

# Be encouraged, you can be part of the harvest

Matthew 9:37-38

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In 1 Peter 2:9 we read these words:

*“But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. <sup>10</sup> Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.”*

Peter is talking to believers of his day. He says chosen race, but they were both Jews and Gentiles. He calls them a royal priesthood, yet very few of them had actually been Jewish priests and we don't know of any who were royal. He refers to them as a holy nation, but that seems to be language that would have been more for Israel in the Old Testament. What is Peter saying?

He is referring to all who by faith belong to the kingdom of God. It is not a kingdom of this world. It is made of people from every nation, tribe and tongue. People who are bonded together not by color of skin or language, but by the Spirit of Christ who lives in them. It is an eternal kingdom.

It is a people whose ethnic identity takes a backseat to their eternal identity that is found in Christ. As we receive Peter's words it is a call to be more than Nigerian, Filipino, British, Spanish, or American. We belong to the kingdom of God. A Jesus culture. A people of the Word. Citizens of heaven. Everything has changed. And just as Israel was to be a set apart people, giving testimony to the greatness of their God, we, too, are to shine the light of Christ to the nations.

We are just passing through this world. This is not our real residence. We are no longer citizens of this world. So, do not live for this world and all its passing riches, but live such honorable lives that they may see your good deeds and glorify God. That is our testimony.

“We are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people of his own possession, that we may proclaim the excellencies of him who called us out of darkness and into his marvelous light” (1 Peter 2:9).

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That is a huge undertaking. Proclaiming the Excellencies of God to a dark world. We are to be His witnesses to the world around us, but where do we begin?

If we are going to impact the world for the kingdom of God, it must eventually arrive at the preaching of the gospel. Only the gospel possesses the power to transform lives. When we watch the news we are overcome by the evil all around us, but the biggest problem is the evil within us. We desperately need a Savior. Salvation is not found in starting another NGO, or in a government, or in the UN, or in more education. Salvation is found in Jesus Christ . . . and his method of bringing the good news to our hurting world is through us . . . the church. Only we are called to be the light of the world. Our world, our country, our city desperately need us to take up this challenge and preach the gospel.

Romans 10:13-14 says this, ***“Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.’ How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?”***

We must share the hope found in Jesus Christ. Salvation is prompted by God drawing people to Himself, but there is a role that we can play.

To “share” is to set before them the simple facts of the Gospel. That all mankind has been separated from a holy, righteous and loving God because of our sin. That the wages of sin is death, and that because of our sin we deserve condemnation and eternal separation from God in a place of endless torment, called hell.

God, seeing our desperate need, sent His Son down from heaven to earth to become a man in the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus lived a sinless life and willingly laid down His life for our sake and was crucified on a Roman cross. In this act He paid for our sins so that we could be reconciled to God. Three days later he was raised from the dead conquering sin and death. All who will repent and believe in Jesus Christ will be saved and reconciled to a right relation with God.

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We believe the gospel and the importance of it being shared with those around us, but most struggle with the idea of speaking about Christ to others. It brings fear and uncertainty to many, but as we look at scripture, we begin to see that it may be more natural than we thought.

The book *Becoming a Contagious Christian* points to the fact that in the Bible we do not see one set way of sharing one’s faith. We see numerous examples of how different believers shared their faith. We even see Jesus, Himself, calling people to faith in various ways.

We see Jesus sharing with the outcast woman at the well. It was a conversation that started out talking about water and ended up with her salvation. Another time he spoke with a religious leader late at night and explained it by saying that “you must be born again”. Still another time, Jesus spoke to a rich young ruler, requiring that for him to inherit eternal life he had to sell all that he had and give it to the poor. And these do not even include all those times Jesus shared with the crowds or small groups that came to Him.

We see the same in the life of Paul. He shared one way with the Jews in the synagogues and a totally different way to the philosophers sitting atop Mars Hill in Athens. Paul was well educated in Judaism and well-read in the way of the Greeks. He was one who reasoned with others on behalf of the gospel. In the same way many today find their preferred evangelistic style to be debate, apologetics and reasoning with others.

