

Jesus' Mission for the Seventy-Two

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[0 : 00] Jesus sends out the 72. Far from being boring and fearful, the Christian church is on the march.

It's on a mission footing. We have a mission from God to tell every man and woman on earth that we have good news for them, that Jesus Christ has died to take away sin and guilt, and that on the third day He rose to destroy death and to give eternal life to all who repent and have faith in Him. The mission of God for the Christian church begins with Jesus' birth in a small village called Bethlehem.

It ends with the good news of Jesus being preached in the heart of the Roman Empire. It ramps up speed as both Jew and Gentile hear and respond in faith to the gospel.

In Luke 10, Jesus, traveling now to Jerusalem where He will be crucified, sends out 72 of His followers on mission to the surrounding towns and villages.

Here in verses 1 to 24, we have the mission of the church in embryonic form, a mission which continues to pick up pace today as more and more people in more and more places hear and respond in faith to the good news of the gospel.

[1 : 36] This passage is made up of at least five themes. Promise, command, warning, reminder, and assurance.

There is still time for us as Christians to get on board with the world-changing mission of the gospel. Let me encourage each of us here to renew our pledge to get involved in whatever way we can in making known the good news of Jesus to a world that desperately needs to hear it.

First of all, then, we have a promise, a promise. No one ever said that Christian mission is easy or that telling people a message which confronts them with their own sinfulness and weakness will win us points in a popularity contest.

All of us find it difficult to do what these 72 followers did in Luke chapter 10, to go out as lambs in the midst of wolves. It's hard to provide for people's physical and spiritual needs as Jesus commands the 72 to do in verse 9.

The experiences of many of us in mission are almost entirely negative. There are only so many rejections we can take before we become discouraged.

[3 : 04] It is intimidating to stand out on our street outside this church and see people walk past with seemingly no interest at all. It's discouraging to know that on a Sunday when Rangers are playing Celtic, there are more people packed into Ibrox or Park Head than are in all the evangelical churches in Glasgow combined.

However, Jesus does not begin His commission to His 72 disciples with discouragement. He begins with a promise. He says to them in verse 2, The harvest is plentiful.

It is plentiful. The seed these 72 followers shall be planting is the good news of the gospel, that with the coming of Jesus, the kingdom of God is near.

And Jesus says that this seed shall produce a plentiful harvest among those in whom it is sown, among those who see the good works, and among those who hear the good words of the gospel.

That is the promise from the mouth of the Lord Himself. Not that the picking shall be meager, but that the harvest shall be plentiful. He promises that the mission of the church shall be successful, not just in terms of the quantity of people who hear and believe, but also in terms of the quality of their discipleship.

[4 : 39] During Jesus' earthly ministry, Jesus' followers numbered perhaps in their hundreds. But some 50 years later, by the close of the New Testament canon, there were hundreds of thousands of Christians scattered all across the Roman Empire.

Jesus made a promise that the harvest would be plentiful, and it was. People heard the good news of the gospel, believed, and became Christians.

Not only so, but those who heard and believed in Jesus grew rapidly in their faith. They became missionaries of the gospel themselves, spreading the message of Jesus, gladly enduring opposition, so long as they could continue spreading that message.

Think of the Apostle Paul, formerly known as Saul the Pharisee. A converted Saul became the most effective missionary the church ever had.

Both the quantity of people who believed, and the quality of the discipleship, fulfilled the promise of Jesus that the harvest is plentiful.

[5 : 53] Now, nothing has changed in our generation. In fact, it's only ramped up. Do we still believe His promise that the harvest is plentiful?

Let's begin to see the opportunities for mission from Crow Road, and not the obstacles to mission in Crow Road.

Let's believe the promise of Jesus here, just like we believe every other one of His promises. When it comes to the mission of the church, the harvest is plentiful.

Well, secondly, there's a command. A command. The work of mission promises to be fruitful.

The problem Jesus identifies isn't a lack of harvest, but a lack of workers to do the harvesting. The harvest is plentiful, He said, but the laborers are few.

