

No One Like Jesus: Proclaiming the Kingdom of God
By Jason Huff
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Psalm 106:1-5; Colossians 1:25-29; Matthew 10:1-15

Friends, our final Scripture reading today comes from Matthew 10:1-15. May God add His blessing to the reading of His holy Word. “[Jesus] called his twelve disciples to him and gave them authority to drive out evil spirits and to heal every disease and sickness. These are the names of the twelve apostles: first, Simon (who is called Peter) and his brother Andrew; James son of Zebedee, and his brother John; Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; Simon the Zealot and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him. These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: “Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel. As you go, preach this message: ‘The kingdom of heaven is near.’ Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you have received, freely give. Do not take along any gold or silver or copper in your belts; take no bag for the journey, or extra tunic, or sandals or a staff; for the worker is worth his keep. Whatever town or village you enter, search for some worthy person there and stay at his house until you leave. As you enter the home, give it your greeting. If the home is deserving, let your peace rest on it; if it is not, let your peace return to you. If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake the dust off your feet when you leave that home or town. I tell you the truth, it will be more bearable for Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for that town.”

What comes to mind when you hear the word “authority”? Perhaps law enforcement – the *authorities*, who have the right to arrest you if you’ve committed a crime. Maybe you think of an expert on a particular subject – an authority. Often, it’s someone with responsibility or power. But authority is under attack in society. Parents, teachers, police, government – who made *them* authorities? In the age of the Internet, you can find an authority that will tell you what you want to hear about almost anything – from conspiracy theories to science and theology.

But today, Jesus shows His authority to give authority to the apostles – His twelve closest friends. Jesus instructs the apostles about their mission, and in many respects, we are on the same mission – to proclaim the Kingdom of God where we are. We’ll see that we are equipped and ready to share Jesus with others in much the same way that the first apostles were.

Now the first disciples of Jesus had a special role to play. They were to spread the word that God was in their land and His Kingdom was at hand. *Jesus gives them authority to do it.* That’s why they are “apostles.” I used to think that “apostle” was a title given to Jesus’ closest friends. But it has a specific meaning in Greek: “one sent on a mission with full authority.”

Think about an embassy. When you are in a country’s embassy, you are no longer on US soil. That small parcel of land is considered a part of that embassy’s country now. You’re subject to their rules and laws. An attack on an embassy is an act of war. In the ancient world, a king’s emissaries were to be given the same treatment as the king himself. They had authority to proclaim and enforce the king’s decrees. It brings a new meaning to the term “don’t kill the messenger;” if you harmed the king’s messenger, you were harming the king.

When the twelve are given the title apostle – and later, when others like Paul and James the brother of Jesus receive it – it means the same thing. They are Christ to those they minister to. They are official representatives of the Kingdom of God. That’s why the ending of this passage is so harsh. Why would the vile towns of Sodom and Gomorrah receive better treatment on the day of judgment than a town that rejected an apostle? Because an envoy from the King of Kings had come to them. If they reject an apostle, they actually reject Jesus.

This also answers a question about biblical authority. Throughout time, some people have ignored huge chunks of the Bible. They say they like Jesus, they’ll even follow His words, but they believe the rest of the Bible doesn’t have any authority over them. Even as the New Testament books were being written, some wayward churches wondered, “Why should we have to abide by what the apostles tell us we should do?” It’s happened many times since.

But Protestant churches trust the New Testament because of the authority Jesus gave to the apostles. Many books that could have been in the Bible were eventually rejected – not because they said wrong things about God, but because they didn’t have apostolic authority. We have a handbook called the *Didache* that tells us many great things about how the early church functioned, but it wasn’t included in the Bible because it wasn’t written by an apostle.

We trust the writings of the New Testament because they were written by those to whom Jesus gave authority. When we read Paul or Peter or the gospel authors, we’re reading words God inspired His representatives to write to His church. Jesus gave them authority to invite us into the Kingdom and to teach us how to live as Kingdom citizens. The Old Testament was trusted because of much the same thing – God called prophets and priests and gave them authority to write down His words and the events in the life of His people.

If we reject Scripture, we reject Jesus because He gave authority to those who wrote it. If we take Scripture to heart and follow it, we aren’t following Peter or Paul or Matthew – we’re following Jesus who inspired the words they wrote. That means we should spend time in the Bible every day. Those words are from our Lord, no matter whose hand wrote them.

Then Jesus “gave the disciples authority to drive out evil spirits and to heal every disease and sickness.” Here’s the point: *the miracles the Apostles do – and the works we do – are based not in supernatural abilities but in God’s authority which gives us His power.* We live in a society that loves superhero stuff: over thirty major superhero movies in the last five years. Most superheroes have innate powers. Superman, Thor, Spiderman, Captain America, the X-Men – their powers come from inside. They can do incredible things just because that’s who they are.