Others relate more with Peter. Bold, direct and passionate. This was why he was the most likely one to share at Pentecost in Jerusalem, only weeks after Jesus had been crucified.

Some share Christ based on personal testimony, more like the blind man in John 9. The man had been blind since birth and yet Jesus was able to miraculously give him sight. The religious leaders called the man to come before them because Jesus had the audacity to heal the man on the sabbath.

In John 9:24-25 we read this account, *“So for the second time they called the man who had been blind and said to him, ‘Give glory to God. We know that this man (Jesus) is a sinner.’ He answered, ‘Whether he is a sinner I do not know. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.’”*

To many this way of giving testimony is the safest. No one knows your story better than you. As you tell your firsthand account of what Christ has done and is doing in your life, you can speak with passion and conviction, convinced of what you have seen, heard and experienced.

Still others are more like Matthew in Luke 5:29. Matthew hosted Jesus at his house and invited all his sinful friends. Scripture called it a “great feast”. It was through hospitality, generosity and friendship that Matthew ushered many into the presence of Christ.

We see two other examples of how to share your faith by two women. The first was the aforementioned woman at the well that Jesus spoke with. Upon hearing Jesus and believing, she set off to invite others, in John 4:29-30; 39-42:

*“<sup>29</sup>Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ?”<sup>30</sup> They went out of the town and were coming to him . . . <sup>39</sup>Many Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman's testimony, “He told me all that I ever did.”<sup>40</sup> So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them, and he stayed there two days. <sup>41</sup>And many more believed because of his word. <sup>42</sup>They said to the woman, “It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is indeed the Savior of the world.”*

At first, she used her personal experience to invite them to Christ. Once there, she was not the one who presented the gospel. She just invited many, many people towards Jesus where they heard the gospel and believed.

While we each need to be prepared to give the reason for the hope that we have, some are really good at inviting and gathering people for the sake of Christ. Inviting can play an important role in the process, as we invite them to share prayer requests, invite them to fellowship events, invite them to church, and eventually invite them to put their faith in Christ.

Lastly, we look at the example of Dorcas, in Acts 9:36. She was well known for her good works and acts of charity. She became ill and died. They sent for Peter. The following verses described what happened next:

*<sup>39</sup> So Peter rose and went with them. And when he arrived, they took him to the upper room. All the widows stood beside him weeping and showing tunics and other garments that Dorcas made while she was with them. <sup>40</sup> But Peter put them all outside, and knelt down and prayed; and turning to the body he said, "Tabitha, arise." And she opened her eyes, and when she saw Peter she sat up. <sup>41</sup> And he gave her his hand and raised her up. Then, calling the saints and widows, he presented her alive. <sup>42</sup> And it became known throughout all Joppa, and many believed in the Lord." (Acts 9:39-42)*

It was through her service to others that God used her death and coming back to life to bring many to faith in Jesus.

To some, this is their best way to share the light of Christ. They may not be people of eloquent words, but their servant heart speak loudly about the love of Christ.

Others will question, "but how can you call this is evangelism? All Dorcas did was good works and acts of charity."

That is a legitimate question. Some Christians and churches now give all their attention to good works and acts of charity, without any mention of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Others preach the gospel loud, but without any good works and acts of charity. So, which is more pleasing to God? Which wing is most important to a plane? Both.

One way that scripture describes evangelism is with the idea of "the harvest".

Jesus said these words in Matthew 9:36-37:

*<sup>36</sup> When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. <sup>37</sup> Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; <sup>38</sup> therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest."*

Think about that word "harvest" for a moment. In the physical world, it is a person or a tractor going through a field when the crop has borne fruit and is ready to be picked and either eaten or taken to market. To make a spiritual comparison, when talking about evangelism, the "harvest" would be speaking the gospel to a non-believer and in response they repent and put their faith in Jesus Christ. The person is born again, forgiven, made new, welcomed into the family of God. The angels are rejoicing and the harvest has come.

