

Growing in Christ

Part 8: 'Our Mission'

Growing in Christ is no easy task. As we saw last week, the implications of Christian maturity are far-reaching and at times quite threatening. When I say threatening I mean that we are challenged at the very core of our being: who we are; why we are here on this earth; what we do with our time, energy, money, gifts and prayers. In the last sermon I spoke about the necessity for us to have and to cultivate a genuine burden for the lost and a passion to meet their deepest need and bring them to Jesus.

Now when I say a burden for the lost, I don't just mean that we put more in the mission envelopes or sponsor an extra child with World Vision - as good as that is - it is not what Jesus had in mind when He said in John 20, *"As I have been sent, so now I am sending you."* If you have the courage, come with me now as the Holy Spirit brings into focus the mission into which we have all been called.

Matthew 25:35-36 *"For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me."*

It used to be that if you wanted to see the great architectural wonders of the world - the Eiffel Tower, the ancient Pyramids of Egypt, the Washington Monument, the Tower of London - you had to travel to far-off places. No more. All you need to do now is open a book; or surf through the picture files on the internet, or drop by the nearest library and see detailed photos, descriptions, even scale-model reproductions.

It used to be that if you wanted to listen to the greatest music in the world you had to schedule trips to concert halls and hear the compositions performed by live orchestras. Not any more. Radio, television, CD's, MP3's and internet streaming all allow you to have the music whenever and wherever you want.

It used to be that if you wanted to experience the different cultures and customs of the world, you had to travel across the world. Again, no more. Just go to parts of Sydney or Melbourne and you can visit little alcoves of almost every culture you can imagine. It turns out that in so many ways, you don't have to go far to see and experience the world. It's true for the wonders and breathtaking features of the world and it's true for the traumas and tragic realities of the world as well. You don't have to go far to see a whole world of hurt and need around you.

Many people are nearsighted. That means they have trouble seeing things that are in the distance. It's a common physical condition. It's also a common problem in human relations; to be able to focus clearly on things right around you (your family, your job, your home, your finances and your health) while not paying much attention to the things far beyond your own circle of existence. But did you know that an even more prevalent problem in the Church of Jesus Christ in our nation is the opposite affliction? Farsightedness, the ability to see things clearly at a distance while being unable to focus on the things that are literally right under our nose.

Consider worshipping Wendy - a committed Christian who never misses a Sunday service. One day in Church she hears some information about physically disabled individuals and the special needs they face in a world built for able-bodied people. Wendy wonders if perhaps her prayers might touch the life of some such individual somewhere far away.

She prays sincerely for physically challenged individuals all over the world. But then later that day at the supermarket, she fidgets impatiently, sighs loudly and rolls her eyes as a disabled gentleman ahead of her struggles to manoeuvre his shopping cart down the aisle.

Or, consider Charlie Churchgoer, who reads on this particular day about all the people in the world who are hungry, even starving; or perhaps homeless, cold or sick. He decides to drop a few extra dollars into the offering plate to help some hungry family in a third world country, perhaps; or to provide shelter for a homeless family through some missions organization somewhere overseas. Then, later that day he finds himself turning his eyes away, pretending not to notice as he drives past the homeless, those people he knows are currently without jobs, people whose gaunt expression belies a diet which is severely lacking in the essentials for a healthy life. Farsightedness. That's what I'm talking about. The ability to get so starry-eyed about what our missionaries are doing 'over there' that we overlook what we could be doing right here! We have not really put into practice the words of Christ himself, who said in Mark 10:45, "*The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve.*"

Now some of you may know that this word *serve* or *servant* as it's used in the New Testament, is not a picture of a household servant or a butler as we might picture today - a hired servant like that is one who is at liberty to pick and choose when and where they will serve and to set the hours during which they are available for service. The kind of servant Jesus calls you and me to be, by contrast, is more closely related to what we would call a slave - someone whose whole life is consigned to meeting the needs of another, without picking and choosing the time or the place; without setting hours of availability; without any expectation of repayment.

What does it take to get us to serve? What does it take to motivate you, to motivate me, to get our hands dirty and work in the life of another? It should take nothing more than the simple realization that a need exists and the love of Christ constrains us to help. If it takes more than that to motivate me, then I'm not being the servant Christ calls me to be. Instead, I'm just being farsighted!

How many times have you walked past a homeless person in order to get into a building? How many times have you been approached by someone asking for money for food, and you do the charade of fumbling in your pocket for a few seconds before shaking your head and saying, silently, "*Sorry, I can't help you.*" Or you ignore them completely. How many times have you slipped quickly past migrant workers and their families at the store, despite the obvious fact that they need Jesus just as much as anyone else? How many times have you said you'll do anything to further the work of the Kingdom of God in the world - and then looked the other way when an opportunity presents itself, up close and personal.

If we are really serious about the words of all the songs we sing about following Jesus, then we need to realize that where God is leading us might be just across the street into the life of someone with a real, immediate need. Yes it's wonderful to pray for revival and dream of the day when every knee shall bow and every tongue confess Jesus as Lord and Saviour, but how will that happen if not through individuals being ministered to by others who care? For many believers revival is an 'out there' word and it means nothing until we see the 'up close and personal' implications of that revival right under our noses.

