

“The Quintessential World Christian”¹ 1 Corinthians 9:19-23

Introduction

- Years ago the following parable appeared in *The Presbyterian Journal*. Maybe you’ve heard it before?
- “On a dangerous seacoast where shipwrecks often occur, there was once a crude little lifesaving station. The building was just a hut, and there was only one boat, but the few devoted members kept a constant watch over the sea. And with no thought for themselves or their safety, they went out day and night, tirelessly searching for the lost. Many lives were saved by this wonderful little lifesaving station, so it became famous.
- Some of those who were saved, and various others in the surrounding area, wanted to become associated with the station and give of their time, money, and effort for the support of its work. New boats were bought, and new crews were trained, and the little lifesaving station grew.
- Some of the members of the lifesaving station were unhappy that the building was so crude and poorly equipped. They felt a more comfortable place should be provided as the first refuge of those saved from the sea. So they replaced the emergency cots and beds and put better furniture in the enlarged building.
- Now the lifesaving station became a popular gathering place for its members. And they decorated it beautifully and furnished it exquisitely because they used it as sort of a club. Fewer members were now interested in going to sea on lifesaving missions, so they hired lifeboat crews to do that work. The lifesaving motif still prevailed in the club’s decorations, and there was a liturgical lifeboat in the room where club initiations were held.
- About this time, a large ship was wrecked off the coast, and the hired crews brought in loads of cold, wet, half-drowned people. They were dirty and sick, and the beautiful new club was considerably messed up. So the property committee immediately had a shower house built outside the club where the victims of shipwrecks could be cleaned up before coming inside.
- At the next meeting, there was a split in the club membership. Most of the members wanted to stop the lifesaving activity altogether because it was unpleasant and a hindrance to the normal social life of the club. Some members insisted upon lifesaving as their primary purpose. They pointed out that they were still called a lifesaving station. But they were finally voted down and told that if they wanted to save the lives of various kinds of people who were shipwrecked in those waters, they could begin their own lifesaving station down the coast, which they did.
- As the years went by, the new station experienced the same changes that occurred in the old. It evolved into a club, and yet another lifesaving station was founded. And history continued to repeat itself. And if you visit that coast today, you’ll find a number of exclusive

¹ Taken from Carson’s *The Cross and Christian Ministry*, p. 117.

clubs along the shore. Shipwrecks are still frequent in those waters, and most of the people drown."²

- As **Carl Henry** said, "The gospel is only good news if it gets there in time."
- I think if we're honest with ourselves and with each other so much of what we make the Christian life, individually or even together as the body of Christ, is the antithesis of this lifesaving station described in the parable. And yet...

Proposition

- **Lost people matter**
- Working to save the lost isn't optional for the follower of Christ. Sometimes we approach the Christian life like buying a car. You buy the car and then there's this choice of all these options. You know what? Habitually gathering with other Christians to worship? Not an option. A prayer-driven life? Not an option. Living by faith? Not an option. Dependence upon the Word and Spirit to lead a holy life? Not an option. Tirelessly working to save the lost? Not an option. Those are the standard features.
- Saving the lost is the obvious storyline of the bible. The bible is the story of a God who saves. You take this idea of mission, of going and sharing and saving out of the bible and there's nothing left. Saving the lost is what it means to be a Christian. It's who we're called to be. We are saved for mission. Mission doesn't exist because there's a church. The church exists because of a mission—to save the lost. In the words of one old saint, "Any church that is not seriously involved in helping fulfill the Great Commission has forfeited its biblical right to exist."³
- When I read the words of 1 Corinthians 9:19-23 the thing that jumps out at me is Paul's passion for the lost. *Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. 20 To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. 21 To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. 22 To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. 23 I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings.* He not only believes the gospel is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes. He believes lost people matter. Five times in five verses he uses the word "win." The goal is to save, verse 22.

Transition

As **Bob Pierce**, founder of World Vision, prayed, "Let my heart be broken with the things that break God's heart." May our hearts today be broken for those who are lost. This morning we are going to look at...

Organizational Sentence

- **Two behaviors essential to effectively reaching lost people**

² From *Presbyterian Journal*, quoted by John MacArthur,
<http://www.gty.org/resources.php?section=transcripts&aid=231367>

³ Oswald Smith

Transition

These things are true of individuals as well as churches—doesn't matter. The **first** behavior is described in verses 19-22. **Contextualizing the gospel message**. Individuals and churches that are the most effective at reaching lost people work to contextualize the gospel message without compromising the integrity of the message. What do I mean by that?

Main Points

- Do you know the name **Hudson Taylor**? Hudson Taylor was probably the most influential and effective missionary in the 19th century. Historian **Ruth Tucker** said of Taylor's legacy, "No other missionary in the nineteen centuries since the Apostle Paul has had a wider vision and has carried out a more systematized plan of evangelizing a broad geographical area than Hudson Taylor."⁴ For 51 years Taylor served in China. He founded the China Inland Mission. He brought over 800 missionaries to China who themselves started 125 schools directly resulting in 18,000 conversions.
- But what makes Taylor unique was that he started to wear his hair long and braided like Chinese men when it was frowned upon by other missionaries. He put on the clothes of the Chinese. He ate their food and he was derided for it. The reason I think Taylor was so effective was because he did the hard work of contextualization. He learned to separate the essentials, the non-negotiables of the gospel from the cultural trappings that were barriers to the proclamation and reception of the gospel message.⁵
- It's what Paul models in verses 19-22 when he says *To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. 21 To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. 22 To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some.*
- The thing that doesn't change as Paul moves from group to group to group is his message; there is only one gospel. Christ crucified is *the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes*, Romans 1:16. Nor does Paul's presentation of this message change. Wherever Paul goes he preaches. What does change from place to place is his **behavior**; how he *lives*... among those he wishes to evangelize.⁶ In other words, Paul shares the condition of the people he ministers to.⁷ He flexes his lifestyle in order to evangelize different groups of people.⁸ He identifies with them. Listen to how **Eugene Peterson** translates this. He writes, *I didn't take on their way of life. I kept my bearings in Christ—but I entered their world and tried to experience things from their point of view.* That's contextualization. And it is absolutely essential to effectively reaching the lost.
- As an aside, it's important to notice there are limits to this principle. Can you imagine Paul saying, "To the proud I became proud. To the compassionless I became as one without compassion. To the liars I became a liar in order that I might win some." No. Obviously not.

