

“Harvest Time” (2014)

Luke 10:1-24 ¹

I have many indelible memories of the ten days that I spent on mission in Malawi, but what I am about to tell you is one of the most vivid. My partner for the week was Wendy Richardson, who was from Durban, South Africa. When Wendy and I visited the remote village of Mlala to preach the Gospel, we were greeted by the woman who was the Chief of the Village. The village seemed abandoned, and she said this was because everyone was down the road making bricks.

It appeared to me that virtually all the brick in rural Malawi was crafted and fired by hand, probably much as it was when Israel was captive in Egypt 3,500 years ago. The Chief wanted us to talk to her villagers, so we walked down the road to the work site, where the men were working in one area and the women and children were in another. Through a translator, Wendy told the women about Jesus, and more than a dozen women prayed to receive Christ as Savior, something we saw happen every single day. It was truly amazing.

After Wendy was finished, our hosts began to lead us away from the work site without speaking to the men. When I objected that we hadn't spoken to the men, our hosts replied, “The men don't want to hear about Jesus. We will wipe the dust off our feet and move on to those who want to hear.” That broke my heart, but “it's in the Book.”

As you may recognize, my hosts' response came from something Jesus said shortly after this morning's text. Jesus had already sent the Twelve on a preaching mission around the region, and now He “*chose seventy-two others and sent them two by two ahead of him to every town and place where he was about to go*” (Luke 10:1).

Jesus gave a number of instructions to these seventy-two, and I want to highlight just five of those instructions this morning: (1) pray for the harvest; (2) trust God's provision; (3) expect to be welcomed; (4) expect to be rejected; and (5) don't touch the glory that will come. I want to use these five principles to organize my comments about Deacon Ministry this morning.

Rebecca, we've gathered this morning to ordain you as a Deacon. Our ordination will not make you a better person, impart the Holy Spirit in some special way, or convey some mystical power or authority. But ordination does represent the church's recognition of God's work in your life, and it's both our invitation to special ministry and our blessing as you undertake it.

As a rule, Baptist churches are only as strong and as mature as their leaders . . . especially their Deacons. So it is that the future maturity of our congregation depends heavily upon your willingness to engage in a variety of ministries while modeling an exemplary biblical life-style. That's what these five principles are about.

1. Pray for the Harvest. Jesus said, “*The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore to send out workers into his harvest field*” (Luke 10:2). The first thing to notice is that Jesus was speaking to the seventy-two being sent out, not to the Twelve. Those seventy-two could hardly have missed the fact that they themselves were the first set of “more workers” for whom Jesus told them to pray.

While membership among the Twelve was a once-only event, membership among the “seventy-two” might be understood as an open-ended ministry task force. Some manuscripts actually read “seventy” rather than “seventy-two,” and some scholars see a connection between this commissioning and the seventy people groups listed in “The Table of the Nations” in Genesis 10, making this a symbolic commissioning to represent Jesus to all the peoples of the earth. Rebecca,

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship of Columbia, Maryland on September 28, 2014.

your ordination is in a very real sense just such a “sending out,” and so I want to apply this text to you as well as to the rest of our Deacons.

Michael Green tells a story about some missionary candidates who were in their first day of language training prior to going to their fields of service. On that first day, their teacher walked in the room and, without saying a word, walked up and down every row of students and then walked out of the room again. Then she came back in and asked, “Did you notice anything special about me as I walked through the room?”

Nobody could think of anything, but finally one student timidly raised her hand. “I noticed that you are wearing a very lovely perfume,” she said. Everyone else chuckled, but the teacher said, “That was exactly the point. It will be a long time before you will be able to speak Chinese well enough to share the Gospel with anyone in China. But long before you are able to do that, you can share the sweet fragrance of Christ with these dear people by the quality of your lives.”²

Paul actually told us that God “*uses us to spread the knowledge of Christ everywhere, like a sweet perfume. Our lives are a Christ-like fragrance rising up to God*” (2 Corinthians 2:14-15, NLT). Now if our lives are going to carry such a fragrance, then we’re going to have to keep ourselves well-connected to the Vine who is Christ, so that His life may flow unhindered through us and produce His fruit. You’ll remember that Jesus told us that “*if you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing*” (John 15:4).

Walking closely with God is the first step toward effective spiritual leadership. Rebecca, a significant part of the congregation’s charge to you today is that you continue to grow in your own spiritual life until you can sense the slightest signal from God; that you grow in your ability to integrate your faith into your daily life; that you grow in your ability to see life and life’s issues from God’s perspective; and that you grow in the spiritual maturity that only comes from a life of consistent obedience to God’s direction. Pray for the harvest!

Now any sane person receiving such a charge as this would be intimidated by it. Who could possibly be equal to such a task? None of us is, of course—that’s why we stay connected to the Vine!

2. Trust God’s Provision. The Bible tells us that “*Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues [and] proclaiming the good news of the kingdom*” (Matthew 9:35). That’s what Jesus was sending the seventy-two out to do. That’s what we did in Malawi, and that’s what we do every day right here in Columbia, too.

