

YOUR REACH

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I want to have a discussion this morning to refresh our minds of what our mission is, and perhaps dust out some cobwebs in our concepts of the Great Commission.

2 Corinthians 4:3–4

And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, in whose case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.

As we go into the world, we are going to be unable to persuade people by our eloquence, by how good we look, or how well we present our point. They are blind.

If we invite people into church, it will be useless to have them sit here with us as we worship because it is foreign to them. They will not enjoy it, nor will they participate. It will not sway them to believing in God. Only the Father can draw someone to Himself and open their hearts at the right time. Plunging them into the congregational worship or a fantastic sermon will only turn them off unless the Spirit leads them here.

2 Corinthians 4:6

We have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves;

Will's example of car that was beautiful on the outside but did not run because the engine was broken, was helpful.

- We are running on the inside, but our outside isn't attractive.
- By that, we don't mean physically but our entire being: how we talk, act, we are everyday people. We look like everyone else.

Why does God use you?

Because He has chosen to work through people, He can actually be seen through our actions.

Why are we here?

We are a gathering of worshippers, to relate, learn, and express our worship together.

Our purpose here is heavenly; it is not understood by non-believers (II Corinthians 4:3–4). They don't understand; they cannot see.

Church is primarily for us. We are a repository of God's gifts and His knowledge. We can help each other grow, navigate through difficult situations, pray for each other, and basically be the kind of community God wants us to be.

This doesn't mean that a non-believer cannot come here; in fact, they are more than welcome. However, our purpose in meeting together is not primarily evangelistic in nature.

This is not the mission field. In fact, we have that sign on the door, don't we? "You are now entering the mission field."

Let's pretend we are missionaries from a far country. We have arrived in the small nation of San Rafael, CA, to bring the message of hope and salvation. There are no churches here nor has there been any impact of the Gospel.

How would we begin this work?

Answers should include:

- Find out what the culture is like? How do we do that?
 - See where they congregate. Go where they are.
 - Look for the centers of commerce and leisure.
 - What traditions do they have?
 - What do they like or not like?
 - What is taboo, and what is acceptable?
- Learn the language and customs.
- Make friends.
- Pray continually. How? That we could have openings and make inroads.

When Jesus came into the world, why was He effective?

He taught as one having authority and not as the Scribes.

- He sat down at a well.
- He went to dinner even with people who opposed Him.
- He showed that He cared for people genuinely.
- The reason He quoted Scriptures was because they were familiar with the Scriptures.
- He wasn't religious or condescending. When He quoted Scriptures, it really applied to the situation. It wasn't just a made-up rule or tradition that was oppressive.

Paul said, *"I am not ashamed of the Gospel, for it is the power of God to salvation"* (Romans 1:16).

What is the Gospel?

What do we mean when we say preach the Gospel?

- Reconciliation
- Life
- Forgiveness
- Acceptance
- Justification by faith
- Friendship
- Coming of the kingdom
- Comfort to broken hearted
- Jesus
- To the Jew, the Gospel was the resolution of Israel's journey. Isaiah 61:1—*Good news to the afflicted: Freedom, healing*

We want people to make a “decision” for Christ. Making a decision is like getting a marriage license. If all we want is the license, then we have not completed the process. We want people to have a marriage.

Now, take the same scenario of coming to San Rafael, CA, to be missionaries. Only this time, they know who we are, and they don't like us. Some predecessors have come through and so turned them off that they want to have nothing to do with us. Yet, God has called us here.

How do we break through?

- Go where they are
- Make friends
- Learn what they like and don't like
- Learn why they didn't like your predecessors

Although more difficult, it is not impossible. However, before we can ever preach the Gospel to them, we have to earn their trust. We have a Christian sub-culture that has been fostered here for many years and many people have been turned off completely.

We've done a pretty good job of alienating the people we should be loving.

Christians have done a lot of stupid things over the years. Now, with the ability to communicate quickly on every level—internet, email, media, and so on—the foolish things we have done get magnified. That's all some people know about Christianity.

We, as well, have done some very unloving things. In our desire for purity, we have often rejected those outside the church as unholy, in order to keep ourselves “spotless.” The world doesn’t understand why we don’t love them the way we are supposed to.

We champion causes, like pro-life or heterosexual marriage, but people see us sinning in other areas, such as adultery or financial misconduct. To them, we are hypocrites. To the outsider, the church is an institution full of rules. Sound familiar?

Do you think trust is important in witnessing?

I thoroughly believe that it is the Father that draws people to Christ through the Spirit, so that they can hear and see the truth. He lifts the veil from their eyes in that moment so that they can begin to be free. However, the treasure is in earthen vessels; the work has been entrusted to you and me.

