

“WHY ARE YOU STANDING HERE?”
I Thessalonians 4:13-18, Matthew 20:1-7, Acts 1:1-11
May 11 & 12, 2024 - Ascension Sunday/Mother’s Day

“Some people thought he was a nut. He was just a shoemaker, after all, and an average one at that. But in the evenings, after work, he studied Greek, Hebrew, and a variety of modern languages. He devoured *Captain Cook's Voyages* to expand his horizons, which, because of his poverty, kept him bound to a small, forgotten English village. Some people said his time would have been better spent getting a second job to support his growing family.

“But the young man's passion wasn't a curious, self-satisfying hobby. Early in life he had become concerned about the millions of unbelievers outside of Europe, and he was trying to figure out what could be done to bring the Gospel to them.

“With God's help, he slowly figured it out. He ended up going to India to serve as the first Protestant missionary in the modern era. His passion inspired a generation of men and women to take up the cause of missions as well -- the likes of Adoniram Judson, Hudson Taylor, and David Livingstone (among others).

“Because one impoverished shoemaker named William Carey followed his God-given passion, large parts of the world that had little or no access to the Gospel now have large populations of people today who confess Christ Jesus as Lord.”¹

God calls each one of us to be His disciples and join His mission in reaching out to folks around the world for the sake of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It doesn’t have to be on the other side of the planet, however. There are many around us right here that need to hear about the Good News of Jesus Christ.

In Matthew 20:1-16 Jesus shared the parable of the landowner who had a vineyard. We read a portion of it today. The landowner went out at various hours of the day and hired workers to go out into his vineyards to bring in the harvest of grapes. Even when it was 5:00 in the afternoon, this landowner gathered people to work for him so that the work would be completed and the full harvest brought in.

¹ (PreachingToday.com, *More Perfect Illustrations*, [Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2003] pg. 27)

When asked why they had not been working all day, the response of those hired at 5:00 was, “*Because no one has hired us*” (Matt. 20:7). So the landowner hired them, even for a short time - just one hour that day - so that they could be about getting the work done in the vineyard. Up until that point the people had been useless, just wasting their day waiting for someone to put them to work. Now they were able to be useful for achieving the gathering of the harvest.

Well, in a way pastors are to be a lot like the landowner of the vineyard gathering and training folks to go out to do the work of the Lord in our world today. The harvest potential is huge, but the workforce is small, and many want just the small number of workers to accomplish all that needs to be done, and this only results in a small harvest capable to be brought in. Many more people are needed to accomplish the full harvest, and Jesus calls each one of us to become a part of the workforce.

But regardless of training and equipping being done, only a small percentage of the Christian population in America take the time to share the Gospel of Jesus Christ with others. Most people believe that it is the pastor’s role to “*go and make disciples of all the nations*” (Matthew 28:19). But the pastor’s role in making disciples is to equip the members of the church to be able to do the work in their own sphere of influence. There are only a few pastors compared with the number of professing Christians in the life of the church, so think for a moment what would happen if ALL of us were to be involved in sharing our faith with those around us? If every Christian told just one person about the Lord Jesus Christ, helping them to come to believe in Him and put their trust and faith in Him, that would turn this nation around in a big way.

Yet, often we get stuck because we’re not sure quite what to do. The work is there to do, but we just don’t know how to get started. The disciples found themselves in this very situation upon the ascension of Jesus. Listen to how it took place. This is Acts 1:1-11. (READ Acts 11:1-11)

Having spent 40 days with the disciples after His resurrection, Jesus told them not to leave Jerusalem before they were equipped to do the work of the Father in the world. They were going to be baptized by the Holy Spirit in a few days. The Holy Spirit would empower them to do the work of Jesus

throughout the world, taking the message of God’s great love and salvation for the world to those who would listen. Even though they had been with Jesus 3½ years, the disciples still felt unprepared to begin reaching out to bring in the harvest of souls for the glory of God.

However, the disciples seemed more concerned about Jesus “*restoring the kingdom to Israel* (Acts 1:6)” than about continuing where Jesus left off. Their understanding was that Jesus was a political messiah who would recreate the free nation of Israel. They didn’t understand what Jesus was calling them to do. So Jesus gave them the Great Commission **again**, by saying, “*But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be My witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth*” (Acts 1:8). They were being commissioned as the servants of Jesus Christ to take the message of God’s salvation of the world out into the world so that everyone could make a decision of following Jesus as their Savior. However, the disciples were relying upon Jesus to be with them to lead the work effort.

So when Jesus was lifted up to return to heaven, their work orders had been given, their training had been completed, they just needed to get started. But they just stood there gazing up into the sky, as if expecting Jesus to wave His hand at the last moment and make it all happen without their efforts extended.

