

Jesus' Mission, and Our Mission, Too
Luke 10:1-20

Twice before – both in the last chapter – Luke records Jesus sending out his followers on ‘mission trips’. All three accounts reflect several circumstances and realities. For one, the sending out of others reflects Jesus’ expanding influence: as his reputation spreads, he can no longer cover all the ministry opportunities. For another, the latter two mission trips take place as Jesus turns toward Jerusalem, where he will face crucifixion: he is implicitly preparing for the continuation of the mission after he dies. Consequently, these narrative model the mission responsibilities of the church in Luke’s time, as in our own.

In our church calendar, we have recently held the annual missions conference, have just concluded the missions-fund pledge, and are now preparing teams for summer short-term missions. So it is a useful time to reflect on Jesus’ mission, and ours.

Day 1: Luke 10:1 Who should hear? Who should speak?

Having sent out the 12 on an earlier mission (9:1-6), Jesus now sends out 72. A comparison of the two demonstrates considerable overlap: (a) both teams are told not to provide for their own needs, but to rely on hospitality from those they seek to reach; (b) in both instances, Jesus gives power to heal and exorcise demons, as well as a commission to preach the reign of God; (c) in each instance, they proclaim not only the availability of salvation, but also impending judgment, by wiping the dust of resistant villages off their feet. So the basics of each mission are parallel, though the second account is considerably longer and more detailed.

Why, then, this second account?

Numbers are often symbolic in Scripture, and are clearly significant in this instance. Jesus chose apostles, and sent them out to preach: the 12 apostles recall the 12 patriarchs of the Old Testament; Jesus is reconstituting a new Israel, a new people of God, and 12 new patriarch-apostles. The present account expands his agenda: based on the ‘table of nations’ in Genesis 10, Jews conceived of the world as divided into 72 nations, languages, and culture groups. So in sending out the 72, Jesus makes the point that the gospel is not just for Jews (or any other distinct national, ethnic, linguistic, or cultural group), but for the whole world. And it requires not just the efforts of a small group of Christian leaders, but a wide range of believers to engage in mission.

So our mission outreach rightly prioritizes our national, ethnic, linguistic, and cultural affinities with Chinese around the world; at the same time, we do not neglect non-Chinese. And in all cases, we prioritize the ‘unreached’ who have no immediate access to the gospel, over those with current access to the gospel

within their own cultures. And our mission requires the engagement not only of vocational missionaries, but of us all.

Day 2: Luke 10:2-3a Be the Change Jesus Wishes to See

One of Mohandas Gandhi's more famous sayings was, "You must be the change you wish to see." His point was that to secure social change, all must join the movement, and play their parts.

In similar vein, in this verse, Jesus first calls his followers to pray that God would send workers into the harvest. Then he calls them to be the answer to their own prayers.

As a church, we pray weekly for missions and our missionaries. And as individuals, prayer for missionaries should be a regular part of our personal devotional lives. In his own day, Jesus called his followers not only to pray, but also to go. He calls us to do likewise.

Day 3: Luke 10:3 Like Lambs into the Midst of Wolves

The metaphor is evocative. As we go into the world with the message of Jesus, we are like lambs moving out into a pack of wolves. There's a sharp irony here: in real life, it is wolves that chase lambs, not lambs that pursue wolves.

Of course, we want to be careful how far we take this: not everyone outside the church is a wild animal seeking to devour us! All the same, Jesus makes the point that our faith – and especially our evangelism and missions – will face a generalized antagonism from within the broader culture.

We see such opposition widely today, with the postmodern prescription that we are free to believe whatever we want to believe, provided we do not impose it on others, provided we do not suggest that others need to believe likewise. Both evangelism and missions are inherently offensive in our context. So our efforts at sharing the gospel – even with due discretion, rather than insensitive confrontation – will meet strong reaction.

Jesus alerts us, so that criticism comes as no shock. Jesus faced worse in his own day, even within his own religious community of Judaism; certainly his message will meet objection today, in a culture committed to secularism, pluralism, and relativism.

Jesus' metaphor cautions us against two inappropriate reactions. For one, we do not respond with comparable antagonism: we are sheep, and do not become wolves in order to defend ourselves from attack. Some evangelical pit-bulls could learn something from this characterization.

