

This Is Jesus: To the Ends of the Earth

Keeping It Simple

April 22, 2018

Worship Songs: Whom Shall I Fear / Beautiful Things

Worship – We Are / T&G

Drama: “First Visit”

Well, I guess that’s my cue ... good morning everyone!

One of Jesus’ very first followers, a guy by the name of Matthew (or “Levi” whenever they called him by his Jewish name) ... Matthew tells us that Jesus once said to His followers:

“You are the light of the world. Therefore, let your light shine!

“Then, those around you will be drawn to God and experience His goodness just as you

have experienced it. And they, along with you, will bring glory to God.”

I think if you were trying to define the fundamental mission of God’s people in the world in a single statement that would have to be it. “Be the light. Share with others what you know and have experienced of God so that *they, too*, can know and experience God.”

That was the basic assignment God first gave to Abraham then to his son Isaac and then to his son Jacob – the great forefathers of the Jewish faith.

“I am going to bless you tremendously,” He said to each of them. “Your people may be small in number right now but, one day, your descendants will be more numerous than the stars in the sky or the grains of sand on the beach. And through your descendants, all nations on earth will be blessed.”ⁱ

In other words, “I am blessing you and your tribe

but *it's not just about you and your tribe*. I am blessing *all of you* so that *all of you* can be a *blessing* – a light – to everyone else.”

This was the calling of the nation of Israel. This was its fundamental mission and its reason for existence. The people of Israel were to represent God to a world who didn't know God in such a winsome way that all nations of the earth would turn to Him and know Him and worship Him and follow Him.

And yet, the history of Israel reveals that the people did not fulfill that commission.

Even worse, as we have seen again and again in this mega-series, by the time Jesus of Nazareth arrived on the scene, the prevailing mindset among the Jewish religious leaders was that the people “out there” were, at best, heathens who ought to be shunned or, at worst, enemies of God who deserved to be destroyed.

And when the Messiah came, they believed, that's exactly what he would do. He would wipe away all of Israel's enemies and restore the glory days of King David from centuries before and place Israel at the center of human history.

Of course, as we have *also* seen again and again in this mega-series, Jesus didn't do that.

Instead, He insisted that, when God's Kingdom is truly present:

- Instead of hating your enemies, you love them and pray for them.
- Instead of retaliating against those who hurt you, you turn the other cheek and forgive.
- Instead of shunning those who are distant from God, you throw open the doors and invite them in.
- And instead of lording authority over

everyone (like those pagans did), being at the top meant serving the least – those at the bottom.

In short, Jesus was calling Israel back to its roots; it's foundational identity. “*Be the light* so that *they* can have what *you* have – the knowledge of God, the experience of God, the blessing of God, the love of God.”

However, as we have *also* seen again and again in this mega-series, by-and-large they didn't accept His message.

Instead, the religious leadership colluded with the Roman government and arranged for Jesus to be crucified. They believed that would put an end not just to Him but to the movement that He had started; a movement that thoroughly threatened the status quo of their economic, political and religious institutions.

But, rather than dispersing like the followers of all

the other would-be messiahs of that time who met the same fate as Jesus, His followers did not run away and hide.

Instead they started proclaiming right there in Jerusalem (right where Jesus had been killed) ...

That *He* – and not Caesar – was now the true king of the world ...

... which, as we have seen was a really dumb thing for anyone to do because it would ensure that you would meet the same fate He did. They would crucify you, too!

But proclaim it they did.

And not because they had a death-wish but because they had *seen* Jesus alive – raised from the dead. And they had spent six weeks with Him; eating with Him, hanging out with Him and learning more from him about God's Kingdom.

And then one day, Jesus calls them all

together and says:

“You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

Acts 1:3-8 (NIV)

In other words, Jesus was saying, “Not only am I expecting you all to step up and fulfill the original mission, I am empowering you through the Holy Spirit to do so.

“So, wait here in Jerusalem until He comes, and then go. Teach everyone all the things I have taught you about God and how to live. And when they believe in Me (and they will!), baptize them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.”

And then Jesus disappears from their sight.

And they do what He says. They wait. In Jerusalem.

