

'I Am Sending You Out as Sheep in the Midst of Wolves'

by John Piper

The sermon emphasizes the importance of missions and the need for Christians to be willing to take risks and face challenges in order to spread the gospel to those who have never heard.

Duration: 48:04

Scripture: Matthew 28:18

Topics: "Missions Work", "Great Commission"

Description

This sermon emphasizes the call to missions, highlighting the costs and blessings associated with being a missionary. It explores the divine enabling needed to fulfill the mandate of making disciples of all nations, echoing Jesus' final words in Matthew about His authority and presence. The sermon delves into the challenges missionaries face, such as persecution, hatred, and even death, while also revealing the profound blessings of being sent by Christ, given words by the Spirit, and valued by God. It concludes with a powerful invitation for those feeling a fear-conquering desire for missions to step forward and commit to this calling.

Transcript

Let's pray together. Father, I thank you for the tears that come unbidden and sweet when I watch those missionary pictures. There's so much interwoven life there.

There's so much pain there. There is so much joy there. These are the people, among others, of whom the world is not worthy and none of them feels that way.

And we want their tribe to increase. And this is not man's doing. It is your doing.

And so I ask for divine enabling to so preach that divine calling would happen. I ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

When Jesus had finished His great saving work and had laid down His life for millions and millions of people who would come to believe in Him from all the peoples and all the centuries, and had risen from the dead and had given His final mandate, or in the giving of His final mandate, He said these words just before He went back to the Father. This is the last thing He said in the Gospel of Matthew. All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me.

Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. And behold, I am with you always to the end of the age. The mandate to make disciples from all peoples is as valid today as the promise that He gave is comforting today.

The promise that He gave was, I will be with you always to the end of the age. Now, that has not come to an end yet. So that promise is comforting and valid today.

And since the promise was given as a foundation and support for the mandate, the mandate is valid today. This was not a mandate given to the twelve. When they're done, nobody else has to listen.

This is a mandate given to Bethlehem Baptist Church, year 2007. Go, make disciples of all nations, Bethlehem. Paul was the most prominent missionary in the New Testament.

He gave his life to fulfill this mandate. Here's the way he put it in Romans 15. I make it my ambition to preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named.

In other words, he's not doing the job that I do. He was not a pastor of a local church. I make it my ambition to preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named, lest I build on someone else's foundation.

But as it is written, and then he takes for his own this quote from Isaiah, those who have never been told of Him will see. Those who have never heard will understand. And he owned that text from Isaiah, just like we read the Bible, and suddenly we own a text as our own.

It's mine. This is a burden on me. And he knew what he had to do.

He had a holy ambition, and it was to preach the gospel where it had not been known. This is the difference between local evangelism and frontier missions. Don't confuse the two.

If you mush it all together, we won't do our work. Both are crucial. I minimize neither, but they're not the same.

Local evangelism, frontier missions. Here's what Paul, the frontier missionary, who wants to preach where nobody knows what he's talking about, said about Timothy in 2 Timothy 4-5. Do the work of an evangelist.

That's what he said to Timothy. Do the work of an evangelist. That means you're the pastor of the church in Ephesus.

You're not traveling with me anymore. You have bedded down just where I want you to be. Do the work of an evangelist.

That is, tell the gospel to everybody in your city. Make it plain to them. Argue with them.

Get in their lives. Form relationships. Persuade them.

Live out the gospel before them. Labor to win people to Christ where you are, Timothy. But that's not a missionary.

A missionary has the heartbeat of Paul. A frontier missionary says, I make it my ambition to preach the gospel where the church isn't planted yet. It's not got any roots yet that can sustain itself if everybody goes home who doesn't belong to that culture.

The job is not done in the world that Christ gave us to do, and the mandate is still binding on us today. That's why we speak of unreached people groups. I send you to a website.

The most helpful website on unreached peoples is www.joshuaproject.net. So just remember joshuaproject.net. 15,965 people groups. 6,434 of them listed as unreached. Definition of unreached? This.

