

A Sermon  
Rev. W. Kevin Holder  
Grace Baptist Church  
Bryans Road, Maryland  
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## **A Preview of God's Kingdom**

Luke 10:1-16

Keep your eyes on what's ahead. That's the way Jesus is conducting his ministry. Based on the chapter prior to today's text, we know that Jesus has "resolutely set out for Jerusalem" (9:51). He's on a path that leads to the cross. No turning back. And anyone who aspires to follow him must also lay down his or her life. At the end of Luke 9, we meet three would-be disciples who make glib promises but fail at actually making Jesus the highest priority in their lives. It turns out that moving ahead without looking back is much harder than they think.

But Jesus keeps going forward. His mission moves ahead. And he won't go about it alone. In today's text, Jesus commissions seventy-two followers. He and the Twelve had already been preaching the kingdom. But now this movement has expanded to the point where many of these disciples-in-training can begin their internship. Eventually, Jesus won't be with them anymore, so now is the opportunity for some training time. Sitting in the classroom learning in person, or taking discipleship courses online, will only take these followers so far. They need some actual experience in the field. They need to be doing what Jesus is doing, healing the sick and announcing the arrival of God's reign.

So Jesus sends them out in teams of two. Each pair is an advance team for the Lord. Their assignment is to prepare the way for Jesus, who is himself the living embodiment of God's kingdom. Like another prominent forerunner, John the Baptist, these disciples aren't the Messiah, but they help people get ready for the coming of the Messiah. What they say and do is a preview of what Jesus will say and do when he arrives in the neighborhood.

This doesn't mean that the disciples' ministry is just a form of practice. True, they'll learn more about how to do things in the way and will of Jesus by repeating his message and actions. But as they do so, they're doing more than just rehearsing. In their mission, the kingdom will be tangibly and audibly present. Jesus will be speaking and acting through them. The reign of God, God's new, redeemed world, will be taking concrete shape in their message and their acts of mercy.

No wonder Jesus tells these disciples to stay focused and keep it simple. They're given a one-sentence sermon: "The kingdom of God is near you" (vv. 9, 11). Or as Eugene Peterson paraphrases it, "The kingdom of God is right on your doorstep!" A message with that kind of weight and urgency requires that the messengers remain single-minded. They need to travel light and not spend a lot of time engaged in social amenities. Their daily food and shelter will come through the hospitality of others, which means they can't be picky about what's for dinner. They need to eat what's put in front of them. They also shouldn't expect to be offered the largest guest room or the softest bed. Enrolling in the mission of Jesus isn't about comfort and convenience. It's a costly enterprise, full of risks, resistance, and rejection. What do you expect when you've signed on with a Savior whose destination is a cross?

This same Lord is still hiring. When it comes to the economy of the kingdom, we're facing a severe labor shortage. There's more work to do than workers to do it. This just underscores how much the world needs the church's mission. There are lost people who need to hear the good news. There are injustices that need to be righted. There are divisions that need to be healed. There are sick people who need to be cared for. There are grieving people who need to be comforted. There are lonely people who need to be visited. There are hungry people who need to be fed. There are exploited people who need to be rescued. There are rejected people who need to be embraced. There are migrant people who need to be resettled. "The harvest is plentiful" (v. 2).

The Lord of the harvest has plenty of job openings, and is eager to distribute the tasks. One pastor tells about a woman who came to him after the worship service. "I've had a hellish week," she said. "My son started drinking again. The boss is in town, and I think he's got it in for me. So I came to church this morning seeking consolation and comfort." "I hope my sermon was helpful," said the pastor. "Not particularly," she replied. "I came here looking for comfort only to receive an assignment."<sup>1</sup>

I always pray that God will use my sermons to speak to you and to give you a variety of things that you need during the course of your life. Comfort, encouragement, healing, conviction, correction, disruption, transformation, direction, help, and hope. And yes, when and where God sees fit, an assignment. The Lord of the harvest never stops recruiting. He's always seeking and sending disciples, handing out tasks and distributing duties that comprise the church's mission in the world.

At the conclusion of today's service, we're going to have a brief business meeting to vote on our Nominating Committee's recommendations about who will be serving in the various parts of our congregation's ministry during 2021-2022. Through the Nominating Committee, our Lord Jesus has been summoning his followers and handing out assignments. Over time, the context and conditions of our church's mission change and evolve. Many individuals continue to serve where they have for years. A few individuals take on a different role or set of responsibilities. Some individuals step down from where they've worked. But year after year, the focus and content of our mission remains the same, namely, the arrival of God's kingdom through Jesus Christ, coupled with the call to repentance and faith.