And, one day, as about 120 of them are together worshipping and praying, the Holy Spirit comes just as Jesus promised.

And this crazy thing happens: suddenly they find themselves out on the streets of Jerusalem where thousands of Jewish pilgrims from all over the world have gathered to celebrate the Feast of Pentecost. And they begin proclaiming that Jesus is King ... which, again, is crazy ... but that's not the really crazy thing.

The really crazy thing is that they're *doing it in the languages of those people* – languages they themselves have never learned!

And, as a result, that day thousands of men and women become believers in Jesus and join the movement which we call “the church.”

In addition, when some of those pilgrims go back to their towns and villages, they begin to talk

about Jesus to their Jewish friends and neighbors. And they believe in Him, too. And they join the community that's committed to living in the upside-down way of the Kingdom.

An Unexpected Development

But something happens that no one seems to have expected, though Jesus told them it would.

A whole lot of people who are *not* Jewish – a whole lot of people with very different racial, ethnic, cultural and political backgrounds – want in. They want to know about Jesus and “the Way”, too!

And this is very hard for those who are dyed-in-the-wool devout Jewish men and women who are following Jesus.

“Is God really inviting non-Jewish men and women to be a part of us?” They wonder. “It’s one thing to say that the good news of the Kingdom is for everyone. But it’s quite another to say that we

are supposed to accept them and even fellowship with them as equals before God!”

And given the mindset that had existed for centuries – that non-Jews were, at best, heathens who ought to be shunned or, at worst, enemies of God who deserved to be destroyed – you can understand why there was some hesitation.

And, so, as we saw in last week’s message (which is available via the NHCC app, podcast and website if you missed it), God miraculously arranges for the key leader of the church in Jerusalem at the time, the Apostle Peter, to cross a long-standing cultural boundary and enter into the home of one of those non-Jewish people who wants to know about Jesus – a Gentile, a Roman centurion by the name of Cornelius.

And, as we saw, this causes a lot of consternation when people find out because good Jewish men and women aren’t supposed to do that kind of thing. But Peter does.

And as he is explaining (in Greek to the Greek-speaking Cornelius and his family and friends because Peter, like most Jews of that time, was multi-lingual) ... as Peter explains who Jesus is and what He has done – actually, before he even finishes – Cornelius and his family and friends begin talking about Jesus and praising God *in Peter’s native language* ... which they did not know!

So Peter baptizes them and stays in Cornelius’ home for several more days teaching them about Jesus.

And as he recounts the story to that Jewish-Christian church in Jerusalem of what happened

...

He says, “so I concluded ...

“If God gave them the same gift he gave us who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could stand in God’s way?” Acts

11:17 (NIV)

And apparently, they felt the same way for the very next verse – Acts 11:18 – says “they had no further objections and praised God” for it was apparent that God really was including Gentiles.

And that was a huge deal. As I said last week, as Christianity spread, this incident would turn out to be on the order of the Civil Rights Movement in our country and the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa.

In fact, as Luke talks about the mixed Jewish and Gentile church that springs up in the city of Antioch just a few verses later in Acts 11, he also includes what seems to be just an odd little footnote.

He writes:

It was in Antioch that the disciples were first called Christians. Acts 11:26b (NET)

Why is that even worth mentioning?

I think there's a hint when Luke later lists the leadership team of that particular community.

Check this out. The leaders include ...

Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius the Cyrenian, Manaen (a close friend of Herod the tetrarch from childhood) and Saul. Acts 13:1 (NET)

- Saul is also known as Paul. He was from Tarsus, in Asia Minor.
- Barnabas we know was from Cyprus.
- Manaen was from Herod's household in the heart of Palestine.
- Simeon (whose nickname "Niger" literally meant "black") was from the region of Sub-

Saharan Africa.

- And Lucius was from Cyrene which is modern-day Libya.

Of the five leaders mentioned ...

