

Weekly Devotional



August 15-19, 2011

Prayers

Monday: Pray for our military, for their safety, and for their families. Pray especially for the families that have lost loved ones.

Tuesday: Pray for those you know who have cancer or are sick.

Wednesday: Pray for the mission work occurring in India.

Thursday: Pray for those who are witnessing in Muslim countries.

Friday: Pray for those who work with the International Justice Mission as they seek to rescue people trapped in some form of slavery or prostitution.



Monday

Matthew 9:35-38, Colossians 4:2-6



The first part of Matthew's gospel is given over to Jesus' teaching and healing. Now a page is turned as He begins to train His disciples, sending them off into ministry. Discipleship training involves first having someone watch you do something, then you watching as they do it, and finally sending them off to do it themselves. Jesus has been training His disciples; now He sends them off and watches. After His resurrection He will send them off to train others.

The turning point comes in verse 36. Jesus sees the crowd and has compassion on them. Evangelism begins with compassion. But real compassion leads to involvement. Involvement includes not only telling others about Jesus but also meeting the needs of others physically, emotionally, and psychologically. If we do not personally know those with whom we try to share, they probably will not be interested in hearing what we have to say. If we show them we care, they often will respond by listening to what we have to say. A preacher (John Dickson) I heard recently said that we constantly need to be exercising the muscles of moral conviction and compassion equally. Unfortunately we all too often focus on one or the other. Jesus exercised these muscles in perfect balance. He loved sinners, while freeing them up from their sin. The Pharisees, on the other hand, often only exercised the moral conviction muscle. Because the church today is often known for only exercising the moral conviction muscle, people turn a deaf ear to our Good News.

But being involved relationally with others is still only part of the story. In verse 38 Jesus commands the disciples to pray. Dickson pointed out that even more than telling us to go out and tell others about Jesus, the New Testament calls us to pray for the spread of the Gospel. We all know that we are to pray for our non-Christian friends, but as Dickson pointed out, if you were to rewind the video tape on the last week of your life, how much time did you spend praying for the advancement of the Gospel?

Tuesday

Matthew 10:1-10



When I heard John Dickson's sermon on evangelism, I found it humorous that as a new Christian, his church recognized his giftedness and sent him off to evangelism training. He said that after three months of memorizing Scripture, learning theology, and practicing his testimony, he was set loose onto the streets of Sydney (his home town). John discovered that he actually did a better job of evangelizing before his training when he would talk naturally about Jesus the same way he talked about his favorite soccer team. After his training he was self-conscious. He was fearful that he would say something wrong or that he would go blank on the Scriptures he had committed to memory, and he felt he needed to give a whole Gospel presentation at each opportunity. All too often that story is true of us. As new Christians we share naturally, but the longer we are Christians the more formal our presentations become. No wonder we stop sharing with others.

In today's passage we see Jesus sending the disciples out to do the very things He has been doing. Notice that He does not just send them off with a message; He sends them off to show compassion, to do miracles, to bring freedom to people. Notice also the message they are to bring: "The kingdom of heaven is near." The miracles display the reality of this message. If our lives do not display the reality of changed lives, why would anyone pay attention to our message? And our message is not so much to accept Jesus so that we can go to heaven someday; it is that Jesus rules and we can be a part of His Kingdom now.

Finally, notice that when Jesus sends His disciples off, He sets up a dependent relationship on those with whom they are to share (verses 9-10). I believe this is key. All too often Christians display a "better than thou" relationship towards non-Christians, setting up walls that hinder communication. The walls often come down when I share my needs, when I allow another to serve me.



Wednesday

Matthew 10:11-42

Why do we not evangelize more? Personally, I do not like the trouble that often comes with sharing my faith. In fact, often when I encounter resistance, I take a step backwards and ask, “What did I do wrong?” It is especially hard to speak out in front of family. And if the priorities of the family get in the way of being available to God, all too often the family wins out.

In Dale Bruner’s commentary on this passage in Matthew, he writes, “Trouble, suffering, problems, ‘static’—these are to discipleship what water is to fish, discipleship’s environment. Trouble is the habitat of Christian work. Trust, decision, commitment, standing up for Christ in front of other people, abandonment of one’s own life to Christ’s cause—these are the inward realities of discipleship. Trust is the habit of Christian work.”

Throughout the New Testament we see that discipleship all too often involves persecution. The persecution comes when we dare to challenge the status quo. Jesus challenged the religious leaders of His day. These leaders were so interested in trying to get people to keep the law that the law became an end in itself. God did not give the Ten Commandments until after He had freed the Hebrew slaves from Egypt. The commandments were meant to teach people how to enjoy the life of freedom that would be theirs in the Promised Land, ensuring that they were never again enslaved. But instead of the law being a tutor, it had become a yoke. Jesus challenged this, and the Pharisees pushed back.