This is not the kind of power that Jesus gives the disciples. Jesus gives them “authority” to heal, to remove evil spirits, and to cure. Jesus doesn’t “zap” them and then they have the ability to “zap” other people. They are given permission to do what Jesus does. Through His authority, they can cure and heal and act as God wills. Sometimes, we’ll hear about a miracle healing or someone released from addiction and it makes us nervous rather than happy. It scares us to think that someone has power like that. Here’s the truth – God is the only one who has the innate power to make anything happen. But by His grace, He gives the authority to do those things at certain places and times to certain people so that His Kingdom will spread.

It also means you don't have to be a perfect person to be used by God; you only have to be willing. We get the list of the apostles, who are still raw; they still have doubts; one of them will betray Him and another deny Him three times. Several of them do nothing to receive another mention in the New Testament – we wouldn't know they were apostles if not for this list. God still gave them authority to accomplish His purposes. This is a good reminder for us. Don't worry about having to get perfect before you can do God's work – just be ready and prepared.

So Jesus sends His apostles out with authority to speak on His behalf – not perfect people, not superhumans with superpowers, but ordinary people given extraordinary ability to witness to the goodness of God. Like any ambassadors, they are sent with specific instructions on how to do the job. Some of these instructions were just for this trip, but most of them inform us how the Kingdom of God expands even today.

The first instruction is exclusive: “Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel.” Does this mean that Jesus is excluding people from the Kingdom? No! We've seen Jesus heal all sorts of outsiders in Matthew's gospel, even Gentiles. Jesus includes an amazing assortment of people in His Kingdom.

But God made a promise to Israel. In Isaiah 42:6, God says to Israel, “I will make you...a light for the Gentiles.” Three times, in Genesis 18, Genesis 22, and Genesis 26, God states that all nations on Earth will be blessed through Abraham and Abraham's offspring. As Paul explains in Romans 1 and 2, the good news of salvation is first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. Blessing and punishment for accepting or rejecting God comes first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. God made His promise with the Jews; they are His covenant people. Because of that promise, they are the first to hear and the first to respond. For two millennia, the gospel has reached Gentiles – but for God to stay true to His promise, the apostles had to reach Israel first.

Jesus then gives these orders: “As you go, preach this message: 'The kingdom of heaven is near.' Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons.” Now we know they were given authority to do these things, and then had been learning for some time the message of God's Kingdom. So why the repetition right here? It's this: *the full glory of the Kingdom of God is seen when words and deeds come together*. The apostles weren't sent out as merely doctors or preachers. The message and the God-given abilities went hand in hand. People were convicted by the message and convinced of its truth by the works they saw.

While we don't have the same kind of authority as the apostles, we do have the same way of bringing people into the Kingdom. We speak about God's Kingdom and what God has done both in our world and our lives. Then we follow it up with actions that show that God is working in our midst. They are in lockstep, one never following very far after the other.

Lots of people are afraid to share the gospel because of fear of an argument. They'd rather just do good things and assume people will figure out we're Christians. But it doesn't work that way. Some people will embrace Christianity and others will oppose it, and that can lead to some heated discussions. But we have it good if we merely suffer the loss of a friend or someone shames us for our beliefs. Unlike brothers and sisters around the world, we do not have to fear our lives are in danger if we share Jesus. Let's not forget to tell people about Him.

At the same time, for some of us it's easier to talk about faith than put it into practice. It's a different kind of sacrifice, a sacrifice of time and effort and money. It is far easier for me – maybe not for you, but for me – to get up front each week and tell you about Christ than it is to mow a lawn or get dirty rebuilding a home or to give up a day volunteering in the name of Jesus. It's not easy for us to put these two parts together – but when we do, people will enter the Kingdom as they hear our message and see the power of God at work in our lives.

Jesus goes on, saying, “Freely you have received, freely give. Do not take along any gold or silver or copper in your belts; take no bag for the journey, or extra tunic, or sandals or a staff; for the worker is worth his keep.” One idea plays out in multiple ways: *we don't minister for material gain but to spread word of our Heavenly Father and His Son, Jesus*. Salvation is a free gift from God that we cannot earn. We cannot even give ourselves faith that leads to salvation – that comes from God, too! So we are told to share the message freely.

