

The Gracious Commission

Gospel-centered Lessons on the Great Commission



Mission to the World

THE GRACIOUS COMMISSION

Introduction for Leaders

Welcome to *The Gracious Commission*, a gospel-centered introduction to the Great Commission. May these materials be a helpful resource in drawing you to the grace of God which is for all the peoples of the earth. But more important than even that, may these studies draw your heart closer to the God of grace.

You may be reviewing these materials in order to prepare a lesson for your church or Bible study, or for your own personal study. In so doing, you may feel a bit like a missionary candidate, who is overwhelmed by the vastness of the field before him and the unfamiliarity of the language there. Missiology, or the study of missions, can seem just as foreign and arcane. This introduction to *The Gracious Commission* material is intended to help you understand the context and navigate the landscape.

First, you should know the foundational premise we've followed. There is no shortage of introductory material on missions. Much of it is quite helpful. Rather than duplicating what is already available, though, *The Gracious Commission* takes a slightly different approach, as indicated by the very title. Mission to the World believes that the Great Commission is a Gracious Commission. From first to last, missions is a God-centered, God-enabled, and God-glorifying endeavor. In missions, all that we do and are should be saturated by grace.

The alternative, as we see in our own natural hearts, is to build on a foundation of guilt or self-effort. No one explicitly says as much, but non-gospel messages like the following are all too common:

- *Given the incredible needs around the world, you should feel guilty about not sending your money, people and resources.*
- *God needs you, and the missionary enterprise waits on your response.*
- *Your primary purpose in missions is to save souls.*
- *God will love you more if you're a missionary. And he will really love you if you go someplace you hate and where you suffer.*
- *You need to reproduce in other cultures the methods and means you like and found successful.*
- *The most important thing you can do is get decisions for Christ, and any pragmatic means to get as many decisions as possible is justifiable.*
- *When you really get down to it, missions is all about you.*

Instead, missions is all about God. The God of the universe positively delights in spreading his glory among all peoples, a delight that will certainly be accomplished. And God is the one doing the work through his children, whom he loves with an irrepressible, secure and eternal love.

Some recurring themes you'll hear throughout the series include the following:

- Missions is about glorifying God alone.
- God's sovereign purposes for this world have not, can not, and will not be thwarted.
- Only God's grace enables you to love and serve with Christ-likeness.
- Missions forces a continual and critical self-examination of our fears, insecurities, idolatries, and prejudices.
- The key to personal change is repentance and faith, not self-effort.
- While drawing people into conformity with biblical truths that transcend cultures, God also delights to draw out the unique expressions of worship and ministry found in every society.
- The Church is central in God's plan for establishing his kingdom.

Feel free to revisit these themes often and explore them further.

Second, you should understand how to navigate these materials. These lessons are primarily intended to engage and stretch adults. You are not simply imparting information. Studies have shown that adults best integrate material in the context of inquiry and self-discovery. Lectures and monologues may be interesting and a good way to ensure technical accuracy, but you're after changed lives. Thus, these studies encourage interaction through a guided discussion. Commentary is provided for each question. Once the participants have had an opportunity to speak, feel free to add these or other insights as you work through the material. Encourage participants to draw from their experience and interests. This discussion oriented format also helps the discussion leader or teacher, who does not have to be an expert on world missions.

Each of the lessons contains a set of questions without commentary that you may copy and distribute. The leader's guide includes these same questions with commentary for each. These notes should help you concentrate on the main applications of grace. More intensive groups may want to review this commentary prior to the discussion and come prepared with their questions and insights. Finally, all the lessons are intended to stand on their own. In that way, you can use any or all of the studies. And people joining the series mid-stream won't feel left behind.

Mission to the World invites your feedback on this series. We'd like to know whether you found the materials clear and accessible, and whether the participants grew in grace and concern for world missions. Feel free to contact the Church Resourcing department at 678-823-0004 or visit us on the web at www.mtw.org. May God bless you as you are a blessing to the nations.

Rev. Scott P. Seaton

PART ONE: GOING IN GRACE

LUKE 24:44-47

1. When you hear the term “missionary” or “world missions,” what positive and negative connotations come to mind?

READ Luke 24:44-47

2. For Jesus to “open the minds” of the disciples, he had to have complete understanding and mastery of their person. How does Jesus’ knowing everything about you make you feel? What difference does grace make to those feelings?
3. Having nothing to hide means that we can be honest with our fears and attitudes. What keeps us from sharing the good news with others, especially those in other cultures?
4. The Scripture that Jesus helped them understand was what we now call the Old Testament. How might the disciples have responded to seeing that hundreds of years before the birth of Jesus, it was written that *“the Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day”*?
5. What difference does it make to us that the crucifixion and resurrection were foretold in the Old Testament? How do your conclusions relate to our motivations for missions?
6. Jesus went on to declare that “repentance for forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem.” (Luke 24:47). This statement is what Christians call the Great Commission. For those familiar with the Bible, what passages first come to mind regarding the Great Commission? What implications are there in your first response?
7. What implications are there in Jesus’ basing the Great Commission on Old Testament passages? Where in the Old Testament do we see God making himself known to all the nations?
8. Can you think of passages in the New Testament where God confirms the Great Commission?
9. What difference should it make in our lives that God’s story of redemption is unfolding exactly as he ordained from all eternity?
10. For further discussion: where have you seen examples of the sovereign grace of God bringing people to himself?

LEADER'S NOTES FOR PART ONE: A GRACIOUS COMMISSION

Main Points

This discussion will focus on a gospel-centered approach to missions. The Great Commission above all is a gracious commission. It begins and ends with the glory of God, and *his* power working through his people to draw all nations to himself. In that regard, we begin and end with nothing: nothing to hide, nothing to prove, and nothing to lose.

With this purpose of God in mind, the whole of redemptive history comes into sharper focus. Rather than being a series of unrelated stories, God bringing glory to Himself through missions ties together all of Scripture. Instead of the Great Commission being a New Testament afterthought, we discover that it has always been on the heart of God to bring salvation to all peoples. We can see this truth by eavesdropping on one of the greatest Bible studies ever given.

Questions and Commentary

1. **When you hear the term “world missions,” what positive and negative connotations come to mind?** Warm-up question.

READ Luke 24:44-47

2. **For Jesus to ‘open the minds’ of the disciples, he had to have complete understanding and mastery of their person. How does Jesus’ knowing everything about you make you feel? What difference does grace make to those feelings?**

In the 24th chapter of Luke, Christ has been raised from the dead and appears to His disciples for 40 days. Shortly before His ascension, Jesus shares a meal with His disciples, and declares “all things which are written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.” Then Luke tells us that “He opened their minds to understand the Scripture.”

The word “mind” refers to spiritual or religious judgment. Being made in God’s image, we are valuable beyond comprehension, and we were made to understand clearly what God has revealed of himself and his world. But this perception has been clouded since we first disobeyed God. The New Testament says our spiritual perception is deeply flawed, using words like *depraved* (ref) and *futile* (ref). The disciples have the same problem, but in an instant, Jesus “*opened their minds*,” enabling them to see the landscape of Scripture with unprecedented clarity. Jesus is able to repair the lens of our hearts because He made us. He knows *everything* about us: our motivations, personality, history, thoughts, dreams and struggles. We don’t even *really* know our own motivations, but he does. It’s all laid out there.

If we’re honest, we should be terrified. This kind of exposure brings us no comfort, and like Adam and Eve in the garden, it makes us want to hide. Mark Twain said he once sent a

dozen of his friends a telegram saying “flee at once - all is discovered.” They all left town immediately. That’s what being found out does: it makes us want to flee. We may not actually run, but we pretend. We desperately want the approval of others.

Grace means we can be free from the burden of pretension. For the believer in Christ, grace means God knows everything about you, every hidden recess of your heart, and loves you anyway—with the deep, irrepressible affection of a perfect father towards his child. He loves you because you are his.

The good news is that we don’t need to fear being “found out” because we are already “found out” and loved. We can be honest that we don’t have it all together. “Going in Grace” begins with the realization that we have nothing to hide.

3. Having nothing to hide means that we can be honest with our fears and attitudes. What keeps us from sharing the good news with others, especially those in other cultures?

A first step in becoming world Christians is confronting our fears and prejudices. If we’re honest, we know there is something keeping each of us from taking that next step in being disciples or making disciples. These typically include

- Inadequacy: feeling unprepared or spiritually immature
- Guilt or shame: feeling you aren’t worthy to be used by God
- Fear: being timid towards other cultures, change, failure, or the unknown
- Prejudice: looking down on people of different races

Grace means we can be honest about our fears, sins, and weaknesses. Personal change never happens when we’re in denial. It only comes when we’re honest with God, and ask him to work in us. The gospel means you don’t have to get your act together before you can be used by God. In fact, *you* can’t change yourself; only God can.

4. The Scripture that Jesus helped them understand was what we now call the Old Testament. How might the disciples have responded to seeing that hundreds of years before the birth of Jesus, it was written that “the Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day”?

