

A Sermon  
Rev. W. Kevin Holder  
Grace Baptist Church  
Bryans Road, Maryland  
May 24, 2015

## **Students of the Kingdom**

Acts 1:1-11

This Thursday evening, all this furniture on the platform will be gone and this space will be occupied by the boys and girls of our church's day care ministry as they hold their annual commencement program. Some of the children will be nervous and fidgety. Some will be shy and reserved. Some will be fearless and flashy. As they recite their pieces of wisdom and sing their songs, some will be barely audible, while others will be shouting at the top of their lungs. All the while, proud, and in a few cases, embarrassed, parents and grandparents, will laugh and smile and capture the moment with their phones and tablets.

It's that time of the year. Time for "Pomp and Circumstance." Time for accepting your diploma with your left hand and shaking the presenter's hand with your right. Time for moving your tassel from right to left. Time for hugs and congratulations from family members. Time for posing in your cap and gown.

Imagine the class picture in this morning's Scripture passage from Acts. It's a small group of graduates who have completed Jesus' 40 day intensive course on the kingdom of God. Seated, on the front row, from left to right: Peter, John, James, Andrew, Philip, and Thomas. Standing, on the second row: Bartholomew, Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. Each one of them is proudly holding a framed copy of their certificate, signed by the risen Lord himself. Unfortunately, Jesus isn't available to be in the class picture. As Luke tells it, the risen Christ is sort of in and out, depending on when he wanted to give his disciples further instruction. Plus, you never could be exactly sure how his resurrection body would turn out in photos.

As with all graduations, music was involved. In this case, it was more hymns and less orchestra. Jesus' disciples began their ceremony with "We Praise You with Our Minds, O Lord": "We praise you with our minds, O Lord, Kept sharp to think Your thought; Come, Holy Ghost with grace outpoured, To teach what Christ has taught." And then, before the benediction, they joined voices to sing "More About Jesus": "More about Jesus let me learn, More of his holy will discern; Spirit of God, my teacher be, Showing the things of Christ to me." The whole thing was quite an occasion. In fact, by the time the ceremony concluded, everyone felt like they had participated in a worship service more than a commencement exercise. After it was over, they headed to the upper room, where a graduation cake, in the shape of a Bible, was waiting for them.

In most cases, graduation is a way of getting launched into the larger world of employment and career. It's a time for moving into opportunities to utilize your knowledge and exercise your newly acquired skills. You've spent several years preparing to take this next big step in your life. Now is the time when your educational institution sends you forth, exhorting you to dream big, pursue your passion, and take risks. So get out there and go for it.

But for Jesus' first disciples, that's not exactly the way it worked. Instead of telling his disciples to go change the world—though that would eventually happen—Jesus starts out by telling them to stay put. Their first job isn't to go forth and show the world what they're capable of. Their first job is to wait and pray. For now, they're to park themselves, and

their dreams, in Jerusalem, until God pours out his presence and sets their mission in motion.

Naturally, the disciples are eager to unleash all their training and experience. They're chomping at the bit to see God's promise of a restored Israel start to take shape. During the course of their studies, they've seen how the give and take between teacher and students, especially through questions and answers, is crucial to the learning process. So they have a question of their own: "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" (v. 6). Maybe they think that just asking the question will move things along and hasten the arrival of salvation. But Jesus' answer just reinforces the fact that this whole redemption thing is God's project, not their own. As one translator renders it, Jesus tells his disciples, "You don't get to know the time. Timing is the Father's business. What you'll get is the Holy Spirit."<sup>1</sup>

In this case, the teacher doesn't want to send the students into the world under the illusion that learning, in and of itself, is enough. The disciples have received plenty of instruction on the subject of God's kingdom. They've mastered the content, in their textbooks and online. But their preparation to be witnesses isn't complete without what Luke calls "power from on high" (Luke 24:49). In other words, they still lack the most essential component of their task, the Holy Spirit, the personal presence of God empowering them and guiding them as they carry out their mission at ground level.

It's one thing to be an expert in a particular subject. But it's another thing to apply that expertise in the circumstances and challenges of everyday life. Some of you are probably familiar with an event called the running of the bulls, which draws hundreds of thousands of people each year to the city of Pamplona, Spain. There's a journalist named Bill Hillman who's an expert on the event. He even co-authored a book subtitled, "How to Survive the Bulls of Pamplona." But last July, just knowing about bull running, and being informed enough to write an instruction manual, wasn't enough. A 1,320 pound fighting bull named Brevito gored Hillman in the right thigh and another Spanish man in the chest. Both of them recovered, but the co-author of Hillman's book later told *The New York Times*, "We will probably need to update the book."<sup>2</sup>

Jesus knew that in order for his disciples to be faithful witnesses, they would need to be more than just Bible experts with an advanced degree in kingdom studies. Having been with Jesus during his earthly ministry wasn't enough. Having experienced his resurrection appearances wasn't enough. Having received instruction from the risen Jesus himself for 40 days wasn't enough. Only as Jesus himself would be present in them and among them, through the Holy Spirit, would the disciples really be able to do the work of Jesus.

