

An Unfinished Task

Missions Month
Matthew 28:19-20
Pastor Josh Black
July 5, 2020

Time and Money

You can learn a lot about what a person values and prioritizes by what they spend their time and money on. I was reminded of this on Friday as I left the fireworks stand—much poorer than I went in! But I don't want to talk about how much I value fireworks this morning.

I want to talk about what our church values. If you look at our use of time and money, it's clear that we value missions. We currently give almost 25% of our budget to missions, which is almost three-quarters of a million dollars. We also devote a lot of time to missions. Missions partners regularly share in our services. We send out a variety of short-term teams every year. For years we've devoted at least a whole Sunday to missions. And over the last few years we've upped the ante. We now devote a whole month to missions. So, obviously, missions is a priority.

Why is missions such a high value for us and what are our priorities in our missions? Those are some of the questions we want to answer this month.

To begin today I'd like to read Matthew 28:19-20.

Matthew 28:19-20:

19Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

This is the Word of the Lord.

One thing important to notice about the Great Commission in Matthew is there's only one command. It's the call to make disciples. But that one command is modified by three participles: going, baptizing, and teaching. Each of these participles informs what it means to be faithful to the Great Commission. We're called to go to the nations. We're called to baptize people and bring them into the church. We're called to then teach people how to follow Jesus.

Every aspect of this commission is important. If we want to be faithful and effective in our church, we can't minimize any of it. But this month, we're only going to focus on one part of this expansive mission Christ has given to the church: The call to go, and to make disciples of all nations.

Each sermon will seek to answer one question. Here's the question for this morning: Who are we called to go to?

According to our missions policy, "The primary purpose for missions at First Free is to further the mission of the church into places and people groups not directly [affected] by First Free." The

¹ Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® unless otherwise noted.

places and people we do not directly touch fall into three categories: unreached people groups, local ministries, and other developmental ministries.

The first category is first for a reason. “We believe the primary [purpose] of missions is to take the gospel to every tribe, tongue, and nation.” In other words, we believe the main aim of missions is to take the gospel to every *people group*.

A people group is a group of people with a common language and a common sense of identity. An *unreached* people group is a people group with little to no access to the gospel. According to the Joshua Project, a people group is unreached if less than 2% of the people are born again, Bible believing Christians.² When there are less than 2% Christians, it will be next to impossible for the gospel to spread among them, unless cross-cultural missionaries go to them.

That’s why this is such an important category for us, and why we spend 50% of our missions budget on missionaries to unreached people groups.

Our second category is local ministries like local church planters and local parachurch ministries who are not specifically ministering to unreached people groups. They receive 30% of our missions budget, because we think it’s so important to make the gospel known in our own community and in our state. But we realize that as a church we’re not able to do that on our own.

Our third category is what we call other development ministries. These ministries receive 20% of our missions budget. They are ministries outside of Kansas, whether in the US or in other parts of the world, that are not directly targeted at unreached people groups.

We feel that all three of these categories are important because all three reach out to people First Free is not able to engage directly. But we prioritize evangelism and church planting among unreached people groups.

Why is this a priority for us as a church? That’s what I want to talk about today. I want to offer two reasons we prioritize going to unreached people groups: It’s God’s vision for the mission and it’s an urgent need.

GOD’S VISION (MATTHEW 28:19)

Jesus is very clear in the Great Commission. We’re called to make disciples of all nations. But the call to go to all the nations is not simply referring to geo-political countries; it’s referring to people groups.

I don’t normally deal much with Greek in my sermons, but I think it’s helpful here. The Greek clause we’re talking about is *panta ta ethne*. *Panta* = all. *Ta ethne* = nations. Listen to that last word again: *ethne*. That’s where we get the word ethnicities. The vision of the Great Commission is more nuanced than simply taking the gospel to all countries. The vision of the Great Commission is to make disciples of all people groups. Or as our missions statement says, for the gospel to go wide to *all peoples*.

In one country there can be many *ethne*, many people groups. Nigeria for example is one country, but it has over 540 distinct people groups. There are almost two hundred nations in the world. But

² [Joshua Project](#)

according to the Joshua Project there are over seventeen thousand people groups in the world. And we're called to go to them.

Now some of you may think, Okay I see your point, but that's just one passage. Have we made too much of missions, based on one phrase in one verse of the Bible? That's a good question. And I hope to provide you a good answer too. The answer is no; this is not an isolated verse. This vision for the nations is a vision that covers the whole Bible. Let me take a few minutes to explain why I say that.

