

SERIES: The Good News, as Reported by Matthew

SERMON: **A Strange Way to Build a Kingdom**

SCRIPTURE: Matthew 10:1-42

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Today we are returning to a series we interrupted last June when we launched a biographical study of the life of Joseph. We followed that with a series on conflict and peacemaking in the church. I am delighted to be returning today to the Life of Christ as recorded in the book of Matthew. Joseph's life was encouraging, the series on Great Church Fights was instructive, but the Life of Christ is the epitome of Bible study.

It is our goal to spend at least the next four months studying the middle chapters of Matthew, at which time we will probably interrupt ourselves once more before completing the study in late 2008, Lord willing. That's just so you can know where we're headed. (Dr. Donald Grey Barnhouse once preached for 13 straight years on the Book of Romans, if I remember the story correctly, but attention spans aren't what they used to be. Nor, I might say, are preachers what they used to be!).

I want you to turn with me to Matthew, chapter 10. We cannot possibly comment on everything in this chapter this morning, so I want to encourage you to allow the reading of Scripture itself to be a learning experience.

He called his twelve disciples to him and gave them authority to drive out evil spirits and to heal every disease and sickness.

These are the names of the twelve apostles: first, Simon (who is called Peter) and his brother Andrew; James son of Zebedee, and his brother John; Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; Simon the Zealot and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him.

These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: "Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel. As you go, preach this message: 'The kingdom of heaven is near.' Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you have received, freely give. Do not take along any gold or silver or copper in your belts; take no bag for the journey, or extra tunic, or sandals or a staff; for the worker is worth his keep.

"Whatever town or village you enter, search for some worthy person there and stay at his house until you leave. As you enter the home, give it your greeting. If the home is deserving, let your peace rest on it; if it is not, let your peace return to you. If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake the dust off your feet when you leave that home or town. I tell you the truth, it will be more bearable for Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for that town. I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves.

"Be on your guard against men; they will hand you over to the local councils and flog you in their synagogues. On my account you will be brought before governors and kings as witnesses to them and to the Gentiles. But when they arrest you, do not worry

about what to say or how to say it. At that time you will be given what to say, for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.

"Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child; children will rebel against their parents and have them put to death. All men will hate you because of me, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved. When you are persecuted in one place, flee to another. I tell you the truth, you will not finish going through the cities of Israel before the Son of Man comes.

"A student is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master. It is enough for the student to be like his teacher, and the servant like his master. If the head of the house has been called Beelzebub, how much more the members of his household!

"So do not be afraid of them. There is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known. What I tell you in the dark, speak in the daylight; what is whispered in your ear, proclaim from the roofs. Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.

"Whoever acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven. But whoever disowns me before men, I will disown him before my Father in heaven.

"Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to turn

*" 'a man against his father,
a daughter against her mother,
a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law -
a man's enemies will be the members of his own household.'*

"Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and anyone who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.

"He who receives you receives me, and he who receives me receives the one who sent me. Anyone who receives a prophet because he is a prophet will receive a prophet's reward, and anyone who receives a righteous man because he is a righteous man will receive a righteous man's reward. And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones because he is my disciple, I tell you the truth, he will certainly not lose his reward." This is the Word of the Lord!

I have entitled this passage, *A Strange Way to Build a Kingdom*. Down through the centuries empires have often been established through military power, sometimes through economic power, and even occasionally through intellectual and cultural power. But no one besides Jesus has ever tried and succeeded in building a kingdom through spiritual power alone. He rejected force completely and He ignored economics, except to urge His followers to work hard and to be generous. His primary weapons were teaching, preaching, and healing. His leadership style was neither autocratic nor charismatic but that of a shepherd.

He never traveled more than 100 miles from where He was born; He never wrote anything we know of (except some unknown words in the dust when dealing with the woman taken in adultery). He never seems to have been in a hurry, or under pressure, or obsessed with the huge task before Him. Instead He spent most of His alone-time, praying, and most of His ministry time, not with crowds, but pouring His life into a few followers. He then left *them* with the task of carrying on His work.

That sure seems to me like a strange way to build a kingdom, especially when you consider the kind of followers to whom He entrusted the task! They were, for the most part, men without intellectual or cultural credentials. In fact, if you were going to choose 12 people to turn the world upside-down, these twelve would probably be close to the bottom of your list of potential candidates.

