

Mission

Today I want to talk to you about mission; because if you are a follower of Jesus, you've been given a mission. In John 17:18, Jesus says, "As You sent Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world." The English word, "mission" comes from the Latin "missio" which means "sent." A missionary is someone who is sent. Most of the nations of the world currently have missions in the US where their ambassadors represent that nation's interests. An ambassador is a missionary: someone sent to represent someone else. And in vs. 18, not only did Jesus have a mission; He says that everyone who follows Him has that same mission. As God sent Him into the world, He sends us - to do what? In John 17, Jesus explains His mission was first to show people the Father and to bring them the truth about God; and second, to save; to make broken people whole. And now in vs. 18, He says that He has given us that same mission: to show and tell people the truth about God so that they also may be saved. Well, it is at this point that somebody will say, "That's what bothers me about you Christians. Its fine for you to believe whatever you want but why must you impose your beliefs on others? It's so intolerant! Why don't you just keep your faith to yourself and leave the rest of us alone?" One of the best answers I've heard to that question comes from Tim Keller. Keller says, "Suppose you saw the symptoms of a deadly disease in someone which you once had but have now been cured. But that person doesn't believe there's anything wrong with them. What would you do? You would do everything you could to persuade them to go to the doctor and get cured, right?" And if I know a person has a fatal but curable disease and I don't do everything I can to persuade them to get treatment, I really don't love that person. Mission is based upon truth and love. If I don't have the truth, I have no mission. If I don't love, I have no mission. But if I believe that truth is in Jesus and I love people like He tells me to love them, then I am compelled to get involved in His mission. "As the Father sent Me, I have sent you." If you have eternal life today, it is only because God sent Jesus to find you. And even if you had been the only lost person in the world, He still would have come. Our mission is loving others the way He loved us. What is that mission? Show and tell: show people who Jesus is by our actions and tell them about what He's done for us by our words. Jesus describes the mission in Matthew 5: 14-16, "You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden; nor does anyone light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven." Our mission is to do as much good as we can while we're in this world so that people will see who God really is and ask us about Him and come into a relationship with Him: which is exactly what Jesus did. Good deeds, good words, show and tell, truth and love: that's our mission. So how do we accomplish that mission? Where will we find the time? As we conclude our study of Paul's letter to the Colossians, I want to look at Paul's final commands as he continues to apply who we really are because Christ is in us to everyday life. Last week, Jeff explained how following Jesus as Lord will affect our relationships at home and at work. Now in vs. 2-6 of chapter 4, Paul explains how following Christ as Lord will affect our relationships with those outside the church; and he reveals three important facts about the mission Christ has given to us. First, true mission is a partnership. Second, true mission is a lifestyle. And third, true mission is personal. The major reason most Christians are not involved in Christ's mission today is because we've made that mission too complicated and difficult for ordinary believers to be involved. What I hope you'll see today is that true mission is simpler than we think.

First, mission is a partnership. Mission is not something we do for God but something we do with God. Let's read vs. 2-4. "Devote yourselves to prayer, keeping alert in it with an attitude of thanksgiving; praying at the same time for us as well, that God will open up to us a door for the word, so that we may speak forth the mystery of Christ, for which I have also been imprisoned; that I may make it clear in the way I ought to speak." Paul reminds the Colossians to keep on praying because we won't have an intimate relationship with Jesus without being devoted to prayer. And not "put in your time, go through the motions, half-asleep with my mind somewhere else" praying but staying alert and thankful, praying about and involving God in everything, daily thanking Him for what He's done and for what we believe He'll do. But what I want you to notice is what Paul asks the Colossians to pray for him personally. He asks them to pray that God will open an opportunity for him to preach the gospel, what he calls the mystery of Christ - even though he's sitting in a Roman jail and that God will tell him what to say and how to say it.

Preaching the gospel is Paul's job and he's been doing it successfully for years. Yet Paul knows that mission is only what God is pleased to do through us and that he is just as dependent on God today as he was the first day God called him. So Paul asks the Colossians that when they pray, they remember him and the spread of the gospel; because unless God works, Paul will accomplish nothing. Christ has sent Paul on this mission but He hasn't sent him by himself. True mission is always a partnership between us and God. We're just junior partners, Christ does the heavy lifting.