In Genesis 1, God created man and woman in his image. And then he called them to be fruitful and to multiply. He desired his image bearers to spread throughout the earth abroad and reflect something of his glory. That was the original vision.

But there was a wrench thrown into this original plan. When Adam and Eve sinned, humanity was no longer able to fulfill the purpose for which they were created. While the image of God is not erased in fallen humanity, it is defaced. We all fall short of God's glory.

But God didn't abandon his original vision of the earth being filled with his glory. He announced a plan. He made a promise that a Savior would come from the offspring of Eve (Gen. 3:15).

That promise is clarified in the call of Abraham. In Genesis 12, God told Abraham that he would make his offspring into a great nation. That he would bless *them*. And then that they would be a blessing *to* all the families of the earth. That promise is reiterated throughout Genesis.

And at two points when that promise is reiterated, it uses the exact same language of Matthew 28. "Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and *all the nations* of the earth shall be blessed in him" (Gen. 18:18; cf. 22:18).³

The blessing spoken of here is not simply material blessings. It is speaking of relational blessing. Being blessed by God is being in relationship with God. And the vision here is that all the *ethne* of the earth would one day come back into right relationship with God.⁴

We see this vision reiterated throughout Israel's history. For example, Psalm 67 says, "May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face to shine upon us, that your way may be known on earth, your saving power *among all nations*. Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise you!"

The blessing on the offspring of Eve, the offspring of Abraham, would one day result in the blessing on the nations. *And then* the nations will fulfill the purpose of creation, the purpose of redemption. They will glorify God! They will praise him.

These promises made to Adam and Eve, to Abraham, and then reiterated in the Psalms and Prophets, were full of anticipation. And that's why when we turn to the first page of the New Testament, Matthew begins with a genealogy. He begins by telling us explicitly that Jesus is the offspring of Abraham! And that's why he ends his gospel by calling the church to take the gospel to the nations.

³ D. A. Carson, *Matthew & Mark*, The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Revised Edition

⁴ M. J. Evans, "Blessing/Curse," in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*

You see, Colossians 1 tells us Jesus is the image of the invisible God (1:15). He perfectly reflects God's glory. And as we saw last week in Colossians 3, all in Christ are a new humanity and we are being renewed in the image of our creator so we can glory God.

So now, through Jesus, God's purposes from the beginning *can* be achieved. And we know that they *will* be achieved. In Matthew 24:14, Jesus says, "And this gospel of the kingdom *will be* proclaimed throughout the whole world as testimony to all nations, and then the end will come." And in Revelation 7:9-10 it says, "After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, 'Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!'"

There it is! The vision from Genesis to Revelation realized. Praise and glory from *panta ta ethne* given to our God and to the Lamb for eternity. It's going to happen!

And here's the amazing thing. God calls us, the church, to join him in his mission of telling this good news to the nations so that they can become followers of Jesus and worshipers of our great God.

Our mission is to make disciples of Jesus Christ who glorify God, as the grace of the gospel grows deep in God's people and goes wide to all peoples.

We can't minimize the call for the gospel to grow deep in those who are already Christians. This is part of the mission. We not only want to see people converted! We want to see them transformed into the image of Christ, so they can glorify God.

But the point I want to make this morning, is that when we conceive of the Great Commission in our mind, it must include a vision for all people groups. And we must also make intentional plans to go wide to all people groups.

AN URGENT NEED (ROMANS 15:18-24)

And that brings me to the second reason why we prioritize missions to *unreached* people groups at First Free. It's because there is an urgent need.

It's difficult to quantify through statistics how many people need to hear and respond to the gospel. But statistics can give us a general picture of the need. Most of the statistics I'm going to share with you this morning come from the Joshua Project. And I hope to whet your appetite to go to their website and see their numbers.

There are about seven billion people in the world. And about a third of the people in the world would identify themselves as Christians. But the number of true Christians is probably more like 10%. So, over six billion people have either not heard or not responded to the gospel.

About 40% of the unbelievers in the world belong to a reached people group. That means that over 2% of the people in their people group believe the gospel. And so, they at least have access to the gospel.

That is true of most people groups in America. Sure, most people in America aren't Christians, but they still have *access* to the gospel. The same could be said of places like Latin America, or the non-Muslim countries in Africa, like Zambia or Uganda.

But 60% of the unbelievers in the world are among unreached people groups. That means that there are less than 2% evangelical Christians among them. So, they have little to no access to the gospel. And statistically, hardly anyone of them will ever even hear the gospel, unless a cross-cultural missionary goes to them.

