

Sept. 9/10, 2000

## **Our Critical First Step in Accomplishing the Mission**

**Pastor Bryan Clark**

Certainly we would say that God has shined down upon us with abundant blessings here in the church in our country. Last week I read something that reminds us how blessed we are as the people of God. It says:

If you can read this message, you're more blessed than the 2 billion people who cannot read at all.  
If you woke up this morning with more health than illness, you are more blessed than the million who will not survive this week.  
If you have never experienced the danger of battle, the loneliness of imprisonment, the agony of torture or the pangs of starvation, you are more blessed than 500 million people around the world.  
If you can attend a church meeting without fear of harassment, arrest, torture or death, you are more blessed than almost 3 billion people around the world.  
If you have food in your refrigerator, clothes on your back, a roof over your head, and a place to sleep, you are richer than more than 4 billion people.  
If you have any money in the bank, and any cash in your wallet, you are among the top 8% of the world's wealthiest people.  
If you own just one Bible, you are blessed. Only one-third of the people in the world have even one.  
If you know the Lord Jesus Christ as your personal Savior, you are a part of the minority who will dwell with Him for eternity!

-author unknown


It is staggering how blessed we are! The real question is: What are we going to do with the blessings we have received? Are we going to consume those blessings among ourselves, or do we understand that we have been blessed to be a blessing? We have been blessed in order to distribute those blessings to a world in need of what only God can offer. The role we have, as the church, is to be the distributor of God's blessings, not to stockpile those blessings and keep them for ourselves, but rather to distribute them out to people in desperate need in our world today.

Last week we studied from Colossians 1 the mission of the church and defined it as: *to glorify God by seeking to present every person complete in Christ*. Paul talked about how he was willing to suffer for that mission. He was willing to labor and strive to basically put it all on the line for the sake of accomplishing that purpose. But in the midst of that discussion in Colossians 1:25, Paul makes an interesting statement. He says he is to steward what he's been given for the benefit of the people in Colossae. To be a steward means to be a manager – to take something that's been given to you which ultimately belongs to someone else and to manage it. I steward something for the purpose of the one who ultimately owns it and gives it. What Paul is saying is that he understood his gifts, his opportunities, and his calling. And, most of all he understands that the message of the gospel is a gift and a blessing from God, not to keep for himself, but to steward or manage for the benefit of others.

Can you imagine how you would feel if you were in an area of the world where children were starving to death. Suppose your family had food in abundance, so you loaded up one of your children to go out and distribute food to those children who were starving. But as you watched your child go out among those who were starving, suppose that child decided to hold onto the food and hoard it, rather than sharing the abundance with children who were dying. If we saw that happen, we would be appalled. We would think we had raised our children better than that – that they should have more compassion. In the same way, God has looked at the needs in the world and has poured His abundance upon us, not so that we can

hoard it or stockpile it, but in order that we can take it out into the streets and distribute it to those people who desperately need what we have. That is our call. That is our mission.

Last week we talked about those who define the purpose of the church as a fortress, who put up walls and hunker down and hold ground. These would be people who stockpile the blessings of God. They just fill their warehouses full of God's blessings, while people outside the fortress are dying in desperate need of what they are hoarding in abundance. But those who see the church as an army understand we are to take what we've been given and, as soldiers, we are to go out into enemy territory and distribute the blessings God has given us. We proclaim a message that sets the captive free.

When Jesus gave marching orders to the church He said to go and make disciples. On the banners in our auditorium we have a loop symbol which we call the People Loop. If you are new to LBC, you see that loop around the building, and may wonder what it means. The loop symbol  is a visual picture of the process we go through to accomplish the mission. It symbolizes that process of going out and making contact with those who do not yet know Jesus as Savior. We introduce them to the Savior, and bring them into the church where they are built up and discipled. As they become built up in their faith, they are then sent back out into enemy territory to influence someone else for Christ, and that whole process starts over again. That process resembles a loop and is what we call the People Loop. Jesus said, "Go, make disciples." He was talking about the responsibility or calling we have both outside the loop and inside the loop. The going is what we're responsible to do *outside* of that loop. The making disciples is what we're responsible to do *inside* that loop.