When Jesus said it was written that the Christ would suffer and rise from the dead, he was not referring to the accounts of the crucifixion and resurrection found in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. These gospels had yet to be written. Instead, the Scriptures that Jesus was “opening” for the disciples are “Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms”, i.e. the Old Testament, written hundreds of years earlier. Jesus is giving the disciples an Old Testament Bible study. In a new and profound way, the disciples understood how all of the Scriptures pointed towards Christ. *Everything* in the Old Testament is about Jesus—the revelation of the character of God and his relentless pursuit of his people.

The disciples then and millions of Christians since discovered that the holiness, justice and love of God cannot tolerate sin. It must be punished and removed from his presence. But

God has provided a substitutionary sacrifice, foreshadowed by the sacrifices made by the people of Israel. Foretold hundreds of years before His birth and with incredible detail, the Old Testament pointed to the life and death of Jesus, the “Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” (John 1:29) When talking with His disciples on this point, Jesus certainly had in mind the explicit prophecies found in passages like Psalm 22, Isaiah 53 and elsewhere.

The disciples saw that the Old Testament is all about Jesus, that the entire biblical account had been leading up to this. Jesus is the centerpiece of history, quite literally *his story*. Surely the disciples responded with awe and wonder. But likely the disciples experienced more. The simultaneous response to God’s greatness is always humility and repentance (c.f. Isaiah 6). Our great sin is believing that life is a story about us. The gospel means it’s not about us at all.

5. What difference does it make to us that the crucifixion and resurrection were foretold in the Old Testament? How do your conclusions relate to our motivations for missions?

Knowing that the crucifixion of Christ was foretold in the Old Testament should have profound consequences to us personally. We’ve already seen that our first response should be a sense that Jesus is the central story, not us. Moreover, we should be confident that the crucifixion was certain. It was never in doubt. The Father never wondered, “Will they crucify Him or let Him go?” And if the act of the crucifixion was sure, so was its intended result. From all eternity, it was always the plan of God to send his Son to suffer, so that “the punishment that brought us peace was upon him,” as Isaiah puts it. This is a finished statement; it’s done. As a follower of Jesus, your own salvation is a foregone conclusion. It is secure.

To take it further, it is secure because nothing in you prompted God to love you in the first place, and therefore *nothing* in you will cause him to stop. You cannot add to his work on the cross. God cannot love you more or less than He already does. This fact frees us from the burden of performance:

- If it’s about us, then we’ll get performance oriented. We’ll believe the lie that God will love us more if we pray a little more, if we’re a better parent or spouse, if we’re more active church members. In regards to missions, we’ll believe that God loves us more if we become missionaries, that somehow they’re more connected to God.
- If it’s about us, then we need to be in control. We’ll need to be successful in our eyes and the eyes of others, we’ll need to keep score of accomplishments, favors, and kindnesses. In regards to missions, we’ll believe that we must pray, plan, and produce.

But it’s not about us. Grace means we don’t have to keep score; there is no score. We can be free from the burden of performance. We have absolutely nothing to prove.

6. Jesus went on to declare that “repentance for forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem.” (Luke 24:47). This statement is what Christians call the Great Commission. For those

familiar with the Bible, what passages first come to mind regarding the Great Commission? What implications are there in your first response?

This statement certainly sounds similar to the Great Commission of Acts 1:8 and Matthew 28: “All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you.” Several New Testament references could be cited as a biblical basis for missions. Indeed, Christians typically go to the New Testament when they are considering God’s imperatives for world missions.

But if the Great Commission is found only in a few verses in the New Testament, then does it really deserve to be the priority of the Church? If the command to take the gospel into all the world only appears as a hurried afterthought in the mind of Jesus, remembered at the last minute before His ascension, then surely it merits the same treatment in our own priorities—tacked on the end of a long list of tasks.

7. What implications are there in Jesus’ basing the Great Commission on Old Testament passages? Where in the Old Testament do we see God making himself known to all the nations?

The Great Commission passages Jesus opened for the disciples are found in the *Old Testament* Scriptures. This point is critical. By directing them to the Scriptures the Israelites cherished for their entire existence—the words of God that shaped their whole life and community—Jesus affirms that the Great Commission has always been central in the plan of God. More than even that, the heart of God is filled with His passion that all peoples would know Him and declare His glory. The Great Commission actually permeates Scripture, from the opening chapters of Genesis to the close of Revelation. Rather than being a footnote in a few passages, this passion of God underlies every word.

From the first occurrence of Adam’s sin, man has turned away and hid from God. Yet even then, God pursued those who were alienated from God and themselves (Genesis 3:8, 9). In the first hours of man’s sinful state, God pointed to the ultimate victory that would come through Christ (Genesis 3:15). Thus, there was never a moment in the history of mankind that God did not have in mind a plan of salvation. In fact, God had ordained the redemption of His people even before the world was created (Ephesians 1:4). Some of the many passages referring to God’s blessing all the peoples of the earth include the following:

God would bless Abraham’s family in order to be a blessing to all peoples:

“Leave your country, your people and your father’s household and go to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.” (Genesis 12:1-3)

Israel was to be a kingdom of priests (i.e. mediators between God and man) to an unbelieving world:

“Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites. (Exodus 19:5, 6)

God used the tragic circumstances of a servant girl’s captivity to lead Naaman the gentile to faith:

Now I know that there is no God in all the earth but in Israel. (2 Kings 5:15)

People throughout the entire world would turn to God:

All the ends of the earth will remember and turn to the LORD, and all the families of the nations will bow down before him, for dominion belongs to the LORD and he rules over the nations. (Psalm 22:27-28)

The prayers of Israel appealed to God to be gracious to all peoples:

May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face shine upon us, that your ways may be known on earth, your salvation among all nations. May the peoples praise you, O God; may all the peoples praise you. May the nations be glad and sing for joy, for you rule the peoples justly and guide the nations of the earth. May the peoples praise you, O God; may all the peoples praise you. (Psalm 67:1-5)

A compassionate God sends Jonah to a Gentile city:

But Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and many cattle as well. Should I not be concerned about that great city?” (Jonah 4:11)

The nations are told to draw near to God:

Come near, you nations, and listen; pay attention, you peoples! Let the earth hear, and all that is in it, the world, and all that comes out of it! (Isaiah 34:1)

The restoration of Israel following the exile included their being a blessing to others:

[The Lord] says: “It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth.” (Isaiah 49:6)

8. Can you think of passages in the New Testament where God confirms the Great Commission?

The same people of God, who in New Testament times have a fuller knowledge of their Messiah, are to continue to be a light to the nations. In the New Testament, “Gentiles” and “nations” are translations of the Greek, *ethne*, from which we get the word “ethnic” or people.

Jesus calls the temple a place of prayer for all peoples. Considering that the temple represents the presence of God among his people, Jesus’ anger at the misuse of the temple is even more powerful:

Is it not written: “My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations”? (Mark 11:17)

Jesus commands His followers to take the gospel to the whole world:

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age. (Matthew 28:18-20)

Jesus repeats this command immediately prior to His ascension:

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. (Acts 1:8)

Peter learns that the gospel is for all the nations:

I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right. (Acts 10:34-35)

The gospel results in faithfulness to God among the nations:

Through [Christ] we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the nations. (Romans 1:5)

Paul explicitly connects the gospel to the promise given to Abraham:

Consider Abraham: "He believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness." Understand, then, that those who believe are children of Abraham. The Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: "All nations will be blessed through you." (Galatians 3:6-8)

Heaven will be characterized by the praise of all peoples:

After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice: "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb." (Revelation 7:9-10)

9. What difference should it make in our lives that God's story of redemption is unfolding exactly as he ordained from all eternity?

It must be emphasized that the Great Commission is a gracious commission. Sometimes the impetus for missions is communicated in a way that suggests the plan of redemption "corrects" a mistake in God's created order. Having wrongly allowed man to sin in the first place, God keeps trying and failing to woo man back. This error implies that redemptive history is Plan B in God's eyes, and that he needs man to fix the problem.

But that's not the biblical story. History has unfolded exactly how our sovereign God has been pleased to orchestrate it. God in no way was obligated to create a way of salvation. We had broken our part of the covenant, and yet God had always designed to bear our responsibility for the fulfillment of the covenant. Though we deserved to be punished for our sins, Jesus bore the penalty Himself. But it does not end there. Even the growth and extension of God's kingdom depends entirely upon God, for "unless the Lord builds the

house, they labor in vain who build it” (Psalm 127:1). Because of God’s covenantal promises to redeem His people, we know that we are part of a plan that cannot fail. The gospel will indeed go forth to all the nations (Matthew 24:14). And in all this—the beginning, the extension, and the fulfillment of God’s kingdom—God alone will receive the glory. This confidence in God’s sovereignty should free us from the burden of paralysis. As we seek to follow him in faithfulness, we can thus be confident that we have nothing to lose.