So if true mission is a partnership, what is God's responsibility and what is our responsibility in that mission? Notice three things God provides in the partnership. First, God is the motive for mission. If mission is a partnership between God and us, then our relationship with Him must be our core motivation for involvement in that mission. I've been on mission with God for 46 years now and I have operated out of just about every wrong motive for mission the sinful human heart can devise. What I have discovered is that unless we're doing the right things for the right reasons, involvement in mission will destroy us. That is why there are so many bitter, angry and disillusioned ex-pastors, ex-missionaries and ex-volunteers and why there are so many bitter, angry and disillusioned current ones as well. If my motivation to serve God and His purpose is an attempt to obligate God so that He has to do what I want Him to do, or to make myself more acceptable or more lovable to Him, that is a denial of the gospel because I'm not trusting in the sufficiency of what Christ has accomplished for me, I'm trying to add to it. I don't serve God so He'll love me, I serve God because He can't love me any more than He already does. If I serve God and His purpose in this world is my own gain – using the ministry He entrusted for my own benefit, then I'm going to be always be disappointed. "I serve You but You haven't given me what I want: financial security, recognition, a happy marriage, an adoring congregation. You at least owe me that! Look at all I've done for You." Truth is, for every person who admires you because of your ministry, there will be 2 or 3 who hate you because of it. For every success you enjoy, there will be two or three embarrassing failures. If I go into mission to prove that I'm significant, valuable, competent or special, that motivation will eat me up and spit me out, because I'll discover there's always somebody who is more significant, more valuable, more competent than I am. If I go into mission for any other reason than God Himself and my relationship with Him, I will be warped, twisted and embittered by the mission. Involvement in mission is my response to the gospel. I am acceptable to God only because of what Christ has done, not because of anything I do. God does not love me more because I'm a pastor. He would love me just as much and bless me just as much if I was a plumber or a salesman. I am righteous and holy in His sight only because of what Christ has done in my behalf; not because I serve Him. And if I use the mission to try to get from it what I should be getting from Jesus, I make myself an idolater and the mission an idol. So what should motivate me to be involved with God in mission? The fact that I get to do it with Him. If you followed Laurie and I around, you'd think we live a pretty boring life. We don't go out much or travel much. We stick pretty close to home. We'll go to an occasional movie but never after 2 o'clock in the afternoon. Or we'll go buy plants at Home Depot or putter around in the yard. But we really enjoy ourselves – not because of what we do but because of who we do it with. We really enjoy being together and as long as we're together, we're happy doing about anything. It's the same with mission. The mission itself isn't always fun but doing it with God is. The motivation for mission is the incomparable joy that only comes from laboring together with Christ. In John 4, Jesus is exhausted and hungry after a day of walking. He sits down beside a well to rest while His disciples leave to buy some food. While He is sitting there, He gets into a conversation with a woman who has come to the well to draw water and leads her to faith. His disciples return with lunch and urge Him to eat but He replies, "I have food to eat that you don't know about." The guys are puzzled. "Nobody brought Him anything to eat did they? Jesus replies, "My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me and to accomplish His work." (John 4:32) Serving God's purpose in that hour with that woman was more satisfying and refreshing for Jesus than a good lunch and a nap. The motive for the mission is God Himself and the joy of partnering together with Him. You will never experience the joy that's available to you in Christ until you join Him in mission. I love this quote from Jonathan Edwards, the great Puritan preacher in early 18th century New England. "If you are selfish and make yourself and your private interests your idol, God will leave you to yourself, and let you promote your own interests as well as you can. But if you do not selfishly seek your own, but do seek the things that are Jesus Christ's, and the things of your fellow human beings, *then God will make your interest and happiness His own charge*, and He is infinitely more able to provide for and promote it than you are. The resources of the universe move at His bidding, and He can easily command them all to serve your welfare. So that, not to seek your own, in the selfish sense, is the best way of seeking your own in a better sense. It is the directest course you can take to secure your highest happiness."

Mission is the opposite of self and when we put God's interests in front of our interests, we experience joy. That's why Hebrews 12:2 says that for the joy set before Him, Jesus endured the cross.

So, because mission is a partnership, God is the motive for mission and second, God gives the opportunity for mission. That's why Paul asks the Colossians to pray that God will open a door for the proclamation of the gospel. Since mission is what God does through us, He is the one who must open the opportunities for ministry. Jesus understood this because throughout the gospels, we hear Him saying things like "The Son can do nothing on His own initiative but only what He sees the Father doing," and "I say nothing on My own initiative but only what the Father gives Me to say," and "No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws Him." Jesus didn't decide how He would be used by His Father, His Father decided and Jesus says, "As the Father sent me, I have sent you." That means, I'm not the architect of the mission and that my job is not to plan how Christ will use me and then ask Him to bless those plans. He uses each of us in the way He chooses, giving each of us the opportunities He wants us to have, and understanding that His job is to give opportunities dramatically changes the way we approach mission, as we'll see in a minute.