This week we will talk about our responsibility outside of that loop – the going. Next week we will talk about our responsibility inside the loop – the making of disciples. I know it seems fairly obvious to most of you that we are to go, and yet it's interesting to notice how all of us have a tendency to gather together as the people of God and form these "holy huddles." After a period of time, we find that we have no real significant relationships with those people we're supposed to be going to. Statistics show that when someone trusts Jesus as Savior, within two years they no longer have any significant relationships with unbelievers. That is a real problem, because these are the people we need to reach. We're not just talking about people we happen to bump into at work, or people that we wave to on the driveway in our neighborhood. We're talking about real, intentional relationships with people in order to influence them for Jesus Christ.

You would think that, if any one group of people clearly understood the great commission of going out into enemy territory and influencing people for Jesus Christ, it would be missionaries. Since they are the ones who have given up everything in order to go to another culture to proclaim the message of the gospel, we would think of missionaries as having a true understanding of the great commission. To intensify that even further, what about a group of missionaries who are on a ship heading for South America to present the gospel? We would say those people would really have their "game faces" on. They would have just left friends and family on their way to South America and must be thinking Kingdom all the time. That perception makes the following story by Jim Petersen so interesting. In his book, *Evangelism as a Lifestyle*, he says:

There were 120 people on ship. Half were tourists; and half were missionaries – including us. 60 missionaries and 60 tourists! A one-to-one ratio for 16 days. Since there isn't much more to do aboard ship than walk, read or converse, I couldn't imagine how any

of these tourists could get through the trip without receiving a thorough exposure to the Christian message. More ideal conditions for evangelism couldn't exist.

During the first 3 days, my wife and I spent our time relating to other passengers. Conversations were unhurried and soon we found ourselves deeply involved in discussing Christ with our new acquaintances.

On the third day I thought that if the other 58 missionaries were doing what we were, we would have a serious case of overkill. I decided to check with the others about coordinating our efforts. My first opportunity came when I encountered six missionaries sitting together on the deck. I joined them and expressed my concern, suggesting that we get our signals straight so we wouldn't overwhelm the passengers.

I had totally misjudged the problem. When I explained what was on my mind, the six just looked at one another. Apparently it hadn't occurred to them to talk to the other sixty passengers about Christ. Finally one said, "We just graduated from seminary and didn't learn how to do that sort of thing there." Another said, "I don't know. I have sort of a built-in reservation against that idea."

A third said, "I've been a pastor for 3 years, but I've never personally evangelized anyone. I'm not sure I know how."

-from *Evangelism as a Lifestyle* by Jim Petersen, p. 11-12

Isn't that staggering to hear a story like that from a group of missionaries enroute to the mission field? You would think that, if ever a group of people would be in tune with the great commission, it would be them. And yet, they weren't. They were completely unaware of the opportunity they had to influence other people for Jesus Christ. If that's true of them, think about the potential of how true that is with us. It is easy to get busy in the things that we have to do and lose sight of our calling to go and make disciples – what we really are supposed to be doing out in the world.

It's interesting to see in the New Testament the many times Jesus used the metaphor of fishing to talk about what He wants His followers to be doing. Half of His disciples were professional fishermen. I think one reason for that is because Jesus really wants us to understand the mindset of a fisherman. Any fisherman knows that to catch fish you have to go out and pursue the fish. It's not terribly effective to push your boat up against the dock, open the livewell, and wait for the fish to jump in. There are actually many churches which operate that way, and they are wondering why the "fish aren't jumping into the livewell." That isn't how any fisherman fishes. A fisherman understands that he has to *go* to the fish, to figure out what the fish are doing and how to catch them. Jesus said, "That's what I want for those who follow Me."