10. For further discussion: where have you seen examples of the sovereign grace of God bringing people to himself?

PART TWO: THE FRONTLINES OF MISSIONS

2 KINGS 5:1-16

1. When you think of the frontlines of missions, what comes to mind?

READ 2 Kings 5:1-16

2. Apart from his skin disease, what kind of person is Naaman? What would be the natural feelings of the servant girl towards Naaman and Aramean culture?
3. What is Naaman's need, both on the surface and more deeply? How does the servant girl see him?
4. How do people typically perceive others who are different from them, including those from different cultures? How does looking on the exterior of a person limit the gospel?
5. How does Naaman try to get rid of his shame? On what "offerings" does he base his hope for healing?
6. How is Naaman's hope like that of other religions, and that of ourselves apart from the gospel?
7. How does Elisha respond to each of Naaman's offerings, and what is behind Naaman's reaction? What does this say to where we must find our security?
8. Is there any person, culture or religion which you subtly believe is somehow beyond the reach of the gospel? How does grace address your feelings?
9. What did the servant girl have to offer? What does her experience tell us in terms of who God can use to reach others, even across cultural lines?
10. Summarize the insights from this passage related to a gospel-centered approach to world missions.

LEADER'S NOTES FOR PART TWO: THE FRONTLINES OF MISSIONS

Main Points

Many people—Christian or not—believe that the life and death of Jesus ushered in a period of grace. This common understanding is expressed in phrases such as “In the Old Testament, God is a God of law, but in the New Testament, he is a God of love.” Naturally, the latter version is more palatable. But this dichotomy can not be defended biblically, for there is both law and love throughout the Scriptures. There is but one Bible, one story of revelation and redemption. But more pointedly, God can not be so divided. His character does not and can not change. His immutability is in fact the basis for our hope and security. He is, has always been and always will be the God of grace. Even in the earliest pages of the Old Testament, God has been drawing the nations to himself through the good news of grace. And because the Great Commission is grounded in the Old Testament, we know that missions is central in the heart of God—and so should be in ours.

This theme was developed in Part One, and in this study we will examine one of these great Old Testament stories of the gospel. This passage clearly demonstrates the continuity of God's cross-cultural extension of grace and invites us to participate in his unfolding story. But more importantly, we will see the faithfulness of God, who keeps his covenant that “I will be your God, and you will be my people.”

Questions & Commentary

1. **When you think of the frontlines of missions, what comes to mind?** Warm-up question.

When Christians think of the “frontlines” of missions, they typically think of far-off places where the task of spreading the gospel seems particularly challenging. Perhaps you think of China, where there has been tremendous response to Jesus Christ, yet hundreds of millions of Chinese have never heard the true gospel. Or places like Vietnam, where Christians are persecuted for their faith. Or in Europe, where most people are hardened to the gospel. Or the peoples of Islam, which represent one-fifth of the world's population and is expected to be the largest religion by 2060.

But the frontline of missions is not in any of these places. It's in our hearts. That's where the battle is won or lost. And this battle is won by losing, namely losing our dependence on ourselves. When Christians go into the world, whether across the street or across an ocean, we are to be “Going in Grace.” That means our motivations must not be rooted in guilt or self-effort, but in dependency on God from first to last, and for his glory and not our own. The Great Commission is above all a Gracious Commission.

A helpful place to consider this perspective is from the story of Naaman in the Old Testament. Naaman is just one of many examples of God's grace being extended to the

nations, long before the birth of Jesus. In Part One of this series, we saw that the Great Commission begins not in the New Testament but in the Old. This means that the gospel is central in God's heart and not a New Testament afterthought. Being transformed by the grace of God is why our hearts are the true frontlines of missions. In this discussion we will consider three ways we are to be taken captive, i.e. captivated, by the gospel:

Our Sight: The gospel transforms how we view others

Our Security: The gospel transforms the basis for our confidence

Our Service: The gospel transforms how we relate to others

READ 2 Kings 5:1-16

A bit of context will help set the stage for the story. Israel and Aramea (modern day Syria) had a history of conflicts over such issues as trading routes, and land and water rights. A treaty was established during the reign of King Ahab, and Israel and Aramea entered a period of uneasy truce. While not officially at war, their lingering distrust and fear led to border skirmishes that were neither officially sanctioned nor discouraged. One such raid led to a "young girl from Israel" being taken captive, eventually becoming the servant of Naaman's wife.

2. Apart from his skin disease, what kind of person is Naaman? What would be the natural feelings of the servant girl towards Naaman and Aramean culture?

We are told that as the commander of the Syrian army, he was a *great man*. He was a man of power and a *valiant warrior*. He was *highly regarded* for a military victory, some speculating by defeating King Ahab of Israel, or by defeating the Assyrians, the most powerful force on the planet. He thus held a place of esteem and honor. Considering that this girl was forcibly removed from her homeland and family, the natural response would be for her to see Naaman as a man to be feared and avenged. Naaman is also from another culture, and it would have been natural for her to distance herself from him and despise his background.

3. What is Naaman's need, both on the surface and more deeply? How does the servant girl see him?

The story takes a dead stop with the phrase *but he was a leper* and an unexpected turn in how we view Naaman. In fact, the wording is more abrupt than that, as the words "but he was" are English additions to make the translation read more easily. The original says more starkly: *a valiant warrior—a leper*. It's as if the Holy Spirit is saying "to understand this story, you must look past Naaman's exterior and see him as a man in need." The obvious need, of course, was healing from the physical disease of leprosy, a biblical term used for a wide range of skin diseases. But at least as scarring to Naaman was the social ostracism that he likely was experiencing at some level. He is need of healing, but he really needed cleansing on deeper level. What kind of healing was this?

Westerners often see Naaman's deeper need as a cleansing from guilt. Certainly this is true theologically, but a focus on his guilt is largely framed by a Western cultural perspective. A

Western worldview typically looks at behavior through the lens of guilt or innocence. This perspective is why Americans may feel guilty when they run a stop light, even though no one is around. It also results in a higher proportion of lawyers relative to the rest of the world. Being right and defending your rights is a strong Western value.

But to understand Naaman's need, we must see this story through the perspective of a Middle Easterner. In the Middle East and Asia, there is a greater emphasis on honor and shame. Your position in society means everything. What you do reflects on your group, family and tribe. Middle Easterners have a strong external desire to achieve honor and avoid shame at all costs. Since leprosy cuts you off from others, it is considered a shameful disease. More than experiencing guilt, Naaman feels shame.

When the servant girl looks at Naaman, the man responsible for her captivity, she is somehow able to see beyond a natural instinct of fear and revenge. She sees Naaman as above all, a man in need, both physically and spiritually. Given the context, this is indeed an outrageous response for her, overriding whatever fear or bitterness she had.

4. How do people typically perceive others who are different from them, including those from different cultures? How does looking on the exterior of a person limit the gospel?

When people look at others, they naturally focus on appearances, such as their physical looks, background, level of education, personal wealth, personality, religious or political beliefs, and social behavior. These may either be attractive or repulsive. On one level, an outward focus limits the gospel in that we are drawn to people we feel comfortable with and write off those who are different. On a deeper level, such a perspective never sees past the surface needs to the issues of the heart. But *God sees not as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance. But the Lord looks at the heart* (1 Samuel 16:7). What does God see there? He sees our guilt, our shame, and our fear. To be transformed by the gospel means that we begin to see people differently, to see them as God sees.

5. How does Naaman try to get rid of his shame? On what “offerings” does he base his hope for healing?

Naaman's expectations for healing are based on five offerings:

- ❑ His wealth. Naaman brings an enormous treasure with him: 700 lbs of silver, 120 lbs of gold, and 10 valuable garments, expecting he can buy a cure.
- ❑ His relationships. He expects the kings of Israel and Aram to open doors for him.
- ❑ His status. He expects Elisha will be impressed by his horses and chariots, and that Elisha will greet him personally out of deference.
- ❑ His background. He expects the rivers back home will work better than the insignificant Jordan.
- ❑ His merits. Barring all else, he expects he can do some “great thing” to earn his healing and restore his honor.

Ultimately, he depends on himself, i.e. what he brings to the table. Naaman's security is in Naaman.

6. How is Naaman’s hope like that of other religions, and that of ourselves apart from the gospel?

Naturally, we are all the same. We may call it by different names, but in the final analysis, we all look to ourselves. Eastern religions speak of karma, where our good deeds build up good karma that hopefully outweigh or negate bad karma. A Jewish midrash says “three things can cancel evil decrees; namely prayer, almsgiving and repentance.” A Jordanian Muslim summed up Islam by saying “we hope that what we do will attract the mercy of God.”

Naturally, we are no different. Like Naaman, we say, “just tell me what to do.” As long as it’s noble or sacrificial—as long as it requires something of me, I’ll try it. We are all wired to think we have to do something for our restoration, that it ultimately depends on us. And this reliance on self doesn’t disappear after becoming a Christian. Christians often think our obedience means God loves us more, and our disobedience means he loves us less. We may have a different river back home or a different holy book, but naturally we’re all the same. The tug of our fallen nature is to relate to God based on what we do. We find our security in ourselves.

7. How does Elisha respond to each of Naaman’s offerings, and what is behind Naaman’s reaction? What does this say to where we must find our security?

Elisha rejects or ignores each of Naaman’s offerings:

- ❑ His wealth. Elisha refuses to accept anything.
- ❑ His relationships. The kings’ references mean nothing to Elisha.
- ❑ His status. Elisha does not greet Naaman personally and sends his servant instead.
- ❑ His background. Elisha tells him wash in a local, muddy, insignificant river.
- ❑ His merits. Elisha tells him simply to let himself be washed, and nothing more.

