

The Effect of Service

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

3rd in a four-part series

November 5 & 6, 2016

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Jeremiah 16:14–16 (CEB)

¹⁴But the time is coming, declares the LORD, when no one will say, “As the LORD lives who brought up the Israelites from the land of Egypt”; ¹⁵instead, they will say, “As the LORD lives who brought up the Israelites from the land of the north and from all the lands where he has banished them.” I will bring them back to the land that I gave to their ancestors.

¹⁶**I’m going to send hordes of fishermen to catch them, declares the LORD.** Afterward I will send a party of hunters to hunt them down on every mountain, hill, and cave.

Luke 5:1–11 (CEB)

One day Jesus was standing beside Lake Gennesaret when the crowd pressed in around him to hear God’s word. ²Jesus saw two boats sitting by the lake. The fishermen had gone ashore and were washing their nets. ³Jesus boarded one of the boats, the one that belonged to Simon, then asked him to row out a little distance from the shore. Jesus sat down and taught the crowds from the boat. ⁴When he finished speaking to the crowds, he said to Simon, “Row out farther, into the deep water, and drop your nets for a catch.”

⁵Simon replied, “Master, we’ve worked hard all night and caught nothing. But because you say so, I’ll drop the nets.”

⁶So they dropped the nets and their catch was so huge that their nets were splitting. ⁷They signaled for their partners in the other boat to come and help them. They filled both boats so full that they were about to sink. ⁸When Simon Peter saw the catch, he fell at Jesus’ knees and said, “Leave me, Lord, for I’m a sinner!” ⁹Peter and those with him were overcome with amazement because of the number of fish they caught. ¹⁰James and John, Zebedee’s sons, were Simon’s partners and they were amazed too.

Jesus said to Simon, **“Don’t be afraid. From now on, you will be fishing for people.”**

¹¹As soon as they brought the boats to the shore, they left everything and followed Jesus.

Matthew 28:19–20 (CEB)

¹⁹Therefore, go 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 obey everything that I’ve commanded you. Look, I myself will be with you every day until the end of this present age.”

Matthew 25:34–40 (CEB)

³⁴“Then the king will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who will receive good things from my Father. Inherit the kingdom that was prepared for you before the world began. ³⁵I was hungry and you gave me food to eat. I was thirsty and you gave me a drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me. ³⁶I was naked and you gave me clothes to wear. I was sick and you took care of me. I was in prison and you visited me.’

³⁷“Then those who are righteous will reply to him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you a drink? ³⁸When did we see you as a stranger and welcome you, or naked and give you clothes to wear? ³⁹When did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?’

⁴⁰“Then the king will reply to them, ‘I assure you that when you have done it for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you have done it for me.’

Like Peter, we too are called to fish for people, and we do so by word and deed.

Nearly all Christians have heard Jesus’ statement to Peter, “from now on you will fish for people.” The metaphor is clear enough to us – Peter had caught an abundance of fish and now he would catch people. But most of us don’t know that the metaphor is not original to Jesus. Centuries before God had spoken of sending out “hordes of fishermen” to catch his people and bring them in, i.e., back together after the various dispersions and scatterings at the hands of invaders from the time of the Assyrians forward (see the passage from Jeremiah above). Why? So that they could be judged as the gathered people of God.

But now Jesus has taken the metaphor and reshaped it. Peter and the rest would fish for people as instruments of God’s salvation. The time had come to proclaim the Good News and gather in all of humanity, not merely the Jews but the Gentiles as well.

Peter and his partners are being called into God's service. They will leave their present lives behind, follow Jesus, and become his disciples. They will have purpose. They will be on a mission. They will see Jesus turn the world upside, caring and healing the marginalized and the weak and the oppressed. They will hear him proclaim the arrival of God's kingdom and the sure promise that God's Day had arrived.

In this, we see two concepts of what we mean by mission, exemplified by the two passages from Matthew that are above. Regrettably, we often treat these two concepts as an "or." Say the word "mission" to some Christians and they immediately think of making disciples, the so-called Great Commission of Matthew 28:19. Others, however, will take "mission" to mean feeding the hungry, providing for the poor, and so on.

We have to guard against our tendency to chop up our concept of mission. If we concern ourselves only with telling others of God's love and neglect those who lack even the basics of life, then how are we truly emulating Christ? But if we provide food and clothing, yet do not tell the person of God's love revealed in Jesus Christ, we are ignoring what matters most. We are to proclaim and to feed. We are to teach and to clothe. Both, together, constitute living the mission. As we go from Judea to Samaria and to the ends of the earth, we go with a Bible in one hand and a hammer in the other.