A people group among which there is no indigenous community of believing Christians with adequate numbers and resources to evangelize their people group. See, the point of missions is to so plant a church that that church can do the work of evangelism. But the missions is the back-breaking, culture-penetrating, darkness-shattering, initial work to penetrate, plant the church, see it flourish, get its own elders, train its own people, evangelize its own networks.

That's the task of missions. It's not over. They estimate that roughly 2% evangelical would be required and so when you go there, you'll see the most unreached and the least unreached list.

It's a very inspiring and helpful site, joshuaproject.net. Jesus gave us a mandate to reach these groups. Go make disciple of all nations, nations meaning the people groups, the ethnic groupings of the world. There are 15,000 to 20,000 of them depending on how you define the ethno-linguistic realities that are out there.

The need, let us feel this, the weight of this, the need is eternal. I was praying downstairs a few minutes ago that God would just beget in us a fresh faith in heaven and hell and that Jesus Christ is the only way to heaven and the alternative is hell and millions and millions and millions of people are on their way there and we have the only means of escape in our heads and in our hearts, Jesus Christ. Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life.

Whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life but the wrath of God remains on him, remains on him. So the question is who will go? Not who will do evangelism, that's all of us who live here should be doing evangelism every day in one form or another. I'm asking who will do the Paul type frontier missions that is so urgently needed in our own day.

Some right here in our city with Somalis that live 100 yards away and most of them far away and in very hard to get to places and places where they do not want you to come. And Jesus never said only go to those who want you to come, ever. So who will go? Who will proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ where the church is not yet planted and flourishing? Should I go? John Piper.

I ask myself that question at least once a year because I have to preach this sermon once a year. And I take it very seriously. If my wife weren't in Africa today, I would have gone to her this afternoon and I said, should we go? Any rumblings in your heart, any stirrings, any movings, any fresh thing that God wants to do for my wife will turn 60 in December, I'm already 61, this is a good time to do something new, right? Give 20 years overseas.

I hope all of you baby boomers think that way. Should I go? I say to the Lord, I say it publicly, I'm willing. I'm willing.

I'm willing to lay down this pastoral ministry and do a 10-year stint among an unreached people group. I'm willing. Every believer should say that, I believe.

Every single Christian should say, I'm willing to stop what I'm doing and do missions. I'm willing. It is not God's will that all of his followers become frontier missionaries.

Nor is it his will that those who don't feel guilty. But some he calls. How does he do that? Have you ever tried to analyze the wonder of how God gets you from one thing to another thing? Especially if it's a big change.

When there's no sentence in the Bible that says, John Piper, be a missionary or a pastor. We have to make those massive decisions with no sentence in the Bible telling us to do it. And believe me, God doesn't want you in the pastorate or missions without a sense of his doing it in you.

There needs to be this inner sense of compulsion and repulsion and urgency. Woe is me if I abandon preaching. Sometimes I contemplate the possibility of a writing career.

That would be so simple. And I think I would absolutely, well first I would be struck by lightning in judgment, I think. But otherwise I would be bored out of my mind without this great and glorious work that God has given me to do.

I don't know, nobody can explain the wonderful, mysterious thing called the call of God. No one can explain the working of the Holy Spirit, how he rises in the heart and brings a sense of uncertainty to a compelling passion to move into missions. This is the work of the Holy Spirit.

It is marvelous and unfathomable in our eyes. But one thing I know from Scripture, from church history, and from experience, and that is that one of the hundreds of means that God uses to move people from where they are into missions is the preaching of the Word of God. And especially the preaching of the mandate of Christ attended by an explanation of the costs of obedience, attended by an even fuller explanation of the blessings that sustain the costs.

When that is held up before people in the power of the Holy Spirit, God acts. And many, many of our missionaries will point back to places and points in corporate worship and under the preaching of the Word and alone with the Word where God made his Word decisive for their own personal life. And that's what I'm praying will happen in this service.

So I'm going to pray it one more time. Let's bow our heads. Father, before I open this text with a view to longing that this come to pass, I ask again that the mystery, the unfathomable wonder of the call of God on a human soul that sets a person on a trajectory of life never before dreamed and now inescapable would come to pass.