Because of Paul’s evangelistic efforts, Christians stopped worshipping idols of gold. The economic impact landed him in prison. Our evangelistic efforts will also challenge the status quo. Saying “no” to an activity because of our commitment to attend church will not be popular. Keeping “work” in the right perspective might mean we do not get a longed-for promotion. Refusing to “cheat” in little ways might cost us dearly with co-workers or friends. They will view these actions as being judgmental of them (although in reality this will cause them to see themselves in a mirror and not like what they see).

As a result of the evangelistic efforts of the early church, Christians were thrown to the lions, but they went to their deaths singing because they saw even this as opportunities to witness. After all, they were more concerned about the next life than this life. What keeps you from being bold in sharing your faith?

Thursday

Luke 10:1-24; Revelation 2:1-7

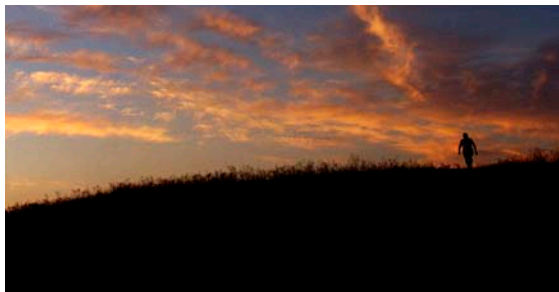
Earlier we read about Jesus sending out the Twelve. Now He sends out seventy-two others to go to the towns ahead of Him. He sent them out in twos. When it comes to evangelism, we are not called to go it alone. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 3:5-9, one person plants a seed, another waters, a third might harvest. As Jesus sent out the Seventy-Two, He told them that He was sending them out as “lambs among wolves.” They were bound to face opposition; but when they did, they were to respond with gentleness and love. Having said that, Jesus told them that they were also not to waste their efforts in places where the doors were firmly shut. Our job is to share; we are not responsible for the decisions others might make.

When the seventy-two disciples returned, they were amazed at the power available to them through prayer. Jesus’ response is one of praise but also a caution. We should never get too caught up in our successes, but always remember where our own lives are grounded—we have received forgiveness ourselves in Jesus.

It is easy to get so caught up in the “work” of the Gospel, especially when it is going well, that we forget to nurture our own relationship with Jesus. It is also so easy to get caught up in stories of miracles and answered prayers that we lose sight of good foundational teachings. Remaining humble and thankful that we personally have received Jesus’ love and forgiveness is always the foundation for evangelism. We are called to share our story, our current relationship with our Lord—what He is doing in our lives now, not just in the past.

Over the years I have heard my fair share of visiting speakers. All too often they have well-rehearsed “canned” talks that they have given so often they no longer need notes. The problem is that these talks—although they sound good and are often motivational—are no longer about what God is currently doing. My question for these speakers is always, “I am glad God worked in your past. What is He doing currently?”

Do you currently have something to share with another about what Jesus is doing in your life? Or is your “testimony” about something that occurred a year or more ago?



Friday

Acts 17



When Paul entered a city, he often went first to the synagogue. There he attempted to reason or teach from the Scriptures that the Messiah had come in the person of Jesus. Such exposition of the Scriptures often led to a dialogue where Paul ended up defending his beliefs. This type of evangelism is called apologetics. As believers we need not only to be ready to present Scripture to people, but we also need to be ready to answer the questions and the objections that non-believers might have.

As we have seen over the course of this series, we need to meet people “where they are at” when sharing our faith with them. We need to live radically different lives ourselves. We need to be living boldly in Christ. We need to build relationships, pray, and expect miracles. We need to proclaim God’s rule (His Kingdom) as opposed to place our trust in the kingdoms and the powers of this world. And we need to proclaim the cross, which requires a decision to receive Jesus not just for His grace, but for His mercy and His forgiveness. We need to commit to making a U-turn from following the ways of the world’s systems to following the revealed way of God. Teaching Scripture and defending the faith both require preparation on our part.

Years ago I set upon a routine of reading through the Scriptures completely once every two years. I would read a chapter of the Old Testament, a chapter of the New Testament and a Psalm or Proverb five days a week. I found that such personal familiarity with God’s Word enabled the Spirit to bring Scripture to mind as I needed it. But beyond reading Scripture, we need to read good Christian books. Not just the ones that make us feel good, but also the ones that strengthen our understanding. I often find myself reading two or three books at the same time—a book that encourages me, some sort of novel or non-fiction book, and a heavier theological book. A book published by InterVarsity Press is always a good start. C.S. Lewis, Tim Keller, Lee Strobel, William Lane Craig, and Abraham Heschel are authors of some books you might check into reading. This year why not make a commitment to turn off the TV a little more often and spend a half hour reading.



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