We often think of harvest of fruit or a grain as a one-moment-in-time event, but in reality it is many small events that make the harvest possible. It is evaluating the soil, preparing the soil, pulling weeds, picking rocks, adding fertilizer, and finally planting the seed. It then is irrigation, protecting from pestilence, giving time for the laws of nature to bring the growth until the time comes for the harvest.

A spiritual harvest is much the same. The preparation of the soil is a huge determinant of when and even if the harvest will come. We read about it in Jesus' parable of the four soils, in Matthew 13. The sower planted seeds on four different soils, but only one soil was prepared for the seed to bring fruit. The first soil was too hard, symbolizing that the person who heard the gospel never even understood it. The second seed was thrown on rocky soil. It grew quickly but then died away. It is similar to a person who hears the gospel of Jesus and at first gets really excited, until tribulation or persecution causes them to fall away. The third soil was sown *"among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and it proves unfruitful."*

Finally, Jesus told of the seed planted in the good soil. This is the one who hears the word, understands it and receives it. It indeed bears fruit and yields a harvest.

In this parable we see how much the preparedness of the soil affects the outcome of the harvest. This explains why evangelism to strangers, with no relationship to prepare the soil, is often not very effective. The majority of time spent in evangelism is not in the "sharing of the spoken gospel", it is in the prayer and in the care that precedes it. We must remember, the harder the soil, the more preparation will be required.

It is interesting that the sharing of the seed becomes so much easier once the soil is prepared. Yes, we must always be ready to speak the reason for the hope that we have in Jesus, but as we look towards the harvest may we understand that evangelism is much more than Bible verses, and a spiritual debate. Even if we are not a great theologian, telling someone about what Jesus has done in our lives is so much easier when they have become a good friend of ours, have seen the change that Jesus has made in our lives, and are wanting to know more.

May we allow God to use us in our unique way as He prepares the heart of others. Be encouraged. We don't all have to be great philosophers and debaters like the Apostle Paul. Or bold and fearless like the apostle Peter at Pentecost.

Consider the following story told in Jim Petersen's Book, *Living Proof: Sharing the Gospel Naturally*:

*"When he was thirteen years old, my son Todd asked, "Dad, how can I be a good testimony? I'm not as good a Christian as Michelle (his older sister). She's talking to her friends about Christ.*

*My mind flashed back to the time I was thirteen. I remembered how I had been caught between two unreconcilable desires. I wanted to measure up to what I imagined my parents expected of me so far as having a Christian testimony among my friends. But at the same time I had to meet my needs for approval among my peers. I remembered the guilt and tension this conflict caused me. Now, how could I help my son avoid the same problem?*

*Finally, I said, "Todd, don't worry about words. Just concern yourself with one thing, Be a peacemaker." I explained that if he would be genuinely considerate of the other person, and if he would take the initiative in resolving the conflicts that arose, he would be doing what God wants of him. This was something my thirteen-year-old could handle.*

*A few weeks later, Todd had an argument with Eduardo, our neighbor's boy, and their friendship broke up. When Todd and I talked about this incident, we reviewed our discussion on being a peacemaker and read Romans 12:17-18 together. "Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to*

*do what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.” Todd decided to take the initiative, visited Eduardo, and restored their friendship.*

*Soon after that, Eduard’s mother invited my wife over to her home to talk. She explained that her family had observed Todd’s friendship with Eduardo and concluded, “We think you have what we need.” A thirteen-year-old’s life opened the door to another family.”*

This is a story of 1 Thessalonians 1:5 in action. ***“Our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction.”***

Let me encourage you to take hold of the style of evangelism that is most natural to you.

May we pray for the lost in much of the same way that Jesus prayed over the city of Jerusalem. May we host times of hospitality like Matthew. Serve others like Dorcas. Invite others like the woman at the well. Tell our testimony like the man born blind.

As we faithfully continue praying and caring with an eye on evangelism, in time God will prepare the soil so that at the right time the spoken word of the gospel will find a heart ready to repent and believe. Then and only then will the harvest come.