When we come to a passage like this, I think certain preliminary questions beg to be answered:

Are Christ's disciples today equivalent to apostles in the first century?

Do the instructions Jesus gave them really apply to us?

If so, to what extent?

If not, why not?

I want to answer those questions by suggesting to you that there are principles in this passage that apply today, but there are also specifics that do not. I do not believe in apostolic succession; that is, the specific authority and office of an apostle has not been passed down from the first century to certain ecclesiastical leaders today.

In fact, only 14 individuals ever held the office of apostle. Many more have had the gift of apostle, including, I believe, some today, but only 14 held the office. Why 14? You've never heard of the Fourteen Apostles? Well, there were the original Twelve we are all familiar with. When Judas committed suicide the others chose a successor to him named Matthias. You can read about his selection in Acts chapter one. That makes 13. Then the Apostle Paul, it seems to me, was given a special dispensation as an apostle, a position he talks at length about in Galatians and elsewhere.

These fourteen individuals had a unique calling, unique authority, unique gifts, and unique results. For example, we are told here in 10:1 that they were given authority to drive out evil spirits and to heal every disease and sickness. I don't see any evidence that anyone possesses that kind of authority today. In the NT we are told that the Holy Spirit has given gifts of healings (plural) to some in the church, but no one has the authority to heal every disease.

Later in verse 8 these same individuals are told to raise the dead; I don't know anyone who can do that today or, for that matter, at any time since the early church. In verse 9 the disciples are told, "do not take along any gold or silver or copper in your belts; take no bag for the journey, or extra tunic, or sandals or a staff." This prohibition also does not apply today; in fact, it didn't even apply to the Apostles themselves later on. It's clearly limited to the unusual circumstances of this trip.

Nevertheless, there are certain aspects of the commissioning of the apostles that do have application today, and not just to clergy and missionaries. We are all disciples if we have accepted Christ as Savior. Matthew 28:19 makes that clear: “Go and make disciples of all nations.” I will try to show how the principles in this passage can make all of us more effective ambassadors for Christ.

Jesus’ ambassadors are sent out with authority and instructions. (1-8)

One of the greatest frustrations to anyone trying to do an important job is to be given responsibility without authority. Jesus knows that, so He gives them both responsibility and authority to accomplish the task.

Essentially there are two parts to their commission: preaching and healing. They are to minister to both body and soul, just as Jesus did. This balance has always been difficult for the church to maintain. Some branches of the church have focused all their attention upon the body—providing food, housing, medical relief, and all manner of other social services, but never telling people what it means to have a right relationship with God. On the other hand, there are Christians who focus all their attention on doctrine and evangelism and discipleship but will not lift a finger to help those in need. Jesus was always concerned about the whole person—both body and soul—and He wants His church to likewise be concerned.

In respect to their preaching Jesus instructs the Twelve to go only to the lost sheep of Israel. At a later time Jesus would give His disciples a wider commission, captured in the Great Commission to go into all the world. But for now they are to go only to their own people. I suppose there are several reasons for this. First, the Jews clearly have a special place in God’s plan. Second, the Apostles need to get their feet wet, and right now they are barely up to the task of reaching their own people, much less Gentiles and Samaritans. There will be time later to spread their message more widely.

Jesus’ ambassadors are to give freely what they have freely received. They had received the ability to heal, perform miracles, and to touch lives with redemption and spiritual growth. It is God’s power, not theirs, and it is to be used for His glory, not their prosperity. When you stop and think about it, the Apostles could have become very wealthy had they charged money (or even had they taken up love offerings) for healing, raising the dead, and casting out demons. Jesus does not want them to do it.

Jesus’ ambassadors are to travel light. (9-16)

Jesus is not sending His ambassadors on an adventure trip or a sightseeing tour, but a ministry trip. They are to stay in the first home that admits them, not shop around for one that has a better mattress or better food. Likewise they are not to take along any money or extra clothes, and the reason given is this: “the worker is worth his keep.” The principle here is that vocational Christian workers—evangelists, pastors, teachers, missionaries—should be supported so they can

give their full time and effort to the Gospel. Paul, as you know, chose not to accept support but to work as a tentmaker and support himself, but even Paul made it clear that was a personal choice on his part and that he had a right to be supported.

