

## **FISHERS OF MEN // Begin with Prayer**

In the book *The Missional Entrepreneur*, Mark Russell references a study of two different missionary teams that went to Thailand with completely different strategies to reach the lost in that region. The first team went with the intention to simply serve the people there and to be a “blessing.” The second team went with the strategy of converting and getting people to make a decision for Christ.

One team came to convert, the other came to bless. This study followed both teams for about two years and here what they found:

1. They discovered that the “blessers” had a far greater social impact than the “converters.” It resulted in the transformation of communities and good for entire communities of people.
2. They discovered the team whose strategy was to “bless” had 50 times as many people begin to follow Jesus as opposed to the team that went to “convert” people. The ones who sought to be blessing, were far more successful in not only impacting communities, but bringing people back to God than those who were just trying to convert people.

This has been God’s strategy from the very beginning. God chose and blessed Israel—that every nation on earth might see what it looked to be a nation ruled by God and be drawn to Him through Israel being a blessing to the world.

That is still God’s strategy to reach the world. That in the person of Jesus, and through His church, we would be a blessing to the world around us. Even when we’re reviled, mocked, ridiculed, that just like Jesus did, we would never stop being a blessing to people around us. That we would continue to serve, to love, to care for, and carry the burdens of those who are far from God for those who don’t yet know Him.

So last week we talked about the four men who did whatever it took to get the paralytic all the way to Jesus, and they didn’t let anything stop them. They saw a man in need, carried burdens, and overcame obstacles, pushing past the crowds, digging through a roof made of mud and manure to bring this man into God’s presence.

As followers of Jesus, God calls us to be blessing to the world around us, and so, just like these four men, we’re going to carry burdens, and we’re going to overcome obstacles to bring lost, broken, hurting people to Jesus.

And maybe you hear that and go, "Okay great. Yes, I'm in. But where do I start?"

We're going to start right where Jesus started.

## BEGIN WITH PRAYER

Before we get into some of the specifics here, I want to give you an overview of where we're going for the next five weeks. Dave Ferguson has created some great missional resources that we've taken and adapted around this, and we're going to implement five missional practices that Jesus models for us.

Conveniently, these 5 practices spell out the acronym:

### B.L.E.S.S.

**B** - Begin with Prayer

**L** - Listen without Judgement

**E** - Eat Some Meals

**S** - Serve Others

**S** - Share Our Story

Now, some of you see that and think, *"Got it. I'm going to do every one of those steps this afternoon, check it off my list and I'm good. I did it."* That's not how relationships work. And if that's our approach, we definitely won't be a blessing to anyone.

Or maybe you think, *"There's no way I can do all that. I'm too busy, I have for too much on my plate to even think about doing this."* One of the clearest indicators that we're following Jesus is that we care about the things He cares about. Jesus cares deeply enough about lost people that He laid down His life for them. What would we not be willing to reprioritize for those who don't yet know Him?

Or you look at this and think, *"This is elementary. This is far too simple. There's no way this will be effective."* What I want us all to see through the next five to six weeks is that Jesus lived out each of these missional practices. I would argue that Jesus' approach to reaching the lost was anything but elementary or ineffective.

Lastly, this isn't a step-by-step formula that guarantees that everyone that you do this with will come to Christ, but it is a track for us to run on. And if you've ever felt like you're not an evangelist or that you've never shared your faith with someone, what we talk through over the next month is going to be so practical and helpful for you. And I

believe that by the time we're through this series, not only are you going to have more confidence about sharing your faith, but I think you're going to be excited about it.

If you're exploring faith or skeptical of Christianity, especially of the Church or of Christians, let's just say right off the bat, Jesus is amazing. And we're all ordinary people trying to follow Jesus together and sometimes we get this stuff wrong.

So, if you've ever been on the receiving end of a negative, judgy conversation with a Christian that left you feeling like the person didn't hear you at all or didn't understand your perspective, and maybe felt pressured to make a decision when you weren't even close to ready, that's just not the way of Jesus.

Let's start where Jesus started.

### BEGIN WITH PRAYER

**Luke 6:12-16**, "In these days he went out to the mountain to pray, and all night he continued in prayer to God. And when day came, he called his disciples and chose from them twelve, whom he named apostles: Simon, whom he named Peter, and Andrew his brother, and James and John, and Philip, and Bartholomew, and Matthew, and Thomas, and James the son of Alphaeus, and Simon who was called the Zealot, and Judas the son of James, and Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor."

Before Jesus chose the 12 disciples, He spent an entire night in prayer. Jesus had a large number of disciples, and from those, He picked 12 who were to be close to Him.

To follow Jesus, become like Jesus, and live as Jesus lived... we want to do the what Jesus did... and so we're going to...

### Pray About "Who"

Ask God who He wants you to invest in that doesn't know Jesus. You might be connected to 30 people that don't know Christ. Ask God to highlight a few of them that live around you, that you interact with on a regular basis, that you can begin to pray for. Pray for God to tell you who to pray for.

**Romans 8:26**, "...the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought..." (ESV)

So, ask for the Holy Spirit to help you, to highlight for you who He wants you to be praying for that doesn't know Him yet. This might be a neighbor, a coworker, a family member, a friend, or an acquaintance, but let God put a "spotlight" on that person and begin to pray.

Jesus only does what He sees the Father doing, and so, He prays for the Father to reveal the people He'd chosen for Him.