Jesus told these seventy-two disciples that they were not to take provisions for the journey, but were rather to trust that God would provide what they needed, “*for the worker deserves his [or her] wages*” (Luke 10:4). Jesus also promised that in moments when witness was required, “*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*” (Matthew 10:19b-20).

Rebecca, it is in this spirit that part of our commission to you today is that you must “*always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect*” (1 Peter 3:15). It’s for this reason that we talk frequently about “loading the heart drive,” which we do through diligent study of God’s Word. Through personal, daily study of the Word and through weekly participation in small group Bible study, you “*hide God’s Word in your heart*” (Psalm 119:11), and God’s promise is that if you do

² Michael Green in *Stories for a Faithful Heart*, ed. Alice Gray (Multnomah, 2004), p. 95.

this—which is one very important way in which we stay connected to the Vine—God will cause you to remember the words you need when the opportunity comes. If you “load the heart drive,” God’s Spirit will “access the files” when you need them. You can trust God’s promise to provide what you need (Luke 12:11-12).

3. Expect to be Welcomed. When Jesus sent out the seventy-two, it’s clear that He expected His emissaries to find a hearty welcome in most places, as in fact, they did. And in a similar way, one of the very best things about Deacon Ministry is what my teacher, Wayne Oates, called “the right of initiative and access.”

What that means, Rebecca, is that you’ll discover that most of the families assigned to your care will be very glad to hear from you, to talk with you, and to welcome you into their homes and places of business. By virtue of your commissioning this day, the members of your Deacon families grant you the right to take initiative toward them, noticing things and asking about things that might seem “forward” or inappropriate on the part of others.

You’ll find that your families want you to greet them when they’re at church and to notice it when they’re absent. They’ll want you to visit them if they’re hospitalized or when they experience other losses. And they’ll enjoy your celebrating with them in the glad moments of marriage, birth, graduation, retirement, and at other similar times.

In ways that are both wonderful and humbling, your ordination makes you an official representative of our congregation wherever you go, and it’s even more awesome that you will represent our Lord Christ wherever you go, as well. Almost every time I’m called to the hospital or to other moments of crisis—even when they’re very hard—I find myself giving thanks to God that I have the privilege of representing our Lord and His People in this moment of need. I pray that you will discover this same deep satisfaction in the ministry to which you are commissioned this day. Expect to be welcomed by those under your care.

4. Expect to be Rejected. Along with much welcome, though, Jesus’ words in our text and my experience in Malawi remind us that we will not find welcome everywhere, even among the families of our congregation. Rebecca, as you go out to serve, bear in mind Jesus’ sobering words to the seventy-two: “*Anyone who accepts your message is also accepting me. And anyone who rejects you is rejecting me. And anyone who rejects me is rejecting God, who sent me*” (Luke 10:16; also vv. 10-15, NLT).

There are many reasons why persons may not be eager to receive you, and it is not ours to judge those reasons. It’s God’s business, not ours, as to what sort of faith is sufficient. God will do the right thing when the final curtain falls; but God does not and will not force Himself upon us. He is visible only to those who wish to see.

In the meantime, we have our orders, and we all do well to remember Paul’s warning as we go about our work: “*So why do you . . . look down on another believer? Remember, we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. . . . Yes, each of us will give a **personal** account to God. So let’s stop condemning each other. Decide instead to live in such a way that you will not cause another believer to stumble and fall*” (Romans 14:10-13, NLT).

When experiences of rejection come, I find great encouragement in the three-fold admonition of Charlie Monk, a retired pastor, now resurrected. Charlie’s principles were pretty simple, but they’re powerful, too: (1) Love People; (2) Do the Right Thing; and (3), Keep Going. We do this, and leave the rest to God. Expect to be welcomed, Rebecca, but expect to be rejected, as well.

5. Don't Touch the Glory that Will Come. Our final words of encouragement and warning from Jesus this morning are found in Luke 10:17-20: *When the seventy-two disciples returned, they joyfully reported to him, "Lord, even the demons obey us when we use your name!"*

"Yes," he told them, "I saw Satan fall from heaven like lightning! . . . But don't rejoice because evil spirits obey you; rejoice because your names are registered in heaven."

Rebecca, the Good News as you begin this journey is that those seventy-two disciples had *wonderful* experiences as they carried out Jesus' instructions, and both they and He were joyful at the results they experienced. For the most part, that will be your experience, too. The warning has to do with the danger of pride and the temptation to take the credit ourselves for good outcomes that are most certainly the work of God.

Dr. Jack MacGorman, one of my New Testament professors long ago, frequently gave us a word of warning and encouragement that I've often remembered in these four decades since. Dr. MacGorman told us that **"There is no limit to what God can and will do through your life, so long as you do not touch the glory."**

Rebecca, as we commission you this day to expanded leadership and deepened ministry in the Kingdom, it is our confident expectation that God will do great things in and through you, both in the lives of your Deacon families and in the life of our congregation as a whole. Savor and enjoy those moments, but be careful to give all the glory to God, as together we journey joyfully into God's future for us all!