For some this has been going on for a long time and my words simply sound like a thunderbolt of confirmation of what you've already been doing. And for others, it's like a wedge pushed in a crack that you opened 50 years ago when they were 9 years old and thought it was closed. So come, O God, I pray, and do your wedding work, your confirming work, your creating work for us, I ask, and for the nations.

In Jesus' name, Amen. We're in Matthew chapter 10. And if you have closed your Bibles, then I encourage you to open them again or take one from the rack and open it to Matthew chapter 10.

Jesus is telling His disciples what it will cost to bear faithful witness in the coming days, what it will cost to make disciples for Him by bearing faithful witness in the coming years, what the blessings are going to be if they follow Him in this mandate. This text admittedly relates mainly to the next 40 years between the life

of Jesus and the fall of Jerusalem in 70 AD. The reason I say that is because of verse 23.

When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next, for truly I say to you, you will not have gone through the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes. I do not understand that text to mean that you will not have gone through all the Jewish villages before the second coming of Christ. I think if that's what it meant, it would be false.

I don't think it's false. I think there are good reasons not to think that it's false. The New Testament speaks of the coming of the Kingdom of God in various stages and manifestations.

In a similar way, it speaks of the coming of the Son of Man in various stages and manifestations. He came the first time and He died. He came back from the dead and manifested Himself and appeared in great power after the resurrection.

He came in judgment in 70 AD and was in the judgment of the Romans as they destroyed Jerusalem, bringing His decisive judgment on the people of Israel. He has come again and again in great awakenings in church history and He will come decisively and bodily and physically and visibly at the end of the age in the second coming. So when it says, when they persecute you in one town, flee to the next.

For truly I say to you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes, I think it means comes to judge Israel. And that happened most decisively in AD 70. But the fact remains that even though the focus in these verses is on these disciples doing this ministry as it scatters out in Judea and Samaria for the next 40 years, everything in here is relevant for us today.

Nothing is in principle changed between what they experienced by way of danger and what they experienced by way of comfort and blessing. And so here's what I'm going to do. Sometimes I just love to take a text, a longest text like this, and just walk through it.

Instead of trying to jumble it all together and pull out three things and kind of show how everything relates to three or one, I'm just going to walk right through. And the first pass through, we're going to notice the dangers, the costs of being a missionary. And the second pass through, we're going to notice the amazing blessings.

And we're doing both because the Lord doesn't want to call anybody into His service who has a naive romantic notion that missions is like a little anthropological field trip or something. You can get yourself killed following Jesus here. And so we will disabuse ourselves of all notions that missions is a cakewalk or is an easy thing or a safe thing to do.

And then having established the realistic view that the Bible gives, we will go back and show why, in spite of all that difficulty, we should be thrilled to follow Him in this way. So first, the cost. There are six costs, and then there are ten blessings.

And we will just walk through them. That sounds like it's going to be long. It won't be long.

Cost number one, the cost of being arrested by authorities in verses 16 to 18. Behold, I'm sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves. So be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.

Beware of men, for they will deliver you to courts and flog you in their synagogues. And you will be dragged before governors and kings for my sake to bear witness before them and the Gentiles. The cost

of being arrested.

Sheep in the midst of wolves. You know, if I were preaching another sermon here, one of its subpoints that would take about five minutes would be to point out that to be as wise as a serpent would mean you just, as a sheep, don't walk into the midst of wolves. That's stupid.

That's not wise. So if you're going to be as wise as a serpent, a serpent just wouldn't do that. And then in that little mini sermon, we would wrestle with, so Jesus is telling us we are sheep in the midst of wolves.

And now while we're sheep, we're also snakes. Smart. And we're doves.

We've got four animals here. Sheep, wolves, snakes, doves. And that would be a great sermon, wouldn't it? But close that parenthesis.

You've got to figure that one out for yourself. I've got, I think, more important things. Maybe tomorrow night I'll tackle that in the missions in the main hall.

How can you be as stupid as a sheep and as smart as a snake? Number two. Cost number two, verse 21. Brother will deliver brother over to death, and the father his child, and children will rise against parents, and have them put to death.

