literally, on the gospel. Recognizing who the real Jesus is and what he’s done for you. Coming to the broken bread and poured out wine and basking in the status and freedom you have there. In Christ you have no future judgment to fear. You can then set your life on the line to announce to the world where they too can find safety.

Benediction

Peace be with you! As the Father has sent Jesus, so Jesus has sent you into the world. May the Holy Spirit empower us to testify to him (Jn. 20:21-22).
This sermon was addressed originally to the people at Immanuel Baptist Church, Chicago, Illinois, by Pastor Nathan Carter on Sunday morning, November 20, 2011. It is not meant to be a polished essay, but was written to be delivered orally. The mission of Immanuel is to be a multiplying community that enjoys and proclaims the Good News of Christ in the great city of Chicago.

End notes:

7 Morris, 251.