So, because mission is a partnership, first God is the motive for mission, second, God gives the opportunity for mission and third, God gives the ability for mission. Paul asks the Colossians to pray not only that God will open a door for him to preach the gospel but that God will give Paul the ability to walk through that door and to speak as he ought to speak. Paul's confidence was not in his experience or eloquence but rather in the fact that Jesus lives inside of him and will enable Paul to do whatever God has given Paul to do. Mission is not just me doing my best for God but God doing His best through me. That's why Jesus tells His disciples, "*Apart from Me, you can do nothing.*" (John 15). What can we accomplish apart from Jesus? That's why Paul writes, "*Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves, but our adequacy comes from God who also made us adequate as ministers of the new covenant.*" (2 Cor. 3) God is the major partner in mission and does the heavy lifting. My job is to trust Him to enable me to do what He gives me the opportunity to do. That's why when Jesus gave His disciples their mission of going into all the world and making disciples, He promised, "I am with you to the end of the age." Christ never sends us on mission alone. Mission is only what He is pleased to do through us. He's the engine, we're the chassis. If I didn't believe that Jesus gives me the power and the wisdom in what I'm supposed to say up here, that Jesus speaks to your hearts through my weak words, that Jesus leads us and protects us and shows us what He wants us to do as a church, I would have resigned a long time ago. I'm not adequate for this job, but Jesus is; and that's why I'm so grateful that mission is a partnership. What could we possibly do with our life that could be more significant than being used by God for His purpose in this world? I can't think of anything.

Here's the second thing we learn from Paul about mission: true mission is a lifestyle. Mission is not something extraordinary which we do somewhere else. I don't need to go to another country to be on mission. True mission flows out of everyday life. Some people think that to be on mission, they need to drop everything they are currently doing because their job, family commitments and involvement in the community are preventing them from really serving Christ; and that's more than they can walk away from. But just the opposite is usually the case. Our everyday life is the mission field God has given to us. He's already sent us to the people He wants them to serve. That's why Paul writes, "*Conduct yourselves with wisdom toward outsiders, making the most of the opportunity.*" Paul writes that we don't need opportunities to serve God as much as we just need to recognize the opportunities He gives us. He tells the Colossians to act wisely toward those outside the church, making the most of the opportunities they have to love those folks and do them good. Our job is not to plan how we want God to use us and then ask Him to bless those plans; but to take advantage of the opportunities He gives us in the course of everyday life. For example, in chapters 8-10 in the New Testament book of the Acts of the Apostles, three men come to faith that nobody in the church could have anticipated. And each comes to Christ as a result of a Christian simply taking advantage of an opportunity which God gave him. In chapter 8, a Christian named Philip is walking by himself on a road down in Gaza on the west coast of Israel when a chariot rolls by and the Spirit of God tells him to run and catch up to the chariot. If I had been Philip, I would have argued with the Lord, "I'll look pretty silly running after a chariot, won't I?" but Philip was more obedient than I and when he caught up with the chariot, he noticed the passenger was a Ethiopian court official who was reading his bible. So as Philip walks beside the chariot, he strikes up a conversation. "Do you understand that stuff?" The Ethiopian says, "No, can you help me