Fishing for people . . . for the kingdom of God

We are so used to hearing Jesus' Great Commission that we can be blinded to what is actually on the page. Jesus doesn't say, "Go and save souls," or "Go and make believers." Jesus knows that soul-saving and believer-making is God's work, not ours. But Jesus does tell his disciples to make more disciples, across the globe – catching ever more.

The word "disciple" has a specific meaning. It doesn't mean those who love Jesus. You can love Jesus and not be a disciple. Rather, a disciple of Jesus or anyone else is someone who is learning to be like the master. More so than "student" or "learner," the word "apprentice" gets us closest to the true meaning of "disciple." Apprentices, in any vocation, are those who are consciously striving, learning, and practicing to be like the master to whom they are apprenticed. This apprenticeship encompasses every part of the apprentice's being: her head, her heart, and her hands.

Discipleship is about doing; learning to do as our Master did. People are surprised when they find out that I recommend against using a red-letter Bible, in which Jesus' words, and nothing else, are in red. It's not that I'm against Jesus' teachings; the problem is that a red-letter Bible makes it seem that what Jesus did was less important than what he said. Yet, we know from our own experiences that what we do often reveals more about who we are than what we say. Even our children know that the ole' "Do as I say, not as I do" doesn't really cut it. Jesus had the wisdom to both say it and do it.

And what did Jesus do? He traveled and he taught and he proclaimed the arrival of the kingdom of God and he invited and he welcomed . . . and he healed. All of this was focused on Jesus' astonishing claim that in him, the long-awaited dawning of God's kingdom had arrived. As Jesus puts it in the opening of Mark's gospel, "The time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the good news" (1:15).

It is pretty easy for us to grasp that Jesus taught about the kingdom of God. Many of Jesus' parables begin with the phrase, "The kingdom of God¹ is like this . . ." The Sermon of the Mount is an extended teaching of what the kingdom of God is like. But what about Jesus' actions? His dining with tax collectors and prostitutes. His healing of the lame and the blind and the sick. Yes, these were acts of compassion, but they were far more: they were enactments of the kingdom of God. Not just mini-dramas to make a point, but the genuine bursting forth of God's kingdom which is meant for all people, for all the families of the earth (Genesis 12:3).

¹Being sensitive to some Jews' refusal even to say the word "God," Matthew uses "kingdom of heaven" rather than "kingdom of God," but they mean the same thing.

When Jesus fed the poor, healed the sick, made the blind see and the rest, he was showing people that God's kingdom had arrived, for in God's kingdom there is no hunger and no sickness and no blindness. Again, these were not merely live-action parables. It was more like Jesus was opening a portal² into the kingdom of God when he cured each sick person.

Lesslie Newbigin

"Who?," you're probably asking yourself. Yet Lesslie Newbigin was arguably the most influential missionary theologian of the late twentieth-century.

After finishing his Oxford studies for ordination, Newbigin and his wife, Helen, set sail for India where they would serve in the mission field for the next 35 years. After his so-called retirement, Bishop Newbigin provided leadership to mission agencies and efforts around the globe, though his most lasting influence has been in Europe and America, which Newbigin came to see as mission fields in themselves. Tim Stafford writes:

"Ministry in England, he discovered, 'is much harder than anything I met in India. There is a cold contempt for the Gospel which is harder to face than opposition. ... England is a pagan society and the development of a truly missionary encounter with this very tough form of paganism is the greatest intellectual and practical task facing the Church' (*Unfinished Agenda*).

From that rude confrontation with pagan England has come an outpouring of books and lectures. Newbigin looked at the West with a missionary's eye and asked a missionary's analytic questions. How can we evangelize this culture, built on Christian foundations yet utterly unwilling to consider (almost unable to understand) the Christian's claim to know the truth that will set us free? It is hard, Newbigin knew, for a Hindu or a Muslim to come to worship Christ. For an Englishman, it would seem, it had become even harder."

Newbigin is always worth reading. Recently, Paul Weston pulled together an anthology of Bishop Newbigin's writings: *Lesslie Newbigin, Missionary Theologian: A reader*, Eerdmann's Publishing, 2006.

The reality of God's kingdom and its arrival 2,000 years ago is what makes Christian mission work different than it appears to some. Whether it is feeding the hungry, providing malaria nets, or proclaiming the Good News, all these are enactments of God's kingdom, portals into a world without hunger, malaria, or ignorance.

A full belly may look like no more than a full belly to some – but there is far more going on. It is a bit like seeing a Bible sitting on a table. For many, the Bible is no more than a marginally interesting collection of ancient writings. But, in truth, the Bible is much more than that. It is the "God-breathed" revelation of God's self. It is the God-given testimony to Jesus Christ, the living Word of God. As the cliché goes, there is more to the Bible than meets the eye. And there is more to each act of compassion.

