



MARCH 25, 2018

# FOUNDATIONS

## WEEK SIX: MISSIONAL LIVING

**CORE COMMITMENT:** Build bridges to your friends, neighbors, and co-workers who do not know Christ in the hope of seeing them come to know Christ.

In January of 1854 a tiny clipper ship sailed into the harbor of Shanghai. The country was in the throes of a civil war and rebel forces had just taken the city. Many quarters of the city were still smoldering, as a wide eyed twenty-one year old stepped off the ship and into the hearts of the Chinese people.

By the end of his life, he would have a more dramatic impact on Chinese culture and the way we think about taking the gospel to the world than anyone would have ever dared to imagine.

Over time, if you were to gather all of the missionaries serving in China, you would immediately be able to pick him out of the crowd. He was the guy with the ponytail in traditional Chinese garb. He spoke fluent Chinese and had even developed the subtle facial ticks that accompanied the richest expression of the language. It was obvious he loved the language. It was even more obvious he loved the people.

Did the other missionaries love the pony tail? No, they did not. Did the Chinese people love the pony tail? Not really. Not at first, anyway. But over time they realized that was just one of the many ways he was willing to identify with them for the sake of the gospel. The ponytail became a powerful symbol of embracing a culture for the sake of Christ.

The young man, of course, was Hudson Taylor. If you have read any missionary biographies, you've heard his name. If you only read one missionary biography, read his. He was a man who was deeply devoted to God, deeply devoted to the gospel and deeply devoted to the Chinese people for the sake of Christ.

While the ponytail was a bold missionary move, it is not nearly as bold as the move God made toward us in Christ. He took on flesh. Became one of us. Identified with the Jewish people, and presented himself not only as the hope of Israel, but the hope of the entire world.

Our God has always been a missionary God. He sent his son. His Son is sending us. To follow Christ is to embrace his mission. To embrace his mission is to make bold moves to those around us for the sake of the gospel.

No one understood this better than the apostle Paul. Paul describes the heart of his missionary strategy in 1 Corinthians 9:19-23. And, no, it did not involve a ponytail, but on two different occasions it involved him shaving his head. Let's pick up in verse 19.

*19 Though I am free and belong to no one, I have made myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. 20 To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. 21 To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. 22 To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some. 23 I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings.*

According to Paul, the gospel changes the way we see ourselves, the way we see others and the way we experience life.

## **THE GOSPEL CHANGES THE WAY WE SEE OURSELVES**

First, Paul tells us the Gospel changes the way we see ourselves.

Paul begins with one of the greatest paradoxes of the gospel. While the gospel brings freedom, we experience that freedom on a far more profound level when we are willing to lay it aside for the sake of others.

Paul wrote to the Galatians, "You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love (Galatians 5:13)."

When we are self-indulgent, our freedom eventually enslaves us. When we lay our freedom aside for the sake of others, we experience far greater joy and freedom.

Paul not only taught humble service, he lived a life of humble service.

*"Though I am free and belong to no one, I have made myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible."*

He was merely following the lead of Christ,

*Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; 7 rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant... (Philippians 2:6-7).*

When we see ourselves through the lens of the gospel, we see ourselves as servants of others for the sake of Christ and the gospel. When we see ourselves as servants, it means we are willing to make the first move in establishing the friendship. We are willing to carry the friendship. We are even willing to take some abuse along the way.

## **THE GOSPEL CHANGES THE WAY WE SEE PEOPLE**

The gospel not only changes the way we see ourselves, the gospel changes the way we see people.

Paul gives us a nice catalogue of the people we might have encountered in the ancient Roman world—his fellow countrymen, the Jews; those who were under the Law; those who did not have the Law, and the weak. Paul embraces each of these for the sake of the gospel.

*<sup>20</sup> To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. <sup>21</sup> To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. <sup>22</sup> To the weak I became weak to win the weak.*

## **The Gospel Transcends Culture**

The gospel changes the way we see people, because the gospel transcends culture.

Paul's first category is "the Jews."