Jesus does not imply that all His followers must necessarily take a vow of poverty, and in fact, many of God's greatest servants—Abraham, Joseph, David, Solomon, Lydia—were people of wealth. However, it seems to me from this passage (and really all of his teaching) that Jesus shows a bias toward “traveling light” for all His followers. While there's no virtue in poverty, there's even less in conspicuous consumption. The Christian disciple should never live above his means and probably below his means so that he has more opportunity to share and minister to those in need.

I have always been impressed by Warren Buffet, not because he is the second richest man in the world but because he doesn't live like the second richest man in the world. He still lives in the house in Omaha that he and his wife bought in 1958 for \$31,500. It's not a shack, but it's certainly not what he could afford. And he has given away \$35 billion. Now I would have liked to see him give that to Kingdom work, but I'm talking about principle here.

Back to the disciples traveling light. Jesus makes it clear that some of the hosts who invite the Apostles to stay with them might have second thoughts after hearing their message or after taking heat from their neighbors, and they might choose to dis-invite their guests. They may be rude and offensive; they may even respond with persecution. His ambassadors are not to respond in kind. On the contrary, Jesus simply says to his disciples, “shake the dust off your feet when you leave that home or town.” True, He also says “it will be more bearable for Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for that town,” but that's *in the day of judgment*. It's not our job to threaten or to react violently or to bring judgment on unbelievers.

Notice the difference between Christianity and Islam at this point, and I'm not just talking about Islamic extremists. I'm talking about Islam as a religion. It teaches its followers to react with indignation at any perceived offense to their religious beliefs. Fatwas, or contracts on a person's life, can be placed on anyone who dishonors the Prophet Mohammed.

By the way, the basis for the greater judgment on the towns of Israel than on Sodom and Gomorrah seems to be the fact that judgment is based upon knowledge. The greater one's knowledge, the greater will be one's judgment in eternity if he rejects that which he knew or should have known.¹ The people of Sodom and Gomorrah had enough knowledge to condemn them, but the people of Israel in Jesus' day had even more.

Here's Jesus' summary advice: “Be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves.” If the first part of that stood by itself, that might be troubling, but Jesus is drawing an analogy only to the snake's shrewdness, not its deadliness; that's why he urges His followers to also be like doves, known for their innocence and gentleness. In a NY Times Magazine article several weeks ago a well-known pastor from Wichita said about his brand of fundamentalism, “Some might compare the religious right to a snake. We may be in our hole right now, but we can come out and bite

you at any time.” I think he missed Jesus’ point and forgot the second half of Jesus’ statement: be innocent as doves.

Jesus’ ambassadors are to be on guard but not fearful. (17-31)

There are two statements in this section that on the surface may seem to be contradictory, but they are not. Verse 17 says, “Be on your guard,” but verse 19 says, “Do not worry” and verse 26 and 28 and 31 add, “Do not be afraid.” I have tried to capture the balance by saying Jesus’ ambassadors are to be cautious but not fearful. Actually these are both common themes in the NT.

Believers are constantly told to be on guard because there are enemies of the faith all around us. If we’re not on guard we can easily be waylaid and have our effectiveness compromised. The Apostles had good reason to be on guard. Jesus predicted they would be handed over to local councils, flogged in synagogues, and called before kings and governors to give an account of their faith. But they were to see it as an opportunity to witness, and God would speak through them.

I have heard pastors use verses 19 and 20 as preaching advice: “Do not worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time you will be given what to say, for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.” They say the best sermons are those that are unprepared, where the preacher just lets God speak through them. Well, I’ve heard some of those sermons, and I don’t think God should be blamed for them. This is a promise for an unusual situation where the ambassador of Christ is arrested and has no time to prepare what he will say to his questioners. In that case God will take care of it.

As an example I can’t help but think of the unbelievable speech Stephen, the church’s first martyr, gave in Acts 7 just before he was stoned to death. Or Paul’s defense before Agrippa and Festus in Acts 26. These were no ordinary speeches; they were incredible examples of divine inspiration in terms of both content and manner. Clearly the Holy Spirit was at work in these men, just as Jesus promised He would be.