Biblical theologian D. A. Carson wrote, “The church does not pay its ministers; rather, it provides them with resources so that they are able to serve freely.” It's a paradigm shift; money changes hands, but the meaning of that money is different. When we pay someone to do a job for us, it comes with expectations. Ministers feel pressure to say what people want to hear so that more people attend, more money flows into the church, and those who “pay” the pastor get what they want. The “Word of Faith” movement has figured out that if you take our sin out of the gospel and preach nothing but encouragement without Christ, you can make a ton of money.

But the true minister is called to give away the gospel to anyone who wants it. There are no hidden secrets of God or a special service that will get you into heaven faster for a small extra fee. It's all done for free. When a congregation supports a minister or a missionary or someone else working on God's behalf, in the perfect situation, it's so we can do what God is calling us to do without the fear of retribution if we make someone upset. That makes us rethink giving, too. Do we give without thought of what we receive back? If we do, that shows maturity in our faith.

Now why weren't the apostles allowed to take extra goods with them? I think there are two complimentary reasons. The first is that the apostles couldn't rely on themselves and back out of their responsibilities. When we have a backup plan, it's easy to shirk what God has called us to do. Jesus even took away the backup plan of switching lodging in a village if someone more wealthy or notable extended an invitation! When a church has a lot of money or resources, the question to ask is, are they spending those resources to advance the Kingdom, or are they building self-serving projects and protecting what they already have? The first is a sign of a church that's alive; the second church is dying even if they have tons of members.

It's nice to have a backup plan. When church attendance is low, I think, “Should I have a backup plan?” It might be easy to think, “If CrossWay isn't here, I could find another church.” But God doesn't want us making backup plans – another church, another career, another car, another spouse, another life – to hedge our bets if things aren't great. Don't misunderstand – if we're aren't serving the Lord, we've got to change course! But when it comes to serving the Lord, we don't want to second-guess ourselves or say, “Sharing the Lord's blessings can wait until tomorrow.” We don't know who'll get tomorrow and who won't. When we serve the Lord, we count on Him to provide, not looking for safety in anything or anyone else.

The second reason that the apostles were sent out with so little was because those who believed them would immediately have to join faith with action. No one could say, “I want to learn more about Jesus” but not offer hospitality. Accepting the message meant accepting some responsibility for it, providing basic care for the apostle who brought them the good news. These earliest believers were not given the option of listening forever without any sacrifice.

That was good. We learn how much we value something when we are asked to give something up to have it. The early believers recognized that the good news of salvation was worth the cost. Many of them valued it even at the cost of their lives. They were willing to pay the price because they knew salvation had real value and, from the very beginning, they had given something to recognize its worth. There is real value in being part of a church like CrossWay for the same reason. It costs you something to be here in terms of finances, fellowship, and responsibility. Yet we grow more willing to follow God as we grow in faith.

Last thought: *go where you're wanted*. The apostles were told, if they weren't welcomed, shake the dust off your feet and move on. The apostles had the whole of Galilee to reach. People needed to hear the good news. There was no time to waste time on those who didn't want to hear. Note that Jesus didn't say to move on from those who didn't become believers immediately or those who struggled with what they heard. The apostles took a while in many places where people had to be convinced. Jesus said to shake the dust off from those who wouldn't welcome you and those who wouldn't listen.

Many people today aren't interested in hearing about Jesus. They just aren't. You aren't welcome to speak His name around them except as a curse. Jesus doesn't say to write them off, to give up on them, or to condemn them to hell. He does say to warn them and to move on.

The science fiction author Robert Heinlein once wrote, “Never attempt to teach a pig to sing; it wastes your time and it annoys the pig.” If God hasn't moved in someone's heart to listen, guess what? They aren't going to listen. Doesn't matter if it's a family member or a best friend. You can't make someone believe, as much as we wish they would. We warn them, we pray for them, and we ask the Father that it might be His will to change their hearts so they would grow soft to Him. But we must attempt to reach others who might be willing to hear.

Share where you're heard. You may not convince someone that Jesus is Savior and Lord the first time you tell them, or even the twenty-first. But what matters is an open spirit and heart to the things of God. Just as the apostles weren't sent to everyone, we aren't called to reach every last person. We are called to reach out to those within our grasp who are willing to welcome the conversation. This might be painful, because we might see our family members and friends reject God while others we never would expect believe. But God is bringing His family together, and we are part of it. It is an eternal family of God's people. We will be together, closer than even flesh and blood could be now. So don't feel bad when you're not heard. Even the apostles knew that sometimes, they had to move on.

Jesus sent the apostles out with authority, commanding them to preach with word and deed. We follow in their stead. May God bless us as we speak His truth into a world that desperately needs Him, and may God bring others to Himself as we minister in His name.