But folks, that’s not the way it happens! Jesus calls us to become a part of the workforce so that it can happen through us, empowered by His Holy Spirit. The more people we have working at accomplishing the Lord’s mission of saving the world, the easier it becomes for everyone. The more we put our energy into working with the Holy Spirit, the more power we gain to do the work, and the more resources come into our possession to make it happen.

So it took the angels’ questioning words to get the disciples focused once more on doing the work of Jesus. “*Men of Galilee,*” they said, “*why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen Him go into heaven*” (Acts 1:11). They had to be jolted from their being spectators of Jesus’ ascension to

become the workers in the harvest field. Only then did they return from the Mount of Olives to the city of Jerusalem. “*They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brothers*” (Acts 1:14).

And we are the same. We are often found to be merely spectators of what the church is involved with, rather than being full participants in the work of the Lord. Yet Jesus calls us off of leaning up against the lamp post on the street, into the vineyards of the world to do His work of bringing the harvest of people into the kingdom of heaven. Though we are the 5:00 crowd being addressed by the Lord to be His servants, there is still great work that has to be done. Though there is only a little while left before the Lord Jesus returns to take all those who have put their faith and trust in Him to be with Him in heaven, there are still millions of people who have not yet made their choice of receiving Jesus as their Savior and Lord.

I am encouraged by the most recent *Decision* magazine report about the success of the God Loves You Tour along the southern border of the United States that took place earlier this spring. The Billy Graham Evangelistic Association Team visited 10 cities along the border in 15 days sharing the message of Salvation to thousands of people. Hundreds of people accepted Jesus Christ as their Savior and turned their lives over to His control.

Then, I am encouraged by the reports of the Jesus Film Project taking the Gospel message of Jesus’ life into the villages and cities all over the world. People who have never heard the Gospel of Jesus Christ are watching the dramatized account of Jesus’ life as believers are sharing it with them through the help of iPads and memory chips that can be inserted into cell phones. Hundreds and thousands of people are receiving Jesus Christ as their Savior.

Then, I am encouraged by reports from Mission Aviation Fellowship (MAF) that tell of missionaries reaching out to remote villages around the South Pacific and other nations in the world. They take the Bible into places that have never been reached for Christ, having been dominated by animistic and spiritualistic religions. As the people hear God’s word in their own language, as they

learn about the love of God for us through Jesus Christ, their hearts and lives are changed, transforming their villages and communities. The pilots and teachers and missionaries work diligently to enhance and encourage the development of the people, and as they receive Jesus into their lives, whole regions are finding new life and hope.

All of these are taking place because people are stepping forward, called by God, to take the message of hope and life to the people around them. They have accepted the invitation from the Landowner of the world to go into His vineyard to bring in the harvest. They are stepping out of their comfort zones to go to places where they are different than the people they serve. But they are showing love and taking the Bible with them so that the people can see their witness of how Jesus makes a difference in their lives. And it is transforming the world. There is great excitement growing with regard to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

So how does that happen for us? How might God be calling us into the workforce to bring in the harvest for the Lord our God? Certainly there is something that God has for each of us to do. Even if people count us as a nutcase, like William Carey, God is inviting us into the vineyard of life so that we might add our bit to the harvest. So we have to change our mindset, and look at what we can do to be a part of the crowd of witnesses living for Jesus.

“In his book, *First Things First*, A. Roger Merrill tells of a business consultant who decided to landscape his grounds. He hired a woman with a doctorate in horticulture who was extremely knowledgeable.

“Because the business consultant was very busy and traveled a lot, he kept emphasizing to her the need to create his garden in a way that would require little or no maintenance on his part. He insisted on automatic sprinklers and other labor-saving devices.

“Finally she stopped [him] and said, ‘There’s one thing you need to deal with before we go any further. If there’s no gardener, there’s no garden!’ [Someone has to be doing the work in the garden for the garden to be kept up and produce what is expected.]

[The same is true when we look at the life of the church.]

“There are no labor-saving devices for growing a garden of spiritual virtue. Becoming a person of spiritual fruitfulness requires time, attention, and care.”² We have to accept God’s invitation to become involved, and then we need to spend the time and energy needed to do the work. It’s not going to happen all on its own. It requires a whole lot of workers to keep the harvest coming in.

Oswald Chambers said it best; “There are no such things as prominent service and obscure service; it is all the same with God” (*So Send I You* (Discovery House, 1993)).³ Jesus calls us to touch the lives of those around us so that we might BLESS them.