Jesus’ ambassadors also need to be on guard because their faith can generate family rejection and hatred. Most of us have never experienced that, but believe me, there are Christians in many parts of this world who have suffered greatly when family members have turned against them, disowning them, even in some places killing them.

And it won’t just be family, for Jesus says, “all men will hate you because of me.” Persecution is common in many places in the world today—in every Communist country, in virtually every Muslim country, and in many areas dominated by indigenous faiths. According to Voice of the Martyrs, there have been more martyrs for the faith in the last half century than in any comparable period in the history of Christianity. We may be coming to the point where even here in the U.S. we will experience widespread hatred of true Christianity. It already seems to be open season in the media to attack Christians in a way that would simply not be tolerated if it

happened to any other group—racial, political, social, or even other religions. Amazingly, Islam is treated with more respect by the mainstream media than is biblical Christianity.

But it is very important that any hatred we experience be “because of me.” Some of us are good at stirring up hatred because we act like jerks. There’s no honor in that.ⁱⁱ

We’ve been emphasizing why the disciples are to be on guard, but caution doesn’t mean fear. Two reasons are given as to why we are not to be afraid of our enemies. One is that our enemies have limited power. They can kill the body, but they cannot touch the person, the soul. The second reason is that our heavenly Father, who has unlimited power, cares about even the minutest part of His creation. Sparrows are tiny, insignificant birds, worthless for most purposes, yet they matter to God. In fact, not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of the Father. Oh, they do fall, but not without His knowledge and permission. God is not so busy running the universe that He has no time for little birds (or little people).

In fact, even the hairs of our heads are all numbered. I am told the average hair count on the human head is about 140,000, but if that’s the average, some must have a lot more because some have a lot less! The point must not be missed—a God who keeps track of falling sparrows and hair counts can be trusted implicitly when it come to suffering and persecution. It’s not that there won’t be any, but rather that it will never be outside His control.

Jesus’ ambassadors are not to expect better treatment than He Himself received. (24-25)

I back up to verse 24, where Jesus gives the principle behind all these warnings about rejection and persecution: “A student is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master. It is enough for the student to be like his teacher, and the servant like his master. If the head of the house has been called Beelzebub, how much more the members of his household!” We evangelicals talk a lot about our desire to be like Jesus. We even have hymns that claim, “I want to be like Jesus.” But what we mean is we want to be like Him in attitude, in purity, in speech. We generally don’t mean we want to be like Him in suffering, in rejection, in being hated. But, says Jesus, that, too, comes with the territory.

Jesus’ ambassadors are to be single-minded and totally dedicated. (32-39)

He opens this section beginning in verse 32 with a promise—that if we acknowledge Him before men, He will acknowledge us before His Father. If we are true to him in time, he will be true to us in eternity. If we seek to follow him in this world, he will accept us in the next. But the converse is true as well. If by our lives we disown Him (even though with our lips we confess Him), the day must come when He cannot do other than disown us. I don’t think that means that if there is one unfaithful act on our part we’re toast. I think it means that if we consciously and as a matter of our will reject Him and the provision He has made for our sins, there is no hope left for us. Hebrews 10:26 puts it this way: “If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God.”

One of the more enigmatic statements in all the Gospels is found in verse 34: “Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword.” This seems so out of character for Jesus, and if understood simply on the surface, it *is* out of character. Jesus must be using the term “sword” symbolically. He is promising that following Him will mean a war with evil—spiritual warfare. A sword divides, and so does the truth Jesus came to bring. It even divides families.

Here’s the ultimate point (verse 37): “Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and anyone who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.” If the Bible teaches anything, it teaches that we are to love our families, but it also teaches that there is a love that has priority even over love for family, and that is our love for God.

The disciples had probably seen more than one man take up his cross, and they knew what it meant. When a man from one of their villages took up a cross and went off with a band of Roman soldiers, he had a one-way ticket. He wasn’t coming back. Likewise, the true disciple of Jesus has died to a whole way of life. He is prepared to walk against the grain of cultural values so that his own expectations and needs take a back seat to God’s call.