Elisha rejects everything he offers, and Naaman feels snubbed. But if we’re honest, we’re equally offended that we bring nothing to the table. There’s a part of us that doesn’t want the gift. It may seem counter-intuitive to resist something that’s free, but accepting grace is an admission that we are broken beyond repair. In a very real sense, grace is the ultimate rejection of self. Our pride finds that repulsive.

The gospel says we can’t make ourselves innocent; we need to be forgiven. We can’t restore our own honor; we need to be lifted up. The way home is not our effort. We can never do enough; in fact, we can do nothing at all. Whether we follow Christ or not, we all need a way home that does not depend on self. Another must free us from guilt and shame. We need a Savior from the outside. The biblical story is that of God’s initiative to reverse the effects of the fall, not by our efforts, but by grace alone. Our security, then, rests not in anything in ourselves, nor in anything we could add to the work of Christ, but in grace alone.

8. Is there any person, culture or religion which you subtly believe is somehow beyond the reach of the gospel? How does grace address your feelings?

Even though they believe in grace, Christians can write off certain people as somehow beyond hope. Perhaps it's a relative who's resistant to the gospel or an entire people group who seems hostile to Christianity. Intellectually, the Christian might believe God can do anything, but in their heart, they may have no real hope. This attitude reflects a misunderstanding of the gospel. If salvation somehow hinges on us, if the decisive ingredient necessary for our salvation is individual merit or even a decision to believe, then we have no basis to hope for anyone, including ourselves. In fact, we should despair.

But grace does not allow you to lose hope for anyone. Because everything depends on grace, no one is more or less able to receive it. No one is beyond the reach of the gospel. A gospel-centered approach to missions is full of hope that God can change the heart of any nation, tribe, people and tongue. And to the degree you've lost hope for anyone, you have likewise lost hope for yourself. If God can't change the heart of a Muslim, Hindu, atheist, or Presbyterian, then he can't change you. The same gospel that saves us is the one we walk by (Colossians 2:6), meaning that the power to change our hearts today is the same power that saved us in the first place. It all depends on grace.

9. What did the servant girl have to offer? What does her experience tell us in terms of who God can use to reach others, even across cultural lines?

In contrast to Naaman, we can't imagine a person of lower position. As a servant, she performed menial tasks and was considered almost a non-person. As a captive, she was a spoil of war and a foreigner who had no rights. As a female in the Ancient Near East, she was considered property. As a young girl, she was neither educated nor respected. And perhaps most insightful, we don't even know her name. All these factors tell us that her identity is not important.

If anyone would seemingly be less qualified to be used of God, especially to reach a powerful man like Naaman, surely it was this unnamed slave. What did she do? She didn't explain fine points of theology. She didn't have a deep understanding of Aramean culture. She simply told Naaman's wife where Naaman could find help. And finally when he washes, he is healed—but not just of leprosy. He is given a new heart, declaring “there is no God in all the world except the God of Israel.” This man, looking for honor in all the wrong places, is now restored.

God had arranged her circumstances, even through tragedy, to put her in position to point someone in the right direction. This should tell us that no matter our background, experience, tragedy, or brokenness, God can and will use us. The servant girl wasn't on Plan B; neither are you. This servant girl, who brings nothing to the table, is a true model of grace. There is no boasting about her abilities. There is no bitterness about her circumstances. She's simply open and willing. She understands it's really not about her at all. God uses ordinary people to share gospel, both across the street and across the world. Because of grace, our sovereign God can and will use us.

10. Summarize the insights from this passage related to a gospel-centered approach to world missions.

Among the many insights would be the following:

- ❑ The Great Commission—taking the gospel to the ends of the earth—has always been central in the heart of God and so should be in ours.
- ❑ Grace helps us see others as God sees them, as people in need of forgiveness, freedom, and honor.
- ❑ Our security is not in ourselves, but in God alone.
- ❑ We cannot lose hope for any person or culture; grace makes us bold and hopeful.
- ❑ God uses the humble in heart.
- ❑ God has sovereignly arranged our lives according to his plan and purposes.

PART THREE: A MISSIONARY'S JOURNEY

SELECTIONS FROM ACTS

1. Who has been one of your greatest influences? Who would you consider to be the most influential person in the New Testament, apart from Jesus?

Read Acts 4:34-37

2. Barnabas is introduced to us in the account of the early Christians sharing their possessions. Briefly, what details do we learn of him?

Read Acts 9:26-28

3. Barnabas drops out of sight for five chapters and re-emerges in the ninth chapter of Acts after the dramatic conversion of Saul, the Pharisee who had zealously persecuted Christians. Why were the disciples afraid to associate with Saul? What kind of people do you not like to associate with?
4. What kind of reaction could Barnabas expect from the apostles? What motivated him to reach out to Saul, who had yet to prove himself trustworthy?

Read Acts 11:19-24

5. Why is there need to investigate what is happening in Antioch, and what does Barnabas see there? How does your appreciation of grace help you see the gospel at work in others?
6. Missions is the work of Christ extending his love for others through his people. Are you typically more full of hope or despair regarding the effectiveness of missions? To the degree that you despair for others, how can you change?

Read Acts 11:25-26

7. Why does Barnabas leave Antioch to get Saul? Given Saul's background (a Jewish scholar who's familiar with the Gentile world), why would he be a good fit for the church in Antioch?
8. How does grace enable Barnabas to build up others in Christ? What other insights about cross-cultural ministry do you learn from Barnabas?

Read Acts 13:1-5

9. Continuing under Barnabas' mentoring, Saul has become a leader in the Antioch church. The two men are appointed to spread the gospel, and their first stop on the first missionary journey is Cyprus, Barnabas' homeland. If you were going to a very familiar place and took someone to work with you, how might you approach the trip?

Read Acts 13:6-12

10. The first known convert on the entire journey comes at the hand of Saul, not Barnabas. How might you have felt, if you were Barnabas?

Read Acts 13:13

11. The next reference to the apostles is "Paul and his companions." Barnabas is not even mentioned. From this point on through the end of Acts, Paul becomes the prominent figure and leader. Based on what we've learned, how might Barnabas have reacted and what enabled him to do so? How do you feel when others pass you by in prominence?

Read Acts 15:36-39

12. How does Barnabas' service to John Mark resemble the principles of grace he demonstrated to Paul?

LEADER'S NOTES FOR PART THREE: A MISSIONARY'S JOURNEY

Main Points

This discussion focuses on the most influential missionary in the New Testament—and it's not Paul! Apart from Jesus, no one has more influence than Barnabas, a man largely forgotten by history. If he's remembered at all, Barnabas is seen as a background figure in the biblical story, a minor character in the early church. And yet God used him to dramatically shape the identity of the Church—not only in his day but in ours as well.

Barnabas is easily overlooked in part because his story is told in small sections, with comparatively little drama. To get to know Barnabas, one must look at all the related passages at once, so that a real person emerges. This lesson will show us his influence on key leaders, his love for the church and his desire to see the gospel take root in other cultures.

But more than studying his impact, we will examine what enabled him to make such an impression on others. The missionary journey that is most significant is not the road Barnabas took to various cities, the one we see in the maps at the back of our Bibles. Instead, the journey that God cared about most and used in others took place in Barnabas' own heart. The reason Barnabas was so influential can be summarized in one word: grace. Barnabas was above all a man who saw himself and others through the lens of the gospel of grace. And the Church, even today, is different because of it.

There are likely people in your study who are struggling with feeling inconsequential. Perhaps this feeling is expressed through a debilitating sense of inadequacy and low self-esteem. Or on the other end of the spectrum, perhaps they strive for power and influence, in order to become a person of consequence. But in the end, it's the same spectrum: their worth is based on themselves. This is the world of ungrace. Only grace can free us from the idolatry of self. And in this, Barnabas can help show us the way.

Questions & Commentary

- 1. Who has been one of your greatest influences? Who would you consider to be the most influential person in the New Testament, apart from Jesus?** Warm-up question.

In this lesson, we will look at a man who most would regard as small and inconsequential. Many people who can identify key figures in the Bible have never heard of him. And yet he is arguably the most influential person in the New Testament, aside from Jesus. Not Peter, John or any of the disciples. Not Mary. Not Paul. At a pivotal moment in the life of the Church, a time of transition, God used this man to define the identity and future of the Church. We can even trace the roots of our own church to his influence. That man is Barnabas.

Read Acts 4:34-37

2. Barnabas is introduced to us in the account of the early Christians sharing their possessions. Briefly, what details do we learn of him?

Barnabas is faithful, generous, and compassionate. As a Levite, he knew God's Word and his ways. He has a reputation for encouragement, as indicated by the apostles nicknaming him "son of encouragement." Barnabas is originally from Cyprus.

Read Acts 9:26-28

3. Barnabas drops out of sight for five chapters and re-emerges in the ninth chapter of Acts after the dramatic conversion of Saul, the Pharisee who had zealously persecuted Christians. Why were the disciples afraid to associate with Saul? What kind of people do you not like to associate with?

