

Sent with the Gospel

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Preacher: Mark Chew

[0:00] Now, I've never been in the Army, as you can probably tell, or Navy, or the Air Force. So I've never really participated in a real war game before.

That's actually an oxymoron anyway, because war games aren't real, are they? They all just pretend war. But anyway, that's not my point. It's just that whenever I watch the Army recruitment ads on TV, I think you've seen some of those, where they feature footage of war games.

It always looks so exciting and inviting. I always wish I could be part of it. I do recall, however, that I did take part in a pretend war game one time.

And that was at the orientation camp I attended at the start of my high school years. The senior boys had organized a war game late one night, and we were divided into two opposing armies.

Our school had two long four-story blocks. Picture of it there. Still black and white in those days. But those two buildings on the top there.

[1:14] And what we had to do was to defend our flag, which was well protected in a top-floor classroom. Now, of course, being nighttime, we did it all with torchlights under the light of the moon.

Now, I have to say that as a 13-year-old boy, that was one of the most exhilarating things for me to do. I don't know whether you feel the same, but it felt like to me that this was like a real-life death, life or death mission.

And I played it like the lives of my army buddies. They were just my classmates, but army buddies really depended on it, you know.

And my heart was pounding as I was going around the corner, up the stairs, and like any moment I would be shot at, and that would be the end of my life kind of thing. Well, as we read the passage today, I sort of get the sense that the disciples might have felt a bit like that.

Last week, we saw that Jesus had called them to follow him, whatever the cost. And of those who heard, at least 72 agreed to go. Now, why 72?

[2:22] We're not sure. Perhaps when you add that to the initial 12, that makes 7 times 12, and 7 being the complete number in the Bible. But anyway, they were sent two by two on Jesus' mission.

But before they go, Jesus gives them their marching orders in verse 2. He says, The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.

Go, I am sending you out like lambs among wolves. So Jesus is sending his disciples into the mission field. But the first question we have to ask is, is this a harvest field or a battlefield?

And of course, as you read the verses that I've just read, the answer is both. First, it's like a harvest. I can sort of imagine a bit like going to a cherry picking farm where you're confronted with rows and rows of cherry trees ripe with fruit.

And there you are, that empty little bucket in your hand. And you know that even after a day's picking and eating as much as you can, you look back on the trees at the end of the day and still find like you've not touched a single fruit on the tree.

[3 : 45] So much is it laden with fruit. So that's the picture I think Jesus paints of a never-ending harvest, which means that workers never seem to be enough.

Hence, Jesus tells them to pray, ask the Lord to send out workers into the field. God, raise up more workers so that the harvest can be reaped. So that's the big picture, I think, of a big picture view of the field, where we see God is in control.

He's the Lord of the harvest. And He's created the right conditions to produce such a harvest. But then in the very next verse, He tells them they're about to be sent as lambs among wolves.

That is, once they're actually on the ground doing mission, it will feel like a battlefield. In fact, a one-sided battlefield, because the enemy, like wolves, seem to have the ascendancy.

You see, this is a battle where Satan, the enemy, and Jesus will introduce him later in the text, He stands guard fiercely over what he thinks is his patch.

[4 : 56] And so he'll do whatever to stop people from following Jesus. It will be lies, accusation, doubts, or temptation, whatever it takes. And he will also intimidate and discourage the disciples to stop them preaching the gospel.

And as we look at our own society, I think what it translates to is a saturation, whether it's the media or whatever, we are being saturated with distraction and deception.

We're being told all the time that this life is the only one that matters, that we need to chase our dreams, pursue our pleasures now, anything or everything to keep us busy so that the gospel is drowned out, so that God is crowded out from our lives.

And so that's what we are up against as disciples, powerful forces that resist the proclamation of the gospel. But what does Jesus then tell them to do in preparation?

Verse 4. It's rather surprising, isn't it? He says, do not take a purse or bag or sandals. Instead of telling them to arm themselves, you know, go prepared, He's telling them the opposite, to travel light.

[6 : 15] Now why is that? Well, I think it's because then they'll be wholly dependent on the Lord, trusting Him to provide for all their needs. Further, they're not to be distracted on the road, so greet no one, but head straight to where they're to preach the gospel.