At the same time, we do not shy away from the interaction, even if painful. Jesus intentionally employs provocative imagery that mismatches the real world: no shepherd would actively send his sheep into a pack of wolves; but Jesus does so with us. He knows we will sometimes – not always – face strong antagonism from a resistant culture, antagonism strong enough to motivate us to slip into silence or to change his message and values. No, says Jesus, we are to stay on message and true to him, even in the face of antagonism or rejection.

Day 4: Luke 10:4-8,10,16 'Put Your Money Where Your Mouth Is'

Jesus' directive not to take along provisions for their mission trip was not a cost-cutting measure. Rather, in this way, they become a challenge to decision, and an evidence of faith.

Instead of simply holding evangelistic rallies and calling people to *profess* faith in Christ, the missionaries' need presents the opportunity for responsive listeners to *demonstrate* allegiance to Christ. The support needs of these missionaries provide opportunity for their hearers to 'put their money where their mouth is,' thus demonstrating faith.

Those who receive the missionaries into their homes, and provide for their needs, demonstrate their commitment to Christ. Those who greet the missionaries with disinterest or disdain demonstrate their opposition not just to the disciples or their message, but also to Christ. How people receive the disciples indicates how they receive Christ. So not just the disciples' preaching, but their very presence and their material need become conduits of faith and salvation to those who hear.

Jesus makes the point explicitly in verse 16: "He who listens to you listens to me; he who rejects you rejects me; but he who rejects me rejects him who sent me." As they spread the gospel, they speak and act with the authority of Jesus, and of the Father himself. And so do we.

Day 5: Luke 10:9-15 Two Sides of the One Message

Under the influence of contemporary American culture, many Christians struggle with the warnings of judgment in Scripture.

The majority opinion in our culture is that man is basically good and sincere, even if flawed; that God understands our predicament, sympathizes with our frailties, and our forgives our peccadilloes; that so long as you are sincere, and what you believe is helpful to you, then God will accept you, and others are ill-advised to disparage either your conduct, or your beliefs, or you. Consequently, any talk of judgment comes over as intolerably intolerant, and inexcusably rude.

In such a context, Christians often struggle with biblical warnings of divine judgment, except possibly against the most depraved and darkest evil. And so we

reconstruct the gospel in more amenable terms, and construe the grace of God as a blanket empathy which precludes condemnation. To our culture, and often to us, the promise of healing is welcome; the 'woes' of judgment are silenced.

But the gospel message centers on this one theme: 'the kingdom of God,' and it is a theme in two parts. The basic idea is better articulated, 'the reign of God.' This is the core of Jesus' message: in his person and his ministry, God has come to reestablish his rightful sovereignty over the world he created. And our response determines our fate: we can embrace God and the healing he provides; or we can reject God and suffer these harsh – but deserved – woes. We need not point to both options whenever we talk to people about God, but we do him no justice – and the gospel a disservice – if we embrace the one while disregarding the other. God's virtue is seen equally in his sacrificial love and in his fierce judgment. Any other God is an idol of our own making, not the God of Jesus.

Day 6: Luke 10:17-20 Finding Satisfaction in Ministry

The disciples were amazed – and thrilled – to find that they had power to cast out demons. From what ministry colleagues in Asia told me based on their experiences in exorcism, exorcism is indeed a heady experience.

Instead of downplaying their spiritual power, Jesus accentuates it: his followers not only have power to cast out demons, but through their ministry, the Grand Poobah himself is cast down from heaven (10:18). The disciples have authority over every power and symbol of evil, snake and scorpion; nothing can harm them.

At the same time, this is not what should bring them joy or satisfaction in ministry. For it is a small thing compared to their own hope of salvation, the promise that their names are written in heaven.

We do well to embrace the same reality: that our spiritual satisfaction should rest fundamentally not in our ministry capabilities, nor in our successes (lest it be undermined by our ministry incompetencies or our failures), but in God's promise that those who live for him have their names written in heaven, that their eternity is secure in him. We take heart in this: that whatever trials or successes ministry brings in this life, our future is secure with him.