*<sup>20</sup> To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews.*

The Jewish culture was one of the most distinctive cultures in the ancient world. They almost completely separated themselves from the rest of the world. They would not have Gentiles into their homes, nor would they go into the homes of Gentiles. They were a people defined by their culture. Paul acknowledges the only way to reach the Jewish people is to both affirm their culture and challenge their culture.

It is interesting to hear Paul say, "I became like a Jew," since he was a Jew. At one point in his life, he was about as Jewish as a Jew could be. Listen to how he describes his past life to the believers in Philippi,

*If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: <sup>5</sup> circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; <sup>6</sup> as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless.*

But Paul no longer found his identity in his Jewishness, he found his identity in Christ—an identity that allowed him to both embrace his Jewishness and set his Jewishness aside for the sake of the gospel.

His message was not, "Get over your Jewishness, and embrace Christ, but celebrate your Jewishness in a far richer way through Christ."

One of the things we need to understand about the gospel is that it both transcends and affirms culture. We can affirm culture because every people group is an expression of God's creative genius. We can humbly challenge culture because no culture fully captures what it means to be a New Creation in Christ.

While some forms of government are more just than other forms of government, no culture is inherently superior to another culture. We, like every other culture, need to learn how to get over ourselves and celebrate the distinctiveness of others. The diversity of humanity comes much closer to expressing the fullness of Christ than any single culture. The gospel both celebrates culture and confronts culture.

## **The Gospel Transcends Religion and Irreligion**

The gospel changes the way we see people, because the gospel transcends religion and irreligion.

Paul's second and third categories are "those under the Law," and "those who do not have the law."

*To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. <sup>21</sup> To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law.*

Those under the law are those who have a finely tuned moral sensibility that is born of deeply seated religious conviction. Those who do not have the law, are those who live their entire lives as a counter argument to those who have a finely tuned moral sensibility that is born of deeply seated religious convictions. These people are constantly in each other's faces. The religious denounce the morality of the irreligious, the irreligious recoil at the smug self righteousness of the religious.

You'll remember Jesus was far more comfortable with the irreligious than he was the religious.

So, whose right and whose wrong? Paul would say neither one is completely right, and neither one is completely wrong. One group is the older brother in the parable of the prodigal son and the other is the younger brother. They are both far from God. They both need the gospel.

Timothy Keller defines bad evangelism as, "I'm right and you're wrong, and I would love to give you an earful"

So, if we take Keller's dictum to its natural conclusion, we can define good evangelism as, "I'm deeply broken, you're deeply broken and the gospel holds out hope for both of us." Our voice should always be the voice of a fellow struggler, and never "look at me, I've got my act together." Or even worse, "When you become like us, you can have fellowship with us."

Keller goes on to say, "That the gospel is neither religion or irreligion, it is a third way of relating to God through grace."

Paul, like Keller, sees the gospel as a third way. Neither religion, or irreligion. While Paul can relate to the moral sensibilities of the highly religious, he knows his own righteousness is not the result of rule keeping (I myself am not under the law)." While Paul can relate to the freedom from rule keeping that those who do not have the law experience, he would never take it quite as far as they do (I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law).

### **The Gospel Transcends Class**

Finally, the Gospel changes the way we see people, because the gospel transcends class.

Paul's third category is the "weak." Paul tells us,

*<sup>22</sup> To the weak I became weak to win the weak.*

While Paul uses the word "weak" in a number of ways, in his letter to the Corinthians the word "weak" most often refers to those who are "powerless"—the nobodies.

Notice how he begins his letter.

*<sup>26</sup> Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth.  
<sup>27</sup> But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong.*

When Paul says "To the weak I became weak, to win the weak." He means he was willing to adopt a lowly posture in order to take the gospel to the lowly.

Part of the way he did this was to adopt a blue collar lifestyle by working with his own hands. The Corinthians were actually put off by Paul's approach. They reasoned, "Any Rabbi worth his salt, is worthy of financial support." Paul's response was, "Thanks, but no thanks. When I work with my own hands I make a strong connection with real people."

It is also interesting that Paul never says, "To the strong, I become strong." He was always willing to lower himself for the sake of the gospel, but never willing to elevate himself for the sake of the gospel.