Luke 5 is the record of Jesus calling three fishermen to follow Him, and the attention is specifically on one of them. Peter, James and John are in this story, but Peter is the focal point. Jesus makes a critical statement to Peter that is very important for us to understand.

Now it came about that while the multitude were pressing around Him and listening to the word of God, He was standing by the lake of Gennesaret *{the Sea of Galilee}*; and He saw two boats lying at the edge of the lake, but the fishermen had gotten out of them, and were washing their nets. He got into one of the boats, which was Simon's and asked him to put out a little way from the land. And He sat down and began teaching the multitudes from the boat. And when He had finished speaking, He said to Simon, "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch."

These men were professional fishermen, and they understood that in the Sea of Galilee you fished at night, because it was at night that the fish came up into the shallows. The fish had to be in the shallows for you to put out a net and reach them, so fishing was done at night. These men had just spent an entire night out fishing and had not caught one fish. Since they

were not paid a salary, but were paid by the fish they caught, it had been a night completely wasted. All that work and no pay check. So they had to have been somewhat grumpy and probably not in the mood for some carpenter to come along and tell them how to fish. Here they were in the daytime, and Jesus was telling them to go out into the deep water and drop their nets. They were probably thinking, “Like that’s going to work! After all, we are the professionals here.” But with amazing obedience, Peter responds. Luke 5:5-9:

And Simon Peter answered and said, “Master, we worked hard all night and caught nothing, but at Your bidding I will let down the nets.” And when they had done this they enclosed a great quantity of fish; and their nets began to break; and they signaled to their partners in the other boat, for them to come and help them. And they came, and filled both of the boats, so that they began to sink. But when Simon Peter saw that, he fell down at Jesus’ feet, saying, “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.” For amazement had seized him and all his companions because of the catch of fish which they had taken. . .

We need to understand that Peter, at this point, is now in the proper frame of mind to hear his calling. It’s important not to miss what’s very significant in this text. At this time Peter understood something about Jesus, but we don’t know exactly what he understood. Did Peter understand that Jesus was God in the flesh? Probably not. But he understood that this was no ordinary man. He understood that this man was sent from God with some sort of miraculous power. What Peter ultimately understood was that he was completely unworthy to be in the presence of Jesus. So he fell on his face and said, “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man.”

That’s the frame of mind we must be in to hear our calling to be in God’s army. Our natural tendency is to turn it around and convince ourselves that God is lucky to have us in His army. We convince ourselves that we’re doing God a favor when we serve Him and go out in His army. If we have the mindset that we’re actually doing God a favor when we serve Him, it means we have completely inflated our view of ourselves and deflated our view of God. We hold a very deflated view of God if we come to the conclusion that God is lucky to have us on the team.

That’s just the opposite of Peter’s mindset. Peter realized he was completely unworthy even to be in Jesus’ presence. Like Peter, we need to realize our unworthiness that, apart from the blood of Jesus, we could not even stand in the presence of God. It’s amazing to then realize that the King of Kings would actually ask us {command us} to be a part of the most significant business in the universe – to be a part of what is most on His heart. It’s an incredible privilege to have that kind of a call. So, rather than saying we are doing God some sort of a favor, we view it as a privilege, that God would have such a significant task for us to do for Him. That’s the frame of mind Peter was in, which made it ideal for Jesus, then, to call him into service in Luke 5:10: “Jesus said to Simon, ‘Do not fear, from now on you will be catching men.’ And when they had brought their boats to land, they left everything and followed Him.”

In calling Peter to follow Him, Jesus defined what that means. Following Jesus doesn’t just mean “I want you to follow along behind me.” Instead it means “I want you to become like Me. And to become like Me you must become a fisher of men {people}.” To become like Jesus means that we have the heart of Jesus — which was to seek and to save those who were lost. Those who are following, who are becoming like Him, are those who

become fishers of men. Jesus is saying, “If you are not a fisher of men, you are not really following Me.”