Of the seventeen thousand people groups in our world, there are still over seven thousand people groups who have little to no access to the gospel. So, as you can see, there is an urgent need to send missionaries to the unreached people groups of this world.

Paul understood this urgent need. Many scholars believe Paul's letter to the church at Rome was like a missionary support letter. Paul spends most of the letter laying out his theology of the gospel and God's plan for the Gentiles being included in the church. Then in chapter 15 he announces that he's going to Spain and he hopes the church at Rome will help send him. But as he says this, he says something remarkable for our understanding of the priority of missions to unreached people groups.

Romans 15:18-24

18For I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me to bring the Gentiles to obedience—by word and deed, 19by the power of signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God—so that from Jerusalem and all the way around to Illyricum I have fulfilled the ministry of the gospel of Christ; 20and thus I make it my ambition to preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named, lest I build on someone else's foundation, 21but as it is written, "Those who have never been told of him will see, and those who have never heard will understand." 22This is the reason why I have so often been hindered from coming to you. 23But now, since I no longer have any room for work in these regions, and since I have longed for many years to come to you, 24I hope to see you in passing as I go to Spain, and to be helped on my journey there by you, once I have enjoyed your company for a while.

In verse 19 he says that he has fulfilled the ministry of the gospel from Jerusalem and all the way around to Illyricum. In verse 23, he says he no longer has room for work in these regions. But how could that be? Surely not everyone in that large area had become a Christian. I doubt that everyone in that area had even heard the gospel.

But a sufficient number had come to faith and churches were established in those regions. Those churches would continue gospel ministry there, but his missionary efforts were finished. It was time to move on to preach the gospel where it had not yet been preached.

Friends, while all ministry and evangelism are important, there's a priority in missions to take the gospel where it's not been preached. There's an urgency to make disciples among unreached people groups.

The Great Imbalance

So how are we doing in God's mission? As Ralph Winter said over forty years ago, there's a great imbalance in the church. Most of our resources in evangelical churches are going to ministry among reached people groups, not to missions among unreached people groups.

According to the Joshua Project, 91% of all cross-cultural missionaries labor among reached people groups. Only 9% among unreached people groups. And of every dollar a Christian gives to the

church or to other charities and ministries, only one penny goes to pioneer church-planting among unreached people groups.

The greatest need in missions is among the unreached. Not because all people are not important; they are. But because unreached people groups have little to no chance to ever become a Christ-follower if a cross-cultural missionary doesn't go to them. That's why it's the greatest need.

But we're giving the greatest portion of our resources, far and away, to ministry among reached groups. That's a great imbalance.

First Free has been working for years at correcting this imbalance. And for that I praise God and celebrate. I'm also encouraged by the fact that many unreached people groups are now living in our backyard. They're attending our universities and living in our communities. Some of our missionaries to unreached people groups live right here in Wichita. And we've seen dozens of people in this church actively involved in evangelism among the unreached international students.

There's a sense in which I'm preaching to the choir this morning. But just because we've seen so much fruit at First Free, we shouldn't let off the gas.

I read 1 Thessalonians recently and there was a line in it that stood out to me. Paul says, "Now concerning brotherly love you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you ... have been taught by God to love one another, for that indeed is what you are doing.... But we urge you, brothers, to do this more and more" (1 Thess. 4:9-10).

First Free, that's what I want to say to you this morning: Now regarding our mission to unreached people groups you have no need for anyone to preach to you, for that indeed is what you've given yourselves to for seventy years. But I still urge you, brothers and sisters, to do this more and more.

So, what can you do to do this more and more? Let me list a few things.

For one, educate yourself about people groups and the needs. Go to the Joshua Project website and read the charts and articles.

And then pray. Pray for the unreached people groups. Pray for missionaries to go to them. Pray for the missionaries that are now laboring among them. Encourage them and give sacrificially to them either directly or through our church budget.

And pray about whether or not God might be calling you to go. Maybe you can get involved with international ministry here in Wichita. You can talk with our ISI partners here at First Free about the ways you can engage.

And talk to other believers in other churches and educate them on the great need and the great imbalance. First Free is only one church. We need hundreds of thousands of churches engaged in this mission and vision.

The vision is clear in Scripture. And the need is great. So, while you're engaged in other critical ministries don't take your eye off of the ball. There are still seven thousand people groups who have never heard, representing billions of people.

Let's go to them. So that the peoples may praise him! So that the nations will be glad.