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Accomplishing the Mission

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From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.¹

You might be familiar with Mission: Impossible, either in its form as a television program in the late 1960s or in the late 1980s, or more recently in the form of one of the movies starring Tom Cruise. Each one of these stories, follows the Impossible Mission Force as they seek to accomplish their seemingly impossible mission using a variety of means. In spite of the differences of setting, cast, characters, and plotlines, one thing that each of them have in common is the issuance of a mission, which is issued via a taped message which lays out an extremely difficult, if not impossible mission beginning with the words, "Your mission, if you choose to accept it." And concluding with the words, "this tape will self-destruct in five seconds."

There is a sense in which Jesus has done this with his followers. After spending three years teaching and relating with a close group of followers, after dying and coming to life again, and after appearing them several times after his resurrection, as a final act Jesus, gives the disciples their mission (should they chose to accept it): to take the my teaching and the good news about me, and make disciples of all nations. I will ascend to heaven in five seconds. Leaving the disciples with their own "impossible" mission.

And in 2 Corinthians 5, we find the apostle Paul talking about the nature of the good news and how we are called to go about accomplishing the mission: *So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.²*

¹ 2 Corinthians 5:16-20, NRSV

² 2 Corinthians 5:16-20

The good news is that in Christ everything is becoming new, that God is re-making and re-storing everything. The world and its old ways of living and thinking in sin leading to death are passing away and in Christ, God is making everything new. In Christ, God is bringing the world back to Himself, bringing peace and hope into the world, forgiving sins, and inviting his followers to join him in the work of reconciliation and restoration by entrusting the message to us.

Paul describes the mission in an interesting, yet simple way, explaining the role of carrying the good news to the world, as the apostles had been doing, to the concept of being ambassadors of Christ.

In the ancient world, ambassadors were messengers, representatives of a government or ruler. Ambassadors would be sent out on behalf of a king, emperor, or nation to carry messages to other nations.

(Messenger story?)

Ambassadors did not have the ability to declare war on their own, they didn't lead armies and they didn't go about their business in secret. Their job was to represent their king and declare the message of their king to the leader of another empire, nation, people, or tribe. Sometimes the messages were of goodwill and peace, other times they were messages of warning or demand. In either case, the ambassador did not get to decide the contents of the message. They could not declare war or bring peace on their own, they were bound to bear the message that their ruler had given them.

And likewise, when Paul likens followers of Jesus to ambassadors of Christ, he is pointing out that Christians are not just people who believe and practice a certain set of religious beliefs, but that they are called to be Christ's representatives in the world, carrying forward the message of the good news that in Christ all things are made new and that in Christ, God is seeking to reconcile everything to himself.

Ambassadors of Christ do not merely declare the message with their words, but rather the call to reconciliation with God and the hope of new life is to be visibly demonstrated by the lives the followers of Jesus live.

In Colossians 3, Paul lays out what this new life that God invites us to live looks like: *Since God chose you to be the holy people he loves, you must clothe yourselves with tenderhearted mercy, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Make allowance for each other's faults, and forgive anyone who offends you. Remember, the Lord forgave you, so you must forgive others. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds us all together in perfect*

harmony. And let the peace that comes from Christ rule in your hearts. For as members of one body you are called to live in peace. And always be thankful.

Let the message about Christ, in all its richness, fill your lives. Teach and counsel each other with all the wisdom he gives. Sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs to God with thankful hearts.

And just in case Paul has missed anything, he concludes:

And whatever you do or say, do it as a representative of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through him to God the Father.³

For Paul, being a follower, being a representative or ambassador of Jesus doesn't simply mean that we carry a message, but that we have to live the message. That everything we say, everything we do, should be done in the name of Jesus, because if we identify ourselves with Jesus, everything we say, everything that we do, reflect upon Jesus and the kingdom that God is building. How we live bears witness to the truth of the message that we bear. That while the old is passing away, God is making all things new – that reconciliation with God and with others is possible, because we are to be living examples of this good news.

Just weeks after the ascension of Jesus, in the book of Acts we see the church begin to undertake its mission, as we read the story in Acts 2 of how the Holy Spirit comes upon the disciples and early believers on the Day of Pentecost and the gospel then goes forth from Jerusalem, out into Judea, to Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

When we look at the church we find in Acts, we find communities of people who are committed to the teachings of Jesus, to living in relationship with one another, and to prayer. They care for the poor in their midst, even to the point that those who have more are selling things to make sure that the needs of those who are poor are met. And as these people go about doing this as part of their daily lives, others take notice that none of them are going hungry, that everyone's needs are being met, and they are drawn into the community of faith.