I know it’s easy to say we all understand that we are fishers of men. But let me ask you: “Can you name 5 people you are intentionally building relationships with who do not know Christ as Savior?” Can you really name 5 people? Can you name 3? Can you name 1? We do have this tendency to cluster and huddle together as believers, and we can end up having no intentional relationships with people who do not know the Savior. We are not becoming like Christ if we are not becoming fishers of men, because that is what defines a follower of Jesus.

An interesting phrase is used in verse 10 which doesn’t show up in the English translation. Jesus said, “From now on you will be catching men.” But the Greek sentence actually reads, “You will be catching men *alive*.” It was just the opposite of what Peter, James and John had done when they fished for fish. When you go fishing for fish, you go out and catch fish that are alive. You bring them in and they die. But what Jesus was saying is, “You’re going to go out and catch men and women who are dead, and you’re going to bring them in to live.” *Catching men to life* – it’s a great statement! That was Peter’s calling, and of course, Peter went on to become one of the great leaders – one of the great “fishermen” – of the New Testament church. Verse 11 says: “They left everything in order to become fishers of men.” In order to accomplish the mission it’s extremely important that we become fishers of men, women, boys and girls.

Let’s imagine that we were to go into business and decided to build a fish factory. The fish factory would be state of the art. Anything that you can do with a fish – process it, develop it, you name it – we were going to do it. So we would go to the bank and tell them our plan and borrow millions of dollars to build a multi-million facility with state of the art computerized equipment. We would have an open house for people to come through and see our impressive building and equipment. They’d say, “If there’s anyone in the world who understands how to process a fish, it’s your company!” On the factory’s opening day the whistle would blow with everyone at their stations. But there’s one slight detail we didn’t think about – there is no one out catching fish. No matter how many millions of dollars worth of equipment we have in the fish factory, it is of no value if no one is out catching fish.

We can have buildings, programs and do all kinds of things as a church, but in the end we are doing nothing but consuming God’s blessings upon ourselves, unless we are first out “catching fish.” That is a necessary first step in accomplishing the mission. The People Loop does not work if no one is fishing. It presupposes that we’re out there catching fish, and then they’re brought into the process, and people are presented complete in Christ.

Years ago I had a couple of friends who spent one whole day ice fishing. That evening I saw them at a church function and asked what they did that day. They said, “Oh, we went ice fishing.” When I asked how they did, they said, “Well, we didn’t even have a single bite all day long.” I asked where they went fishing and when they told me the place, I said, “I think I know what the problem is. Don’t you remember last fall that they put a chemical in the water that killed all the fish, because they plan to re-dig it and re-stock it in the spring.” The guys just shook their heads. The reality is that no matter how hard they tried to fish, the fact is there were no fish in that pond. That’s why we have to understand why Jesus said, “Go.”

I was a district leader of churches and had one particular church that needed help. It was my job to sit down and talk with them to help figure out what was happening in this church. I had a meeting with them, which consisted of 11 of them {their congregation} and one of me. We sat down and started to chat and I asked them, “Tell me what’s going on in your church. What does Sunday morning look like?” They answered, “Our pastor stands in the pulpit and preaches the gospel faithfully. He doesn’t compromise, but tells it the way it is. He really lays it out every single week.” I said, “That’s great. What else do you do?” They said, “Afterwards, he has an altar call and gives people the opportunity to respond.”

