

3. First Things

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[0 : 00] For a number of years, I taught mission.

At a college in Sydney. And regularly, students came to me to get my advice for their future. They had an interesting mission, but there was so much they couldn't work out.

Like, well, where should I go? It's such a big world with so many needs. Where should I go? And what should I do? Should I go there as a Bible translator?

As a church planter? A doctor? A nurse? There's so many things I could do. What should I do? And who should I go with? Should I go with OMF?

Or SIM? Or Pioneers? Or Operation Mobilization? There's so many. How do I make these decisions? I said, relax. Because all these are, in my view, what I call second-order issues.

[1 : 29] Because you can't get them wrong, really. It wouldn't be wrong to go to Cambodia, not Vietnam. It wouldn't be wrong to be a church planter, not a translator.

It wouldn't be wrong to go to OMF, not SIM. They're not moral issues. They're issues of wisdom. Well, in this session, I want to look with you at what I call the first-order issues.

The key issues, when you think about world mission, from this sermon given by Jesus on mission to the disciples. And it begins, as we're told, with our Lord telling them, it's harvest time.

Harvest time. Now, if you know about harvesting, you don't need workers so much to plant a seed. But when the seed is grown and the fruit in the tree, then you need workers.

In my country, every year, tourists come from overseas. They spend six, twelve months. They go to vineyards and farms and work at harvest time. If the trees are full of fruit, you want all hands on deck, all the laborers, because it's now harvest time.

[2 : 45] So Jesus is saying, the kingdom is now dawned, the new age. It's time to bring in the harvest. So let's have lots of workers. But then he warns them, doesn't he?

He says out, he says, I send you out as sheep, like lambs among wolves. In other words, I send you out into a hostile world.

There's a lamb, innocent, defenseless. There's a sheep, savage and powerful. It's savagery up against weakness. That's the world I send you into, a hostile world.

I love the story of a man called Vitalis. He lived in the fifth century.

He was a monk. He lived in a mountain retreat. He gave his days to prayer and Bible reading. One day he read those words that Jesus spoke to the woman caught in adultery.

[3 : 42] He said, neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more. He lived in Gaza. He felt the Lord speak to him and say, go to Alexandria and work there amongst the prostitutes and the petty criminals.

So he left his mountain retreat and went to Alexandria. Alexandria. What he would do, when he first drew up a list of all the city's prostitutes, he would do this.

He'd work for a day as a labourer, get a day's wage, go to a brothel, buy, as it were, a prostitute, give her a meal, give her his day's wage on the condition she kept herself from sin for that day.

And he prayed for her. He prayed this prayer. Bless my toil during the day, O Lord, that by night I might save one of your little ones from evil.

Bless this girl for whom Christ died, that she might turn from sin and find true life in you. Help her to be what you made her for.

[5 : 03] In Jesus' name, I plead a blessing on her. And he made a promise not to tell anyone.

Because if the word got out, he was setting prostitutes free, the pimps would try to stop him.

But the word got out about this monk who spent his night in brothels. And one day he walked onto a work site and a man cried out, Wretched old man, return to your monastery and stop disgracing the name of God.

If you can't control your desires, then take a wife, you are a living blasphemy. But he kept on his ministry. One night in the middle of winter, he went to a brothel.

He found a girl. He gave her money. He prayed for her. As he left in the morning, a young man saw him. He cried out, How long will you disgrace Christ, you filthy old rogue, and hit him hard in the head?

[6 : 21] He began to bleed profusely and stumbled off into the early morning mist. The woman came out and said, What have you done, you pig?

He said, I've taught a filthy old sinner a long overdue lesson. And she said, She began to cry.

He's not like that at all. He spent the whole night in prayer, begging me to give up my ways, and I shall.

I'm leaving. And the man was cut to the heart and began to search for Vitalis. He called people out, Look out for him. Find him. Find him. And they found him.

Moving down. Hands clasped in prayer. Frozen in death. Before he died, With his finger in the ground, he wrote, 1 Corinthians 4.4 Don't judge prematurely before the Lord comes, for he will bring to light those things hidden in darkness and reveal the inner workings of the heart.

[7 : 38] At his funeral were a vast crowd of women, some wives, some nuns, but all had this in common.

We were once prostitutes, and no one in this city did a thing to help us. Vitalis rescued us, each of us, from a life of misery.

I send you out as a lamb in the midst of wolves. I think it's a wonderful story, but not remarkable.

Many servants have their testimony, and you may too. The world our Lord sends us into is a savage, hostile world, and wolves bite and devour.

When he sends them out, the disciples, it's striking, we're not told what happened on the mission. We're told what he said before they went out, and then what he said when they came back.

[8 : 53] He gives them, I think, strange commands. Don't take sandals, don't take a bag, don't say hello to people. In other words, this is a short-term mission, just a few days.

Preach, preach peace, preach salvation, then move on. You'll get a mixed response. Some will receive you and be hospitable.