out?” Philip gets into the chariot and discovers that the Ethiopian is reading Isaiah 53 about the Messiah dying for the sins of the world, which leads them into quite a conversation about Jesus and before long, the Ethiopian asks if Philip will baptize him. Philip does and that’s the last they ever see of one another. But that Ethiopian court official becomes the first non-Jewish convert in the church and tradition tells us he went home and started the church in Ethiopia which is one of the longest running churches in history. In chapter 9, we meet Saul, public enemy number 1 who is throwing every Christian he can find into jail and executing them. Saul is the last guy anyone would expect to become a Christian but Jesus appears to him in a vision, blinding him and tells him to wait in Damascus until a Christian named Ananias shows up who will tell him what to do. When the Lord fills Ananias in on his role in the story, Ananias says, “Whoa. I know about this guy. He kills every Christian he meets. Are you sure you want me to talk with him, Lord.” Jesus says, “Go because he is a chosen instrument of mine.” Ananias goes to Saul, Saul’s blindness is healed and he believes and is baptized and becomes the great apostle Paul. In chapter 10, Peter while waiting for lunch, has a vision in which God commands him to eat non-kosher food. As Peter is wondering what that was about, some Roman soldiers come to the house where he’s staying and ask for him by name. The Lord tells Peter to go with them and they take him to the home of a Roman centurion named Cornelius who tells Peter how that morning he was spoken to by an angel who told him to send for Peter who would tell him how to be saved. So Peter preaches the gospel to Cornelius, his family and his soldiers who all believe and the first Gentiles enter the church. Each of these three conversions had a major impact on the future of the church and yet not one of them was planned by anybody but God. He is the author of salvation and He opens the opportunities. All each believer had to do was to walk through the door God had opened. Of course, we never know when those opportunities will appear and God doesn’t give us advance notice. That’s why mission has to be a lifestyle. We’re always on call, always ready for whatever opportunities God provides. In fact, I’ve found that the best opportunities are almost always the most unexpected and inconvenient. Philip didn’t want to run after that chariot, Ananias certainly didn’t want to pay Saul a visit, and Peter wasn’t crazy about going home with a bunch of Roman soldiers. Mission isn’t Tuesdays from 7-9. Mission is 24/7. The times God seems to use me most are the times I wasn’t planning to be used, the times I was doing something else. And I’ve missed more of those opportunities than I’ve taken advantage of because of plain old selfishness. I had something else I wanted to be doing. That’s why we need wisdom; wisdom to know that it’s more important to talk with my neighbor when he wants to talk than to get my chores done so I can catch the next round of the NCAA’s; wisdom to see an open door when one is in front of me instead of blindly walking past it and then complaining that God never seems to use me; wisdom to recognize the most important thing to do right now. That’s why mission must be a lifestyle of taking advantage of the opportunities God gives rather than an occasional project or something on a to-do list; because we never know where taking those opportunities might lead. Some of my best friendships here at Creekside began in very ordinary ways. Most of you know Greg Arthur who is one of our elders, sings with Fret Not and is one of my favorite preachers here. Greg and I first met at an A’s game which Jerry Engler invited us to before Greg gave his life to Christ. I decided that afternoon to take my lunch rather than buy food from the Coliseum vendors and I figured I probably ought to bring enough for the other guys as well so I made a bunch of submarine sandwiches. Years later, after Greg had asked Christ into His life and we had gotten to know each other a lot better, he told me how much that sandwich meant to him – that the guy who wrote the Bible study in the gospel of Mark he was going through with Jerry – showed up with sandwiches for a stranger. It was a tiny kindness on my part but you never know where even the smallest opportunities God gives you to do good will eventually lead. True mission is a lifestyle; living with the perspective, “God put you in my path. I must help you.”

Finally, here’s the third thing we learn from this text about true mission. True mission is personal. The mission isn’t really about numbers or a cause or building a movement or changing the world. True mission is always about individuals and their relationship with Jesus. Look at vs. 6. *“Let your speech always be with grace, as though seasoned with salt, so that you will know how you should respond to each person.”* I read a bunch of commentaries and each had a different take on what Paul means by gracious and salty speech. However, one thing is clear from the text; the goal is to know how to respond to each individual we encounter most effectively with the gospel. When Paul writes about *how you should respond to each person...* he is saying that who that person is determines how I speak to him about Christ because before I can minister to anyone, I must first be able to connect with him. That’s why Paul writes in 1 Cor. 9:19-22, *“For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I may win more. To the Jews I became as a Jew, so that I might win Jews; to those who are under the Law, as under the Law though not being myself under the Law, so that I might win those who are*

under the Law; to those who are without law, as without law, though not being without the law of God but under the law of Christ, so that I might win those who are without law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak; I have become all things to all men, so that I may by all means save some." Paul communicated one way with the barbarians who lived in the hills and another with the cosmopolitan Greeks who lived in the cities; and still another with his fellow Jews. Mission is always intensely personal because we're always dealing with individual people and one size never fits all. You've probably noticed that some people communicate in a way that makes you want to do the opposite of what they say. You may even know they're right but they are so abrasive or pedantic or superior; you're unable to connect with them. You know they don't get you and probably don't care to. They've got a message to deliver and your job is to be their audience. However the Bible says that how we say something is as important as what we say. Paul says I become all things to all men. Why? So he can win more. More than what? More that he could win if he doesn't respond to each individual appropriately. Proverbs 15:2 says *"The tongue of the wise makes knowledge acceptable but the mouths of fools spout folly."* Two verses later, Solomon writes, *"A soothing (healing) tongue is a tree of life but perversion in it crushes the spirit."* (15:4) That's what Paul is saying here. We've got good news to deliver but the gospel is good news which is hard for some people to hear. So make sure that it is the gospel that offends and not the messenger.