The disciples had every reason to be afraid. Their friend Stephen had been stoned for his faith, with Saul's support. Saul clearly wanted to destroy the church, and they suspected he wanted to ingratiate himself with disciples so that he could destroy them. They naturally feared Saul was being duplicitous and could not see him as anything but an enemy.

Based on indications from New Testament letters, nearly three years have passed since Saul's conversion. Thus, for three years they distanced themselves from Saul, in spite of his public ministry. The apostles had written Saul off and never changed their mind.

4. What kind of reaction could Barnabas expect from the apostles? What motivated him to reach out to Saul, who had yet to prove himself trustworthy?

The apostles likely would have questioned Barnabas' judgment: "Do you not remember what he's done? He's responsible for killing Stephen and other followers in Christ? You can not trust him, no matter what he says." Barnabas is taking an unpopular stand at great risk to his own reputation. This is nothing short of extraordinary.

What motivated Barnabas to lovingly serve someone who had been a professed enemy of the Church, before he had a chance to prove himself? Barnabas knew that God loved us even when we deserved the opposite. Saul would later put it this way: "*while we were enemies* we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son" (Romans 5:10). Although the histories of Barnabas and Saul were different, they had one thing in common: both deserved justice and got mercy. Barnabas knew this and was transformed by the gospel. Only a heart that understands its own need for grace can offer it to others.

Grace enables Barnabas to see what the apostles could not: the unconditional initiative of Jesus extending love to his enemy. Saul had seen the Lord, the Lord had spoken to him, and he a bold witness in Damascus. Barnabas looks at Saul and is able to see beyond his sin and his history. Instead of looking on outward appearances—which would give him ample reason to distrust Saul—Barnabas looks at the heart. And when he does, Barnabas sees Jesus. Maybe the picture he sees is small or out of focus, but Barnabas clearly sees Jesus in

him. And that was reason enough to give Barnabas confidence. Barnabas knew that God's work didn't depend on anything in Saul; it had nothing to do with Saul at all. Barnabas sees God at work, and he bets on God.

Read Acts 11:19-24

5. Why is there need to investigate what is happening in Antioch, and what does Barnabas see there? How does your appreciation of grace help you see the gospel at work in others?

About five years after Saul is accepted by the apostles in Jerusalem, some believers from Jewish backgrounds move to the gentile city of Antioch. As was typical, most of these believers shared the gospel only to Jews. For centuries, they had been taught that Jehovah was the God of the Jews. In the same way, they believed the gospel was meant only for Jews.

But some believers—notably those not from Jewish lands—spoke the good news to the gentiles, who responded in faith. The disciples in Jerusalem weren't sure what to make of it, so they sent Barnabas to investigate. They knew he had discernment, was grounded in the Scriptures and most important of all, he was able to see the gospel in different and surprising packages. As he had done with Saul, Barnabas sees beyond the outward circumstances and sees “the grace of God” (11:23).

We must remain open to God working in anyone, for with grace, there are no boundaries to who can receive the gospel. If the gospel does not depend on something in a person—his behavior, background or potential—then it cannot be restricted to any individual or group. Because it does not depend on something in us, none of us is more or less able to receive grace. The gospel of grace, to be truly gracious, must by definition be open to any person, group or nation. Missions is fueled by grace.

6. Missions is the work of Christ extending his love for others through his people. Are you typically more full of hope or despair regarding the effectiveness of missions? To the degree that you despair for others, how can you change?

Our being gracious means that we cannot restrict hope for anyone. Instead, we should be eagerly searching for any sign that God may be doing a new thing in someone.

Conversely, losing hope for someone is an indictment not on that person—who is unable to deserve it anyway—but on our understanding of the power of the Holy Spirit. Hopelessness says far more about ourselves than about others.

Change does not happen by our flipping some switch, or by our somehow manufacturing or pretending to hope for others. Instead, we need grace to be more gracious! The Christian life from start to finish is one of repentance and faith. Thus, the starting point to see the grace of God in others is repenting of the pride that blinds us to grace, e.g.

- Of not believing that the same power that changed your heart can change others.

- Of believing your ethnic or national background is inherently superior to others. Or for that matter, inherently inferior.
- Of thinking that the real problem in our church or society is the other person: if he could just fix him, things would be fine.
- Of thinking that God only speaks to you and people like you.
- Of second guessing people's words and motives.
- Of holding to untested stereotypes or prejudices.
- Of bearing grudges against individuals or groups.

It is when we are broken of our pride that the gospel most fully works in us. The depth of our repentance determines the height of our faith, for we have made room for something other than ourselves. Having nothing left in ourselves to cling to, we look to Christ to change us, renew us and fill us. And he will because he promises to do so. That is faith. It is not faith in faith, it is faith in Christ.

The first principle from the life of Barnabas is *grace always hopes for any person or situation.*

Read Acts 11:25-26

7. Why does Barnabas leave Antioch to get Saul? Given Saul's background (a Jewish scholar who's familiar with the gentile world), why would he be a good fit for the church in Antioch?

The Antioch church is growing rapidly, new believers are being discipled, and the walls of racial division are coming down. In the midst of fruitful ministry needing wise and capable leadership, Barnabas does an amazing thing: he leaves. At a pivotal time for the church, when Barnabas' presence was greatly needed, he felt compelled to leave the city to find help. Barnabas knows that the care and growth of the church urgently required more leaders. But rather than looking to Jerusalem for help, he travels westward to Tarsus, nearly a week's journey on foot.

He goes there to recruit Saul, who has been out of the picture for five years. Given that we know little about this interim period, perhaps Saul is still somewhat disconnected from leaders in Jerusalem. Regardless, his ministry offers little hint of the future impact we remember him for. Instead, the last few years have been a time of seasoning and preparation.

Barnabas brings Saul to Antioch, where they taught and led the church for a year. But in enlisting Saul, Barnabas had more in mind than the needs of the Antioch church. He was also thinking of Saul. Barnabas sees the opportunity in Antioch as a perfect match for Saul's unique talents. Barnabas is a man supremely committed to seeing others grow in Christ, and he gives Saul a context to grow into the leader God intended him to be.

What did Barnabas see that others might have missed? First, he knows the context. Antioch is an important center of commerce, full of people from diverse ethnicities. The city is strongly influenced by Greek thinking and culture. To succeed there, one must be adept in the gentile world. Barnabas also knows the church in Antioch. The work began as a result of persecution, so they knew the gospel comes at a price. Barnabas is aware that the gentile

members may be viewed with suspicion by Jewish believers. He also knows the church has a passion to share the gospel with both Jew and gentile, and that ministry to gentiles will represent a host of unique challenges.

In Saul, Barnabas sees a man grounded in the Scriptures and the gospel of grace, exhibiting a life transformed by Jesus. As a Roman citizen, Saul also has an appreciation for the gentile world. He is fluent in Greek, a natural leader, and has a bold passion to see the gospel take root among gentiles—even at great personal expense. Given the mix of all these factors, Barnabas sees Saul as the perfect person to come alongside him in ministry.

8. How does grace enable Barnabas to build up others in Christ? What other insights about cross-cultural ministry do you learn from Barnabas’?

From the perspective of two thousand years of Church history, we look back on the arrival of Saul in Antioch as a critical turning point for both him and the early church. The time in Antioch launches Paul’s public ministry and the expansion of the Church into the gentile world. Given the drama of this moment, it’s easy to overlook what made it possible in the first place.

Given a growing ministry doing exciting work, many people might have been tempted just to stay in Antioch. When people are turning to you for leadership and advice, why share the role at all? And if help from the outside was really needed, why not get someone safe and predictable? When things are going well, it’s easy not to give anything away.

But Barnabas was a man of grace. He knows it’s not about himself, his reputation, his position, his control, or his ego. It’s not about Barnabas and his kingdom. It’s about Jesus and the kingdom of God.

Only grace can humble and transform a heart like it did for Barnabas. Grace enables Barnabas to think more about others than himself. And grace enables Barnabas to build them up in Christ without manipulation, without reservation, and without pride. Why? Because the gospel means that Barnabas has nothing to prove. He doesn’t have to earn merit in the eyes of God, others or himself. Instead, he knows he is fully accepted, and nothing—*nothing*—can make God love Barnabas more than he does already. Thus, Barnabas can relax his ego. With his own reputation out of the way, he can humbly address the need at hand. And in so doing, he pulls a man like Saul from the sidelines and gets him into the game.

Missionaries should learn to model Barnabas in their appreciation of grace, so that they can most effectively equip others for leadership. Like Barnabas, missionaries serve not simply as doers and delegaters, but as facilitators of leaders, equipping others for the work of ministry. An encourager grounded in grace draws out the unique abilities and talents in others, without forcing them to conform to a preconceived mold. We also learn from Barnabas the importance of the local church and it being an instrument in the Savior’s hands to take the gospel across cultural boundaries and walls.

The second principle from the life of Barnabas is that *grace draws out the best in others*.