When you voice your vote at the end of our service, you're doing more than just putting your stamp of approval on an organizational list of names. You're actually affirming the call and work of Christ in the lives of others who join you as part of this community of disciples. The names on the roster of officers and committees aren't just a way of making sure that the machinery of the church keeps running and the bills get paid. We aren't just trying to plug people into particular programs or match their gifts with particular projects. Those things certainly matter, but what matters most is that these names are part of the Lord's way of staffing up his kingdom mission. If our prayer is, "Lord, hire more workers to help accomplish this project called the reign of God," then our Nominating Committee process is part of how Jesus makes sure that people get signed up and sent out.

I stress the sent out part because it's easy to see the roster as just a way of maintaining our in-house operations. In other words, making sure that we have a church than functions properly as an organization, sustaining our internal fellowship. But the fact is, internal fellowship is inseparable from external mission. Remember that our congregation follows a risen Lord who doesn't stay put and doesn't keep silent. He's constantly going, and constantly sending his followers into places where he has promised to show up. We don't secure Jesus as a resource for our mission. He enlists us for his mission.

Missionary Lesslie Newbiggin has written, "Mission is not a burden laid upon the church; it is a gift and a promise to the church that is faithful. The command arises from the gift. Jesus reigns and all authority has been given to him in earth and heaven. When we understand that, we shall not need to be told to let it be known. Rather, we shall not be able to keep silent." Because Jesus Christ is Lord, we have something to say and something to do. Even now, we're participants in the reign of Christ. In our life together, which includes our committees, offices, and various assignments, we experience a foretaste of what it will be like to rule with Christ in the life of the world to come.

At the same time, we exhibit to the world what the reign of Christ, the kingdom of God, looks like. You may recall that in the spring of 2015, six Baltimore police officers were charged in the death of Freddie Gray, a 25-year-old man who died after suffering a severe spinal injury while in police custody. At the time, Russell Moore, who was president of our denomination's Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, wrote about the need for investigation and justice. But at the same time, he stressed the significance of the church in addressing these kinds of social issues. Moore said, "I would argue that the primary need Baltimore has is for the church." He went on to stress how the church is to show a different path:

... not because the church is made up of people more intelligent and more morally put-together than other organizations. It is instead because the church is the place where Jesus now reigns (Eph. 1:22-23). The church is the outpost of the future, the colony of the kingdom, in the midst of this fallen, violent, devil-haunted universe ... Baltimore is hurting. Let's pray for the wisdom of the governor, the mayor, the Justice Department, the police. But let's pray also for Baltimore to see a preview of the future—of peace and righteousness and unity—in the only place we can see it in the now: the church.<sup>2</sup>

Notice how Moore stresses the need for the church not just to say, "The kingdom of God is near," but to live in it and under it, and to embody the reign of Christ, as an anticipation of what our Lord has promised at his coming.

When Jesus sent out the seventy-two followers, he didn't want them to be under any illusions about resistance to the kingdom and rejection of its messengers. The message of God's reign, and its implications for how we should live, would not always be received with a warm welcome. This is true in our post-Christian culture, where indifference to or hostility toward the good news of Jesus has increased. In that kind of context, we followers of Christ have to work even harder at defining who we are and what we're all about.

According to Bruce Ashford, who has done a lot of research and teaching on this subject, congregations tend to fall into one of four mindsets. Some congregations view the church as a bomb shelter, whose job is to protect itself from the assaults of the larger culture and preserve the purity of the life of God's people. Some congregations view the church as an ultimate fighter, wielding the weapons of spiritual warfare in order to combat cultural forces that reflect and propagate unbelief. Some congregations view the church as a chameleon, thinking of the culture as an ally rather than a threat, and trying to incorporate aspects of the culture into the life of the church, especially those aspects that reflect, truth, goodness, and beauty.

Ashford points out that each of these views of the church has its strengths and its weaknesses. But according to him, the fourth option, and the best mindset for the church, is to understand itself as a preview of God's coming kingdom. As he puts it,

In the midst of unbelief and even persecution, we determine to live our lives as seamless tapestries of word and deed. We proclaim Christ and the gospel with our lips (word), and we promote Christ and the gospel with our lives (deed).

In so doing, the church's corporate life previews a future era when we will live together with Christ on the new heavens and earth, when we will flourish in our relationship to God, to each other, and to the rest of creation.<sup>3</sup>

Whether we are the church gathered on Sunday morning for worship, or the church scattered into our neighborhoods, homes, workplaces, schools, and communities, we're sent to announce the kingdom and demonstrate its arrival, in anticipation of its full coming when Christ returns. For now, he's commissioned us as an advance glimpse of God's ultimate purpose, the redemption of the world.

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<sup>1</sup> Will Willimon, *Preachers Dare: Speaking for God* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2020). Kindle edition.

<sup>2</sup> Russell Moore blog, "What Baltimore Needs." RussellMoore.com (April 27, 2015).

<sup>3</sup> Bruce Ashford, "4 Mindsets for Facing a Post-Christian Culture." Lifeway Research website. January 11, 2016. <https://lifewayresearch.com/2016/01/11/4-mindsets-for-facing-a-post-christian-culture/> (September 23, 2021).