Next, I asked them who attended their church on an average Sunday morning, they answered, “Well, just us.” I then said, “When was the last time a visitor walked through the doors of your church?” They looked at one another and finally said, “You know, we don’t remember when that ever happened.” The only people who ever attended that church were those 11. Then I asked them, “So, every Sunday morning, who is the pastor preaching to?” They were hearing a gospel message and having an altar call, and for years no one had ever walked that aisle, because every one of those people had been Christians for over 20 years. Yet, in their minds, they were faithfully fulfilling the Great Commission. They were opening up the livewell and expecting the fish to eventually jump in the boat. They were fishing where there were no fish. That is not accomplishing the mission. The mission is to *go* – to go out into the marketplace and into our neighborhoods – to go where the fish are. To make contact with people and to introduce them to the Savior is what the mission is all about.

Lincoln Berean’s **Philosophy of Outreach** is important for us to review. It states:

We believe that all people matter to God, and therefore to us. We believe all are lost and separated from God without Christ and destined to eternal judgment. Therefore, every believer should be motivated at all times to reach out to the lost in our community and around the world through intentional contact, building relationships and personal witness. We believe most people require time to process the Gospel and respond to it. The church will provide events and activities to facilitate this process but these events and activities are not designed to be a substitute for the personal responsibility of each believer to be an intentional witness. We believe that outreach is not separate from the discipleship process but rather the initial phase of the discipleship process.

Key Components:

**“...all are lost and separated from God without Christ...”** All people are born sinners and deserving of judgment. All are separated from the God who loves them and desires a relationship with them. Trusting Jesus Christ alone for salvation is the only means by which a person can be saved from eternal judgment and be reconciled to God.

**“...every believer should be motivated at all times...”** Outreach is the responsibility of every believer. Evangelism is not a program but rather a way of life. For us to be Christ-like, we must seek the lost as He did.

**“...in our community and around the world...”** Outreach must always include a balance between reaching our neighbors and reaching the world. To fail in either area is to fail as a church.

**“...through intentional contact, building relationships, and personal witness.”** Outreach doesn’t just happen. We must be proactive in making contact with unbelievers and influencing them to trust Jesus for salvation. Personal witness includes both a life reflecting the presence of God and a verbal witness clearly articulating the essential truths of the Gospel.

**“...most people require time to process the Gospel and respond to it.”** In most cases, people go through a process of events, circumstances and exposures to the truth of the Gospel before they reach a

point of decision. Our responsibility is not to “close the deal” but to lovingly be a part of the process by planting and watering and letting God bring the increase.

“...events and activities...” Lincoln Berean offers various events and activities to assist in the outreach process. These events are not designed to be an end in themselves but rather one part of the process of reaching those with whom we have built relationships.

**“. . . outreach is not separate from the discipleship process but rather the initial phase in the discipleship process.”** Evangelism and discipleship are not two separate responsibilities of the church but rather two parts of the same process. Jesus clearly stated we are to “go and make disciples,” implying that evangelism is a part of the discipleship process. The People Loop is a corporate discipleship process which includes outreach.

One of the things you see emphasized in our outreach statement is the essential need for relationships. There is no more effective way to reach people with the gospel of Jesus Christ than to build genuine, authentic, loving, caring relationships. We need to understand that we must be out in the world caring about people, mixing with people. Jesus modeled this so well for us. In fact, He did it so well that the religious establishment constantly criticized Him for doing it. Jesus was out among the fish, making contact, demonstrating His kindness and His love and compassion, and people were drawn to Him. If we’re truly following Jesus, then that’s what we need to be doing. If the purpose were to just make spiritual babies, maybe there would be a better strategy. But the purpose is not to make spiritual babies, but to make disciples. We are called to present people complete in Christ. For that to happen, people must come into the body of Christ (the Church) and be corporately discipled, as we help them continue on in their growth.

