

***Discipleship 202: Field Trip!***  
***By Jason Huff***  
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***Isaiah 56:1-8, Matthew 5:38-48, 1 Corinthians 9:16-23***

Today's final Scripture reading comes from 1 Corinthians 9:16-23. Listen now to God's Word. "When I preach the gospel, I cannot boast, for I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel! If I preach voluntarily, I have a reward; if not voluntarily, I am simply discharging the trust committed to me. What then is my reward? Just this: that in preaching the gospel I may offer it free of charge, and so not make use of my rights in preaching it. Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings."

We're ten months away from the presidential election, and if you're like me, you're already kind of weary. But most of us believe in our country and that it can be governed well. I remember the first time that I really became aware of our country's history in a big way, and that was through a field trip. Sometime in seventh or eighth grade, my school took a class trip to Washington, DC. I still have the pictures I took on my \$20 camera. While I knew plenty about how the US ran before then, the trip made me realize that government was bigger than any one person and that an entire city, more or less, was dedicated to making sure our country ran well. We can all debate how often that happens, but the field trip put a brand new perspective on it. It's one thing to see it on TV; it's another thing to experience it for yourself. And that's why schools take kids to places from apple orchards to factories. Hands-on makes all the difference.

As we've been studying discipleship, we've learned a lot about personal choices to grow closer to God that affect us in ways that may affect other people. But this week, we're going to talk about mission work – the place where we get hands-on with others and specifically work to reach out to the lost with the good news that Jesus Christ offers forgiveness and salvation to all who believe. Mission work is scary and exciting and often not at all what we think it is. So this week, I'd like us to take just a few moments this morning to get our heads wrapped around our call to be missional people for Christ.

While the Jewish people didn't send missionaries out to other countries, word of the Hebrew God spread throughout the middle east and beyond as reports came of their successes against ridiculous odds. Who would imagine that any people could stand up to the might of the Egyptian pharaoh or the Philistines? What army could hold back Sennacherib from Assyria? What other nation stayed together after seventy years of exile and deportation? As word spread about Yahweh and His people, foreigners naturally wanted to know about this God who displayed genuine authority – not only in His amazing power, but in giving His people a law and a way of life.

The Jews were God's chosen people, but God's relationship with them was never to the exclusion of others who would follow Him. When God promised to make Abraham into a great nation way back in Genesis 12, He told Abraham that "all peoples of the earth will be blessed through you." God chose the Hebrews to be His unique and special people, but no one was cut off from God because of heritage. That's what Isaiah 56 was describing. The foreigner, the eunuch, they believed they had no place in God's design. Yet God says that all who hold fast to Him will be given joy and an everlasting name that will not be cut off. Even though they weren't fully able to participate in the worship life of Israel, by covenanting with God, they were accepted.

If the Old Testament gives birth to a promise that all people who believed in God and desired to follow Him would be accepted, Jesus brought that promise to fruition. His ministry was not first and foremost to the religious people of Israel but to those on the margins: the sick, the disabled, the poor, those stuck in patterns of unrighteousness and sin, those that the religious people could never see ushered into God's Kingdom. They were Jews, but Jews who had been cast out of polite society. Jesus made it clear that it wasn't following the Law that saved anyone, because no one could do it perfectly. Salvation came by grace through faith in Jesus – and even that faith we have in Jesus, we're told, is itself a free gift from God.

When Jesus' work of teaching, healing, and ransoming us was complete, He gave the continuing work to the disciples. His last command to them was to "go and make disciples of every nation." That mandate had two verbs – going and making disciples – and one descriptive clause – of every nation. Jesus' followers were to actively do what He did – go out wherever God led and spread the news. His words were not just for His immediate followers; they call us to action as well, to complete the work that is not yet finished, to bring the message of Christ's salvation to anyone who will listen.

Now let's be honest – not everyone is called to be a Paul who goes around planting churches. Peter, the leader of the church, stayed primarily in Jerusalem, establishing and sustaining the growing number of Christians there. Others of the disciples found themselves in various places sharing the news that Jesus had attained salvation for all who would faithfully believe and follow. But while some went, many stayed and helped the work of the church by giving. Paul was called to his particular ministry; as he says, he is "discharging the trust given to me." Paul writes in many of his letters how he has taken up collections where one church gives to another church in need, and he tells how he has been blessed by those who have provided for him during his missionary journeys. Not everyone travels to faraway places and foreign lands, but every Christian has a part to play in sharing the gospel with the whole world.

