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THE CRUCIAL MESSAGE

Luke 10:1-16

By

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Luke Lesson 49

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A pastor began his Sunday sermon by saying, "I'd like to make three points today. First, there are millions of people around the world who are going to go to hell. Second, most of us sitting here today don't give a damn about that." After a lengthy pause, he continued, "My third point is that *you* are more concerned that I, your pastor, said the word 'damn' than you are about the millions going to hell" (*Reader's Digest* [5/79]).

It's easy to get our priorities all mixed up, where we treat as major that which is minor and we treat as minor that which is crucial. One day Hudson Taylor was traveling on a Chinese junk from Shanghai to Ningpo. He had been witnessing to a man named Peter who rejected the gospel but was under deep conviction. In the course of events, Peter fell overboard, but no one made any effort to save him. Taylor sprang to the mast, let down the sail, and jumped overboard in hopes of finding his friend. But no one on board joined Taylor in his frantic search.

Taylor saw a fishing boat nearby and yelled to them to help, but they wouldn't do it without money. Finally, after bartering for every penny that Taylor had, the fishermen stopped their fishing and began to look for Peter. In less than a minute of dragging their net, they found him, but it was too late. They were too busy fishing to care about saving a drowning man.

We can easily condemn the selfish indifference of those fishermen, but by indicting them, we may condemn ourselves. Are we too busy with our jobs and other activities to take the time to rescue those who are perishing without Christ? I realize that the analogy breaks down. We must be tactful and wait for the right opening before we talk to a person about spiritual things. But if a person's response to the gospel is the deciding factor in where he or she will spend eternity, should we not do all that we can to get this crucial message to them? Do we have the proper sense of urgency about spiritual matters that we ought to have? Or, could it be that we really don't give a ... (damn)?

Our text records something not found in any of the other gospel accounts, that Jesus appointed 72 (or 70) others (besides the 12) and sent them ahead of Him to proclaim the gospel in the cities and villages where He was going to come. The question of whether it was 72 or 70 is one of the most difficult textual questions in the New Testament to resolve, since the evidence is quite evenly distributed. Commentators also debate whether there was any symbolic meaning behind the number. But since we cannot be certain about the number, it is tentative at best to speculate on any symbolic meaning. I think that the weight is slightly on the side of 72, but either way it's not a major point to spend more time on.

Jesus sends these workers out with instructions and warnings that are similar to those He gave to the 12 before their preaching mission (9:1-6). Some of these instructions were unique to these men and to this mission (Jesus later changed the orders; Luke 22:35-36) and thus do not apply directly to us. But many of the principles and the overall thrust of the passage do apply to us. The overall thrust is that ...

The gospel is crucial because people will be judged eternally on the basis of their response to it.

As I meditated on this passage four words kept surfacing: Prayer, Mission, Message, and Urgency.

1. Prayer: Do you pray for the harvest?

Jesus was saying to them, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore beseech the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest" (10:2). What a mystery, that God is the sovereign Lord of the harvest, and yet He limits Himself, as it were, by our prayers for more laborers for His harvest!

When you think about the Lord's words in verse 2, you have to ask yourself, "Do I pray for the harvest? Did I pray for the harvest this past week? Do I regularly pray for the Lord's work around the world? Do I pray for His work in Flagstaff? Do I ask Him to raise up and send out workers into His harvest?"

Let's be honest: We all pray for the things that matter the most to us. I pray often for my children, because they matter greatly to me. I pray for my wife, because she matters greatly to me. If I get sick, I pray for my health, because that matters to me.

If we're in financial difficulty or need a job, we pray earnestly for those needs, because those things matter to us. But the important question is, "Does the Lord's harvest matter enough to me to motivate me to pray often for it?"