If they hate us or think we are fools, the opportunity may not arise to free them. If we merely walk up and begin preaching to someone, they will likely turn us off immediately. However, if we spend time with them, befriend them, do what they do (without disobeying the Spirit), and learn their culture, more than likely they will open up to us. This takes time, commitment, and dedication.

Getting people to come to church should not be our goal. Eventually, someone who is drawn to God will be guided into a church gathering somewhere. But we need to invite people into our lives, and hopefully, they will invite us into theirs.

Surprisingly, people want to be part of a larger, caring community like a church. But they don’t want to be just handed a tract, or told by a casual acquaintance that they need to come. They really want to be part of something real, vibrant, creative, and loving.

An Attitude of Humility

Let’s not forget where we came from. We have come from terrible backgrounds. At one time, we too thought there was no hope; we too thought there was no Savior. From arrogance to debauchery and everything in between, we were lost. Who became our friend? Who led us? Will we be like that?

Isaiah 51:1

Listen to me, you who pursue righteousness, who seek the LORD: Look to the rock from which you were hewn and to the quarry from which you were dug.

I Corinthians 6:9–11

Don’t you realize that this is not the way to live? Unjust people who don’t care about God will not

be joining in his kingdom. Those who use and abuse each other, use and abuse sex, use and abuse the earth and everything in it, don't qualify as citizens in God's kingdom. A number of you know from experience what I'm talking about, for not so long ago you were on that list. Since then, you've been cleaned up and given a fresh start by Jesus, our Master, our Messiah, and by our God present in us, the Spirit.

What does remembering who we were do for us?

- Helps us to be grateful
- Gives us a humble perspective
- Aids us in helping people
- Reminds us of how great a struggle it may be for someone to become a believer

Were we loveable when we came to Jesus? Probably not.

Jude wrote: *"Be merciful to those who doubt"* (Jude 22).

That reminds me of the story of Jesus healing the son of a man who pled, *"I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief"* (Mark 9:24).

The Pharisees were not merciful. They were only interested in people keeping the rules—like they did. Remember the story of the publican and the Pharisee? The Pharisee thought he was A-OK. He had no concept that he was a sinner or needed grace. Hence, he could not be merciful.

Are We Interested in Them?

People want to know if we are truly interested in them. If we just want a convert, we won't have their interest at heart. As we witness to people, will we take the time to make sure we understand where people are coming from?

1 Peter 3:15

"But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect."

Another translation:

"Be ready to speak up and tell anyone who asks why you're living the way you are and always with the utmost courtesy."

What did Peter mean?

We often think this is just studying the Scriptures so that we can rebut any other belief system. Or we want to recite Scriptures that show why Jesus is the only way.

For example, do we tell a Mormon that he or she is misguided and the Bible is only true without understanding what they believe or what is in the Book of Mormon? Or, for those following another religion, do we just tell them that the stories and beliefs they study are wrong or Satanic and that only the Bible is true?

Let's say we begin to have a friendship with someone who is a Buddhist. Will it help us to find out all we can about their religion so that we can help guide them? Or do we simply treat them as dumb and misguided?

Can we answer questions intelligently like: Do all paths lead to the same God?

When we tell someone that Zoroastrianism or Hinduism is wrong, do we even know what it is or why it is erroneous? I once heard a lecture series by Floyd McClung on the background and beliefs of Hinduism that was illuminating for me.

Remember that I said "Jesus quoted the Scriptures because they were familiar with the Scriptures?" If we quote Scripture to prove what we believe is true, we may well be speaking to people who have no frame of reference to relate to what we are saying.

We're afraid. We think that by studying about another religion or belief system and preparing our minds that we will get sucked away into the abyss of sin. Really? Are we that insecure in our faith?

How about letting them tell us what they believe in and why they believe what they believe?

We assault people's intelligence when we give pat, canned answers that have no depth. It's no wonder that people think Christians are shallow. We aren't dedicated or interested enough to find out in depth what it is they actually believe so that we can have an intelligent conversation with them.

If we begin to befriend people and find out where they are coming from, we may need to be able intelligently to answer difficult questions. And we need to do it with humility and a merciful attitude.

In summary, I would like us to remember these points:

- We have a treasure inside of us, the One true God, who uses people to spread His message

- That the local church is a gathering of believers primarily for believers to learn, grow, worship, and give
- In order to reach people, we have to be one of them—not aloof and separate.
- The Gospel is life; it is hope; it is the fulfillment of all God's promises in Jesus
- Don't forget who we were or from where we came
- Be humble enough in our attitudes to be aware and alert of why other people believe the way they do. Do not simply dismiss them.

Jesus told us to go into the world and preach the Gospel. The Gospel is hope, not a set of guidelines. The Gospel is for everyone, not just the select ones that we think are eligible. Let's remember this as we go out to bring life to the dying, healing to the sick, and hope to the hopeless.