To really connect with someone, we have to be able to make the journey from our perspective to their perspective; to understand how they see things, what's important to them and the things they assume to be true, before we can move them from their perspective to ours. And there is no other way to know how to respond to each person besides asking questions and listening carefully to their answers – which is a lot of work. I was reading a book called *Real Influence* this week about the importance relationships play in influencing people and the author described four different levels of listening. The first level is distracted listening. Somebody is talking but I'm thinking about or doing something else. I'm not really hearing what they say. The second level of listening is defensive listening which is quick to react and slow to consider the other person's point of view. I'm not really listening to you, I'm thinking about why you're wrong and how I can make you see you're wrong. The first two levels of listening actually only give the appearance of listening. We aren't really listening at all and we're certainly not growing in understanding of the person who's talking. The third level of listening is one of my favorites: listening to fix. I'm listening but with the goal of fixing something, solving a problem or moving the process forward. And as soon as I think I understand what you need or what your problem is, I stop listening and begin problem solving. But all too often, as soon as I begin to give advice, I'm embarrassed to discover that I really don't understand your situation – that I didn't listen well enough or long enough because I wasn't patient enough to get the information I really need. To know how to respond to each person, we need to go to the highest level of listening: listening to connect and to discover what's really inside. It's listening without any agenda except to understand. It's resisting the urge to defend or explain ourselves or to offer a solution. It's listening to others the way we wish people would listen to us. In the book, *Real Influence*, author John Ullmen describes an exercise developed by his mentor, UCLA professor Samuel Culbert. "Imagine that someone in your office gets a promotion. She's not a personal friend but you do know her. Now here's the question. When you see her, what's the first thing you'll say to her? Everyone pretty much agrees on this. It's "Congratulations." OK, what's the second thing you say?" Almost everybody says something like, "You deserved it." "I'm happy for you." "You must be thrilled." But Culbert says that not one of those answers is the correct one because they all start with you and what you think you would feel if you got a promotion. But one woman did get the right answer. "I would ask, what does promotion mean to you?" It turns out that she had been in that situation. She had gotten a big promotion and received a hundred emails congratulating her, "It couldn't have happened to a nicer person" "I'm glad you got this, you're terrific." She clicked through them quickly until she got to one that was different. A coworker named Jeff offered congratulations but then added, "How do you feel about it?" This caught her attention because she was deeply concerned about how this promotion was going to affect her home life and she appreciated that someone else recognized that promotions can also complicate things. She felt worried and trapped because of the additional travel the promotion would mean. So she reached out to Jeff, talked it through with him and together they planned a strategy to negotiate the promotion so that she wouldn't be trapped by it. Because Jeff didn't assume what she would be feeling but asked, they genuinely connected and he was able to help her. Every soul is precious to Christ and the better I understand a person, the easier it is for me to see why the gospel is good news for them today; how Jesus is the answer to their questions and the solution to their problems. But I can't do that until I understand them. Ever been with a person that you'd like to share Christ with but you just don't know how to

begin? I find that's usually because I don't know them well enough yet. That's why mission is so personal. Each person is unique and the more we know about the individual, the more useful to God we become in serving them.

Let me ask you a question. Why does God have you here rather than heaven? *"As You sent Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world."* The reason we're still here is because God is a missionary God. Jesus left heaven for us, entering our world, taking on our weaknesses, temptations, pains and humanity to bring us back to God. He is the supreme example that mission is the opposite of self – and now He asks us to go to the lost because He came to us. That's why we're still here and not in heaven; to seek and to save the lost. And if you're not a Christian, the reason you're here is because God is unwilling that you perish. He wants you to come to know Jesus who came to find you, lived the life we failed to live so that God can credit us with His righteousness as a gift; and died the death we deserve to die, bearing the punishment for our sins on the cross so that God can pardon all who put their faith in Him. A Christian is simply someone who believes that and asks Jesus to be their Lord and Savior.

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