Your peace remains on them. Some will reject you. Here's what you do. Go outside and shake the dust off your feet.

Back then, if a Jew was in a Gentile country, which was unclean, and returned home to Israel, he or she would symbolically wipe the dust off their feet.

Wipe off the feet, the dust of the unclean. If they reject you, you're saying to them, these Jewish people, they are the unclean.

[9 : 54] Now that seems a little bit harsh, doesn't it? You go to a house, give them one chance to hear the gospel, they don't respond. You call them unclean, you curse them.

Paul didn't do that. Paul stayed for three years. Why? Why one chance at the gospel? Because of who they were.

These weren't rank pagans. These are Jewish people who had heard for centuries every week in the synagogue, Messiah's coming, he'll heal the sick, raise the dead, give sight to the blind, cast out demons, and there's our Lord and the disciples doing these things.

It's clear to them this man's the Messiah. Clear to them. If they reject him in the face of all this evidence, woe to you, Chorazin, woe to you, Bethsaida.

You knew I was coming, you knew what I would do, you are without excuse. A bit like you and me. We know the Lord is coming.

[11 : 09] You've heard many sermons on the Lord's great second coming. You know that. He'll come like a thief in the night. You've heard, you've had so many sermons on this topic. If you're not prepared for the second coming, you have, I have no excuse.

It'll be better on that day for Osama bin Laden than for you. It'll be better on that day for the atheist Richard Dawkins than for you if on that day you're not prepared.

You have the scriptures, you've heard the sermons, you know that, therefore, no excuse. That's why the Lord says these dark words. So he warns them of what they might face.

But here's the key thing. Here's what doesn't change. He who listens to you listens to me. He who rejects you rejects me.

But he who rejects me rejects him who sent me. That's stunning. How people respond to you and your words is their response to Jesus.

[12 : 25] Is their response to God. You are God's ambassador. like Saul under Damascus Road.

There's Saul imprisoning Christians taking their property beating them maybe killing them. He sees Jesus who says what?

Saul, Saul why do you persecute me? I'm not you Lord. Yes I persecute Jacob and Rebecca and Rachel and Ananias but I don't even know you.

When you touch them Saul you touch me. When you reject their gospel you reject me. When you receive them you receive me.

And you receive God. That's the great privilege of being a preacher teacher, evangelist, proclaimer. So they go out on their mission.

[13 : 34] We now fast forward a few days and clearly it's been a great success. They are over the moon. We've seen demons submit in your name.

Like you plan a church outreach night. You plan well maybe we'll get 50 people and 300 turn up and 200 come to Christ. Wow! What a fantastic night!

And it is. But you can lose perspective of what's really important. So our Lord reminds them of us of what's really important.

They seem surprised that Satan and the demons submit to them in Jesus' name. Are Lord not surprised? I had a vision.

I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. I think he means by that I've seen a vision of the final downfall of Satan.

[14 : 42] Satan. And every time someone becomes a Christian and is set free from Satan's chains it's like a picture a portent of his final overthrow.

I give you power over snakes and scorpions. Now he's just spoken about Satan the great serpent.

I've seen the downfall of the great serpent. Here the snakes aren't little snakes they're Satan's hosts. The little snakes the servants are saying I give you power over the hosts of darkness.

That's wonderful but here's the key thing don't rejoice they submit in your name. Don't rejoice KEC Church keeps growing.

Don't rejoice in the great preaching. Don't rejoice rejoice in this says Jesus that your names are written in heaven.

[15 : 50] I preached recently on the book of life and I thought I've never heard a sermon on the book of life.

But it's a key Bible theme. There are books in heaven. One is the book of life. It's not a story book. It's like a directory a list of names of all the elect all whom God has destined for eternal life.

Those who live with him forever. It's through the whole Bible. In Exodus when the people worship a golden calf Moses prays for them ask God to spare them and forgive them if not he says please blot me out from the book you've written.

Moses spoke of the book of life. Daniel spoke of God protecting his people everyone who's found written in the book.

Our Lord says here don't rejoice in the success of your mission rejoice you're in the book. in the book of Revelation there's a picture there at the end of the final judgment.

[17 : 20] It's a courtroom thousands of books are there with all the evidence that condemn people all their thoughts their words their deeds.

Then John sees another book anyone whose name wasn't found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire.

I want to say four things about the book of life. God wrote this book we're told in Revelation 13 from the foundation of the world.

Father to ask you when did you know God? You might say well Mike I came to know God in my 40s or in my teenage years or I've always known God but here's the more basic question when did God know you?

when you became a Christian? When you were born? No.