That's just unbelievable. Some of your kids, some of your parents, will so not want you to be saved, it says, they'd rather have you dead. That's what we'll meet.

Number three. The cost of being hated by all. Verse 22.

You will be hated by all for my name's sake. Now be careful. Lest in your missionary dreaming, evangelistic dreaming, you elevate friendship evangelism to the point where you assume you cannot evangelize people who hate you.

Don't elevate friendship evangelism to the point where you assume you cannot evangelize people who hate you. This text says everybody will hate you at some point, and you don't stop doing missions because of it. You lay down your life for them.

We're not called to win. We're called to be faithful. We're called to testify.

If our hands are being nailed to a stick and flames are around our bodies, we're being hated, but we haven't stopped evangelizing. We haven't stopped doing missions to beware of idealizing evangelism into the only way to do it is to have friends. Number four.

The cost of being persecuted and driven out of town. Verse 23. When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next.

Keep on doing your evangelism. Number five. Cost number five.

The cost of being maligned. You know that word? Criticized, insulted, mocked. Being maligned.

Verse 25, middle of the verse. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household? Jesus died in our place so that we might escape the wrath of God, not the wrath of man. You got that? The atonement, the substitutionary atonement means Christ takes our place in bearing God's wrath.

He does not take our place in bearing man's wrath. We join him in bearing man's wrath. Jesus was called to suffer for the sake of propitiation, and we are called to suffer for the sake of propagation.

That's the way Joseph Zon used to say it. Number six. The cost of being killed.

Verse 28. Do not fear those who kill the body, but cannot kill the soul. So they can kill the body.

They do kill the body. Let's not elevate safety in missions to the point where you assume if one of our missionaries is killed, we made a mistake. It's going to happen.

It has happened. And the word comes. Are we going to say, oh, we sent them to the wrong place? Wrong time? As though Jesus' words are pointless? So count the cost, brothers and sisters.

This is not an invitation to an easy life. For 2,000 years, thousands and thousands of missionaries, the unnamed, no biographies written about them to give them some glorious place in our hagiography, just unnamed people of whom the world is not worthy, have counted this cost and put their lives at risk and reached the lost with the only message of salvation. And the reason they did it is because of the blessings that sustained them along the way.

They can't do it in their own strength. They can't do it by themselves. We go our own great weakness feeling.

And from our hearts a song of triumph peeling because our triumph is in another. So we turn now to the blessings in this text. I love the way Jesus is sober and realistic and honest.

He pulls no punches. He doesn't try to attract anybody to an easy way. He doesn't believe in the prosperity gospel.

He's calling people to come and die and suffer and be rejected and be hated. And then he tells them 10 amazing things that they're going to experience. And you know, one of the reasons that people are drawn to missions seemingly against all odds is that when these are mentioned, when these 10 things are mentioned, the Holy Spirit applies them to the heart in such a way that they know these things will be enjoyed at a deeper and more satisfying and more life-sustaining level if I do that than if I do what I'm doing now.

They're true for all of you. None of these is unique to missionaries. But there's something about having Jesus say it to us precisely in relationship to this calling that makes us feel like there may be something of Him to be known there.

Number one. Blessing number one. The blessing of being sent by Christ.

Verse 16. Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves. I am sending you out.

It is a deeply, deeply satisfying thing to have a call rise to the level in your life where you sense it as a personal commission from the living Christ. Do this. Do it on my behalf.

Do it as my representative, and I will be with you personally. This is my sending. That is a glorious thing.

Number two. The blessing of being given words by the Spirit of God. Verse 19 and 20.

The blessing of being given words by the Spirit of God. When they deliver you over, do not be anxious how you are to speak or what you are to say. For what you are to say will be given you in that hour.

For it is not you who speak but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you. What a wonderful promise. When you get arrested and they yank every book out of your hand, take away your laptop, and put you half naked in a cell and tell you tomorrow morning you'll give an account, and you have nothing to lean on, you'll have Him.

And you'll have this promise. It is not you who speak. The Spirit of your Father will be speaking through you.

Give you what you need. You might not even have it tonight. Tomorrow you'll have it.