Read Acts 13:1-5

- 9. Continuing under Barnabas' mentoring, Saul has become a leader in the Antioch church. The two men are appointed to spread the gospel, and their first stop on the first missionary journey is Cyprus, Barnabas' homeland. If you were going to a very familiar place and took someone to work with you, how might you approach the trip?**

After a trip to Jerusalem, Barnabas and Saul returned to Antioch, taking with them John Mark. The names of the leaders in 13:1 indicate Antioch is a multi-ethnic church, and that Saul is considered among the visible leaders of the church. Given the order of the names in Acts 12:25, Acts 13:1 and elsewhere, we know that Barnabas has the preeminent leadership role. Saul becomes one of two men set apart by the Holy Spirit for a new work. Considering that just a few years prior, the disciples kept him at arm's length, Saul has come a long way, thanks to Barnabas.

They head to Cyprus, Barnabas' homeland. Given a similar situation, we might likely take on the role of host, even explicitly telling our co-workers to follow our lead. It would be natural to expect that the insider and host would take the lead role in dealing with others.

Read Acts 13:6-12

- 10. The first known convert on the entire journey comes at the hand of Saul, not Barnabas. How might you have felt, if you were Barnabas?**

The group begins their journey on the northeast corner of Cyprus and travel through the entire island until they get to Paphos, on the southwestern tip. Along the way, they share the gospel in the Jewish synagogues, but no responses are recorded.

In Paphos, a gentile official wants to learn about God from Barnabas and Saul. When Elymas opposes them, Saul boldly steps in and confronts him. Instead of preventing the proconsul from seeing the truth, Elymas will become blinded for a time. This dramatic event is used by God to open the heart of the official, who believes the gospel. From here on, Saul is now referred to as Paul, the name by which he is remembered.

What might Barnabas have been feeling while watching this unfold? Another man might have felt Paul was being too confrontational, and that his tactics weren't appropriate for his homeland. Or it would be natural to feel a bit slighted or jealous that the first conversion took place at the hand of Paul. Barnabas, the primary leader and host, was overshadowed.

Read Acts 13:13

- 11. The next reference to the apostles is "Paul and his companions." Barnabas is not even mentioned. From this point on through the end of Acts, Paul becomes the prominent figure and leader. Based on what we've learned, how might Barnabas have reacted and what enabled him to do so? How do you feel when others pass you by in prominence?**

The wording in 13:1 is startling. Barnabas—the man who first showed confidence in Saul and enlisted him for service—is completely eclipsed by his protégé. From this point forward, the story centers on Paul. Paul clearly is the lead figure, being mentioned first in all but one reference to the two men (c.f. 13:46, 50; 15:2, 22). Largely forgotten by history, Barnabas is reduced to a footnote of the early church.

We have every indication that Barnabas is ok with that. He never holds Paul back, nor does he seek the limelight. Grace means not holding on to our reputation or position such that we can't enjoy others' success. It means letting others pass you by in prominence, even the very people you mentor, because grace is only concerned with the prominence of Christ. We can sincerely respond this way because grace teaches us that life is not a story about us. We aren't the central figures in history. The story is about God. And he is at work in his world, for his glory and not ours.

The third principle we learn from the life of Barnabas is *grace unreservedly delights in the success of others*.

Read Acts 15:36-39

12. How does Barnabas' service to John Mark resemble the principles of grace he demonstrated to Paul?

After leaving Cyprus, John Mark abandons Paul and Barnabas and returns to Jerusalem. Paul and Barnabas continue on their journey. In planning for a return visit to the cities they visited, Barnabas wants to bring John Mark, but Paul refuses. Paul does not trust John Mark and will not reach out to him. Paul and Barnabas have such a sharp disagreement over the matter that they separate. Barnabas takes Mark and heads straight for Cyprus. We know nothing of their travels, for the storyline in Acts follows Paul's journey. However, we can see a few things.

First, *grace always hopes for any person or situation*. Though Mark is not trusted, Barnabas sees something in him that others miss. Barnabas looks past the circumstances to the ability of God to transform any heart. Second, *grace draws out the best in others*. Barnabas sees a need that Mark can fill with the proper guidance. So he takes Mark back to Cyprus, the very place where Mark failed. Third, *grace unreservedly delights in the success of others*. Though we don't know what happened on the journey, we can see its effects on Mark. Years later, Paul writes of his great confidence in Mark's ability (2 Timothy 4:11). And Mark goes on to write the gospel that bears his name. As did Paul, Mark becomes more prominent than Barnabas.

With Paul, Antioch, and Mark, Barnabas essentially repeated the same principles of grace. He loves seeing the gospel take root in surprising and unexpected places, helping it to grow, and getting out of the way. And then he looks for another place to plant the seeds of the gospel.

Conclusion

Apart from Jesus, no one in the New Testament had a greater influence on the lives of others and the unfolding impact of the Church than did Barnabas. We see this through the transformation of Paul, the Antioch church, and Mark. Rather than remaining a pariah, Paul goes on to plant churches throughout Asia Minor and write half of the books in the New Testament. Largely through his influence, the Church is grounded in the gospel of grace. Unbounded by any person or group, the Church spreads the gospel to the uttermost ends of the earth. Instead of being considered unorthodox, Antioch becomes a key church in extending the gospel to gentiles and in demonstrating mercy to others in need. After the fall of Jerusalem, Antioch becomes the leading church of the day. And rather than being sidelined, Mark becomes a leader in the early Church, whose gospel account is read by millions every day. Mark's gospel is often the first book to be translated by missionaries into other languages, introducing countless numbers of people to the grace of God.

The greatest missionary journey, though, takes place in the heart of Barnabas. Something had to transform his own heart before he could become the "Son of Encouragement." That something, of course, is the gospel, which alone is "the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes" (Romans 1:16). Barnabas' confidence was grounded not in his own abilities, but in the surpassing power of grace. And in this affection, he stopped looking out for himself and started looking out for the grace of God. Precisely because he wasn't concerned with his own influence, God used him to be a tremendous influence on others.

PART FOUR: THE PILLARS OF GRACE

MATTHEW 16:13-18

Questions & Commentary

1. In the passage we'll discuss, Jesus asks the disciples what was the public perception of his identity. Considering the opinions of your relatives, neighbors or co-workers, how would you answer the same question?

READ MATTHEW 16:13-18

2. Jesus next asks the disciples the more penetrating question: who do you say I am? Why is this question so critical to all of us? How does this question serve as a prelude to Christ's next word about the mission of the church?
3. This passage indicates we cannot know Jesus apart from God the Father giving us understanding. Do you think a belief in God's initiative in drawing people to himself strengthens or weakens a commitment to missions? Why?
4. What do we learn about the nature of the Christian life from Jesus' statement that he is the building the church, not us? What difference should this make?
5. The word *church* literally means 'called out ones.' The Christian life is to be distinct and compelling, filled with purpose. Other biblical analogies for the Church include building, body, people, family and bride. What do these images suggest of the nature and mission of the Church? What does Jesus think of the Church?
6. A common theme in all these images is the importance of unity in the Church. What should this unity look like, and how does it foster the mission of the Church? What can you do to promote unity in the Church?
7. Jesus declares that the church is his. In the best sense of the term, he owns and directs the Church. How do human images make us rebel against the idea of Christ owning and ruling us? How does grace make this something to be welcomed rather than feared?
8. What implications of Christ's ownership do you see regarding the Church's composition and purpose, and our participation in its mission?
9. Gates are a defensive protection against invasion. Jesus thus envisions the Church to be on the offensive, attacking the 'gates of hell' which are unable to withstand against the incessant blows. Do you feel the Church is busier defending its walls against outside influence or gaining entrance to areas presently beyond its reach? What should the Church on the offensive look like in your city and around the world, and what are some good examples?
10. Jesus' words assure us that the Church will be established—even in places where the gospel presently seems to have little presence. What people or places do you find it

hardest to hope they will respond to the gospel? In what ways have you participated in the Great Commission and how can you help establish the church around the world?

LEADER'S NOTES FOR PART FOUR: THE PILLARS OF GRACE

Main Points

In the 16th chapter of the gospel of Matthew, Jesus and his disciples are in Caesarea Philippi, a site for worship of the Greek god Pan. Against this backdrop, where people came to proclaim the deity of Pan, he put forward two questions. The first question was a safe one: “who do people say I am?” The second, far more penetrating: “who do you say I am?”

Peter declares that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God. This dramatic proclamation is as much an affirmation of the glory of Jesus as it is a confession of Peter's own need for a Savior. In so doing, Peter gets it exactly right. And his response is well rewarded, for it prompts Jesus to reveal how he intends to establish his kingdom: *I will build my church, and the gates of hell will not overcome it.*

The Church, then, is central to the mission of Christ. It is through the Church that Jesus will extend the gospel of grace to the uttermost ends of the earth. The Church will be the primary instrument to bring hope to all peoples, where all are equal at the foot of the cross.

But it is more than a means to an end. Jesus deeply loves the Church. He is the head of the Church and has given his own life for it. More than we can possibly imagine, Jesus is committed to its care, protection and extension. Because the Church is built on the pillars of grace, nothing can topple the affection of Jesus for his bride. Jesus loves the Church, and so must we.