[6 : 53] The limitation upon the harvest isn't its plenty, but the fewness of its workers. The problem Jesus identifies with the church's mission is the fewness of those who are willing to go out into the fields and harvest.

And so, Jesus issues a command. Therefore, pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest. It is the Lord's harvest, and we are to pray earnestly that He would send out laborers into His harvest field.

Sending is a rather weak translation here. We are to pray that God would thrust out or to compel people to go out and gather in His harvest. Here is the command of Jesus to each of us today.

Pray for laborers. Pray for more people to engage in the work of mission. Pray for more people to go out in the name of Jesus, proclaiming both by word and work the good news of the gospel.

A few years ago, the Free Church of Scotland ran a campaign called 10-2, referring to this verse in Luke. Luke chapter 10, verse 2. 10-2. Its focus was that at 10, 2 minutes past 10 every day, members would stop what they were doing and pray for God to send, to call 70 men into the ministry by 2030.

[8 : 22] Now, in my case, it led to one farcical incident where during a slow park run in Drum Chapel, I think Ellen might have been doing it as well, I stopped beside a tree at 2 minutes past 10 to pray for 70 workers by 2030, only for my fellow runners to speed past me to ask if I was okay, and for me to say, I'm fine, I'm just praying.

And they looked at me as if I was a zombie or something. I thought 10-2 was a brilliant idea because throughout the Bible, we're commanded to pray. We're commanded to pray when we're anxious.

We're commanded to pray when we're persecuted, when we're in trouble. We're commanded to pray when we're thankful. But we're also commanded to pray that God would thrust out laborers into His harvest field to gather in the sheaves of the gospel.

I wonder sometimes whether, in the light of what Jesus says here, much of the harvest in Glasgow is left to rot in the field because of our unwillingness to go out and gather it in.

Now, this is a call to young men here to consider the full-time ministry of the gospel. It is. But it's not just that. It's a call for every Christian among us to be mission-minded, to do what we can, where we can, with whom we can, to seize opportunities to share the good news of Jesus Christ.

[9 : 53] Are there ways in which we can meet new people? Can we offer our talents for our master's use here in Crow Road? It's a call to pray for new laborers.

It's just that as we pray, we might find that it's us God is calling to go. Jesus commands, pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into the harvest, knowing that one of these laborers might well be me.

Third here, there's a warning. There's a warning. It never ceases to amaze us as to those who choose to reject the good news of Jesus Christ and those who choose to accept it.

Those we might consider to be close to the kingdom, those brought up in a Christian family, those brought up going to church as children, those who are socially respectable and morally upright, they often reject it.

Now, they've sat under vibrant ministries where the gospel has been faithfully preached and they've had modeled for them consistent, faithful Christian living in the church, and yet they consciously choose to turn their backs on it.

[11 : 14] Sometimes those who appear to be closest to the kingdom are in reality those who are furthest away. Such were places like Chorazin and Bethsaida and Capernaum.

Jesus talks about in verses 13 through 16, places in which Jesus had done mighty works and preached powerful sermons. Such were people like those in verses 11 and 12 where the 72 went but were not received.

These places were close to the kingdom because they had seen the healing works of Christ and heard the powerful words of Christ to believe in Him. But they have chosen not to believe but to reject.

Jesus reserves His most stern warnings to places like those and people like these who are close to the kingdom but choose to reject. He says to them, it shall be more bearable for Sodom than for you.

The terrifying judgment of God upon Sodom led to it being annihilated from heaven with burning sulfur. Again, as Jesus says in verse 15 of the Capernaum, Jesus' hometown, which had witnessed so many of Jesus' miracles but which had rejected Him, you shall be brought down to Hades, to the shadowy world of the dead, to what we might call hell.

[12 : 43] On the day of judgment, no level of association with the church will be enough. It will not be enough that we grew up in the church or that we listen to its greatest preachers.

Jesus says that our judgment will be all the more severe because even though we were close, even though we heard the message and we saw the works of the kingdom, we consciously chose to reject rather than accept Jesus.