Number three. Blessing number three. The blessing of experiencing God's fatherly care.

Same verse. Verse 20, in the middle of the verse. For it is not you who speak but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.

He could have said the Spirit of God. He could have said the Holy Spirit. He could have said the Spirit.

He could have said the Spirit of me. He said the Spirit of your Father. I think perhaps He wants us to call to mind the fact that if you have left mother, father, sister, brother, lands for my sake, do you notice that when He says that, Mark 10, Matthew 19, it doesn't say you will receive back many mothers and fathers.

Fathers is missing from the list. It's because we have one. And He'll be there.

Same Father for everybody. No matter what's about to happen to you, your Father, who really prizes and loves His children, will be there. What a promise to carry us through missions.

Number four. The blessing of salvation at the end of it all. Verse 22 in the middle of the verse.

But the one who endures to the end will be saved. When all the cost has been paid and all the endurance has been endured and you have persevered to the end, you will be saved. You will be raised from the dead.

You will be given a new body. No more sorrow. No more malaria.

No more depression, discouragement, the fact that no mail has come for three months. You will only thrive in infinite joy in the presence of your Lord forever and He will speak words to you so satisfying it will be worth every endurance. Well done.

Well done. You kept the faith. Number five.

The blessing of knowing the Son of Man is coming in judgment and mercy. Verse 23. Midway through.

You will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes. Now He's telling that to them there. Why? Why is that encouraging? Because He's coming.

And these people who are rejecting your word, they are going to be judged. They will not get the last word. The Son of Man will show up at the right time in history.

He'll show up at the right time at the end of the age. Blessing number six. Belonging to Jesus' household is very precious.

Verse 25. Partway through. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household? Whose household? Jesus.

If they have called the master of the house, that's me, Jesus, Beelzebul, they're calling me the devil. How much more will they call my servants bad names? So that's a warning that's going to be tough for us. But I find tremendous encouragement that every time legitimate, that is criticism comes to me because I have exalted Christ, it is a sign that I belong to His house.

I'm in His house. Part of His household. And what could be more strengthening, more encouraging than to say we're in His house, part of His family.

Number seven. The blessing of knowing that the truth will triumph. Verse 26.

So have no fear of them, for nothing is covered that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known. What does that mean? Don't be afraid. Nothing that is covered, or everything covered is going to be revealed.

Hidden is going to be known. I think it means this. For a season in this world we're sheep amidst wolves and we look very foolish.

Why are you walking into the midst of wolves? You are stupid sheep. And we bleat out our saving message and the wolves laugh us to scorn. There is coming a day when that message will be written from sky to sky and every wolf will bay its truth and admit the sheep were right.

Isn't that what it means? Nothing is covered that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known. So don't be afraid. You will be vindicated.

Your truth, so scorned, so laughed at by the high and mighty in this world will be written from horizon to horizon in letters clear and bold and we will be vindicated. So don't lose heart. Keep on.

Number eight. The blessing of having an immortal soul. Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul.

Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Jesus said elsewhere, Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. Eternal life.

He does not come into judgment but has passed from death to life. Christians have already passed out of death into life. Our bodies have to die but our souls have passed from death into life.

We're already inhabited by eternal life. We inhabit eternal life. Henry Martin made that famous statement, I am immortal until my work on earth is done.

He was a missionary to the Persians, died when he was 31 years old. So he's 30 years younger than I am. Left a huge mark.

He would agree at another level to say not only I am immortal until my work is done but I am immortal after my work is done. He was talking about the physical body. I'm talking about the soul because that's what

Jesus is talking about here.

We are immortal. They can only kill you. I preached a sermon one time about urban ministry or encouraging people to move to dangerous neighborhoods.

Fear not, you can only be killed. Which is a paraphrase of this verse. That's the way Jesus talked.

Fear not. The worst they can do is kill you. So go.

Not exactly the way Americans think. It's the way Christians think. Number nine.

The blessing of having a heavenly father who sovereignly rules the smallest details of life. Verse 29. Boy, this is important.