## THE GOSPEL CHANGES THE WAY WE EXPERIENCE LIFE

So the gospel changes the way we see ourselves, the gospel changes the way we see others, and finally, the gospel changes the way we experience life.

Paul not only engages with people for the sake of the gospel, so that they might come to know Christ, he engages people for the sake of the gospel, so that he might have a far richer, deeper experience of Christ.

*I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some.  
23 I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings.*

A literal translation might be, "I do all of this for the gospel that I might participate in it."

Paul is telling us that the gospel always invites us into a deep, richer experience of Christ. Through the gospel, we are reconciled to Christ. Through the gospel, Christ dwells in our hearts by faith. Through the gospel, we are a new creation in Christ. Through the gospel, we are transformed by Christ. Through the gospel, we are reconciled by Christ to one another. Through the gospel, we experience deep fellowship in the body of Christ. And through the gospel, we see other people reconciled to Christ. Nothing is richer or deeper than giving our lives away for Christ and his gospel.

## TAKING THE GOSPEL TO OUR FRIENDS AND NEIGHBORS

So how do we take the gospel to our friends and neighbors? Some times it is as simple as being a good neighbor, or better yet, being a great neighbor, co-worker or friend. Here are a few suggestions:

**Nurture your relationship with Christ.** Our love for people grows out of our love for Christ. More happens by accident when we are vitally connected to Christ than will ever happen on purpose when we are not walking with him. When we remain in him and he in us, we will bear much fruit, but apart from him we can do nothing.

**Pray for your friends, neighbors and co-workers.** Invite God into your relationships, pray for your friend by name, and pray for gospel opportunities. Hudson Taylor once famously said, "Never underestimate the power of God to move in the hearts of men through prayer alone."

**Be friendly and engaging.** Someone once said of Thomas Jefferson, "He had a yes face." We need to learn how to cultivate a yes face. You can start by smiling and saying "hi." Be engaged with the people you meet. Almost every big conversation starts as a small conversation. Almost every gospel conversation starts as a conversation about every day life. Sometimes it takes a hundred every day conversations to lead to one gospel conversation. Stay engaged with the people around you for the sake of the gospel.

**Hang out in the front yard.** We bought four Adirondack chairs and placed them in our front yard. We met four new neighbors within ten minutes of setting them out. We often put out a iced bucket of cold drinks. People always sit down and talk.

**Take evening walks through the neighborhood.** You'll always meet new neighbors who are more than happy to meet new neighbors.

**Have your neighbors over for dinner.** Great things happen around the dinner table.

**Be a regular where you shop and eat.** I have a few restaurants that I go to, the people know me. Sometimes I don't even have to order. Sometimes they comp me food and beverages. Sometimes I get to talk about Jesus.

**Learn to speak the language of the heart.** Sharing the gospel is more than just reciting the four spiritual laws, and there is nothing wrong with sharing the four spiritual laws. But beyond sharing the four spiritual laws, or even before you share the four spiritual laws learn the language of the heart. Listen to people's deepest longings, and learn how to describe how Christ and Christ alone fulfills the deepest longings of the heart.

## AROUND THE TABLE

### READ 1 CORINTHIANS 1:19-23

1. In Sunday's message we said, one of the paradoxes of the gospel is "While the gospel brings freedom, we experience that freedom on a far more profound level when we are willing to lay it aside for the sake of others." Why is this true?
2. If the gospel changes the way we look at ourselves, according to Paul (v. 19) how should we see ourselves?
3. What are some practical ways seeing ourselves as "slaves of everyone" might shape how we engage our culture for the sake of Christ?
4. How does the gospel transcend culture?
5. What are some things we should keep in mind when engaging with people who have a rich cultural heritage?
6. How does the gospel transcend both religion (those under the law) and irreligion (those without the law)?
7. What are some things we should keep in mind when interacting with religious people?
8. What are some things we should keep in mind when engaging with irreligious people?
9. What are some ways that the gospel transcends social status?
10. What are some things we should keep in mind when engaging with people of varying stations in life?
11. What are the blessings of the gospel?
12. What are some practical ways we can engage our friends and neighbors with the message of Christ?