Questions & Commentary

1. **In the passage we'll discuss, Jesus asks the disciples what was the public perception of his identity. Considering the opinions of your relatives, neighbors or co-workers, how would you answer the same question?** Warm-up question.

READ MATTHEW 16:13-18

2. **Jesus next asks the disciples the more penetrating question: who do you say I am? Why is this question so critical to all of us? How does this question serve as a prelude to Christ's next word about the mission of the church?**

The single most important question ever asked seems a simple one: “Who is Jesus?” That's not to be answered by what others think or by what you've been taught. Jesus asked the disciples then and us every day, “Who do *you* say I am?”

The answer to that question will shape our lives and destinies. If we dismiss Jesus as simply a great teacher or religious leader, than we are saying we have no need of a Savior. If there is a God, then we can be good enough to merit his approval. Further, while God may in some

remote sense govern his universe, denying Jesus as Lord means proclaiming our own autonomy. We are beholden to no one else; we are the final authorities. The answer to Jesus' question says as much about ourselves as it does about him.

But if we affirm with Peter that Jesus is the Christ, then we are acknowledging our own desperate condition. We need help from the outside. And when we proclaim him the Son of God, we are confessing that he is Lord. We are his, and he has the full right and power to do in and through us as he pleases. Proclaiming Jesus as Lord is fundamentally a declaration of submission.

The mission of the Church is essentially the establishment and expansion of the kingdom of God. There is no point in talking about the Church without first establishing who leads it and why. Otherwise, the Church is reduced to an irrelevant social club.

3. This passage indicates we cannot know Jesus apart from God the Father giving us understanding. Do you think a belief in God's initiative in drawing people to himself strengthens or weakens a commitment to missions? Why?

Peter believes Jesus is the long awaited Messiah, the great King prophesied in the Old Testament. Peter also proclaims him to be the Son of God. While Peter's understanding of the divinity of Jesus will become clearer, his initial declaration receives Jesus' joyful affirmation. But this is not something Peter could have realized on his own. Instead, the Father graciously revealed Jesus' true identity to Peter. Likewise, neither our own discernment nor personal merit can lead us to faith (John 6:44). The entire Christian life, from start to finish, is a work of grace.

Some Christians believe God's sovereign initiative in drawing people to himself fosters complacency in evangelism. The concern is that if faith depends entirely on God, then we have no responsibility to share the gospel. But neither the Bible nor Christian experience supports such a conclusion.

The Scriptures clearly command Christians to share the gospel to the ends of the earth (Matt. 28:19). While the Lord's command is reason enough to witness, a belief in grace gives us further motivation. Grace gives us hope that some will believe. If it were up to us—we who are dead in sin (Ephesians 2:1)—we would not be able to respond. Without grace, there would be no point in sharing the gospel at all, for no one could believe. But God's initiative means that he has drawn multitudes from every nation, tribe, people and language (Revelation 7:9) to himself. Our hope for world missions is based on God's certain promise. Gospel-centered missions is like looking for buried treasure: you will be far more motivated to dig if you know it's out there. Grounded on this hope of God's initiative, countless numbers of Christians have gone into all the world to share the good news of grace.

What do we learn about the nature of the Christian life from Jesus' statement that he is the building the church, not us? What difference should this make?

Christians often begin and end their understanding of grace at salvation. We read verses like “it is by grace that you have been saved” (Ephesians 2:8) and proclaim the good news that we can do nothing to earn eternal life. We must receive this gift by faith alone.

This is all true. But to leave the gospel at a half truth turns it into a lie. Many sermons and books about the Christian life essentially teach that we are saved by grace, but we grow by works. We're given a list of imperatives that on the surface sound biblical but are fueled by our own initiative. God is not happy with us, and we need to try harder. A lot harder. The angry countenance and tone of many a preacher reinforces the notion that Jesus doesn't like us very much. Sure, we're saved. But we need to walk better. And the Christian walk—and God's continued pleasure—comes by self-effort, self-discipline, and obedience.

The Bible is abundantly clear that the Christian life should look radically different. Discipline and obedience are necessary and expected. But they are the fruits of grace, not the cause of it. Paul affirms that grace is the foundation for both beginning and continuing in our walk with Christ: “For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say ‘No’ to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age” (Titus 2:11-12; c.f. Galatians 3:3; Philippians 2:12-13; Colossians 2:6). God's grace alone enables us to live the Christian life. It's all a gift

This should give us great hope. Because we are sustained by grace and not by self-effort, the Christian life is possible. In fact, it's assured. There is every reason to “press on” as Paul puts it (Philippians 3:12, 14) because we know that it is God who is sustaining us. Left to ourselves, we would quickly run out of strength for the Christian life. In fact, we wouldn't get started in the first place. But because Christ is the one building his church, we don't have to manufacture obedience or pretend to have faith. The Christian life is to be a rest or sabbath from self-effort. We now have peace because we are fully accepted as beloved sons and daughters. Rather than trying to appease an angry God, we can dance. But to dance we need to stop looking at our feet and begin to hear the music of grace.

4. The word *church* literally means ‘called out ones.’ The Christian life is to be distinct and compelling, filled with purpose. Other biblical analogies for the Church include building, body, people, family and bride. What do these images suggest of the nature and mission of the Church? What does Jesus think of the Church?

As a building (c.f. Ephesians 2:19-22, I Timothy 3:14-15, and 1 Peter 2:4-6), Christians are to be ‘living stones,’ living not as independent converts but as part of a community. Stones rub up against and press on each other, both giving support and smoothing out rough edges. But all the while, and often unseen to us, Christ is building a glorious edifice. It is staggering to consider that the God of the universe has determined that he will make his earthly home not in a physical temple, but in the hearts and minds of his people. The temple mount is no longer in Jerusalem, but in the Church (John 4:21-24).

As a body (c.f. Ephesians 4:3-6 and I Corinthians 12:12-31), Christians are to live in interdependent relationships. Each part functions only when it is attached to others. Further, each part is necessary for the whole and should be celebrated by all. No part is of greater or lesser worth, particularly since it is God who by his grace grants us gifts and roles. Christ alone is the head of his body, the Church.

As the people and family of God (c.f. I Peter 2:9, Ephesians 3:14-19 and I Timothy 3:15), Jesus sees his followers as beloved sons and daughters. As one global family, we have brothers and sisters around the world, with whom we have more in common in God's eyes than our nearest neighbor. We are to be mindful and concerned for our family, and we should make efforts to connect to other branches of the family tree. One of the roles of God's people is to serve as a nation of priests. This means the Church is set apart as intermediaries between God and other people, bringing them to a deeper knowledge of God and addressing their needs.

As the bride of Christ (c.f. Ephesians 5:25-33 and Revelation 19:6-8), we know Jesus loves us with a perfect and intense affection--more deeply than the greatest love a human bridegroom has for his bride. Jesus will never forsake his bride, whom he is preparing for the wedding. While Christianity is a life-changing faith, it is not moralism or activism. Instead, Jesus desires a living relationship with us based on his grace, not our works.

All these images remind us Jesus deeply loves the Church. He has given himself for the Church and is committed to its care, protection and extension. Since Christ loves the Church, despite its shortcomings, so should we.

5. A common theme in all these images is the importance of unity in the Church. What should this unity look like, and how does it foster the mission of the Church? What can you do to promote unity in the Church?

Sometimes unity is confused with unanimity, a misunderstanding that can be disastrous for the church. Unanimity means believing exactly the same things or having the same passions. If this is the standard we are holding up for the church, it will lead to constant frustration over the inevitable differences that arise. Or it will lead to endless division and church splits, as Christians seek fellowship only with like minded people. The pursuit of unanimity does not build up the Church.

But unity is something altogether different. Unity is the harmonious combination of various parts. It recognizes that Christ intentionally gave us unique talents and convictions for the building up of his body. Christ knew that we grow only when we rub up against people who are different from us, exposing our own needs and shortcomings. We are interdependent parts of one whole. The Christian life cannot be lived fully in isolation from the parts that are different from us. Thus, unity is not opposed to diversity. Unity actually requires it.

In that sense, unity requires more from us than does unanimity. It's relatively easy to connect with people who share identical beliefs and priorities. No one is stretched, and there really is little need for grace. But for the body of Christ to be one as he intends, we will have

to be givers and not simply recipients of the gospel. The Church is a living laboratory of grace.

The unity of the Church is a powerful apologetic of the gospel's power to bring hope to hopeless situations. The world's despair is apparent to all. No one needs convincing that ethnic, family and social discord hardens hearts and promotes endless cycles of distrust and retribution. Those caught in it sense they are powerless to break free. The Savior who came to seek those bound in sin prayed that his people *would be one so that the world would believe the Father sent the Son* (John 17:21). In the first century, Paul rejoiced in the unifying effects of the gospel which overcame the barriers between Jew and Gentile (Ephesians 2). In every century since, the gospel has repaired broken marriages, healed racial tension, and reconciled national enemies. When forgiveness and acceptance break down entrenched walls of division, a watching world takes notice. Some observers will wonder how Christians achieved what seemed so elusive.