- One is from the Middle East
- One is from Asia
- One from the Mediterranean
- And two are from Africa.ⁱⁱ

Point being that believers were first called Christians in Antioch because, with the wide racial and ethnic diversity that existed in that particular church, *there was no other uniting factor other than what they had in Christ.*

To be a Christian, therefore, meant that *your identity as a follower of Jesus and your citizenship in the Kingdom of God trumped all other identities.*

That turned the first-century Roman world

upside-down. People had never seen anything like it. It was that big.

And would to God that we who are Christians today would have the same frame of mind! That we would truly believe that, in Christ, there is ...

- No Democrat or Republican
- No upper class or lower class
- No “redneck” or “hipster”
- No black or white or Hispanic
- No Baby Boomer or Millennial
- No American or Mexican or Russian

Would to God that for those of us who are Christians, while all of those identities *do still exist in us*, our ultimate loyalty would be to King Jesus and His Kingdom and His people. That truly is the way to peace on earth.

Another Challenge

Anyway ... at this point in the story, it sounds like things are heading towards a happy ending:

- Jesus tells his first followers – that native Jewish core of believers who chose to believe Him and follow him – to go to the ends of the earth and be his witnesses to *all* people ... even the Gentiles.
- And they do.
- Case closed.

But not so fast because there is still another big challenge that lies ahead. Remember, this idea of inclusion is rocking not just the Roman world but *their* Jewish world.

And in Acts chapter 15, Luke tells us what happened as a result.

Certain people came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the believers: “Unless you are

circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.” Acts 15:1 (NIV)

Now, who are these “certain people?”

Sincere, well-meaning Jewish Christians – specifically, Pharisees who have come to believe in Jesus as Messiah who are thinking quite logically about the matter.

They’re thinking “since God really is inviting non-Jewish men and women to be a part of us, they need to become part of *us* – the people through whom the Messiah came, the people who have been chosen by God to bless the world. These people need to become *Jewish first* in order to become *Christians* ... and to become Jewish means, for men at least, *being circumcised.*”

Now, when you are a newborn male, this probably isn’t the most pleasant of experiences. But you don’t remember it, so it’s not a big deal.

But if you're a non-Jewish *adult male* ...and now you're being told that, in order to become part of the upside-down community that follows the Way of Jesus, not only do you need to be *baptized* (which is, in itself, a little strange) ... but you also need to ... well, you know.

THAT is a huge barrier.

Now, this morning when you came in, I'm sure you noticed there were a few obstacles set up in the commons area. That's because I wanted you to experience a minor irritation or two in getting in to the auditorium this morning. (We debated fencing off the coffee bar, too, but figured that would be a bridge too far).

But I wanted you to experience just a few small barriers so that you could imagine *what a huge barrier* this requirement would've been to Gentiles who had come to believe in and follow Jesus and the Way of His Kingdom.

I mean, this is going to be a deal breaker ...

... which is why, in the very next sentence, Luke tells us that ...

This [demand] brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them. Acts 15:2 (NIV)

... because Paul and Barnabas, who understand that the true calling of Israel has always been to be a light to the Gentiles so that “God’s salvation may reach to the ends of the earth”ⁱⁱⁱ also understood that salvation isn’t based on what we do but on *what* Jesus did. And this demand communicates exactly the opposite!

So, to resolve the debate, the church in Antioch appoints Paul and Barnabas along with some other believers to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question.

And when they arrive, the apostles and elders call

everyone together and Paul and Barnabas report on the amazing turn of events. And everyone is happy and excited to hear what God is doing among the Gentiles.

Buuuuut ...

Some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, “The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to keep the Law of Moses.”

Acts 15:5 (NIV)

And again, they weren't *trying* to be overly difficult.

For them, circumcision and the Law of Moses are signs of the Covenant God made with the Jewish People. And Jesus, as the Messiah, was the fulfillment of all of that, so what's the big deal? The Gentiles just need to get over it and join up!^{iv}

At that point, Luke writes that ...

Peter got up and addressed them [these Jesus-following Pharisees]: “Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe.”

Acts 15:7 (NIV)

And he’s talking about what happened years before with Cornelius and his family and friends.

Peter continues ...

“God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. He did not discriminate between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. Acts 15:8-9 (NIV)

In other words, “they didn’t have to do anything to be saved other than to believe.”

