



February 12, 2017
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in•ter•cede: Unbelievers

Luke 10:17-20

It was an incredible week. Right at the beginning of the week, before it all kicked off, we sat down and read the passage in the gospels where Jesus sends out his followers out to the villages and towns of Israel to go and preach good news and heal the sick. And we felt a bit like those followers of Jesus during this week: sent by Jesus, without all the supplies we might have liked, but armed with his authority to preach good news and heal the sick. So this weekend, I'd love us to look at what happened when those followers of Jesus returned from their missions trip, and see what we might learn from that. So, turn with me to Luke 10:17-20. Jesus has just sent out 72 of his followers in pairs to go and heal the sick and preach the good news about God's rule and reign breaking into this world. This is what happens when those 72 return to Jesus...

"The seventy-two returned with joy, saying, "Lord, even the demons are subject to us in your name!" And he said to them, "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. Behold, I have given you authority to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall hurt you. Nevertheless, do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven." (Luke 10:17-20 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Let us pray.

We've been in a whole season of prayer at Chapel Hill these last six months. We've prayed through the Lord's prayer, we've prayed through the dark of advent and the light of Christmas, and we're now praying for others, something the Bible calls "intercession." In this series we've called *in•ter•cede*, we've prayed for the church, our nation, our city, our marriages, our children and now, we're going to pray for unbelievers—those who don't yet know and believe in the name of Jesus. Now you may ask: what has this passage I just read, all about Satan and treading on serpents got to do with praying for unbelievers?

Well... the 72 were sent out by Jesus to preach good news to and to pray for healing for unbelievers. And this passage shares with us the results of such a missions trip. The disciples came back over the moon because their prayers in the name of Jesus were powerful and effective. Verse 17 says: "The seventy-two returned with joy, saying, "Lord, even the demons are subject to us in your name!" (v. 17) And you saw in that video the same sort of responses from those who went down to ASU. The amazement at the way God worked. The power of the name of Jesus. The joy in their faces.

And Jesus backs this up to the 72 as well. He tells them in verses 18-19 that he has seen the way that their work and prayers have made an impact. Jesus uses language which reminds us that what the 72

were engaged in was not a physical battle, but a spiritual battle. A battle between the kingdom of darkness and the kingdom of light. And Jesus says that while they were out preaching good news and healing the sick, he, “saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven.” (v. 18) When we go out and preach good news and pray for healing for those who are sick, we are engaged in a spiritual battle for the lives of those who we pray for. And Jesus says in verse 19, “Behold, I have given you authority to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall hurt you.” (v.19) We have been given Jesus’ authority to step out into the dark places in peoples’ lives, to preach the good news about Jesus, and to pray that they may be healed. And when we do so, he will protect us from the evil one.

Last week, one of our team, Stacie, came down with sickness on Thursday morning. And then, to make matters worse, she dropped her phone in the toilet. She made it into campus with us, but just couldn’t face the prospect of stepping out and talking with students. So she found a couch and tried to take a nap. Sadly, she got moved on and decided that she would get on with the video assignment I had given her to shoot the interviews for this video. Well, she tried to turn her phone on and it just had lines all across the screen. She guessed God was trying to tell her that he had work for her to do, and she needed to trust that he would protect and sustain her.

Stacie came to one of the lunchtime talks, sat at the back of the room and tried to be invisible. Sadly for her, two young girls who it turned out didn’t believe in Jesus came and sat next to her. After the talk she started talking to them and eventually was left talking to one girl: Julie. As she chatted with her, asking her about the talk, about what she believed, about who she thought Jesus was, she asked Julie if she wanted to make a decision to follow Jesus. Stacie got the opportunity to pray with Julie as she committed her life to Jesus for the first time. Moments later Stacie shared with me through tears about how she couldn’t believe that in the midst of her weakness, God would use her. The power and authority of Jesus at work through her, in the midst of her sickness, overcame the power of the enemy trying to take her down, and God used her in an incredible way to bring salvation to a young woman.

When we step out in that authority that we have in the name of Jesus, in the midst of our weakness and brokenness, not only will Jesus protect us from the enemy, but he will also use us in mighty ways. And the abiding image I will have of Stacie is of a person, who through the midst of tears, was overcome with joy. Utter wonder and joy at the way God has used her. And the 72 that Jesus sent out came back with that same feeling of joy. That’s what our passage says. But then, Jesus says something, which might be seen as puzzling. In verse 20, he says, “Nevertheless, do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.” (v. 20)

Here’s what I think Jesus is getting at. These disciples had come back all giddy about the way God had used them... about the power they had in the name of Jesus. But Jesus reminds them not to find joy in power they have, but to find joy in the power-giver. Jesus says to them, don’t rejoice that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that you are a part of God’s kingdom... that you have been chosen to be a part of God’s family... that your names are written in his book in heaven.