Each of us begins as a novice, or as Peter puts it, a newborn infant feeding on the pure, spiritual milk, so that we might grow into salvation (1 Peter 2:2). We learn to be trustworthy apprentices, eager for, as Paul puts it this time, "solid food," (1 Cor. 3:2). We strive to be maturing and ever-growing disciples of Jesus Christ.

But of course, God doesn't stop with us there. We are to be disciples with a purpose, modeling Christ with our heart, hands, head, and habits. In this sense, we are all missionaries. It is this outward focus that is so easy for us to forget. It is not just about helping out or doing good for others. It is about proclaiming the Good News in all that we say and do. Freeing the oppressed, healing the sick, feeding the poor . . . this is not just Jesus' work, it is our work too. And every moment spent doing such work is a moment lived in the kingdom of God. Never underestimate the meaning or the effect of service.

²The kingdom of God is not merely a conception of our heads or hearts. It is real; every bit as real as the pavement you and I walk on each day. The best way to think about God's kingdom is as a parallel reality that will one day fully wash over our own. The coming of the kingdom is not about our going somewhere, it is about that somewhere being fully here. One of the things I like about the Harry Potter series is that it opens its readers to the possibility of two parallel realities, the world of wizards and the world of muggles, which somehow coexist in the same "space;" one world fully aware of the other, while one lives in near ignorance.

What is the church's mission?

What exactly is the church's mission in this world? Preaching the word? Making disciples? Feeding the poor? Regrettably, Christians have too often seen these as competing choices. But a better understanding of what Jesus meant by the kingdom of God would go a long way to leading us out of this particular trap. In an interview in *Christianity Today*, Bishop N. T. Wright was asked to talk about the church's mission:

“For generations the church has been polarized between those who see the main task being the saving of souls for heaven and the nurturing of those souls through the valley of this dark world, on the one hand, and on the other hand those who see the task of improving the lot of human beings and the world, rescuing the poor from their misery.

The longer that I've gone on as a New Testament scholar and wrestled with what the early Christians were actually talking about, the more it's been borne in on me that that distinction is one that we modern Westerners bring to the text rather than finding in the text. Because the great emphasis in the New Testament is that the gospel is not how to escape the world; the gospel is that the crucified and risen Jesus is the Lord of the world. And that his death and Resurrection transform the world, and that transformation can happen to you. You, in turn, can be part of the transforming work. That draws together what we traditionally called evangelism, bringing people to the point where they come to know God in Christ for themselves, with working for God's kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. That has always been at the heart of the Lord's Prayer, and how we've managed for years to say the Lord's Prayer without realizing that Jesus really meant it is very curious. Our Western culture since the 18th century has made a virtue of separating out religion from real life, or faith from politics. When I lecture about this, people will pop up and say, 'Surely Jesus said my kingdom is not of this world.' And the answer is no, what Jesus said in John 18 is, 'My kingdom is not *from* this world.' That's *ek tou kosmoutoutou*. It's quite clear in the text that Jesus' kingdom doesn't start with this world. It isn't a worldly kingdom, but it is for this world. It's from somewhere else, but it's for this world.”

The key to mission is always worship. You can only be reflecting the love of God into the world if you are worshiping the true God who creates the world out of overflowing self-giving love. The more you look at that God and celebrate that love, the more you have to be reflecting that overflowing self-giving love into the world.”

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Fishing for people? What does Jesus' metaphor mean to you? What do you think your part is in this? How can we go about making ourselves into better fishermen?
2. What do you mean when you use the phrase “kingdom of God?” What are some other meanings you've heard expressed? How could you make the kingdom of God more real to your own life and faith? You might re-read Bishop Wright's comments in the p. 4 textbox and reflect on them. Because Jesus speaks more about the kingdom of God than anything else, coming to a deeper and richer understanding of what he means is crucial.
3. Why is it so difficult for our “doing” to conform to our “saying?” How could we do a better job of living out our beliefs? What are a few immediate, concrete steps, regardless of how small, you could take this week to be a more Christlike “doer?”

Weekly Prayer List

During the week, jot down the names of people who need your prayers.
Such prayers bind you to them in the presence of God.

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

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| Monday, Genesis 12:1-3 Grasping the importance of the third promise – re the families of the earth – is essential to understanding the rest of the biblical story. | Tuesday, Jeremiah 16:6-21 The rather terrifying passage with the fisherman metaphor. Note the affirming verses at the end of the passage. |
| Wednesday, Matthew 4:18-22 Jesus calls his first disciples. How does Matthew's telling differ from Luke's. | Thursday, Acts 1:1-11 Jesus tells his disciples, "Be my witnesses." |
| Friday, Acts 3 Peter too enacts the kingdom of God by healing a crippled man and then proclaims the Good News. | Saturday, Acts 14:8-18 Paul joins in too!! |