And then he puts the hammer down:

“Now then, why do you [guys] try to test God by putting on the necks of Gentiles a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors have been able to bear?”

“No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.” Acts 15:10-11 (NIV)

In other words, “we ourselves no longer believe that keeping the Law of Moses has anything to do with our standing before God. Instead, we know that we – and they – are saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. That’s the deal. That’s how it works.”

“So why should we require anything else of them – like circumcision and keeping all of our cultural laws? That is an affront to God Himself” (which is what Peter meant by “testing God.”)

I love what happens next.

Luke tells us that ...

The whole assembly became silent ...

It was one of those moments when you realize, “God has just spoken to us and we’d better take this seriously.”

The whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them.

Acts 15:12 (NIV)

When they finished, the leader of the church at that time, James (the brother of Jesus) stood up and said:

- “We’ve been reminded again of Peter’s experience ...
- “And we’ve heard Paul and Barnabas’ experience ...

- “And we know from our own Scriptures that God’s plan has always been for the whole world to seek Him and know Him.”

And then James gives voice to what I believe is the single greatest strategic decision ever made by a group of Christian leaders.

He says ...

“It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God.”

Acts 15:19 (NIV)

In other words, “we should not put any artificial barriers in front of people who are hearing about King Jesus and want to follow Him and become part of His upside-down community.”

In other words, “we should not allow our own cultural practices and preferences – even those that have for centuries defined us as *special to God* – to cloud or obscure the simple message of

salvation by faith in Jesus.”

Instead, James says “let’s keep it simple. Let’s keep it basic.”

“We should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood.”

Acts 15:20 (NIV)

Now, just to be clear, James isn’t spelling out some other requirement for salvation. Instead, he’s highlighting two very important characteristics of people who belong to God’s Kingdom (in the same way Jesus often did).

- First of all, people of the Kingdom attempt to live morally pure lives. James uses the example of “sexual immorality” because that was the most obvious area in his day (and in ours).
- As for “not eating meat from strangled

animals and from blood, food polluted by idols” ... those things were really offensive to Jewish people. And what James is saying here is saying “don’t make it hard on your fellow Jewish Christians. Be sensitive and gracious toward them” (Paul later has to remind Gentiles of this in several of his letters).

And so they do exactly what James suggests: they write a letter that includes their decision and these instructions *and also an apology* for those “certain people” who had come without permission and told them to be circumcised.

And when Paul gets back to Antioch and reads it to all of the Gentile Christians in that church, everyone rejoices – but especially the men. 😊

Getting Practical

Now, because you and I are so far removed from this time and because most of us are not of Jewish

lineage and all that familiar with the cultural markers of being Jewish, we don't realize just how radical this decision was.

For James and all those Jewish Christians – especially Pharisees who were known for being “zealous for the Law” (all 613 rules!) – for them to say ...

- The main thing is faith in Jesus and His death and resurrection.
- The main thing is changing our mind about who really is King and about whose Way is best.
- *Therefore, centuries of our practice and culture and tradition as The Chosen People of God are not the main thing.*

And for them to say ...

- If our ways are presenting a barrier to the

Gentiles ...

- If they are keeping us from being a light to the nations ...
- We will let them recede to the background. We will honor them ourselves but not require them of anyone else.

For them to say and do that was incredibly brave, incredibly humbling and incredibly strategic. It's no exaggeration to say that it's a big part of why all of us "Gentiles" are here in this room today.

In fact, their attitude and example is actually a critical part of our DNA as a church.

In the years before North Heartland began (I'm talking early 1990s), it was becoming clear to me and those who helped to launch this church that many aspects of Christian culture and tradition had become barriers to people who were not Christians.

- The way we expected people to dress and behave in church.
- The style of music that we thought was appropriate for church.
- The assumption that people who were not church-goers would automatically “get” what we were doing.
- The fresh “churchy language” – right out of the 16th century – that we used.

We saw an extreme example of those things in the skit that took place right before the message.

And so we committed from the very beginning to “erasing artificial barriers” – practices and traditions that have become associated with Christianity that are not the main thing.