And we cannot complain, saying, but only if I'd heard Jesus Himself and not one of His followers, I'd have believed because in verse 16, Jesus says, the one who hears you, to the 72, hears me.

I'm the one who rejects me, rejects the one who sent me. It really is so tragic, isn't it?

Because from what Jesus says in these verses, it would seem that Hades, this shadowy world of the dead, is going to be jam-packed full of people who were so very close to the kingdom but didn't receive Jesus Himself and didn't believe in Him.

[14 : 13] By contrast, in verse 13, Jesus says of those close to the kingdom, if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago.

Now, Tyre and Sidon are non-Jewish, Gentile lands in today's Lebanon. They represent people far away from the kingdom of God. And yet, from what Jesus seems to say here, they shall be more receptive to the message of the gospel than those who are close.

Far-off Gentiles will hear the gospel and believe. Close-up Jews will hear the gospel and reject. How does this relate to what we see in mission today?

Is it not that so many people in our own generation who reject the message of the gospel are those who, culturally speaking, are close to the kingdom?

What are so many of those who are accepting the message of the kingdom are, culturally speaking, very far away from the kingdom? The poor in body, mind, and soul.

[15 : 27] Those whose life and society has beaten up and spat out. Those who are not of our blood. The forgotten.

The incomer. The reject. The principle of vaccination rests on a small number of dead bacterial cells being injected into a healthy person, thus stimulating an immune response, so that when living bacterial cells invade that person, the body is able to resist them.

In the same way, people close to the kingdom are often those who are vaccinated in their youth. by a dead message of works, so that when they hear and encounter a living gospel of grace, they resist and reject.

Let's not be judgmental, reaching out only to those we think are close to the kingdom, because, in my experience at least, the low-hanging fruit we talk about often prove to be the hardest nuts and prove themselves to be immunized against the living gospel of grace.

Rather, we share it indiscriminately with all men and all women, whoever they are, recognizing that in His sovereign grace, God will call those who are far away to believe and trust in Him.

[17 : 04] And they will. And they will. Fourth, there is a reminder here from verse 17 to 20.

A reminder. These verses record the reports given by the 72 of the results of their mission. They're exultant. Lord, even the demons are subject to us in Your name.

Jesus then says something remarkable. He says, I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. He's referring here to how when His followers engage in mission, Satan loses his power.

The mission of the church in doing the works of the gospel and preaching the words of the gospel are more destructive to the power of Satan than anything else. Every time a sinner hears the good news of Jesus and repents and believes, Satan falls again like lightning from heaven.

Would the church deliver another shattering blow to our defeated enemy? Then, in the name of Jesus, engage in the mission of the gospel. March on and triumph from Galilee to Jerusalem and from there to the palaces of Rome itself, all the time preaching the good news of the gospel.

[18 : 27] March on into every area of society, into our sciences and into our arts and into our culture, doing the works of the kingdom and preaching the words of the kingdom. And as the harvest is gathered in, Satan's fall becomes all the more rapid and all the more demonstrable.

But the point I want to make from these verses isn't so much about the church's enemy and our triumph over him, but about the church itself. In verse 20, Jesus teaches us a very important lesson. Nevertheless, do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are written in the book of heaven. Jesus reminds us that what's of ultimate importance isn't what we do for Jesus, but that we ourselves are Christians and are therefore secure in His love and salvation.

Before ever we are servants of the gospel, we are Christians. Before ever we find our status in being ministers of the gospel, we find it, as Hannah said, in being sons and daughters of the living God.

It's our relationship with Jesus that comes first. If we get that wrong, if we begin to take pride in our achievements for Jesus, we become hypocrites who preach the grace of Christ for salvation, but in reality are practicing salvation by our own good works.

[20 : 02] At the end of the day, our salvation is entirely down to the grace of Christ in the gospel, His sacrifice on the cross. We dare not approach God and boastfully say to Him, look what I have done for you.

Rather, we bow down in humility before Him, saying, look what you have done for me. And if we get that wrong, we're headed for a spectacular fall.

