

Equipping the Church

Part 12: 'The Harvest is Plentiful'

We have covered many areas in this series and I could preach another fifty sermons under such a broad banner as 'Equipping the Church' because there is so much to learn and so many areas in which we can mature and grow in Christ. However all of them really fall into just three categories: our ministry to God, our ministry to the Church and our ministry to the world.

Often this is described as the 'upward, inward and outward' aspects of our ministry. I don't like those terms much. Our ministry to God is not really 'upward.' We just say that God is 'up' much like we say the sun rises in the east. The sun doesn't move, we move around the sun. God is not 'up' He is everywhere and even within us. Our ministry to the Church is also not really 'inward' because we have to give out to our brothers and sisters to minister to them.

The term 'outward' is also problematic when referring to the world because it can create an 'in and out' mentality or a 'them and us' distinction when we think of those who are yet to embrace the good news of Jesus Christ. The truth is, Christ died for every single person on this planet and we all stand on level ground before the cross – there is no 'in and out' we are all God's beloved children. It's just that some of us know that and have let the truth set us free and some of us are yet to embrace that truth.

The other problem I have with the 'upward, inward, outward' illustration of ministry is that it's often presented as a 1-2-3 priority list. I am sure you have heard it said that our most important ministry is to God, then to the Church and then to the world. Now there is no doubt that a strong relationship with God in worship and prayer and a well-equipped Church are essential if we are to minister to the world – but the great danger in prioritizing these three aspects of ministry is that we inadvertently put one above the other and sadly, our ministry to the world always comes last and it's there we see our greatest neglect.

For example, we have many mega-Church ministries across the world which have amazing corporate worship programs and many of them have really solid teaching and equipping programs for the Church, but their impact on the world is far less significant. Most of their new members have come from other Churches rather than new disciples in Christ and that's because evangelism is way down their list from worship, preaching, teaching and fellowship with other believers.

So I prefer to see our ministry to God, to the Church and to the world as three large spokes in a single wheel. They are all the same size. They are equally important and should be always be equally valued otherwise the wheel buckles and that never ends well. I believe God is warning us in these last days that we desperately need a wheel alignment. I am not suggesting our ministry to God and to the Church are perfect but I do believe our ministry to the world is seriously neglected and there is a real sense of urgency with here. Let me explain.

We will worship God throughout all eternity; we will be with our brothers and sisters in Christ throughout all eternity, growing and maturing in Christ for all eternity. However that is not the case with the world and therefore that's not the case with evangelism. Our ministry to the world is not an eternal ministry because this world is not eternal, it has an end date. From the day Jesus gave us the Great Commission until now, the clock has been ticking and the need is now urgent.

Our ministry to the world is urgent because we only have a finite numbers of years on earth to be productive and to make a difference. It's urgent because the people around us in the world also only have a handful of years to hear the gospel and embrace their Lord and Saviour. Some of them only have days or hours before death will end their earthly journey.

Now here is where there is a wonderful synergy with the three spokes in our wheel. I believe the book of Acts and all of Church history shows us that effective evangelism is actually the natural outflow of a healthy Church. Evangelism is not a task or a specific ministry we give to some people. Whilst there are most certainly people to whom God imparts a special gifting and specific calling for evangelism like D.L. Moody, Billy Graham and Reinhardt Bonnke, the overall task of evangelism belongs to the whole Church and when we are worshipping God in every aspect of our lives and growing and maturing as a Church family - the Church is healthy and then the outflow, the fruit, the impact of a healthy Church is always effective evangelism.

I have actually heard people say that if they really get locked into worship, they don't want to do anything else, but that's not what Scripture teaches. In Isaiah 6, we see Isaiah locked in worship before the Lord. He says, *"I saw the Lord, high and exalted, seated on a throne; and the train of his robe filled the temple ..."* and he goes on for several more verses describing this rapturous worship experience but in the midst of His worship he heard the voice of the Lord say, *"Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?"* And Isaiah says, *"Here I am. Send me."*

When we truly worship God, when we actually connect with the heart of the Father, we will always hear God's call to evangelism. We won't just want to be lost in worship like we have reached a destination, we will want to take that transforming experience out to the people; we will want to share that powerful reality with as many people as we can. When we truly taste and see the goodness of the Lord it is the greatest privilege imaginable and we have to share our testimony with the world. Ok, with all that as a backdrop, let me take you to the Matthew's Gospel.

Matthew 9:35-38

*"Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, **'The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.'**"*

I have always been fascinated by this verse. Notice that Jesus didn't say pray for the harvest. He said, pray for harvesters. So by implication Jesus is saying that the size and effectiveness of the harvest is actually determined by the amount of workers. In other words, the harvest is there, but there has to be harvesters. Now some people jump in at this point and say that God is in control and whatever He wants is going to happen. No argument from me on that one. However, because God is in control He will often present us with a challenge or an invitation which without our response, without us embracing our responsibility, there will be unfulfilled potential and even an unfulfilled promise. In other words, **God often presents us with ministry opportunities which require our involvement or they just won't happen.** God could easily just do it all Himself, but God is absolutely committed to this partnership with His people and more often than not He will not do it without us.