So we have attention, don't we, in the mission to hold in balance, on the one hand, that this is a harvest field, that God has already prepared the harvest so that wherever we are, whether it's our friends or colleagues or schoolmates, God has prepared people to trust in the Lord Jesus.

They're out there. We just need to harvest by telling people about the good news and pray that God will raise up people to do it. And as we pray, I would say that God may be calling some of you right here to answer that call, not to say I'm too established in my career to worry about it, but to say, yes, I'm willing.

Whatever the cost, whatever the cost, Lord, send me. So here's my challenge. Might that be you? But at the same time, we're to expect difficulty in ministry as well as we head into the mission field.

Rejection, suffering, persecution, these are normal. And when we encountered it, it doesn't mean that actually we're on the wrong track. But no, actually, that we are on the right track.

[7 : 45] But it's also a reminder as we face them to keep praying and to keep depending on God for what we do. So the mission field is both a harvest field and a battlefield.

But then from verse 5, Jesus turns his attention to the nature of this message. This is what he tells them to do as they go into each town, verse 5. When you enter town, first say, Peace to this house.

If someone who promotes peace is there, your peace will rest on them. If not, it will return to you. Stay there, eating and drinking, whatever they give you, for the worker deserves his wages. Do not move around from house to house.

When you enter a town and are welcome, eat what is offered to you. Heal the sick who are there and tell them, The kingdom of God has come near to you. But when you enter a town and are not welcome, go into the streets and say, Even the dust of your town we wipe off from our feet as a warning for you.

Yet be sure of this, the kingdom of God has come near. Can you see how there's really only one message, both in verse 9 and 10?

[8 : 52] Whatever the response, the message is still, The kingdom of God has come near. That's the gospel. We have to preach that wherever we go. Same message. The kingdom has come because Jesus, the king, has arrived.

And as a church, that's a message we need to stick to. The good news of Jesus come to earth to die for us so that we may be saved and received into his kingdom.

But as the message is preached and the hearers respond differently, then the nature of the message changes as well. So to the house and town which welcomes the disciples, this is a message of peace.

The disciples are to accept their hospitality as an expression of their welcome. not just of the disciples but of the message as well. But if the disciples are rejected, then it should show that judgment has come upon them by shaking off the dust from their feet.

Effectively, they are saying, if you want nothing to do with Jesus' message, then Jesus will have nothing to do with you. And so, what we have here is that there is really no middle or neutral ground.

[10 : 00] It is not like being offered ice cream for dessert and then just politely turning it away. You either receive the gospel as a message of peace or you receive it as a message of warning, of judgment.

And so, if there is anyone here tonight who is hearing the gospel for the first time or you haven't responded to Jesus, then can I say the stakes are high. Once you have heard the gospel, you have a life or death decision to make.

And in verse 12, we actually get a glimpse of that judgment. So, Jesus goes on to say, I tell you, it will be more bearable on that day for Sodom than for that town.

Woe to you, Chorazin, woe to you, Bethsaida, for if the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago, sitting in sackcloth and ashes.

But it will be more bearable for Tyre and Sidon at the judgment than for you. And you, Capernaum, will you be lifted up to the heaven? No, you will go down to Hades.

[11 : 10] Now, remember that these are Jewish towns that Jesus is talking about, Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum. They are towns in the north. They are sort of underlined in red in Galilee. But being Jewish, they would have regarded themselves as heirs of the promise of God.

And yet, because they reject Jesus, Jesus is saying their fate will be worse than the most wicked of pagan cities. Sodom was a city that God rained down fire from heaven in Genesis.

If you remember, Sodom and Gomorrah. Tyre and Sidon are actually further north. Tyre, you can see right up in the top. Next slide, Hugo. and then Sidon is even further north than that.

These were proud and powerful cities because they were trading cities right on the coast during the reign of Israel's kings. And so, because they were rich, they were powerful.

But if you read many of the Old Testament prophecies, God prophesied against them and prophesied judgment upon them. But Jesus saw the response of these other towns right now and he said that they were going to be judged more severely than them.

[12:33] Jesus saw that they would reject him. And I guess the question we ask is why would these towns reject him? After all, isn't Jesus Israel's Messiah, the king, to come to rescue them?

Why would they reject him? When he came, he came doing miracles, so why would anyone reject someone who did miracles? Well, if we go back again to the message of the gospel, what we know is that at the heart of the gospel message, there is first and foremost a call to repent.