In the Lord's Prayer (Matt. 6:9-13), what comes first? Prayer for the glory of God, that the Father's name would be hallowed or revered. For that to happen, we must pray next that His kingdom would come and His will be done on earth as it is done in heaven. It is only when people submit themselves daily to God as King and seek to do His will that He is hallowed or glorified on earth. So Jesus there shows us that our priority in prayer should be for the Father's glory and for His kingdom. Only after that does He instruct us to pray for our personal needs, such as our daily bread, forgiveness, and victory over sin. But the Lord's instruction in that well-known prayer is clear, that if we are not praying first and foremost for God's glory to be increased through the spreading of His kingdom, we are not praying rightly.

So to be obedient, we pray, "Lord, send out workers into Your harvest." We're thinking, of course, of young people who will dedicate themselves to world missions and of young men who will feel called to the pastorate. It is true that there is always a need for more godly missionaries and pastors. It is also true that a person should not go into those areas of service without a distinct call from God, and that not everyone has such a calling. Only some should devote themselves full-time to the work of the ministry.

But there is another sense in which every believer is to be a worker in God's harvest field. Every believer is given a spiritual gift from God and is told to use it for His kingdom. Every believer is to be a witness of Jesus Christ to others in his or her sphere of influence. Every believer is to be a good steward of the material resources God has entrusted to him, so that we use our money and possessions to further His cause. So, you can't pray for workers very long before the Lord taps you on the shoulder and asks, "What about *you*? I want *you* to work in My harvest." That leads to the second word:

2. Mission: Do you labor in the harvest field?

These men went out with a sense of mission. Granted, it was a special mission, and not everyone is commissioned by God to do what they did. But, if we're all commanded to seek *first* God's kingdom and righteousness (Matt. 6:33), it's hard to escape the fact that we all should have a sense of mission from God. We may fulfill that mission in different ways, according to our various gifts and situations. But whatever we do for the Lord, we ought to have the seriousness of purpose that comes from realizing that we have a job to do and we will give an account to the Lord of the harvest for what we did about what He told us to do.

While the Lord's instructions to these men were unique for their mission, the overall impression you get is that they were to be focused on their task and not let anything get in the way of their mission. Jesus warns them right off that He is sending them out as sheep in the midst of wolves (10:3). There will be opposition and danger, and they will be helpless by themselves to stand against it; thus, they must depend on God for protection.

Jesus tells them (10:4) to "carry no purse, no bag, no shoes" (presumably, extra sandals). They were to travel light and trust God for the provisions they needed. They shouldn't get distracted by the belongings that they were carrying with them, but should stay focused on their mission. They were to "greet no one on the way." This did not mean that they were to be rude or unfriendly, but rather that they were not to get distracted with lengthy chitchat that did not contribute to their mission. The disciples are not to be distracted from their mission by moving from house to house in search of the best food and lodging (10:5-8). Rather, if someone is willing to house and feed them and the person is sympathetic to the mission, they should stay there and get on with the work.

While the specific instructions do not apply to us, the main point does: We are not just to dabble in the things of God. We must stay focused on our mission. Jesus commands every believer to "seek first His kingdom and righteousness."

A man was fishing without success when he noticed a woman nearby who was reeling in one after another. Frustrated, he finally asked the woman her secret. "Are you fishing for supper or for sport?" she asked. "I'm fishing for sport," he answered. "Well,

there's your problem," the woman stated. "I'm fishing for supper." (*Reader's Digest* [11/96].)

We aren't to ask the Lord to send out hobbyists into His harvest. We're supposed to pray for *workers*. Workers are intent on the job, because they're working for their supper. If we care about the things God cares about, we will entreat Him to send out *workers* into His harvest field. We can't sincerely pray for workers if we aren't one of them. So we should begin to pray, "Lord, what is *my* mission? What do You want me to do to further Your cause?" Once you figure that out, these verses give at least two warnings:

- Don't give up because of opposition or rejection. Rather, expect it.

Sheep wandering in the midst of a wolf pack should not expect to have a jolly good time. Most of the opposition that Jesus and His workers encountered came from the religious establishment. When I went into pastoral ministry, for some reason I expected that most of my opposition would come from outside the church. The fact is, unless you try to shut down an abortion clinic or a pornographic bookstore, outsiders don't really care what you're doing. The main opposition you face comes from those in the church. Be prepared: If you get involved in serving the Lord, you will be criticized, mostly by those in the church.