It is interesting how the Apostle Paul writes a lot more about living like Christ than talking about Christ. In his day and time, when the church was surrounded by such hard soil, the gospel had to be lived out before it could be spoken about. He knew that it was only after the patient preparation of the soil that the seed would bear fruit.

I must warn you. If God is going to use us to prepare the hearts of others to receive the gospel, it may take a while. Maybe weeks, months or even years. Because of that it will demand that we live a consistent, authentic Christian life. It is not preaching to strangers who know nothing about the way that we really live. It is daily living alongside non-believers who will watch our lives, and either be moved more towards Christ or more away from Him because of the way that we live. There will be days when our efforts seem pointless, but we must continue to pray and care for those we love.

When thinking about a delayed harvest, Pastor Rick Warren shares this story:

*“Of all the growth patterns I’ve observed as a gardener, the growth of the Chinese bamboo tree is the most amazing to me.*

*Plant a bamboo sprout in the ground, and for 4 or 5 years (sometimes much longer) nothing happens! You water and fertilize, water and fertilize, water and fertilize —but you see no visible evidence that anything is happening. Nothing!*

*But about the fifth-year things change dramatically. In a six-week period the Chinese bamboo tree grows to a staggering ninety feet tall!*

*World Book Encyclopedia records that one bamboo plant can grow three feet in a simple twenty-four-hour period.*

*It seems incredible that a plant that lies dormant for years can suddenly explode with growth, but it happens without fail with bamboo trees.”<sup>1</sup>*

The same may be true for us as well. It could be that family members, co-workers and friends, with whom you have been sharing life, take years to finally come to the point that their hearts are receptive to the gospel. Until then carry on living the gospel, preparing to speak the gospel when the time is right. As Paul wrote in Galatians 6:9, **“And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up.”**

Our goal is a combination of Matthew 5:16 and 1 Peter 3:15: **“Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven . . . in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you.”**

In closing, may this following letter, written by a relatively new Christian to the person whose life had influenced hers so greatly, be an encouragement to you:

*“You know when we met; I began to discover a new vulnerability, a warmth, and a lack of pretense that impressed me. I saw in you a thriving spirit - no signs of internal stagnation anywhere. I could tell you were a growing person and I liked that. I saw you had strong self-esteem, not based on the fluff of self-help books, but on something a whole lot deeper. I saw that you lived by convictions and priorities and not just by convenience, selfish pleasure, and financial gain. And I had never met anyone like that before.*

*I felt a depth of love and concern as you listened to me and didn’t judge me. You tried to understand me, you sympathized, and you celebrated with me, you demonstrated kindness and generosity - and not just to me, but to other people, as well.*

*And you stood for something. You were willing to go against the grain of society and follow what you believed to be true, no matter what people said, and no matter how much it cost you. And for those reasons and a whole host of others, I found myself really wanting what you had. Now that I’ve become a Christian, I wanted to write to tell you I’m grateful beyond words for how you lived out your Christian life in front of me.”<sup>2</sup>*

May God use us each in a similar way. May Christ be on display in our lives. May we find our natural way to reach out to others. May we team-up with other Christians whose way of evangelism complements our own.

May we each pray that our hearts would be burdened for the lost around us. May we be selfless in our care for them. May we have faith, discernment and courage to clearly share the gospel with them when the time is right. May God use us as the workers in the fields who eventually bring in His harvest.

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<sup>1</sup> Source: Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church: Growth Without Compromising Your Message and Mission* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1996), 393-394.

<sup>2</sup> From the book *Becoming a Contagious Christian*. Bill Hybels and Mark Mittelberg.

### Discussion questions:

1. Romans 10:13-14 tells of the importance of one hearing the good news of Jesus Christ before they can believe in Him. What do you think are the largest obstacles to speaking the gospel clearly to those who need to hear it?
2. What do you think are the largest obstacles that keep an unbeliever from truly hearing the gospel when it is shared with them?
3. How has your thoughts about evangelism been affected by this sermon?
4. What from this sermon do you think God wants you to remember?
5. How do you think God wants you to put it into action?

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