My late father owned a sports car, a Caterham Seven. He bought it before I was born and one day after the engine failed, he decided he would take the whole thing to pieces and rebuild it from the ground up. He spent hours over many years working on that thing, and one of my lasting memories of childhood is spending time helping my dad out in the garage as he built this car. Now, I was practically useless as a

child, compared to my father. You know, I could do menial jobs like hold tools or pass him things, but in all honesty, he could have got things done much quicker without me. And yet, he chose to have me out there with him as he worked away.

Why? Joy. When we were together, spending time, me helping him, or him pretending I was helping him, we both experienced a deep sense of joy. Not joy in the completion of a project, but joy in our relationship to one another. Those shared experiences will forever remind me, not of the car, but of my relationship to my father, and will forever bring me a smile. In fact, last year, after he passed away, my mom sold the car, and it achieved fame beyond anything my dad could have imagined. Last August, it graced the pages of Classic & Sports Car Magazine. For me, I look at these pictures and find joy, not in the accomplishment of helping my dad build the car, but in the relationship and memories that I have with my father.

Our heavenly Father is building his kingdom on this earth. And he could build it any way he wants. Yet, he has chosen to use the followers of his Son—you and me—to build his kingdom. He doesn't have to use us. He could snap his fingers and get the job done way more efficiently. But he chooses to use us. Why? Because he loves us and longs for a deeper relationship with us. He longs for us to know his joy.

So when the 72 come back and they are rejoicing in the work they have done. Jesus reminds them: don't rejoice in the work, rejoice in the one who worked. Don't rejoice in the power you have, rejoice in the powerful one. Don't rejoice that God used you, rejoice that God loves you. Just like I don't find my joy in the completed work of that car, but find my joy in my relationship with my Father... Jesus says to his followers, don't find your joy in the works you do, as powerful as they may be, find your joy in your relationship to your Daddy in heaven.

So when it comes to the topic at hand in this sermon series of praying for unbelievers, I believe this passage tells us something very important. It tells us that God isn't dependent upon our prayers, or even upon our evangelism, to save those who as yet don't know him. But God chooses to use our prayers and our evangelism... our works... like a loving Father, delighting in his son in the building of a classic sports car. God doesn't rely upon us to build his kingdom, but... he wants to and chooses to use our prayers to do so and he finds delight in us as we do. And in that process, we discover the joy of a deeper relationship with our heavenly Father.

I'm here to tell you today, when it comes to those in your life who don't yet know Jesus, you don't have to pray for them, you don't have to share the good news about Jesus with them. Just like I didn't have to help my dad build his classic car. But... if you choose to pray for them, if you choose to share Jesus with them, you find yourself working alongside your heavenly Father, as he builds his kingdom, and you will find a deeper, more joyful relationship with Him as a result.

You met Vince earlier. I've known Vince for many years, and when I studied with RZIM at the Oxford Centre for Christian Apologetics he became not only my professor, but also my small group leader as part of the program. At the end of the year we gifted Vince with this photo in a frame to remind him of our wonderful faces as each of us went to different corners of the world. Vince proudly displayed that photo in his office, and around 3 years later, a new student was sitting in his office and suddenly caught sight of the photo.

He looked at it, and said: "Is that Ellis White?" Vince told him yes and that I was one of his former students. And this student, filled with joy, went on to explain that he had been praying for me to come to know Jesus all through high school. In fact, a whole group of students and teachers had been praying for me. And now, he couldn't believe that not only had I come to believe, but that I had gone through a one year training course on how to share that faith with others. He was overcome with joy.

You know God didn't need to use this young man's prayers, but he did. And God doesn't need to use your prayers, but he wants to. God wants to use our prayers to change the lives of those who don't yet know who he is. So, will you join me in praying for those who don't yet know Jesus? Here's what I want us to do. In your bulletin you will find a bookmark. It is based upon a bookmark that was in my Bible in college and I still have today. And this bookmark has space for five names on it. I want you to fill that in with the names of five people who don't yet know Jesus from your neighborhood, leisure activities, family, work or studies who you want to commit to pray for them to come to consider seriously what it means to know Jesus personally.

And I want you to do that before you get up out of your seat to leave. Then put this in your Bible, and every time you open your Bible to read it, which I hope you're all making time to do every day, I want you to pray for these five. On the back of the bookmark are different ways that you can be praying for those five people and for yourself as a witness to them. Maybe you're all high-tech and a bookmark doesn't work for you... well then I want to ask you to try something else. I want you to go, right now, to your app store on your phone, and download this app. It's call Echo and it's super-simple. You hit one button to add a prayer, and then you hit another button when you want to pray. Then add the names of your five people you want to pray for before you leave today.

Before we finish, I want us to pray for those people. I'm going to give you a moment in quiet to fill in your bookmark, or download the app and add your five names. And then we're going to pray together...