

A SUCCESSFUL MISSION: BUT HOW SUCCESSFUL?

—LUKE 10:1-24

Introduction

Welcome back to College for second term—after your vacation and mission. I hope you have had a really worthwhile time away, and that you feel refreshed, even if you are still recovering from mission! I am looking forward to the reports.

This morning, I want to talk about another mission—in Luke 10. Seventy-two of Jesus' disciples, at the conclusion of their mission (perhaps at the end of their third year!), returned with tremendous enthusiasm. We are told that they came back 'with joy' after they had been ministering in Jesus' name. And there were real grounds for their joy. God had been at work in and through them. There was not just an emotional response or some psychologically induced experience because they enjoyed working in pairs in their mission with Jesus. Not at all. Things had really happened.

Further, their analysis of what had occurred was correct. They were factually correct, for demons had submitted to them during their ministry. And, their theological analysis was correct. 'The demons submit to us *in your name*'. The 72 did not claim the credit for what had happened. They acknowledged that it was through the power and authority of Jesus alone, that the subjection of the powers of darkness had occurred. In line with this, Jesus endorsed what has happened, and he interpreted it in an ultimate heavenly and theological perspective. Satan had fallen like lightning from heaven.

But . . . it looks as if Jesus has put a dampener on things. He seems to have squashed their enthusiasm. He tells them not to rejoice that the spirits submit to them; instead, they are to rejoice that their names are written in heaven. What is all this about? What does it mean? Let's look further into this mission of the 72.

1. Their mission was essentially Jesus' own mission

For starters, it is right for us to use the term 'mission' in relation to the 72 here. These unnamed disciples have been sent by Jesus (v. 3). And they are involved as workers in the harvest field. They are involved in mission. But it is not an independent mission. It is Jesus' mission, for he has come to seek and to save the lost (19:10). He is the one who sends (v. 3), he is the Lord of the harvest (v. 2), and he despatches workers into *his* harvest field.

Jesus commissions them, gives them the details of their mission, and instructs them about the content of their proclamation, viz. that the kingdom of God is near. And as a result, they are full participants in the divine mission—they are sent before 'his face'. So they both prepare the way, and work as labourers in the harvest field.

What you have been involved in during this past week might have been called a 'College mission', or even the 'mission of parish x'. But if it is following the pattern of the New Testament missions, then it is God's or Christ's. That means any lasting work has been done by him. And the kudos, the honours, belong to him.

2. Because it was Jesus' mission it stands under the shadow of the cross

The 72 disciples are sent out in pairs to prepare the Lord's approach to Jerusalem. We are told that they were sent 'ahead of him', (lit.) 'before his face' (10:1). Jesus has begun his final journey to Jerusalem. At the beginning of the travel narrative in chapter 9 we read: 'Jesus set his face steadfastly to go to Jerusalem' (v. 51). His journey stands under the shadow of the cross. It is to his death and resurrection that he resolutely goes. They are central to the saving plan of God. As we shall see on another occasion, ultimately there is no mission unless it is grounded in the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus. The 72 are caught up in Jesus' movement to Jerusalem, to rejection and death. They are like John the Baptist for they are messengers who are sent to prepare the way of the Lord. They go ahead of him to 'every town and place where he was about to go [on his way to Jerusalem]' (10:1).

This mission of the disciples, which is ultimately Jesus' mission, stands under the shadow of the cross. Theologically, there can be no mission apart from the cross and resurrection of Jesus (cf. 24:44-48). Any ministry that you have engaged in during these past days which has focussed on this gospel, will be used by God to draw men and women to himself. We glorify both Father and Son as we focus the attention of men and women on these great saving events.

3. It was a mission to Israel calling on the people of God to repent

The 72 disciples are royal heralds who have a message of national emergency. Theirs is a ministry to Israel. In fact, because they are travelling with Jesus to Jerusalem on his final journey, then their appeal to men and women marks the final call of Jesus to Israel (during his earthly ministry) to repent and to submit to her King (v. 9).

The issues are both dangerous and urgent. In fact, the urgency of their mission is so great that normal courtesies, which are part of the fabric of life in an eastern culture, are laid aside. They are to travel light and not to take any provisions with them (v. 4). They are not to shop around from place to place looking for the best accommodation, the best billets, before they get on with the work. Time does not permit this.

So single-minded and dedicated are they to be to the task, that they are not to greet anyone on the road. You can pass people in Newtown without greeting them and this is the norm. But in eastern society this failure to respond with a greeting is unthinkable.

There is an Old Testament text, 2 Kings 4:29, that gives us a clue as to what this signifies. During the time of Elisha the little son of the Shunammite woman has died. Elisha despatches Gehazi to the woman's home with this instruction: 'Tuck your cloak under your belt, take my staff in your hand and run. If you meet anyone, do not greet him, and if anyone greets you, do not answer. Lay my staff on the boy's face'. This was literally a matter of life and death!

The mission of the 72, calling on Israel to turn back to the living God during the ministry of Jesus, was a matter of life and death. I take it, this is why there are some instructions found in this mission charge that do not occur in any other.

Because their appeal marks the final call to Israel to repent and submit to her King (v. 9), then,

4. It was a mission of ultimate significance—of peace or judgment

It is clear from the warnings given by Jesus to the disciples at the time of the commissioning and from the announcement of the messengers that they were on about ultimate issues. For starters, it is a message about the kingdom (v. 9).

The official declaration of the messengers is ‘peace, i.e. salvation, be to this house’ (vv. 5-6). Not simply a greeting, it is more than that. They have come in Jesus’ name announcing his salvation—salvation in the person of God’s final messenger, Jesus himself, is present.

But a division results. Some reject this message of the kingdom, about the king who is passing by, and this is very serious. It means to have no part in the people of God (vv. 10, 11). The refusal to accept the envoys designated by Jesus is to spurn the good news, and to reject him in whose name they came. This is the most serious of sins, as the sayings about the rejection of Jesus by the Galilean villages show (vv. 13-15). To reject the messenger is to reject Jesus himself and, indeed, God himself.

How awesome is the task of representing the King! I am sure there were some of you who had to lay out the options, as clearly as possible, when you presented the gospel.

5. Well, what about the results?

Well, during the ministry of the 72 the kingdom of God powerfully advances. How do we know this? First, demons have been subject to Jesus’ name, and Satan has fallen from heaven (vv. 17, 18). The time of fulfilment has come. Satan’s power will be decisively broken at the cross. The ministry of the 72, as part of Jesus’ mission, anticipates and points forward to that cross. Jesus sees Satan as having fallen from heaven.

But a division has occurred within Israel (v. 21): the official representatives (‘the wise and learned’) have been by-passed. They have not responded to the arrival of the kingdom. The churchmen have said ‘No’ to the salvation and peace offered by the King. In contrast, the disciples (‘the little children’) have been given God’s revelation.

Back to our original question: Why does Jesus urge the disciples to rejoice that their names are written in heaven? Why does he not rejoice over the success of the mission as such? I think because there has been a new people of God formed and the disciples are part of that (vv. 20, 21). And this is a crucial part of the divine plan. This is why they are to rejoice that their names are written in heaven.

Application to the College mission. That people have been converted, their lives transformed, and that they have been incorporated into the body of Christ. Fits precisely with God’s purposes in Romans 8:28-30.