[18 : 42] He knew you from before the foundation of the world before God said let there be light he said write down in my book the name Mike Rater write down in my book the name Brian King and Raymond and Sue write down in my name in my book these names I know him I love him I belong to him he belongs to me and one day later I bring him rebirth new birth and I guard him by faith until the last day that's the first thing he wrote that book he knew you by name and loved you by name before the foundation of the world number two in Israel told the lamb's book of life all those who love and follow the lamb who gave his life for them do you love

Jesus you know he died for you do you follow him your name is in the book thirdly God warns he may blot out the names of those whose lives don't match their confession in the letter to the church in Sardis Jesus tells them they have a reputation for being alive but the church is dead but not all there are some who are faithful those who have not saw their clothes them are never blot out their name from the book of life so those in the book of life are those who trust

Jesus and live lives not perfect but lives of faithfulness and fourthly it's the one and only book worth being in I've written books I've seen my name on book covers I remember the first time my first book was published it was a buzz it was a buzz to see stirring of the soul Mike Rater I was just a happy man that's nothing compared to this my name is in the book of life that's just such a wonderful assurance that God loves you from eternity to eternity rejoice in this more than the growth of your church more than the success of your mission more than even the conversion of your family rejoice in this your name is in the book of life that's what should bring us joy but lastly what brings

Jesus joy what brings God and the spirit joy verse 21 at that time Jesus full of joy through the holy spirit yea father this is what you are pleased to do what brings them joy God father son spirit answer you've hidden these things from the wise and learned and revealed them to little children there are two people at a party and the guest is Jesus the host is Simon he is proud and arrogant doesn't even kiss our Lord in the cheek doesn't anoint him doesn't wash his feet he just treats him with contempt wise and learned there's a woman probably a prostitute who with their tears of joy washes his feet of the two who's forgiven there are two sons in a house a wise son a lord son outwardly godly but proud and hard hearted a younger son a rebel a prodigal but repentant and sorrowful at the story's end who's inside the house with the father who's outside the house there's a man on the road to jericho he's beaten up and left to die two men come along wise and learned harden their hearts and walk on by but another man a samaritan a pagan unclean despised but knows god's will loves the man and cares for him who's the true child of god i thank you father you've hidden these things from the wise and learned and revealed them to small children how do you get to know god well someone has to tell you but here's the thing you tell jack about jesus and jack says that's the dumbest thing i've ever heard or he says that's true but my life right now i have other priorities you tell june and she says that's the best news i've ever heard i want to follow jesus why such different responses no one can claim to know the father except the son and those to whom the son chooses to reveal him a man walked into our church some years ago a turkish man he told our pastor he had a dream he was sitting in a field and the wind was blowing softly and a man in white appeared to him and said quite simply follow me and the turkish man said oh if i follow you this will happen and

this will happen and the wing got stronger and stronger and the man said follow me he woke up from the dream he knew who the man was he googled churches found our church turned up he was a fruit ready to be plucked from the tree and there and then gave his life to christ because the son had chosen to reveal the father to him then finally he reminds us the disciples of how blessed we are you see what kings and priests and prophets long to see how blessed you are I worked in Pakistan 30 years ago that was the day the era of letters

[27:10] I'd write a letter to my mother put a stamp on the envelope and mail the letter and maybe two weeks later it arrived in Sydney and she would write back and maybe two weeks later I get a reply so a month after my letter I get a reply a month of course 30 years before that they went by see you heard from your mother six months later I remember at a mission meeting in 1994 a leader told us of a new revolution in communication that you could write a letter to someone 10,000 miles away and get a reply in a moment it was called email I could hardly believe my ears now I have Skype and WhatsApp and

FaceTime it blows me away it blows me away Mr. Abraham Mr.

Moses Mr. Elijah Mrs. Rachel imagine never having to sacrifice a bull again and knowing your sins are forgiven imagine never having to circumcise your son again imagine never having to travel miles and miles to go to the temple just to be in God's presence imagine wherever you are anywhere you're in God's presence imagine Mr.

Moses Mr. David you could walk into the holy of holies and not be destroyed you could be in God's presence and just enjoy his presence imagine being able to eat bacon and pork and shellfish and anything you like imagine that imagine calling God your father imagine being in a church with people of every tribe nation and tongue imagine that imagine knowing with absolute certainty that when you die you'll be with Christ the Messiah forever the things we now take for granted are the prophets priests leaders long to see these things we see them and experience them what a blessing they're the first things the

Lord of the harvest is separating the wheat from the chaff the need is laborers he sends us out as lambs amongst wolves if they call Jesus Beelzebub they'll call you the same how people respond to you as you preach is their response to Jesus is their response to God yes rejoice that God works through you to bring salvation but rejoice in this your name is written in heaven you would not be here tonight if the son hadn't revealed to you by his grace and sovereign power the father and remember the great privilege of living in this age and seeing what those of old long to see these are the first things father thank you for the reminder tonight of what's at the heart of mission thank you for reminding us of what should bring us joy and what thrills your heart thank you for your sovereign grace your mercy thank you so much that our names are written in the book of life keep we pray before our eyes these great and glorious first things we pray this in Jesus name amen