- Don't get distracted by social contacts or material possessions. Rather, stay focused on your mission.

Just as these workers could easily have been distracted by engaging in meaningless chitchat with those they met along the way, we can be distracted by social contacts that are extraneous to our mission. We need to stay focused on our purpose. Jesus was known as the friend of sinners because He went to their social gatherings. But He never went just to socialize. He always went with a purpose, to seek and to save the lost. If you go to social gatherings without a sense of purpose, you'll get sucked into the world's meaningless ways and you'll cease to be a worker in the harvest. The harvest worker's focus is always, "Where is this person at spiritually and how can I be a part of bringing him or her to the Lord?"

Also, we need to be careful not to get distracted by material possessions. While God graciously supplies us with all things to enjoy, we are not to fix our hope on the uncertainty of riches, but on God. We are to be rich in good works, storing up the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that we may take hold of that which is life indeed (1 Tim. 6:17-19).

Prayer, Mission, ...

3. Message: Do you proclaim the kingdom of God by your life and lips?

These harvest workers were to heal the sick and to say to them, "The kingdom of God has come near to you" (10:9). If their message was rejected, they were still to proclaim as they left town, "Be sure of this, that the kingdom of God has come near" (10:11). Thus by their lives (healing) and by their lips, they were to proclaim the message of God's kingdom. Clearly, that kingdom had come upon these people whether they accepted it or rejected it. I argue that the healing ministry here was unique, in that these men were given power to heal everyone indiscriminately as a sign of the coming of the kingdom age in Jesus. No one in our day is given that kind of gift, since its purpose was unique. But, even so, we are to care for the total person and while we cannot promise God's miraculous healing on every person, we can and should pray that God would be merciful in healing those who need it. But their greatest need is to come into submission to God as Lord and King.

The kingdom of God is that realm in which He rules. By saying that the kingdom had come near, or come upon these people, Jesus was not saying that there was no further fulfillment in the future. The day is still coming when Jesus will return and reign over Israel and the nations in accordance with all that the Old Testament prophets predicted (Acts 1:6; 3:18-24). But the kingdom in its initial phase had arrived in the person of Jesus and the message was that people must submit their lives to the King.

The message of the kingdom of God draws a definite line in the sand by announcing peace to those who submit to Jesus as King, but terrible judgment to those who refuse to submit. When the workers entered a home, they were first to announce peace to it. These were not just nice words, but were an actual announce-

ment of God's blessing if the people accepted and submitted to the message of God's kingdom. If the people would not accept the message, the pronouncement of peace would return to the worker and it was to be replaced with a terrible warning of certain judgment to come (10:10-15). Darrell Bock comments, "The passage assumes God's universal sovereign authority and the cruciality of the kingdom message for humankind" (*Luke* [Baker], 2:1002).

Just three years ago, *Moody* magazine (Jan./Feb., 1996) reported that 49 percent of professing Christians agree that, "All good people, whether they consider Jesus Christ to be Savior or not, will live in heaven after they die." If that shocking statistic is true, then almost half of professing Christians do not believe what Jesus plainly taught about the judgment to come and hell!

Jesus didn't speculate about the future judgment; He spoke about it with authority (10:12)! He makes it clear that people will be judged according to the degree of light that they rejected. There will be degrees of punishment in hell. It will be worse for those who heard plainly of Christ and rejected it than for those, such as Sodom, Tyre, and Sidon, that lacked clear witness. Verse 13 is mind-boggling: Jesus declares that He knows how those who never heard would have responded if they had heard! Yet even though they would have repented if they had heard, they did not hear and they will be judged for their wickedness and unbelief!

