

Proclaiming the Kingdom  
Matthew 10:1-15

The Evangelical Presbyterian Church exists “to carry out the Great Commission of Jesus as Presbyterian, Reformed, evangelical and missional congregations.” That’s our mission statement, and that means evangelism and missions lie at the heart of our denominational identity. And that’s why our Presbytery is supporting no less than five church planting projects in Texas and Louisiana.

But at the same time, many of the congregations throughout our Presbytery, including our own, have hit a plateau or even begun to decline in membership. So, how can we Port Gibson Presbyterians get more personally involved in evangelism and missions? How can we as individuals become more effective at spreading the gospel and making disciples right here in Southwest Mississippi?

Well, in this passage we find the instructions Jesus gave to His twelve disciples before He sent them on a short-term missions trip. So maybe if we eavesdrop on them, we can get some ideas.

But before we lean in, a word of caution is in order. After all, this passage includes Jesus giving the twelve disciples authority over demons and over every kind of disease. Now, we know good and well that we don’t have the same kind of miraculous powers.

Moreover, it is obvious that at least some of Jesus’ instructions were of limited duration and focus. After all, Jesus told the disciples in verse 5 not to preach to the Samaritans or Gentiles on that particular trip. But at the end of Matthew’s Gospel He told all of us to make disciples of all the nations. So given that these particular instructions are obviously not intended to apply in the same way to all Christians for all time, how can they help us? What can we learn from Jesus’ manual for missions?

Well, at the very least, Jesus makes it clear that all effective missionaries do their work in an atmosphere of trust. This was true even of the apostles, as all the miraculous power they had over demons and sicknesses came from Christ. They thus had to trust Jesus in the same way that we do, for He alone is the source of all our abilities.

And it is this need for trust in Christ that explains some of the rather peculiar instructions that Jesus gave them for their journey: Don’t take any money in your purse. Don’t even take a scrip, which is a bag, with an extra change of clothes – one staff and one pair of sandals would have to do.

So, why would Jesus tell His disciples these things? Because if God can feed the birds and clothe the lilies, as Jesus told them back in chapter 6, He can take care of His servants as well. Traveling light would thus give the twelve a chance to put their faith in God into action.

But traveling light is also a way to demonstrate or display that faith. It is a visual symbol of dependence, of helplessness, of need. More importantly, it is a way for missionaries to give credibility to their words when they urge other people to turn away from self-reliance and to trust in the Lord instead.

Well, what about us American Presbyterians? Could it be that our relative wealth and safety have made it difficult for people to believe us when we talk about how important it is to trust in God? Could it be that we are in fact tempted to rely on our own resources rather than on God to provide our daily bread? Traveling light might not only be one of the keys to effective evangelism. It might also help us be better disciples of the Lord.

But what about these curious instructions about lodging? Why would Jesus tell the twelve to abide, to stay in only one house in each town where they ministered?

Well, on the one hand, Jesus is clearly endorsing the idea that those who hear the Word of God should provide support for those who proclaim it. Jesus thus doesn't want his messengers to feel like freeloaders if they stay with the people to whom they are preaching. In fact, it is through the generosity of the people of God that God most often makes provision for His servants in mission – after all, Jesus says in verse 10 that the workman is worthy of his support, his nourishment.

But on the other hand, Jesus also warns his disciples against shopping around among their listeners for the best room and board. And that's because while it's right to accept hospitality, it is wrong to use the gospel ministry as an excuse to enrich yourself.

Unfortunately, all too many modern ministers need to heed this advice, and not just the ones who have become the objects of public scandal. After all, far too many preachers, even Presbyterians, only seem to hear a call from the Lord when that call is to a larger church with a bigger salary. Can we doubt that has damaged their credibility? And since most Presbyterian churches are very small, too many money-minded pastors translates into too many vacant pulpits, too many sheep going unfed.

Okay, but what can non-minister types learn from Jesus' rules about lodging? At the very least, we should all remember that the call to evangelism and mission must never be self-centered. We must never see our service for Christ as a way to get either spiritual or material things for ourselves.

And that means we must not engage in evangelism or give to mission work in order to feel better about ourselves as Christians. Moreover, we must not predicate our service to God or others on the condition that we gain or even keep particular blessings. Our ministry must instead be characterized by self-abandonment, by a complete focus on God and His glory.

American Christians, could it be that our efforts at evangelism have not been so successful lately because our focus has been more on ourselves than on God? Presbyterians, could it be that too many of our congregations are not growing because we are too concerned with ourselves, with our wants and our desires? Could it be that we need to forget about institutional survival and focus instead on the glory of God and the needs of the lost, even if that might mean giving up some of our cherished practices, changing the way we do some things?

Okay, so Jesus says we must travel light, which builds and displays our trust in God. Jesus says we must not try to feather our own nests, but keep our focus on the glory of God and the good of others. But the next lesson may be the most important one: What should be the content of our preaching? If we are missionaries, what message are we to proclaim?

Well, in verse 7 we find Jesus explaining the good news that He wanted the twelve to announce: "The kingdom of heaven is at hand." That was the essence of their message and it must be the essence of ours.

Okay, but what does this message really mean? Well, in the first place, it means that God, and in particular Jesus Christ, the One to whom all authority in Heaven and on Earth has been given, is in fact the king. The gospel must begin at this point – with the truth that no mere man is sovereign over anyone or anything, no matter what

any of us may think. In fact, we aren't even autonomous rulers of our own lives, free to make whatever choices we please.