It's not spelled out explicitly here, but back in Luke chapter 5 and verse 31, when Jesus was asked why he ate with sinners and tax collectors, he replied, it is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick.

I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance. And so you see, although Jesus' coming is good news, it's only good news for the humble, those who are willing to repent and turn away from their former life and start submitting to God.

You see, the people of Sodom were wicked, Tyre and Sidon were proud, but at least they had one excuse. They had the excuse that Jesus, God's very own son, did not turn up on their doorstep.

[13:52] But these other cities, these other towns and the Jews in them, they actually knew the promises of the Messiah and yet when he came and arrived, they still rejected him.

And Jesus said, because of that, that their rejection of him was inexcusable. You know, we have a rule in our house which we try to uphold as parents and that is, if a mistake is made once, you're told off, but the punishment is mild.

But if after repeated instructions, there is still the I couldn't care less attitude, not that it happens very often in our house, then the punishment changes accordingly.

Same offense, different punishment. And why is that? Because the punishment is not just for the initial disobedience, but it's also for the constant and continuing refusal to listen.

And I think that's the same with us. We may think we have the excuse by saying we haven't met Jesus in the flesh, but that's not true, is it? Because we have a permanent witness of Him in the Bible and we can read it again and again.

[15:08] And so we are without excuse. I couldn't imagine myself standing before God one day and saying to Him, oh, but God, I didn't know. Because the fact is, He has revealed this to us.

He has revealed that Jesus is His Son and the only way to salvation. So again, friends, I would say to anyone here, if you've not made a response yet to Jesus, then please do so.

Come and talk to me after church or come up front here to people who will pray with you and find out more so that you can make a decision. But for those of us who do believe, Jesus' instruction then is for us to keep preaching the kingdom, to keep reaping the harvest.

And in verse 16, He gives this encouragement to us. He says, whoever listens to you listens to me. Whoever rejects you rejects me. But whoever rejects me rejects God, Him who sent me.

And so, friends, we don't have to make up or change our message. What we need to do is faithfully proclaim and God will call those who will listen.

[16:21] And one of the great things about sharing the gospel is God does not give us sales targets. Alright? We don't have conversion targets.

You know, if we preach the gospel to someone and they don't believe, it doesn't get reflected on our performance review. If people reject the message, then they're not rejecting us, but Jesus and His Father.

Well, let's turn to the final section where Jesus reminds them and us what we should ultimately give, what should ultimately give us joy and satisfaction in ministry. So, some time has probably passed between verse 16 and 17, but the 72 return with joy.

They have met ministry success. For they say, Lord, even the demons submit to us in your name. These wolves are submitting to the lambs.

How great is that? And Jesus replied, Yes, great. I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. I have given you authority to trample on snakes and scorpions and to overcome all the power of the enemy.

[17:33] Nothing will harm you. So, yes, God is on their side and so Satan cannot win. But then Jesus quickly warns them not to be puffed up in pride.

For He says, However, do not rejoice that the Spirit submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven. You see, at the end of the day, the disciples mustn't forget that they too are part of the harvest.

That what they should be rejoicing over isn't their newfound power, but God's grace shown to them in the first place. And I think this is particularly important for those of us who are paid gospel workers or training to be, like myself.

Because it's very easy to let your identity drift from being in Christ and His work to being in who we are as God's workers and what we do. To turn from rejoicing over what He's done for us to taking pride in what we're doing for God.

I still remember the first time that I led someone to Christ and also the first time when I was here I preached and someone came to faith as a result. And the joy that comes with knowing that is just indescribable.

[18:49] So I sort of understand how the disciples feel. But it's also at those very times when pride so easily puffs up. When I think I go from preaching the Savior to actually thinking I'm one.

Or at least think that I've got what it takes to do God's work. And so that's why Jesus wisely turns the disciples' attention back to rejoicing that their names are written in heaven.

Because our standing in heaven for all of us comes from solely one thing. The blood of Jesus shed for our sins and our faith in Him.

And so I have to say that if we go out and we serve the Lord and good things happen then yes let's rejoice but no let's not let let it go to our heads.

But if on the other hand we go out and we serve God and things don't go quite as planned or you know it fails even then you know we should still be able to go home that day and rejoice anyway.