Elizabeth Elliot has written perceptively,

“I think there is a great deal of nonsense taught about this business of bearing one’s cross. For example, when people shrug their shoulders and say, ‘Well, I suppose that’s meant to be my cross,’ they suggest that the cross is some inevitable circumstance which cannot be avoided. But the cross can be avoided. So I think that what Jesus is getting at here is the voluntary, positive acceptance of what he is asking of us, whatever it may be. This should be the dominant theme of our lives, ‘Yes, Lord, what do you want me to do?’”ⁱⁱⁱ

We live in a day and time when self-denial is almost unheard of; in fact, it is viewed almost as a disorder. I have known parents who went ballistic when their child chose the teaching profession, to say nothing of the ministry, rather than a career in which they could make some serious money. Friends, the pursuit of power, independence, and financial security are probably the biggest obstacles to anyone’s spiritual advancement. Everything in our culture screams at us to seek our own agenda, but Jesus is calling His followers to deny their own agenda and to seek His.

There is a law God has written into his universe that goes against all human notions. It is this (verse 39): “Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.” The person Jesus describes as wanting to save his life is the one whose whole emphasis is on getting the best out of life for himself. That way means certain loss. But the one who gives his or her life to God finds ultimate fulfillment. Jim Elliot said it best, “He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.”^{iv}

Those who treat Jesus’ ambassadors well will be rewarded. (40-42)

Jesus teaches here the doctrine of rewards—not rewards for faithful service (that is taught elsewhere), but rather rewards for the one who treats His faithful ambassadors well. The warm reception of one of Christ’s disciples will be treated as a warm reception of Him and even His father. The warm reception of a prophet entitles the person to a prophet’s reward. The warm reception of a righteous man yields a righteous man’s reward. In fact, even if someone just gives a cup of cold water to a follower of Jesus, that deed will be remembered by God.

Conclusion: In his book *Quiet Talks on Service*, S. D. Gordon gives an imaginary account of Jesus’ return to heaven after His ascension. As the angel Gabriel greets Jesus he asks, “Master, You died for the world, did You not?”, to which the Lord replies, “Yes.” “You must have suffered much,” the angel says, and again Jesus answers, “Yes.” “Do they all know that you died for them?” Gabriel continues. “No,” responds Jesus, “Only a few in Palestine know about it so far.”

“Well, then, what is Your plan for telling the rest of the world that You shed Your blood for them?” Jesus responds, “Well, I asked Peter and James and John and Andrew and a few others if they would make it the business of their lives to tell others. And then the ones that they tell could tell others, and they in turn could tell still others, and finally it would reach the farthest corner of the earth so many will know the thrill and power of the gospel.”

Gabriel asks, “But suppose Peter fails? And suppose after a while John just doesn’t tell anyone? And what if James and Andrew are ashamed or afraid? Then what?” Jesus answers, “I have no other plans.”^v

It would be wrong to leave you with the notion that God is handcuffed if we refuse to join His plans for building His kingdom. He will do it with us or without us. If we refuse to enlist in His service He will find someone else to do it. But we will be the ultimate losers, not His plan. He *will* build His Church.

i. This is another indication of a truth we find many times in Scripture—that there are degrees of punishment in hell. Many people are troubled by the suggestion that their favorite aunt who died without receiving Christ might have the same eternal destiny that Saddam Hussein has. Well, it’s not going to be the same. I wouldn’t want to convey to anyone the notion that separation from God is ever anything but a tragic destiny, but clearly there are those who because of their rejection of clear knowledge or because of their especially heinous acts, will suffer in a greater way.

ii. A problem arises in verse 23 where Jesus tells His Apostles that they will not finish going through the cities of Israel before the Son of Man comes. This is clearly an important statement, because Jesus adds His patented statement, “I tell you the truth,” but it’s not certain what He

means by it. If he's referring to the Second Coming, that didn't happen before the Apostles finished going through the cities of Israel. But many scholars think Jesus is not referring to the Second Coming but to His coming back from the dead in the resurrection. In that understanding the disciples are to carry on with the task to which He sent them, but they would not complete it before His work on earth reached its climax.

iii. Elizabeth Elliot

iv. Jim Elliot

v. Herbert Lockyer, *All the Apostles of the Bible*, 31.