But the real warning that we must take to heart is this: These cities that Jesus warns of terrible judgment to come were religious cities that were familiar with Jesus' message and miracles. Sodom, Tyre, and Sidon were pagan Gentile cities. The warning is that those who sit in church and yet remain unmoved by the offer of peace with God through Christ, those who are familiar with spiritual truths, but who refuse to submit to Christ as Lord—these religious people will be judged far more harshly than raw pagans who are ignorant of the gospel. J. C. Ryle puts it this way,

We need not run into any excess of riot. We need not openly oppose true religion. We have only to remain cold, careless, indifferent, unmoved, and unaffected, and our end will be in hell. This was the ruin of Chorazin and Bethsaida. And this, it may be feared, will be the ruin of thousands, as long as the world stands. No sin makes less noise, but none so surely

damns the soul, as unbelief (*Expository Thoughts on the Gospels* [Baker], 3:355).

We often hear people say that if they saw a miracle or actually heard Jesus in person, they would believe. Not so! These towns heard Jesus and saw His miracles, but they hardened themselves against Him. They would not submit to Him as King. To hear Jesus' messengers is to hear Him, and to reject them is to reject Him (10:16). Jesus predicts Capernaum's demise. They thought highly of themselves (exalted to heaven), but Jesus thought otherwise, and His word stands. The city of Capernaum is now an uninhabited heap of ruins. The same that happened there could easily happen to America. Our nation has had great light, but even many of those who profess Christ show by their disobedient and self-centered lives that they are not subject to His lordship. It is a terrible thing for those with such knowledge to reject the gospel!

So our text shouts at us the words: Prayer (do you pray for the harvest?); Mission (do you labor in the harvest field?); Message (do you proclaim by life and lips the kingdom of God?). Finally,

4. Urgency: Do you live and bear witness in light of eternity?

Again, I realize that we must be sensitive to people; we can't grab them by the lapel and shout warnings about hell. But even so, do we have a sense of the urgency of our mission? "That day" (10:12), the day of judgment, is coming soon. Our message is not, "Try Jesus and you'll feel better and have a happier life." We must sensitively but plainly warn people that they are sinners who face God's certain judgment, but they can know peace with God if they will trust in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. Time is short; we must keep eternity constantly in view.

During the 1981 Byron Nelson Golf Tournament in Dallas, a massive tree limb broke off and fell on a spectator who was killed instantly. It happened near the third hole where Charles Coody was playing at the time. Shortly after the accident, he was interviewed on the radio and he said, "After running over and seeing the accident, I tried to play golf, yet I had no desire to play after that. All of a sudden those three foot putts didn't seem all that important."

The suddenness and certainty of death should instill a sense of urgency in us who know what Jesus taught about the judgment to come. We should pray for openings with lost people. We should pray that God's people would be working in the harvest with a sense of mission. We should clearly proclaim the message, that Jesus is Lord and King, and that people must accept His offer of peace now or face the terrible consequences later.

Conclusion

A few years ago the newspapers ran a story about a guy who jumped from a plane and his parachute didn't open properly. It took him more than a minute to fall 3,000 feet to the ground. In those circumstances, a minute is a long time! What do you suppose he thought about as he sped toward the ground? I don't know the answer to that question, although somehow the man survived. If that experience didn't make him think soberly about eternity, nothing will!

People all around us are plummeting toward eternity without a parachute. Jesus Christ is that chute. If you know that fact, *pray* for the harvest and for more workers. Go with a sense of *mission* to labor in the harvest field. Live and speak the *message* in a way that honors Jesus Christ as Lord and King and that shows lost people His offer of peace. But don't compromise the *urgent warning*, that to refuse the offer means certain judgment. In light of eternity, the gospel is the crucial message. We are the messengers.

Discussion Questions

1. How can we shake off our apathy and develop a burden to pray for the harvest?
2. Must every Christian have a sense of mission? What does that mean in practical terms?
3. Why must the lordship of Jesus be a crucial part of the gospel? If we tell people that they can accept Jesus as Savior but need not accept Him as Lord, have we truly presented the gospel?
4. How can we warn people of judgment without sounding like "hellfire and brimstone" preachers?

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