The nation of Israel is a great example. God declared that His people would reach the promised land. God says, *"It's yours, I give it to you now."* God gives them this incredible promise but that generation never made it to the promised land because of the choices they made. It was a promise from God Himself but they never saw it fulfilled - it wasn't God's fault. In the context of Jesus' statement in Matthew 9, the people failed to co-labor with God to bring about His promise for them.

God doesn't give us commands or ministry tasks just to keep us busy. He is always trying to lead us into fruitfulness, into effectiveness. So God gives this assignment because there's something in His heart that has to be touched by somebody who is made in His image. There's something God longs to do but He's actually looking for agreement before it can be done because He will not force it on us against our will. It must come in partnership with us as we exercise our free will and accept God's invitation or embrace God's command. So Jesus says, *"Here's My heart – here's My mission: the harvest field is ripe and ready - but the workers are few."* Jesus is healing the sick and casting out demons and declaring the gospel of the kingdom and it's in that context that He was moved with compassion and turns to the disciples and tells them to pray for the Father to send out workers into the field because the harvest is ready. But then look at the very next verse, which is actually the first verse of chapter 10. Just remember there were no chapter breaks in the original manuscript.

Matthew 10:1, 7-8

"Jesus called his twelve disciples to him and gave them authority to drive out impure spirits and to heal every disease and sickness." (Then vv.7-8)

"As you go, proclaim this message: 'The kingdom of heaven has come near.' Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you have received; freely give.

This entire tenth chapter of Matthew focuses on the equipping of these twelve disciples to become the workers Jesus just told them to pray for. So we have a mandate to minister to God in worship and that's really important. But there's something that happens in that environment as worshipers which actually sets the stage for evangelism. The closer we come to God in worship, the more we see His heart for His lost children. We also have a mandate to minister to believers – to the Church – but the danger is always there that we get caught up just caring for people around us, but we never take it beyond the family.

Jesus said in John 13:35, *"They will know you're my disciples because of your love for one another."* In other words, they will see how compassionately we walk through conflict; they will watch us, as we respond to the person in crisis; they will watch us care for them; they will see how we practice community; how we learn together etc. and they will come to the conclusion that we are Jesus' disciples. They will see our love for each other and be convinced that Jesus is raised from the dead, He is present in the midst of His people.

Do you remember where you were on Thursday 9th November, 1989 when the Berlin Wall fell and the Soviet Union started to be dismantled? I do. Ironically I was sitting for a Church History exam that day in my first year at Morling College. I remember watching it on TV that night. As the Berlin wall started to crumble in one place, thousands of people started pouring through the gap in a wall that had divided East and West Germany for decades. Thousands ran through this gap in the wall and many of them were singing. Do you know what song? They were singing a verse from Psalm 118, *"This is the day that the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it."* I discovered later that at the exact spot where the section of the Berlin wall was removed, there had actually been a very significant and powerful prayer meeting the night before. There was a gathering of believers praying for a breakthrough the night before and then all heaven broke loose! Brothers and sisters, you never know when your next prayer is going to be the one that triggers a breakthrough.

So these people who had probably gathered for many years to pray saw the mighty hand of God move and the world was never the same again. For a whole lifetime we had heard about the darkness and evil which had grown unchecked behind the Iron Curtain, we had seen the power of Communism and Socialism - but no 'ism' can stand against Jesus Christ. Nothing can stand against the power of the gospel. It was a glorious day and the rest of the world rejoiced.

However nobody really saw it coming. No matter how long they had longed for this revolution, it caught everybody by surprise, including the Church. The Church had been praying for this to happen for decades but when this miracle unfolded, we were not prepared. There was no money set aside; there were no laborers trained and ready to go into the harvest field the moment the wall fell. To most Christians this was a dream, a hope, a wish and we were keen to say a hearty 'amen' to every prayer but nobody was ready to go when it happened. The Harvest was plentiful, but the workers were few. So when the wall fell, all the missions organizations rushed to put their reserves together, pool their finances and they started training as many people as they could so they could quickly saturate this new mission field with the gospel. It was wonderful to see but the problem was, we had been caught off guard. The Church had ignored the many prophetic warnings that this was coming; the Church was simply not alert and ready to go when the harvest was ready. So they rushed to prepare themselves and get ready but so did the mafia; so did a number of dangerous cults.