Looking at the passages that speak to missions in Scripture, there are two lessons for us wherever we are and two lessons specifically on missions, on being disciples to the nations. Not only did Jesus give us a task to complete, He gives us the specifics on how to get it done. I want to see how the call to making disciples affects us at home and as we look beyond our borders.

The first thing I see in the Bible is this: *let God expand your outreach zone*. Most of us are comfortable with a limited group of people: the folks that we see at work and maybe a few neighbors, hopefully the friends we see at church. But Jesus' idea of discipleship was radical. In Matthew 5 this morning from the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says to be praying for those who persecute us and to love our enemies. That's insanely difficult to do. But Jesus calls on us to do it because it marks us as His disciples. Nobody else is going to do it. Nobody else is going to turn the other cheek. Nobody when forced to go one mile goes the second mile. When we do those radical things, it sets us apart. It makes the world go, "what's that all about?" And it gives us the opportunity to step in with the gospel.

I have to admit this is a tough one for me. I gravitate to people who I think will like me. We all do. We don't first approach folks we think are going to reject us. And truthfully, I don't think God's call was for that either. Whenever the disciples traveled to a new town, the book of Acts tells us they always went first to the local synagogue, if there was one. They preached to the people who were already primed by Scripture to hear and believe the message of Christ. If they got kicked out of the local synagogue, then they went to whomever was willing to hear. But their goal was not to go to people who would like them – their goal was to get the message out to those who would listen and whose hearts were being prepared to become disciples.

Honestly, it is sometimes most difficult for us to share the gospel with people we want to like us. Because if we offend them, we'll no longer be friends. But the one thing I've found over the years is that true friendship springs out of true relationship with God. I've known a lot of people over the years, from high school buddies to connections I've made through my love of Japanese animation. I like a lot of them. But truthfully, every person I am genuinely close to, I am close to because we share a common faith in Jesus Christ. A friendship that isn't rooted in Jesus Christ may be lifelong; it may be comforting at times; it's good to have those around you who don't think just as you do. But it will never have that deep core that only comes from God being the center of your relationship. So let us encourage one another to share Christ with those who are close to us and pray that they become eternal friends.

But in the same breath, it is my prayer that we as a body of believers would welcome in the person who doesn't quite fit, the guy who's still working to get his drinking under control, the single mom who's at her wits end, the guy who's socially awkward...even the guy who thinks that believing in Christ is a bunch of hooey. Jesus saved murderers, thieves, tax collectors, and prostitutes. If we have a problem with that, Jesus has a problem with us. Because Jesus said, what reward should we expect if we're nice to the people who are nice to us - if even pagans greet their fellow brothers? Jesus says no – to be the church, we have to befriend the friendless and the hard to love. If we are being the church Christ called us to be, it means that we'll find friends in church who have a history, who have a past. Not only is that OK, that means we're doing what God asked of us as we all move together beyond our pasts into the future God has set before us in Jesus. Let's be praying that we would welcome everybody so that they might hear that the forgiveness and salvation we have found in Christ can be theirs, too.

And that brings me to the second universal I saw in this week's Scripture: *we need to meet people where they are, not where we want them to be*. There was a time in the American church, and you'll still find it in some places, where you were expected to come in your quote-unquote "Sunday best" and look the part of a good little Christian. That worked for some people, I guess. But we also lost a ton of people, hurting people, people Christ died for, because we expected them to look and act in a way that wasn't genuine. We have much to repent for in that way of excluding people from the Kingdom of God.

In comparison, Paul said he became a servant of everyone. He became like others in order to reach them with the news of Jesus' incredible love. He was a Jew to the Jews, a Greek to the Greeks, weak to the weak. This didn't mean he ever compromised the gospel. It meant he approached them wherever they were in life. He didn't expect the Gentiles to understand the Scriptures the Jewish people had lived with for centuries. Nor did he expect the Gentiles to have to act like Jews and follow Jewish ways to become Christians. His conversations went differently with every person, whatever life station they had. And when he did this, he was simply following the pattern of Jesus, who spoke with authority to the authorities, with loving discipline to his followers, and with great kindness to the poor and oppressed.