It is said that 80% of the people who trust Jesus as Savior and are assimilated into a local church are led to Christ by a friend. The key ingredient is that there’s an ongoing relationship. A person trusts Christ as Savior, the relationship continues and they come into the church. Ultimately that is what the mission is all about. Relationships are absolutely critical. From time to time we, as a church, have events which we call come/see events. We have one at Christmas and one at Easter, and our men, women, youth, and children all have various come/see-type events throughout the year. But these events are not meant to be a substitute for individual responsibility. We do not depend upon these as our outreach as a church. Rather, they are simply meant to facilitate this process of reaching people through relationships. You are building relationships with people, and when one of these events comes along, you invite them to come. This is a significant step in their journey, but it is just a step. It may be the point where they make a decision, or it may not be. The come/see event is meant to assist you in the process, but the most important thing is still your relationship. You continue to build into these people, and when they trust Christ as Savior, they are brought into the church.

As far as Sunday morning, it’s important to understand that when we gather like this, we are gathering as the church – the people of God. Therefore, the worship and sermons are targeted toward believers. There is an understanding that the church is gathered together in order to be built up and strengthened. Why? So that we can go out and build relationships and penetrate the culture to influence people for Christ. On any given week, there are seekers among us who are here and have not yet trusted Jesus as Savior. They’re in the process of trying to figure out who God is – who Jesus is. They are questioning, “What does all this mean?” We want them to know that we’re very happy to have them with us, and we want to remove all unnecessary roadblocks, so that they can hear, understand, and make a decision in their own spiritual journey. We welcome seekers among us, but the main target on Sunday

mornings is the church body {believers} who will be going out and making contacts with others.

It's also important to understand that our relationships with unbelievers is a process and a journey. When we understand that God is at work, and that we can't speed up God's timetable, we then understand why we don't need to corner our neighbor in the garage and unload both barrels on him, just so that we can feel better about ourselves. But, rather, we are to be in the process of building relationships. Sometimes we try to make it too complicated. It isn't that complicated to be kind, caring, and compassionate, and to build friendships with people. Along the way, we live out the difference that Jesus makes in us, and God will open up doors and provide the chance to talk about what makes that difference. Little by little they will begin to understand more and come to their own conclusions. It's very important that we understand that this is a process, and that we let people have their journey.

When you go to the car lot, do you like it when the dealer gets in your face and tries to pressure you to buy? When you are going to buy a home, do you like it when a realtor is pushing you to buy something you are not ready to buy? What about an insurance agent breathing down your neck to get you to sign on the dotted line? You are probably not thinking, "I need more of these kind of people in my life," but instead, you want to back off from that approach. Why would people make the most critical decision of their life under that kind of pressure? We don't like that – and they don't like it either. We need to be faithful to live the difference and to declare Christ and who He is. But we also remember that this is a process, and that we need to let people have their journey. In time, God will reveal Himself to them and it will be between God and them. We just need to do our part. Some cultivate; some sow the seed; some water; some pull the weeds. But God is the only one who can give the increase, and that is very important to understand as we go into the world and become fishers of men.

In my first year of pastoring at Broken Bow, I was introduced to a guy in town with these comments, "Bryan, this is Sam. You'll like him. He loves to fish." Sam only came to our church occasionally, so most of the time when we met it was just out in town somewhere. But whenever we'd meet we'd talk fishing, and Sam loved to talk fishing. He could really talk the talk. After the first year, I asked him, "Sam, how was the fishing this year?" "Oh," he said, "I didn't go fishing. I just didn't have time." After the second year he didn't go fishing. After the third year he didn't go fishing either. I was there for almost 10 years, and I'm not sure in those 10 years that Sam went fishing one time. Sam loved to talk about fishing, but Sam wasn't a fisherman. Because fishermen *go* fishing.

Jesus defined a follower of His as someone who fishes for men. That is the essential and critical first step in accomplishing the mission. If we're truly going to be the church, we must go. In going, we penetrate into the culture. When we leave our homes in the morning, every one of us ought to hang a sign on our door that says, "Gone fishing." Because that's what everyday is really about. If we do that, we'll build relationships and we'll influence people for Jesus Christ. They will be brought into the church, and together we'll help present them complete in Christ and accomplish the mission of the church. We cannot be a church that just talks fishing. We must be a church that goes fishing.