[19:58] Because what's important is that we're children of God still. Let's not tie our identity to ministry success but to Christ alone. You know otherwise we'll start getting jealous defensive stressful or worse we become proud and haughty.

But in our final bullet point there Jesus also then gives them a second thing to rejoice over. As we read it we see that He talks about it in terms of His own joy but I reckon whatever Jesus has joy in probably we can have joy in as well.

So verse 21 at that time Jesus full of joy through the Holy Spirit said I praise you Father Lord of heaven and earth because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned and revealed them to little children.

Yes Father for this is what you were pleased to do. All things have been committed to you by my Father. No one knows who the Father is except the Father who knows who the Son is except the Father and no one knows who the Father is except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal Him.

Now what's Jesus getting to here? Well He's saying that in times past kings and prophets have heard the revelation of God foretelling the Messiah's coming and if you read the prophets in the Old Testament there is chapter after chapter of this and Isaiah 61 which Dan read at the start is just one example.

[21:26] I chose it because Jesus Himself in Luke chapter 4 chose that passage as He stood up to read it in the synagogue and then declared that this scripture is fulfilled in their hearing.

But all these prophecies that were being revealed were nevertheless cryptic in how they were being fulfilled and so prophets and priests and kings since that time have eagerly sought to know how it would be.

But the thing is that when Jesus finally comes He chooses not to reveal it to important people so called wise and learned but to the little children meaning His disciples.

Now again why is that? Well because humility is the very attitude needed to receive and understand this message. A message which I've said before requires repentance and so it's a message which the proud cannot accept much less from the Son of God who comes not as a pompous king but a lowly king.

again last week we heard no place to lay His head no earthly power to speak of. You know one of the joys of a teacher some of you are teachers is when your students finally get it.

[22:47] You try so hard to teach your students to make them see or understand exactly what you yourself understand and see and finally one day the lights turn on and they get it.

and the joy on the teacher's face when that happens is great isn't it? It's such a great joy to see that your work has paid off in them understanding what you've been trying to tell them.

Well I think that's the same thing that's happening with Jesus here. We probably can't say that the disciples get everything fully but they finally caught a glimpse of what's going on in Jesus' ministry.

the beginning to see just what God is doing through him the grand plan that was foretold in the Old Testament. And so that gives Jesus great joy and that's why in the last verse in 24 he says to them blessed are the eyes that see what you see for I tell you that many prophets and kings wanted to see what you see but did not see it and to hear what you hear but did not hear it.

Brothers and sisters one day some years from now I hope we'll be in heaven together rejoicing and recalling over recalling and rejoicing over the events of human history.

[24:11] I hope we'll be looking back on our time here and recounting the highlights. And I tell you what many of the things that the world considers to be historic for our time would barely rate her mention.

So Julia Gillard as the first female prime minister of Australia unimportant. Barack Obama as the first black American president who cares?

The rise of China as a superpower so what? Donald Trump making America great again I'll say no more.

Instead what we'll be rejoicing over and retelling again and again is the gathering of this great harvest in human history. The turning to faith of millions upon millions to Jesus from the time he walked on earth.

And I'll probably find you talking joyfully to the person that first shared the good news of Jesus with you and you'll be telling him or her what a turning point that was.

[25 : 23] Not just for you but for your children and for your grandchildren. And then you'll be talking with another about the time you both reached out to a friend at school and that was the thing that brought them to faith in Jesus.

Or you might be looking your child in the eye and sharing about the joy in your heart when they own their faith for the very first time. Because these are the individual stories that make up the great harvest.

And as his little children were each blessed to be part of it. We're blessed to be witnesses of it. And we're called to be witnesses to it.

So believe it or not we're actually part of making history. And so I want to encourage you to go out into life to create more of these moments.

To build up a lifetime of such memories. To see every opportunity you have wherever God puts you whoever God has put in your life to share the message of the kingdom.

[26 : 39] Because we're being sent with the gospel into God's great harvest. Let's pray. Father, thank you that you have revealed your great plan of salvation to those who are humble.

That for more than 2,000 years now you have been gathering your people into your kingdom. Lord of the harvest, raise up workers for the field. Help us to go and gather those who are in Christ for the glory of your son Jesus.

Amen.