Jesus is our teacher here in both word and in deed. He's our example in word because of stories He told like the Parable of the Good Samaritan, in Luke 10. Remember in our last sermon how we read where the priest and the Levite saw the man in need, but passed over to the other side of the road and strolled on by? That was because they were farsighted: They knew from the study of their own chosen professions that (a) there were plenty of needy people in the world, and (b) that God's people needed to be out there helping them; but they failed to engage with a real need right in front of them.

Don't make the mistake of judging the priest and the Levite in the story too harshly unless you look in the mirror - for there's a little bit (quite possibly a big bit) of that attitude in every one of us. We know what God would like for us to do in that ideal situation, that perfect scenario, the one where we've got plenty of time and energy, and the other person is nice, clean, and able to repay us handsomely. But the situations of real life are seldom ideal; so we quickly make excuses; and we too "*pass over to the other side of the road*" and move on. The Samaritan, though, was the one who was truly willing to get involved. He was the one who realized that, if you're really serious about being a compassionate bearer of the message of hope and fulfillment in Christ, then you don't have to go far to find ways to get involved.

Jesus put this message into practice in His own life, too. In Mark 6:34, we read about how Jesus came ashore from the sea and was met by a great crowd. Mark says that Jesus was "*moved with compassion*" toward them, "*because they were like sheep without a shepherd.*" Some translations of the Bible say that Jesus simply "*had compassion.*" But it's really more correct to say that Jesus was "*moved with compassion.*" It's one thing to have compassion - when we watch television reports of families who have been displaced and rendered homeless by natural disaster or war, it's easy to feel compassion towards them. When we hear reports of people in your own community who are having a very difficult time because of financial hardship or physical problems, it's not hard to feel compassion welling up within us. But how often are we truly *moved* by compassion: specifically, moved out of our own chairs and moved into the lives of those who have the needs? Remember, we don't have to go far to find people who need the compassionate touch of a friend in their lives. If we were to allow ourselves today to be moved by compassion, we could find ourselves making a difference today in the life of someone around us.

There are three things, then, that we really need to recognize about the needs of the world which surround us. The first is what we've already talked about; that is, we must recognize how easy it is to reach out to those with such needs. It's easy because we don't have to go far to see the needs of the world; they are all around us - possibly next door to us, or across the street; possibly in the halls of the office or building where we spend our days, or behind the counters of the businesses we frequent each week. The needs are all around us if we simply have eyes to see.

The second thing we need to recognize about the needs in the world is how important it is to reach out when we see these needs. According to the New Testament, it's absolutely non-negotiable; any failure on my part to reach out and serve my fellow pilgrim in this world constitutes a denial of Christ's Lordship and an absolute refusal to do His will. Quite simply, Christianity without service, Christianity without compassion, is hollow Christianity, a mere shell of faith that has no substance with which to answer the realities of this world!

There is no other reason for us being here friends. If we are truly allowing the Holy Spirit to transform us into the image of Jesus, then increasingly we will be speaking the words of Jesus and doing the works of Jesus. We seem more content with the former than the latter. It's easy, then, to reach out to the needs of the world but we must do so in response to God's leading and serve out of the reservoir of love within us. Doing good works because we are supposed to is religion and God cannot bless religion. Our good works must flow out of the love of Christ which constrains us. All our acts of service are to be motivated by that love and are to be accompanied by the deep desire to lead the people we serve to the source of that love: Jesus Christ.

Thirdly, we must recognize how extraordinary the reward is for those who show compassion in this way. On one level, the New Testament challenges us to look all around us and see those who are hungry, thirsty, lonely, needing clothes or shelter, and to serve them; but on another level, there is a promise to all of God's people that says, take heart when you're giving of yourself and seem to be getting nothing in return - be assured, your reward is coming.

Matthew 25:34 *"Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you ..."*

Who's Jesus talking to here? Precisely the people who have been faithful in reaching out with compassion in these ways! There's no greater reward in the Kingdom of Heaven than the reward that awaits those who have devoted their lives to reaching out with compassion to all those who are considered least in the eyes of this world. You don't have to go far to find ways to 'give to the Lord' today. Look around your own life today; see what God might be leading you to do . . . to pray ... to give .. and where He may be leading you to go.

I wonder how our world might be if every disciple of Jesus began every day by asking the Holy Spirit to lead them to just one person in the world today whom I may bless or serve in some way. Just one person today, then another tomorrow. That's 7 people a week, 30 people a month, over 300 people a year who encountered the love of Christ through just one of His disciples. Multiply that across all believers in our city and our nation and see what happens! Revival will not just be something we pray for and sing about – it will be where we live!

It all comes back to those two words, doesn't it? Becoming and doing. Becoming more like Jesus and doing the works of Jesus. This is what embracing the mission of Christ is all about friends. We don't have a mission. The Baptist Church doesn't have a mission. Only Jesus has a mission and it has not changed for over 2,000 years. That mission has a Church. We have been called by Jesus to embrace His mission and He has promised to empower that decision as we join with Him in bringing all of God's lost children home. May it be so!