Our personal relationship with Jesus comes before our ministry for Jesus. Knowing God is greater than serving God, but those who know God will serve God.

Jesus reminds us here, find your status in God and what He's done for you, not in mission and what you do for Him. How then is it with us?

What is your spiritual temperature today? As we go through the gospel of Luke and into the book of Acts, we're amazed at the progress of the mission of the church, but we're even more amazed at the spiritual devotion its missionaries showed to Jesus Himself.

[21 : 08] that's what gave them their enthusiasm. It's a reminder from Jesus that knowing Him must come first. Rejoice, He says, that your names are written in heaven.

And then lastly, from this passage from verse 21, we have an assurance, an assurance. You know, the mission of the church can appear at times very random and haphazard.

It's become cool for churches to produce a five-year plan for how they intend to grow. Now, it's good to look ahead and it's good to plan ahead, but in the experience of most ministers, at the end of five years covered by that plan, God has worked in very unexpected ways to bring in very unexpected people, people who weren't initially part of that five-year plan.

It may be that in a city church like ours, a group of international students begins to attend and a new ministry to them begins. Or it may be that the needs of a community in a rural area demands a shift in the church's vision there.

Now, none of this invalidates the planning process, but it reminds us that ultimately, God is sovereign in the growth of His church and in His harvest.

[22 : 27] that He'll work according not to our five-year plans, but according to His 10,000-year plan. And in these verses, verses 21 through 24, Jesus reinforces that point.

God has a sovereign plan for the mission of His church. He most often chooses its growth through the conversion of the little children to whom He defers.

Those who seem very far away from the church, but behind the scenes, He has prepared to hear the gospel. The point is this. God has the mission of our church in hand, and ultimately, it's He who is in sovereign control over the results of our mission.

And it might seem awful random to us, but God knows what He's doing, and He is working out His plan. And the beauty of this for us and for all those who minister the gospel ultimately, is that we can be assured that ultimately we are not accountable or responsible for the results of our work. We do what we can, and we leave the results to the Jesus who said, I am building my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. And even though it might seem so intimidating to us to see a lack of interest in the gospel from those who work past our church every day, consider what Jesus says, and He says in verse 22, all things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows who the Son is except the Father, or who the Father is except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal Him.

[24 : 13] In other words, that resistance to the gospel we meet in mission can be broken down in an instant by the powerful work of Christ in that person's life.

He can change their hearts and show them Christ and His gospel and convert them in the space of a click of my fingers. Let's have confidence that though we may encounter much opposition as we share the gospel, it is ultimately God who breaks down hard hearts.

And as we look back, and as we look at ourselves, and our own experience of coming to faith in Christ, we can only say that if God hadn't broken down my hard heart first, I would never have responded to the gospel in the first place.

As we close, let me do so with two very brief applications. The first is this, for those of us who are Christians, if we are aware that ultimately the results of our evangelism and mission rest upon the sovereign will of God, let's commit ourselves to prayer knowing that God has told us in His Word that He will only work as we pray.

there are two prayer meetings, three prayer meetings in this church every week. 5.30 before the evening service, 2.30 on a Wednesday here, and 7.30 on a Wednesday here.

[25 : 53] If we're aware that ultimately the results of our evangelism rest upon the sovereign will of God, let's recommit ourselves to the prayer meetings of this church and also to private prayer for those who at present seem so resistant, but in reality, whose hearts God can change with a click of our fingers.

Secondly, those of us who are not yet Christians, is your name written in the Lamb's book of life in heaven?

Is your name written there? How can you be sure of it? By receiving the message of the gospel that the same Jesus of this passage suffered and died to take away our sins, by believing that in Him and in Him alone there is salvation for you and for all who will have faith in Him, as Hannah said earlier, for those who will receive Him and believe in His name.

If you will turn to Jesus today in faith and trust, your name is written in the book of heaven itself, and you can look forward to one day being there with Him and will you believe?

And will you believe? So, as a result of this passage, will you do that very thing right now and will you believe?