⁴ Ruth Tucker, *From Jerusalem to Irian Jaya: A Biographical History of Christian Missions*, 1983, p.73.

⁵ Carson, p. 122.

⁶ Fee, p. 432.

⁷ Garland, p. 436.

⁸ Carson, p. 117.

He says in verse 21 he's *under Christ's law*; he's constrained as to how far he can go by the law of Christ. Or as Peterson puts it, *I kept my bearings in Christ*.

- This work of contextualizing the message is the same thing Christ did among us. What does Hebrews 2:17 say? *He was made like us in every way*. Jesus so thoroughly contextualized the message that He became the message. Contextualization to the extreme. Let me put it like this. The effectiveness of your witness for Christ will be dependent on your willingness to be made like, to identify with those you're trying to reach. Let me say that again. This is the most important thing I'll say all morning. The effectiveness of your witness for Christ will be dependent on your willingness to be made like, to identify with those you're trying to reach.
- There is a great need for every follower of Christ to sensitively, discerningly strip away those behaviors which serve as hindrances to the gospel message and at the same time sensitively, discerningly adopt the practices and lifestyle of those you're trying to reach. This is the hard work of the missionary that each of us is called to. This is what it means to be a world Christian and it's just not optional behavior, not if lost people matter.
- This job of contextualization is what you are called to do at your work. It's what you are called to do among your family members. This is the task before us as a church. How about this. Instead of just meeting for budgetary reasons, why don't we as a congregation meet sometime to think through and pray through this task of contextualizing the gospel right here in our own backyard? If we're serious about being a lifesaving station like the parable described; if lost people really matter, this would be a good exercise. Would you be open to that?

Transition

Let's turn our attention to verse 23. *I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings*. The **second behavior** essential to effectively reaching lost people is acting in such a way to **maximize the progress of the gospel**. Let me see if I can explain.

- You would expect Paul, by the time we get to verse 23, to say something like "I do all this, I become these different things to these different groups because I love Jesus" or something like that; but he doesn't say that, does he? He says *I do all this for the sake of the gospel*. Just think about that for a second. *I do all this for the sake of the gospel*. That's profound. Not all this for Christ. Not all this for God. But *all this for the sake of the gospel*. In other words, all things "for the sake of the progress of the gospel."⁹
- Think this idea of maximizing the progress of the gospel in terms of church structure. Who does what and how things get done. You've got a pastor and elders and people serving, etc. Does our church structure, the way quote unquote "do church" maximize the progress of the gospel or hinder it? If not, don't you think we should change the way we do church *for the sake of the progress of the gospel*? Think for a minute in terms of family life. Does the way you live life in your family maximize the progress of the gospel? Might your family habits and traditions and patterns hinder the progress of the gospel? It's possible. Do a family audit. Sit down as a family and talk about these things.
- When it comes down to it reaching lost people is really a matter of priorities. And the question for us this morning is how much of a priority are lost people, really?

⁹ Fee, p. 432.

Conclusion

- Do you know the story of David Brainerd? David Brainerd was a missionary to the Indians in various places but most notably at Crossweeksung, New Jersey. His story is tragic. He father died when he was nine. His mother died when he was fourteen. His brother Nehemiah died at age 32. His brother Israel died at 23. His sister Jerusha died at 34. Throughout his life he constantly battled depression. And he was often sick. In fact, he probably contracted tuberculosis sometime during his time at Yale and once was sent home coughing up blood. He came to Christ at age 21; felt called to the ministry but was barred from pastoring a church because he was expelled from Yale.
- But in God's amazing providence, he was examined for his fitness for missionary work and despite his frequent illnesses was appointed as a missionary to the Indians in 1742, most of the time severely ill. An entire Indian village came to Christ through his work. Five years later he died—his life cut short at the age of 29.
- What amazes me and others about Brainerd's life was how much he accomplished in so little time, with very few resources, mostly because he deeply cared for lost people. His journal records prayer after prayer of his desire to grow in his love for others. September 18, 1742. "Felt some compassion for souls, and mourned I had no more. I feel much more kindness, meekness, gentleness and love towards all mankind, than ever (p. 181)." December 26, 1742. "Felt much sweetness and tenderness in prayer, especially my whole soul seemed to love my worst enemies, and was enabled to pray for those that are strangers and enemies to God with a great degree of softness and pathetic fervor (p. 193)." Tuesday, July 2, 1745. "Felt my heart drawn out after God in prayer, almost all the forenoon; especially while riding. And in the evening, could not help crying to God for those poor Indians; and after I went to bed my heart continued to go out to God for them, till I dropped asleep. Oh, 'Blessed be God that I may pray (p. 302)!'"