For us, that means that we need to leave our expectations of others at the door. What clothes they wear, how they do their hair, what job they have, what their background is...our goal isn't for us to make carbon copies of ourselves. God has made each of us distinctively to reflect Him – His grandeur, His compassion, His mercy. He doesn't need two Jasons or two Cathas or two of anybody. He wants each one of us to shine for Him, and He is remaking us so that we will uniquely speak to His glory.

That also means that we can't expect people to walk in fully-formed Christians. If anything, we want to see all sorts of people who hardly know anything about this Jesus guy who are willing to learn. If the church is a hospital for the spiritual ill, then everybody's going to come in with a different spiritual disease for which Jesus is the only cure. But let's not expect that they should find the cure outside and then come inside. Let's open the doors wide to meet people where they are right now and invite them to experience the healing Jesus brings.

So let's move on to missions, to the Great Commission, to going. What do we see there? The first idea I see is this: *go see for yourself what God is doing*. In the book of Acts, as God builds the church, it expands beyond the Jews to the Gentiles. All of the believers up to that point were Jewish, and they weren't exactly certain that God's promises really extended to those outside Israel. So what did God do? He gave the Holy Spirit to the Gentiles. When the Jewish Christians showed up, they said, "How can we not consider them brothers and sisters in Christ when they have the signs of the Spirit?" God demonstrated that He had indeed chosen His people from all the nations. The Jewish believers were encouraged and strengthened because they saw God's truth shining through those they once considered enemies.

Not all of us are going to go overseas or spend years doing missionary work. But when we have the opportunity to cross boundaries to see what God is doing, we should take it. I've known many people who have been set on fire for God from taking a short-term mission trip. I'm not sure there's a better way to get our blinders off to what God is accomplishing.

Much of my own ministry desire sprang from a two-week trip down to Monterrey, Mexico. I still remember worshipping in the midst of a garbage heap that tens of thousands called home and realizing that God was working amidst devastating poverty. People with nothing to call their own called Christ their own, and it was more than enough to convince me that a life in full-time Christian service was a life well spent. Others from our own congregation have been deeply moved by serving in New Orleans and helping with disaster relief.

I can't urge you enough, if you have the time and the ability, to make a difference in someone's life through a short-term mission trip. It doesn't have to be far away. A number of churches in Detroit itself would love help and arrange for groups willing to help. There's plenty of relief to give still in places like Iowa and Louisiana. And many places still are open to hearing the news of Jesus Christ lovingly presented. I believe that God will work through you and work in you when you decide to step out in faith and go somewhere new to be His light to our darkened world. If you'd like ideas where to go or what to do, talk to me and I can point you to a mission trip that might be just right for you.

The other idea about missions I have for you today is not easy but simple: *support it with your wallet*. The early church didn't send everyone out to faraway places, but it did uplift those that were sent with prayer and financial support. When you support a missionary or a missions project, you are claiming that work as your own – to pray for it, to give to it, and to be encouraged by it when it blossoms. The local church is responsible to look for ways to bless the larger global church as it can, and supporting missions work is a key way to do it.

I know a number of successful churches have missions in their DNA. When they first started, they determined they were going to support other ministries with the money they received. Many tithe what they receive, giving 10% or more to missions and new church developments. That has never happened at Church of the Covenant, and you know, what we receive isn't yet enough to cover our needs. But dream with me! We're still a young church. We still have the ability to be missional in our thinking, to see mission as part and parcel of what we do. I encourage you, let's follow in the example of the early church and give generously to ministries outside our walls. We've started that with our partnership with Hope Center. What more could we do to be the giving church God calls us to be, to make sure His gospel goes where we cannot?

The warm beating heart behind missions work is that God loves us so incredibly much. So much that the Father sent the Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins, to take on Himself the penalty for our wrongdoing, so that we might be restored to a right relationship with Himself. While missions work gets us out to see what God is up to, it's also so much more. It's the proof that God wants relationship with us, wants restoration for us, and wants reconciliation among us. Missions is something to celebrate -- we have such a good God that not only does the world need to know Him, we get the joy of sharing Him with all who would hear! As we yearn to become deeper disciples, may God touch our hearts that we might feel the desire to be engaged through our lives, our dollars, and our hands and feet in spreading the news that we serve a risen and reigning Savior and Lord who forgives and saves all who would believe. Amen.