And then we see in Jesus' High Priestly prayer in John 17, Jesus says... **John 17:6** "**I have manifested Your Name to the people whom You gave Me out of the world. Yours they were, and You gave them to Me...**

It's almost as if Jesus looked at these 12 guys and then looks to heaven going... *"Really? This is what I've got to work with?"*

You might not be all that thrilled about the person God highlights for you. Maybe they're the ones that drive you crazy at work. Maybe they smack when they chew their food, or they smell weird, or they have a radically different worldview than you and you think, *"there's no way God could reach this person."* Maybe, it's the person who hates God or has been burned by the church. Or maybe, you already have a good relationship with the person and God is asking you to be a bit more aware of what He wants to do in their life.

Point is: You might like the person, you might despise the person, but the Father chose the 12 and Jesus obeyed. We're going to follow His lead and that's why we're going to start by asking about *"God, who is it in my life, that doesn't yet know you that you want me to begin to pray for?"*

And once you know who, here's what we're going to pray for...

### **1. Pray for Open Eyes**

**2 Corinthians 4:4**, "...the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God." (ESV)

This is why we can't just use human strategies or tactics to reach lost people. This is a spiritual battle, and what this passage tells us is that the Devil has blinded the minds of lost people so that they might not see the beauty of the gospel.

This is why we can't just reason or argue people into the kingdom. We have to pray that God would take the blinders off, that they would begin to perceive God's love for them through the love of Christ.

Jesus tells Paul,

**Acts 26:17-18**, "...I am sending you to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in Me." (ESV)

I thank God for my grandma who prayed for me every day when I was lost. I am convinced that I know Jesus today because I had a praying grandmother. Some of you are in the kingdom of God today, not because someone twisted your arm, or pressured you, or judged you, but because out of love for you, they simply prayed for God to open your eyes, and He did. Never underestimate the power of a praying grandmother. This is why we sing, "I once was blind but now I see!" And so, we're going to pray for open eyes.

## 2. Pray for Open Doors

Paul and Barnabas return to Antioch after spreading the gospel across the ancient near east.

**Acts 14:27**, "And when they arrived and gathered the church together, they declared all that God had done with them, and how He had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles." (ESV)

Now, some doors are wide open. Last year, after a service, a man came up to me and said "Hey, I don't believe in Jesus, and I have a lot of questions." That is a wide-open door. That's happened once in my 20 years of following Jesus. We went out for coffee, and I got to learn about his life as we talked through some of His questions. At the end of the conversation, I simply asked him what's keeping you from giving your life to Jesus right now? He looked at me and said, "Nothing." And we prayed, he gave his life to Christ, and we continued meeting long after. Now, he's connected to other followers of Jesus in the church.

Now, many doors take time, and an enormous amount of grace, patience, wisdom, love, self-sacrifice, and a whole lot of prayer. I came into the Kingdom of God because people prayed for me, loved me, and deeply invested in my life before I ever said yes to Jesus.

If we start by trying to “convert” people rather than simply serving, loving, being a “blessing,” being watchful, attentive, prayerful, and ready for God to open a door, it’s like trying to force a relationship to happen when the other person isn’t interested. The only thing you’re going to do is create more distance in the relationship, and it’s just going to make things worse. And just like you can’t force a relationship to happen, we can’t pressure people who are far from God into the kingdom of God.

Maybe, you hear all this, and you don’t know a single lost person. Here’s what I’d invite you to do: think about simple things that you enjoy doing and find places in the community where that’s already happening. Maybe a class, a club, something that you’re interested in, interested in learning more about, and sign up. Go to it. Get involved, and inevitably, you’re going to meet someone that doesn’t know Jesus.

Like we said last week, we’ve got to stop “going” to church and start “being” the church. We’ve got to get outside the walls of the building. So, we’ve got to pray for open eyes, and open doors, and have the courage to be ready to walk through them in a kind, gracious, and gentle way when they do open.

### 3. Pray for Open Hearts

In Luke 8, Jesus tells a parable and compares the message of the kingdom –the good news of the gospel–to a seed being planted in a person’s heart. The heart is compared to soil. Some soil is like a hard path. Some soil is rocky, some soil is filled with thorns, and nothing can grow there, but there is a heart whose soil is ready for a seed to be planted. And it grows and yields a hundredfold.

When Paul visited the city of Philippi...

**Acts 16:13-15**, “...we sat down and spoke to the women who had come together. One who heard us was a woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple goods, who was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul. And after she was baptized, and her household as well...” (ESV)

Paul did his part. He saw an open door, walked through it, and planted the seed. But God is the one who opened her heart to receive salvation and be baptized that day. And her openness led to her household receiving salvation, being baptized, and begin following Jesus.

A friend prayed for Robyn for 10 years while they were relationally investing in her life, and eventually, Robyn opened the door for the gospel and gave her life to Jesus. Then, Robyn prayed for sister, Selena, for eight to 10 years. Robyn prayed for her husband Carey for three years before they both surrendered their lives to Christ.

Can you imagine how many lives could be eternally changed and how many lives those people will change? You have no idea the eternal impact God can make through your life—how far it will reach, how impactful it will be.

You have a role to play, Church. We can love the lost, we can serve, we can be a blessing, we can carry burdens, and overcome obstacles, remove barriers, and we must do that work, but ultimately, God is the only one that can change the human heart.

Jesus said in **John 6:44**, "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him." Paul writes in **1 Corinthians 3:6**, "I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow."

Ask God to open their heart to the message. While you can't make someone believe, you can plant a seed. Someone else might water it, but God is the one who makes it grow. That's why we have to start with prayer.