Though it's easy to overlook Luke's opening remarks, recall that he begins today's text by pointing back to the Gospel he has written, in which he described "all that Jesus began to do and to teach" (v. 1). *Began* to do and to teach. Here is a sign pointing us ahead, telling us that volume two, the Book of Acts, will be about the extension and the expansion of Jesus' work. What Jesus began, his successors will continue. And they will not continue it by their own strength and wit, but by the animating, energizing presence of the one who has already ascended and now shares in the life and reign of God.

When the Holy Spirit eventually descended on those first disciples, and the entire church, these followers of Jesus took to the streets with the good news of God's reign. As they preached and taught and healed, others would often ask why they wore bracelets that read, "WIJD." "Well," they said, "we had originally planned on WWJD. But that makes it sound like Jesus is just some first century Galilean figure who went about doing good and serves

as a good role model for others.” “Our mission,” they said, “is more about what is Jesus doing (WIJD) and how we can be part of it.”

You see, there in the midst of daily life in Jerusalem, the disciples whom Jesus had taught began teaching others. Through Jesus, they had heard about the kingdom, seen the kingdom, and come into the kingdom. Now they themselves were talking up the kingdom, making the kingdom visible, and seeing others come into it. What had previously been the subject at the top of a course syllabus was now becoming a living reality before their very eyes. Sure, they had heard it and seen it during those years with Jesus leading up to his death. But now they were students of Jesus and practitioners of the kingdom at an entirely new level. Now, more than ever, they realized that the kingdom is God in action. It’s God reigning. It’s God’s will, the things God wants, getting done. And the Holy Spirit was the one doing it.

In one sense, Jesus’ first disciples were simply out there recruiting new students for the kingdom, increasing enrollment in the reign of God. I like the way Dallas Willard puts it when he says:

Isn’t this the gospel: that when others not only hear the content of it but also see how we live it and present it, they say, “I want that. I want to be a disciple of Jesus. I want to be one of his students, learning how to live in the kingdom of God now as he lives in the kingdom of God”?<sup>3</sup>

Dallas Willard spent much of his life addressing the problem of why the church isn’t raising up more people who look and act like Jesus. In an interview shortly before his death, he was asked, “When you look at how off track the church is, do you ever just throw up your hands in despair?” Willard smiled and said, “Never.” “But how can you not?” the interviewer asked. “Because,” he said, “I know Christ is the head of his church and he knows what he’s doing.”<sup>4</sup>

Those first disciples also believed that Jesus knew what he was doing. Remember that after the disciples had completed their 40 day intensive course, and Jesus had given them some final instructions, he ascended. So everything they did from there on wasn’t an attempt to impress their teacher. On the contrary, they knew that they already had Jesus’ blessing, and that everything they did, day in and day out, to bring the kingdom to bear on life, revealed the truth of Jesus’ message and testified to the fact that he was reigning.

I know it’s late May, but remember that in the life of the church we have year round school. Jesus’ primary class, The Kingdom of God 101, is always in session. We keep enrollment open. That’s because we’re always learning more about what the kingdom is, how it’s happening, and how to align our lives with it. For us, discipleship isn’t about knowledge alone, without the power of the Holy Spirit. Nor is it about the Holy Spirit alone, without the necessity of knowledge. If we’re going to continue doing the work of Jesus, we need both the light that comes with learning and the enlivenment that comes from the Spirit. That way, we’re equipped and empowered to speak the kingdom and do the kingdom in the places and circumstances where we live.

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<sup>1</sup> Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message: The New Testament in Contemporary English* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1993) 238.

<sup>2</sup> *The West Australian*, “Stragglng Bull Gores Pamplona Survival Guide Author.” PreachingToday.com. Accessed May 21, 2015 <<http://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2014/july/3072814.html>>.

<sup>3</sup> Dallas Willard, *Living in Christ’s Presence: Final Words on Heaven and the Kingdom of God* (Downer’s Grove: IVP, 2014) 20.

<sup>4</sup> Skye Jethani, “Vampire Christianity.” PreachingToday.com. Accessed May 21, 2015 <<http://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2014/november/4111014.html>>.