No, there is one true king Who reigns over all the world, one ruler Who has given one law to guide and govern all our actions. And to the extent that what we want or think or do comes into conflict with God's good and perfect will, to the extent that we break any part of God's perfect law of love for Him and for others, we are rebels against the Lord's authority, traitors to our King.

And since all of us have, in one way or another, defied God's sovereign majesty in this way, if we would proclaim the Kingdom of God we must necessarily acknowledge the sinfulness of everyone, including ourselves. But at the same time, we must announce that the King has come, not to destroy the world, but instead to redeem it. The King has come, not to slay the wicked, but instead to die so that those who sin against Him might live and be forgiven.

And so we must proclaim the kingdom of God in all its justice and all its grace. We must proclaim not only God's might and majesty but also His loving welcome, His merciful forgiveness. We must proclaim His offer of peace to those who remain at war with Him. Such is the message with which all of us are sent into the world.

So Presbyterians, could it be that our efforts at evangelism have become ineffective because we sometimes fail to preach the whole gospel? In our anxiety to be acceptable to the world, might we have soft-pedaled the problem of sin and thus the urgent need for repentance? And if we continue to preach such a gospel of cheap grace, why would anyone be convicted of his sin? Why should anyone think it necessary to surrender to the claims of Christ?

And it is precisely because sin is such a serious problem that we must proclaim the whole gospel message of justice and forgiveness, of repentance and grace with the highest urgency. And that's because this passage makes clear that rejecting God's kingdom and God's authority has eternal consequences.

That is, after all, the meaning behind the symbolism Jesus prescribes in verse 14. Pious Jews used to shake the dust off their feet as they departed from pagan lands – it was a vivid expression of separation, a dramatic method of rejecting the wicked ways of the godless world.

And even today, the same kind of separation exists. For the simple but sad fact is this: those who choose to remain in rebellion against the Kingdom of God have no hope for salvation. Those who refuse today to live under the authority Christ will not have Him to protect them on the Day of Judgment. Those whose separation from the people of God is now symbolized by sandals and dust will eventually spend eternity in a place of outer darkness, a place where there is only weeping and gnashing of teeth.

No, there's just no getting around it: refusing to repent and submit to Christ, rejecting the Kingdom of God has eternal consequences. For there's just no other way to explain the solemn warning we find in verse 15: "It shall be more tolerable for Sodom and Gomorrah in the day of judgment" than for those who reject the message and the messengers of Christ. After all, Genesis 19 tells us that the Lord rained down fire and brimstone from heaven on those two wicked cities, destroying them so completely that the smoke of the whole area ascended into

the skies like the smoke from a furnace. And according to Jesus, that utter devastation is somehow better than what those who reject Jesus will receive on Judgment Day.

So Presbyterians, could it be that our hesitance to proclaim this frightening but certain truth has undermined our mission efforts? Could it be that our neglect of the Bible's teaching about the need for repentance to avoid the pains of Hell has sapped the urgency of our evangelism?

Oh, but let's not forget – there was one more thing Jesus sent the twelve to do. While they were trusting in the providence of God and maintaining their focus on His glory and the good of their listeners, and while they were proclaiming the Kingdom of God, pleading with their listeners to repent and submit themselves to the authority of Christ, Jesus also sent them to cast out demons, to cure diseases, to bring healing into people's lives.

Now again, I very seriously doubt that any of us has been given the same sorts of miraculous powers the apostles received. In fact, we know that Jesus gave them the ability to do such signs and wonders primarily in order to demonstrate the authority that Jesus had also given them. In a sense, the miracles the apostles did were Jesus' seal of authenticity on their ministry, and thus on their teaching. In no small part it is because the apostles did such mighty miracles that we can be sure that what they said and wrote about Jesus is true.

But that doesn't mean we modern-day Christians are off the hook where it comes to a ministry of healing. For just as traveling light and living selflessly made the twelve disciples' call to submission to Jesus believable, so their deeds of healing gave credibility to their proclamation of salvation by grace through faith. In short, because they demonstrated God's power to heal broken bodies, people believed in God's power through Christ to heal sin-sick souls.

So what about us? Presbyterians, could it be that so many of our congregations have stopped growing because we have stopped doing works of healing? No, not performing miracles, but finding different ways to help those who suffer from the brokenness that sin has brought into our world. So, how can we do this? Can we, perhaps, work for reconciliation for those who are estranged, or encourage sobriety for those trapped in addiction? Can we bring relief to those mired in generational poverty, or comfort and understanding to those who grieve, or welcome and love to those who are lonely and left out? Can we do such works of healing to demonstrate the reality of the gospel? Can we engage in holistic missions – showing rather than just telling of the love of Christ?

We should, for how can we expect people to believe what we say about the love of God if we don't show them that love at the same time? If we are only preachers and not healers, why should anyone listen to our words?

So, what lessons can we learn from Jesus' instructions to His disciples, from His manual for mission? Travel light. Focus on God. Be mindful of the present and eternal needs of others. Go with urgency. Go with love. Go and proclaim the kingdom with your heart and your hands as well as your lips. And as we go in such a way, who knows what great things God may accomplish through us?