I believe God is warning us today to not make the same mistake again. When the word of the Lord comes forth, it means I must position myself for what God just said, I must be about the Father's business; I must be in the harvest field already, praying for more workers. Jesus is standing before us again today and He is declaring that the harvest is ready and let me tell you, there's no room in all the Church buildings in our nation to contain the harvest God wants to bring. The Holy Spirit is moving across the Church calling us to position ourselves better because the harvest is ready. There will be a tipping point in the moral decay and anti-Christian sentiment in our nation and around the world and the day is coming when God will lift the veil and open the eyes of millions of people. He needs us to be ready when that happens because God has determined that we are the harvesters. He will not do this without us. This is the calling and purpose of the Church. I'm not sure about you but I don't want to stand in heaven one day looking back at what could have been possible had I been ready. I'm reminded of a song written by Steve Camp years ago. The song is called "*Run to the Battle*" and the opening words are: "*Some people want to live within the sound of chapel bells, but I want to run a mission a yard from the gates of hell*"

This world is in no condition for the people of God to simply sit back and watch it fall apart. There is a tangible and desperate need for Jesus; for a glimpse of hope in the midst of hopelessness. Jesus experienced this need first hand and it filled Him with compassion. His heart was breaking when He turned to His disciples and said... "*The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few.*" This alone should stir our hearts. We have a calling to make a difference, to share the truth of the Gospel and to be a light in the darkness. This is the mission of Christ and God has determined that this mission will be fulfilled in and through the Church, by the power of the Holy Spirit. But perhaps the most confronting reality facing us in 2022 is so obvious it's embarrassing and yet we have continued to miss it for nearly 2,000 years. We understand that through the ministry of the Holy Spirit speaking through the Scriptures that Jesus is speaking to us here and now when He says, "*The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few.*" That is confronting enough, but we forget that He first spoke these words to the very first disciples before the Church as we know it was even established.

The harvest has been plentiful from God's perspective since the day Jesus ushered in the Kingdom of Heaven. When He went from town to town preaching, "The kingdom of heaven is here," Jesus was declaring the harvest was ready and the only reason we are still hearing those words through His Spirit today is because the workers are still few! So why is Jesus still calling for workers? Why has the end times harvest of souls remained incomplete for so long? There is only one place to look for the answer to that question: the Church which carries the name and the mission of Jesus Christ. As I said at the beginning of this sermon, I believe effective evangelism is the natural outflow of a healthy Church and a healthy Church is comprised of those who have fully embraced God and the salvation He has given us freely through the finished work of Jesus Christ. If we want to know why the harvest is still plentiful and the workers are still few we need nothing more than a mirror.

The greatest evangelist ever to walk the earth in our lifetime, Billy Graham, uttered one sentence towards the end of his long ministry which was as pertinent as it was confronting. He said, ***"It could be that the greatest hindrance to evangelism is the poverty of our own experience of God."*** If you remember nothing from these twelve sermons except that one sentence and allow it to grip your heart and renew your mind, then I will have served my purpose.

Of course I hope you remember much more than that. There is a huge amount to ponder and process in this teaching series and I hope and pray that you will re-visit each of the sermons and allow God to bury His word deep in your heart. I also pray that you will share the link to this series with many of your brothers and sisters in Christ around the world and with those family and friends who are yet to embrace the wonderful truth of the gospel.

So I think I need to finish on a lighter note with a true story about Billy Graham. It really has nothing to do with this sermon other than the fact I have just mentioned the great evangelist. But I know you will love it and pass it on and maybe you will pass on the sermon it's attached to as well. I hope so.

This all happened late in Billy Graham's life, well after his full time ministry had ended. Billy was returning home to Charlotte after a speaking engagement and when his plane arrived there was a luxury limousine waiting to take him home. He hadn't ordered the limo, it was a gift. It was a stunning shiny black stretch limo with heavily tinted windows in the back and all the luxuries that Hollywood Stars enjoy. But as Billy prepared to get into the limo, he stopped and spoke to the driver.

"You know" he said, "I am 87 years old and I have never driven a limousine. Would you mind if I drove today?" The driver said, *"No problem Mr. Graham. It's all yours."* Billy told the driver to get in the back and help himself to a drink and snacks and enjoy the ride!

So Billy Graham gets into the driver's seat of this stretch limo and they head off down the highway. He was having the time of his life and so was his passenger! Billy was so enthralled with this new experience that his foot must have become a little heavy. A short distance away sat a rookie State Trooper operating his first speed trap. The long black limo flew by him doing 70 mph in a 55 mph zone. The trooper pulled out and easily caught the limo and motioned for him to pull over. The young trooper got out of his patrol car and walked up to the driver's door and when the window was rolled down, he was stunned to see who was driving. He immediately recognized Billy Graham and quickly excused himself and went back to his patrol car and called his supervisor. He told the supervisor, *"I know we are supposed to enforce the law... but I also know that important people are given certain courtesies. I need to know what I should do because I have just stopped a very, very important person."*

The supervisor asked, *"Is it the Mayor?"*

The young trooper said, *"No, he's more important than that."*

The supervisor said, *"Is it the Governor?"*

The young trooper said, *"No, he's more important than that."*

The supervisor said, *"Oh, so it's the President."*

The young trooper said, *"No, he's even more important than that."*

The supervisor finally asked, *"Well then, who is it?"*

The young trooper said, *"I really can't tell through the dark windows, but I'm pretty sure it's Jesus, because he's got Billy Graham for a chauffeur!"*