World missions, then, absolutely requires grace. Extending the Church across ethnic and cultural barriers means the Church worldwide will be full of people far more diverse than those in our neighborhoods. But missions based on anything but grace will retain vestiges of division, even if those distinctions seem subtle. Guilt or pity cannot move the Great Commission forward. Ministry based on pity tends to adopt a patronizing attitude towards "those less fortunate." Only grace realizes we're all less fortunate.

We can help foster unity by recognizing our need of Christians who are starkly different from us, yet are co-recipients of grace. Christ died for them too. Fostering unity means accepting that the church won't ever be exactly like we want. We can't bring a consumerist mentality to the Church, continually shopping around for ministries and styles that suit us. Unity means bringing our own talents and passions to the table, but submitting repeatedly to the consensus of others. A commitment to unity requires a constant inclination towards forgiveness, humility and reconciliation.

6. Jesus declares that the church is his. In the best sense of the term, he owns and directs the Church. How do human images make us rebel against the idea of Christ owning and ruling us? How does grace make this something to be welcomed rather than feared?

The possessive "my" establishes Jesus' claim to own and rule the church. Peter echoes this idea in his first letter, calling us a "people belonging to God" (1 Peter 2:9). Because Christ has both created and redeemed us, we are twice bought. Christ rightfully owns us in every sense of the word. And he has authority to do in and through us as he pleases. But our human experience doesn't give us much comfort with these concepts.

One distorted view comes from our upbringing, where the basis of full parental acceptance rests on merit. Children deeply need to belong, not in a vague legal sense, but with the heartfelt, unconditional acceptance of their family. But most of us grow up believing our parents love us conditionally, in part or completely. If we do well on the math test, run fastest in a race, or look prettier than others, we can earn our parents' approval. And when we disobey them, do poorly in school, or cause the team to lose a game, our parents will love

us less. Though we long for acceptance, we can never know from one moment to the next whether we are truly favored. This performance basis is deeply ingrained, universal, and reinforced throughout life.

Another distorted picture of ownership comes from slavery, where possession is based on function. Slaves are stripped of their innate dignity and rights, and are sold as property to fulfill whatever purpose or whim of the new master. The slave has no more innate worth than any other tool. The master owns him only as a utilitarian means to another end. The slave indeed belongs, but not willingly or for his own sake.

Our common perception of authority figures is likewise negative. We bristle at the idea of yielding any of our autonomy, particularly to flawed individuals and organizations that have only their own interests in mind. American culture daily reinforces the idea that we should have it our way and live according to our own rules. These media messages subtly shape our personal philosophies such that it becomes unthinkable to submit to another's absolute rule. We may see the need for supervision in certain places, but the idea of a supreme monarch ruling our lives is repugnant. Americans have learned to revolt against kings.

These human perspectives lead us to fear Christ's full ownership and authority. Apart from grace, we may see God as a capricious ogre or cruel taskmaster. Apart from grace, we learn to resist God's rule—and keep him as distant as possible. But grace gives us new eyes to rightly see God's ownership and rule.

First, grace means that our belonging to God is based solely in his nature. We are not children who must perform to earn our acceptance. We are not slaves whose worth is based on our productivity. Our relationship to God is not “merit-based ownership.” Instead, the unmerited, relentless love of God is fueled by something entirely in himself. “Grace-based ownership” grounds our relationship solely in the unconditional love of God. As such, we can never consume or exhaust it. Our innate desire for acceptance can only find rest in being fully known and fully loved.

Second, grace means that God's authority over us is truly good and for our best. God is not a graceless employer who sees people as tools to improve his market share. Indeed, we will find our greatest joy in glorifying God. But Christ has come to give us life (John 10:10), even giving his life so that we may live. Rather than repelling us, the gracious, self-sacrificial love of Christ draws us to his rule.

7. What implications of Christ's ownership do you see regarding the Church's composition and purpose, and our participation in its mission?

Because the Church is Christ's and not our own, it must be built according to his plans and designs. If it were left to us, the church would be filled with people not much different from us. We would reach out to the people we most naturally have affinity for. They would probably look like us, have fairly similar backgrounds, and enjoy the same interests. The church would exist to take care of our needs, not those of a dying world. The church would be comfortable and complacent. But it wouldn't be Jesus' Church.

Instead, Jesus sends the Church on a mission to reach across cultural and ethnic divisions, engage the world in its brokenness and need, and share the good news of the gospel in every community and nation. The inevitable future of the Church is a diverse family drawing from every nation and tongue (Revelation 7:9), yet united in Christ. And to the degree that each local congregation affirms that it is owned and ruled by Christ alone, it will be join Christ in his global mission.

And because Christ has full authority to do in and through us as he pleases, the Church must follow where he leads. We know he will extend the gospel to the uttermost ends of the earth. It is the responsibility of every Church and every Christian to be enlisted in the Great Commission. This service will invariably come at some level of sacrifice of our time, energy and treasure. It may cost us much more. But when we remember that God is good and gracious, it is not only our duty to follow him, but our heart's desire.

8. Gates are a defensive protection against invasion. Jesus thus envisions the Church to be on the offensive, attacking the “gates of hell” which are unable to withstand against the incessant blows. Do you feel the Church is busier defending its walls against outside influence or gaining entrance to areas presently beyond its reach? What should the Church on the offensive look like in your city and around the world, and what are some good examples?

Many people feel that churches all too often acts like fortresses, putting up higher and higher walls to keep the culture at bay. Sometimes these are walls of indifference to the needs of the world, passivity that waits for the needy to initiate, busyness on meeting the needs of the church, or forms that make the church an insider's club. In too many churches, there is little evidence of a church on the offensive.

On the other hand, common images of the Church that is aggressively influencing the world suggest a reliance on the tools of power. Sometimes the Christian voices that are heard the loudest are shrill and lacking in grace. Certain issues—on both the political right and left—are labeled as “Christian” to rally enough support in favor of a particular agenda. But that is fighting power with power. Yes, Jesus used strong language at times. But his harsh words were always reserved for religious legalists, not for those “bruised and broken by the fall.” Make no mistake about it: Christians can and should have a voice in the public arena. But the tools of legislation cannot be confused with the tools of grace.

The only thing the Church has to offer the world that it can find nowhere else is grace. Only grace can overcome power. A church on the offensive is deeply concerned about evangelism and missions, going as beggars sharing bread with other beggars. The church is also concerned about justice and mercy, looking after the needs of the poor, oppressed, sick and immigrant. And the church sends its members to be salt and light in the culture—the political world included—influencing the world in seemingly small but meaningful ways.

When the Church leads with grace, no force can withstand its blows.

9. Jesus' words assure us that the Church will be established—even in places where the gospel presently seems to have little presence. What people or places do you

find it hardest to hope they will respond to the gospel? What ways have you participated in the Great Commission and how can you help establish the church around the world?

Jesus says that he will build his church, and that nothing can withstand its extension. This church will reach to the uttermost ends of the earth (Acts 1:8), drawing people from every nation, tribe, people and language (Revelation 7:9). The primary instrument he has chosen to extend his kingdom is the Church, in spite of its flaws and brokenness.

The good news of grace means that our sin and failure will not hinder the expansion of Christ's kingdom. Nor will the seeming intractability of unresponsive hearts or the explicit oppression of the Church in persecuted lands thwart the gospel. Because it doesn't depend on us, nothing can get in the way of the promises of Christ to establish his Church. Grace means there is no person or community on earth that is beyond the reach of the gospel.

Christ enlists his followers in the Great Commission. There are limitless ways we can all be involved, but each of us has a role in Christ's mission to build his Church.

First, every Christian should be praying on behalf of missions. Pray for missionaries and their families as they serve cross-culturally. Pray for the national leaders they work with, that they would be well equipped, bold in their efforts, and fruitful in their ministry. Pray that new churches would be started, that they would be healthy and grow, and that God would preserve the Church as it faces opposition. And pray that God would open the hearts of those in need of the gospel.

Christians can also give towards missions. We are stewards, not owners, of the resources God has given us, and he wants us to invest the extension of his Church. Surely he wants to direct resources where his body is in greatest need. Yet less than 5% of what American Christians give to ministry finds its way overseas, where the Church is often poor, under-equipped and marginalized. Most pastors in other countries have a fraction of the Christian material of the typical American Christian. One sure way to be more concerned about the Great Commission is to support missions work, for where our treasure is, there will our hearts be also (Matthew 6:21).

We can pray, we can give, and we can go. Whether it's across the street, across the city, or across the ocean, all Christians can befriend people in other cultures and share the good news of grace. Our investment of time may be short or long, but all Christians will be enriched by broadening our appreciation for God's world and the needs facing the Church.

As we participate in the Great Commission, we must remember that Christ goes before us (Matthew 28:20). Throughout the Bible, God's promise to be with his people invariably comes at a time when they are feeling inadequate and dependent. In spite of—or rather because of—our weakness, God enlists us for service. Not only is this a great comfort in times of testing, it is a reminder of grace. We most fully experience Christ's presence and strength not when we have it together or when there are no obstacles in front of us. God comes to those who are weak and humble, and who know their need for grace:

“For thus says the One who is high and lifted up, who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: “I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly, and to revive the heart of the contrite” (Isaiah 57:15).