And down through the centuries, Christians have continued to seek to share the gospel with the world. Men and women, some well-known and others almost unknown, have shared the good news with the neighbors and others have left the world they know behind to take the good news to far-off places and cultures. Christians have given away bibles and invited friends

³ Colossians 3:12-17

to church services or other events, built hospitals and schools, led movements to abolish slavery, establish civil rights, and end racist systems like Apartheid. They have fed and cared for the poor, visited the lonely and clothed the naked, and shared the love of Jesus both with their words and with their actions. All of them representing Christ, serving in God's diplomatic corps proclaiming the good news.

And because of the faithfulness of those Christians who have come before us and their willingness to share and live the gospel, the church grew from a small community of Jesus followers in one city in one part of the world, to a movement that down through the ages has numbered millions and billions people and stretches from here in Brewster to all around the globe.

But at times Christians have sought to spread the gospel through the use of force, by attacking those outside the Kingdom of God and trying to force them into it. Instead of being Christ's ambassadors, they have been warriors and fighters, declaring war on their enemies. Instead of demonstrating the goodness of the gospel by loving their neighbors as Jesus would, they bashed their neighbors over the head with the gospel and tried to drag them into the kingdom of God against their will.

At other times, Christians have gone in the opposite direction and sought to accommodate the world and failed to share the good news at all. Instead of being ambassadors, they have functioned as secret agents, attempting to follow Jesus secretly and trying to attract as little notice as possible.

But the call of Christ is not to be a fighter or a secret agent. To be a follower of Jesus is to take on a mission, to become an ambassador, a representative, a messenger of Christ who not only proclaims the good news but is living proof of the good news because of the way their life is changed because the gospel is not good news for anybody unless it's good news for everybody.

Pastor and author Rob Bell writes:

"Imagine an average street in an average city in an average country, if there is such a place. Let's imagine Person X lives in a house on this street. Next door is a Hindu, and on the other side is a Muslim. Across the street is an atheist, next door to them an agnostic, and next door on the other side, someone from Ohio (or maybe a Yankee fan).

Imagine Person X becomes a Christian. Maybe she read something or had friends who inspired her to learn more, or maybe she had an addiction and through a recovery movement she surrendered her life to God. However, it came to be, she became a follower of Jesus. Let's say

she starts living out Jesus' teachings, actually taking him seriously that she can become a compelling force for good in the world. She is becoming more generous, more compassionate, more forgiving, more loving. Is she becoming a better or worse neighbor? If we are her neighbors, we're thrilled about her new faith. We find ourselves more and more grateful for a neighbor like this. We wish more people would be like this.

Let's make some observations about this street. The good news of Jesus is good news for Person X. It's good news for the whole street. It's good news for people who don't believe in Jesus. We have to be really clear about this. The good news for Person X is good news for the whole street. And if it is good news for the whole street then it's good news for the whole world.

If the gospel isn't good news for everybody, then it isn't good news for anybody.”⁴

So as we encounter our friends, family members, and neighbors who do not know Jesus and who have not experienced the goodness of the gospel for themselves, we have to consider: is the good news for me good news for those around me? Has my encounter with Jesus changed me? Has it changed how I treat other people? Has it changed my priorities and values? Has it changed how I view the world and those around me? Am I becoming more loving, more compassionate, more generous? Am I becoming more forgiving, more willing to allow for the faults of others? Am I the kind of neighbor I would want to have? How well do I represent Jesus in what I do and say?

As followers of Jesus who seek to share the good news with others, we have to be sure that we are not just talking about the gospel, but that we are also living proof of its goodness because as we seek to live it out. Because as we live it out, it will affect our relationships, the way we go about our day, the way we prioritize things, the way we treat other people. When we fail to do this, we risk the message of reconciliation and transformation being lost or even discredited as people have difficulty reconciling what we say with what we do. But when we live out the gospel, we testify not only to the invitation to reconciliation and the transforming power of the gospel, but also to its goodness of the message.

The diplomatic corps of Christ is not limited to the apostles, or even just to missionaries or clergy, everyone who follows Jesus is called to be an ambassador of Jesus, and to carry the good news and hope of the gospel out into the world. As we go today, may we seek to carry forward this good news, that in Christ, God is making things new, and that reconciliation and

⁴ Rob Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, pp 166-7.

relationship with God is possible. May we not just share the good news with others with words, but may we demonstrate its truth and its power and its goodness as we ourselves are transformed as in Christ, we seek to live out the gospel, and whatever we do or say, may we do it all as representatives of Jesus.