In fact, if you’ve attended our *Introduction to NHCC*

class, you know we still talk about that idea and how that impacts what we do and say each week in terms of music and dress and language.

But it also impacts what we do in other ways that may not be as obvious.

- *It's why we don't have "walk the aisle" invitations to declare faith in Jesus. We do baptisms instead (and we have one coming up in two weeks).*
- *It's why we don't make a big deal out of our denominational and interdenominational affiliations. People aren't interested in becoming Baptist or Presbyterian or whatever ... and we're not trying to make Baptists or Methodists. We're trying to make Christians.*

(BTW, you have to go to the Intro Class to find out what flavor we are).

- *It's why we're politically agnostic ... why you will never hear me or any other speaker endorse any politician or specific political position.*

In fact, I'm personally committed to being an "equal opportunity offender" when it comes to politics. My goal is to make *everyone mad* at some point because neither side is completely right in our political wars and it's simply arrogant and naïve believe otherwise.

The only King truly worth swearing allegiance to is King Jesus. The only Kingdom that will last is the one that is upside-down in relation to this world.

- *It's why we're not public crusaders for specific moral convictions.* Instead, we choose to support and serve behind the scenes those organizations (like Parkville Women's Clinic) that work for change in those areas.

Moral convictions are important but they are not the main thing so we don't give them top billing which, as you might expect, makes some people think we're afraid or compromising. But we're not.

We're always evaluating: "what non-essential things are keeping people away from the essential thing?" which, again, is Jesus – who He is, what He has done and what He has taught and modeled for us.

By the way, this is the rationale behind our PALs ministry and the PALs Project which we began last month. The PALs ministry teams up a "special needs" child with a designated adult in our Adventureland Program so that their parents are free to participate in church. It removes a barrier for them.

Last week, we sat down to talk with one of those parents about the impact of that ministry. Check

it out.

Video – Tim Hockett Pals Program

Isn't that awesome? Can we express our appreciation to Tim for telling his story?

And, by the way, if you've been here over the past month or so you know that we had an urgent need to do some modifications to the physical space in Adventureland which would enable us to improve and expand our PALs ministry. So we had a goal to raise \$25K by the first Sunday in May which would enable us to do that.

This morning I am happy to announce that, as of this past Thursday ...

We have already met and exceeded that goal. We have received \$26,345!

That friends, is incredible!

And I now get to do something that no pastor ever

does: I get to tell you to stop giving because we don't need any more money for this project!

Now, obviously please keep giving to the regular offering if that is your custom and practice. And you can do that on the way out this morning. The baskets are at the door today.

But this particular need – which helps us to remove one more artificial barrier – has been met.
THANK YOU!

Conclusion

Now, there is probably a lot more that could and should be said about keeping it simple by removing artificial barriers – those non-essential cultural practices and traditions for which we've become “zealous” over the years because they were so helpful to us.

One of the big questions in front of us right now, as a church – a question which our leaders are

praying about and thinking about is “what artificial barriers are we putting in front of the next generation?” ... millennials and Generation Z – who think very differently about things like technology and even childcare.

More importantly, when we discover those barriers, will those of us who are old-timers both in age and spiritual maturity do for them what our Jewish forefathers did for us?

Will we courageously, humbly and strategically lay down our non-essential traditions so they can encounter THE ONE TRUE ESSENTIAL? Will we accept them as they are just as Jesus has accepted us – unconditionally?

Let’s pray together.

Feature: Unconditionally

CLOSING COMMENTS

1. *Super Saturday Serve* happens this coming Saturday. We still need about 12 volunteers to help with just one of our projects – Restoration House. You can sign up at the table or online at website.
2. A new “You Belong” Single Moms small group is forming...interested gals can come down front to your right to meet the leaders, get more info and sign up. You can leave kids in AL.

Endnotes

ⁱ Genesis 22:17

ⁱⁱ <https://jdgrear.com/blog/why-should-we-pursue-racial-integration-in-our-churches-a-biblical-answer/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Acts 13:47 quoting Isa 49:6

^{iv} For more detail see <https://readingacts.com/2013/03/13/acts-1513-21-james-and-the-jerusalem-council/>