Verse 29. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny and not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your father? Why is he telling them that? Two sparrows sold for a penny meaning they're very insignificant. They're cheap.

Unimportant. And if one of them is flitting around on a branch and suddenly dies, nothing in the world could be less important than that. It doesn't happen without God.

The argument is, if God so rules the details of the world down to the smallest thing like the fall of a bird out of the sky, he hasn't dropped the ball at any point in your life. One hair turns white by God's design. Number 10.

Finally, perhaps the sweetest of all. The blessing of being valued by God. Verse 31.

Verse 31. Fear not, therefore, you are of more value than many sparrows. God does not despise his children.

He values his children. And there are two reasons. If you need help because you don't feel valuable, which you're not in yourself, you need help processing that emotionally, which most of you do because you were not valued by your parents the way you might have liked to have been, so you still are laboring under the burden of that feeling.

The first reason God values his children is because in union with Christ, the perfection of his Son is imputed to us. That's the rock solid foundation of his valuing us. So when your days are good and horrible, good and horrible, good and horrible, his valuing does not get good and horrible, good and horrible because it's rooted in Christ, not you.

However, that's not the whole story. Because of that, we are enabled. Because we know he is affirming us, accepting us, delighting in us, loving us as we are in Christ because we're united to him by faith, we now have the liberty to begin to fight real sin in our lives and overcome bad habits and become a little better, and God delights in every micro step we make in Holy Spirit-given holiness.

C.S. Lewis said one time, it was quite an impact for me when I read it in college. He said, God is easy to please and hard to satisfy. I don't think I had the theological framework to make too much sense out of that, but now I think I have it because I have both justification and sanctification.

God is hard to satisfy because he's perfect, and we must be perfect as our Heavenly Father is perfect, and we never will be, and therefore he sends Christ to cover all of our imperfection. But he's easy to please because his heart is totally for us as our Father, and as we make any incremental progress in holiness or love, he is delighting in what he makes and what he sees. Fear not, therefore, you are of more value than many sparrows.

So go. How does God call people to give their lives in missions? He does it among many other influences by the mysterious and wonderful awakening of fear-conquering desire. He awakens fear-conquering desire.

And that desire ebbs and flows for a while. It goes up, it goes down, and over time, because God's providence, it just becomes inescapable. And you find yourself led in a path of obedience.

The desire cannot be shelved. It's not just me anymore. I'm being carried along by God, and he is working this in me in a way that is divine.

A calling is on my life. For many of you, and now I'm going to be addressing all the campuses, those of you downtown on Sunday morning, and those of you north on Sunday morning, I want all of you to listen, because this invitation that I'm about to issue, I will issue to all the campuses. And then at the north campus, I believe Eric is going to be there, and at the downtown campus Sunday morning, Kenny Stokes is going to be there to wrap it up like I will do tonight.

All right, so everybody be listening to this last moment of explanation. Over time, say for 20 years, 50 years, God has been working in your life, awakening desires and a sense that missions is out there somewhere. It's going to be out there somewhere.

I'm going to go this direction someday, and this service perhaps has simply brought you to the place where you say, I really believe. I believe that now. I believe that.

I may be wrong. Something may happen to change it, but I believe that I am moving towards missions at least for a year of my life or more. Others of you might have come into one of these services and simply had no intention whatsoever of being awakened to such a thing, and it happened anyway.

And your sense is a remarkable unsettledness right now and a sense of, I really think God is doing something to awaken in me this kind of desire that others are feeling confirmed. Those are the two groups of people that I would like to invite to come and stand, and once you're here, I'll pray for you, then we're going to sing, and there will be people to give you a card to introduce you to and get you connected with the Nurture Program if you want to be, but that's it. So let me pray, and then we'll invite people to come.

Father, at the North Campus and the Downtown Campus Sunday morning and here tonight, I ask that you would do that mysterious quickening, awakening, confirming work to cause people to say, yes, yes, I believe he's leading in this direction, and I want to say yes, I want to get prayer from Pastor John or Pastor Kenny or Pastor Eric, and so I want to move on this. Lord, bring them and do a profound work in this moment, I pray, in Jesus' name, amen.

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