Now, if we take the word BLESS and use it as an acronym it stands for: Begin with prayer, listen, eat, serve, and story. This means that as we begin to ponder how God can use us in the mission field, we First BEGIN with prayer. We pray for those around us, seek the Lord’s guidance in how we can impact their lives and then spend the last 10 minutes or so of our prayer time, walking our street or neighborhood, praying for each of the families around us. We can also do the prayer walk around the job that we work at, praying for our associates and the others working there.

The disciples modeled this starting place. They were “*constantly in prayer...*” (Acts 1:14) seeking the work of the Lord in their lives. They knew that if they were to do anything for the Lord Jesus, they had to pray about it and make sure that it was within the will and work of God first.

We, likewise, must begin to use prayer in our lives so that God can open up our eyes to see the harvest right before us. Who are the people that need to hear the Good News of Jesus? What are the ministries that we need to begin to impact the lives of folks in our community? How might we be used by God to be the witness of Jesus right in our neighborhood?

That leads us to the second letter of the word BLESS - we begin to **LISTEN** to those around us. We engage people in conversation and really listen to them - what are their joys (you always start on a positive note), what are their struggles, where are they hurting, what are they experiencing in life? This

² (Edward K. Rowell, editor, *1001 Quotes, Illustrations and Humorous Stories*, [Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2008] pg. 239)

³ (PreachingToday.com, *More Perfect Illustrations*, [Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2003] pg. 258)

helps us to know better how we can pray for them, and helps us to understand them a bit better. In order to help them, we must first begin to get to know them as individuals. As we listen to them, it shows that we care enough to be with them and learn about them. This begins a relationship with them where trust is established and opportunity for future ministry is possible.

And as we get to know a person, we make use of the third letter of the word BLESS - we **EAT** with them. You make time in your schedule to join them for coffee or tea, or go out to lunch with them or even invite them over for a fry out at your house. This enables the relationship to build deeper so that as you get to know them, and maybe their family, you can discover how to witness to them.

Jesus and the disciples were always eating at someone's home, so they set us a marvelous example of reaching out to others. Joining together around a table develops a community atmosphere and it opens up the door for more conversation to take place so that friendship begins. Notice, that this takes time and energy on our part to establish this relationship. But the closer we get to the person, the easier it is for us to make time for them.

That friendship creates opportunity to put the fourth letter of the word BLESS into practice - you find a way that allows them to **SERVE**. It involves getting them to help you out and allow you into their lives in a deeper way than just conversation. One example could be getting their help for a project around your home. Maybe you call them and say, "Hey, I'm rearranging the garage. Could you come over and help me move this dresser or work stand or shelf?"

Another example is you go over to the neighbor's for a cup of sugar. Or you ask them for their help in some way that allows them to feel good about your relationship. You find something to help them serve so that they begin to trust you as a friend.

The greater the involvement in their lives, the greater the trust comes that leads to the fifth letter of the word BLESS - you ask them to tell you their **STORY**. That can lead you into all kinds of questions: What's their relationship with Jesus Christ? Have they been involved in a local church? Do they want to go with you to your church to hear more about the love of Jesus? Would they like to get

involved in a Bible Study? What's the passion of their heart? How might they become involved in the work of the Lord?

To BLESS another person - begin with prayer, listen, eat, serve and story - takes dedication and time, but the end result is often much greater than the investment of our own lives into them - they become disciples of Jesus Christ. But it's a start for us to begin the work of the Landowner in His vineyard bringing in the harvest that is so available.

So let me ask you this probing question, "What will it take to get you moving for the Lord Jesus?" It took an angelic admonishment to get the disciples moving away from being just the spectators of Jesus' ascension and moving them toward working for the Lord. There are plenty of entry level positions here at the church to help you get started in your service activity. And there are plenty of people to BLESS around you.

Let the Holy Spirit jump-start you so that you might also change the world, one person at a time. You may be a simple, average worker at what you do as a livelihood, but what can you do to let God use you in a mighty way, maybe even transform a continent? Let's not just be spectators, but full participants working in God's vineyards so that the full harvest might be brought in before it's too late.

Let's pray: Father, Thank You for Jesus! He came to be our Savior and Lord, not so that we can sit back and enjoy life, but so that we might tell others about Him and help them to believe and trust in Him, too. But, we need encouragement to move out of our comfortable places to meet people where they are. Help us to focus on You in prayer, and then get out into our communities to listen, eat, serve and share our stories. Give us just one person to start with that we can establish a friendship with who needs guidance into the arms of Jesus. Then grant us the desire to get going as witnesses for You. Help us to see those around us as brothers and sisters in Christ, so that we can feel good about helping them grow closer to Jesus. Lead us, Lord! Send Your Holy Spirit on us so that we might accomplish Your work here in this world. This we pray in Jesus' mighty and powerful Name. AMEN.