

**“How big is the Good News?”**  
**Matthew 11:5**

### **Introduction**

1. **In 1974 Christians from around the world met in Lausanne, Switzerland, for an historic conference on world evangelization.** The leaders were Billy Graham from America and John Stott from England. A second Lausanne conference was held in Manila in 1989 and I was there. And, I was one of the representatives of the USA last month at the third Lausanne conference in Cape Town, South Africa.
  
2. **Cape Town 2010 brought 5000 participants from 198 countries around the globe for nine days of meetings and conversations about reaching our world in our generation for Jesus Christ.** It was the largest most representative gathering of Christians in history.
  
3. **I suppose that there are 5000 different takes on all that was said and done.** But, here in our Wooddale Worldwide Week I can tell you that my overall take-away was about the size of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The 1974 Lausanne Covenant stated that “evangelization requires the whole church to take the whole gospel to the whole world.” I was newly impressed that the whole church is big, the whole gospel is big and the whole world is big.
  
4. **Christianity is the largest and fastest growing religion in the world.** Perhaps most amazing is what is happening in China.  
 There were a couple of hundred delegates coming from the Peoples Republic of China but the government clamped down and stopped almost all of them from coming to Cape Town. Chinese churches and Christians had already contributed a large amount of money to underwrite their own delegation but also to provide subsidy and scholarships to Christians from other countries and then they couldn’t come themselves.  
 There can be lots of speculation about the politics of why the government stopped them. I sent a letter on behalf of the National Association of Evangelicals to the Chinese embassy in Washington protesting the embargo of the Chinese delegates.  
 There were a few who slipped through the government restrictions. A small group of us met with the handful of them—including a businesswoman who is also pastor of a church of 500 in a Chinese megacity. I think she was traveling on business and that’s why she made it to South Africa.  
 During one of the evening sessions in Cape Town we all stood to pray for our Chinese brothers and sisters and to put our hands on the empty chairs reserved for them across the room. My heart was stirred by the sight of one man who picked up the chair and held it as high as he could reach over his head as if lifting it up to heaven.  
 But, there is a far greater point to be made. No government can stop the church of Jesus Christ. During the severe persecution of Christians during the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s and 1970s the estimated number of believers in China dropped below one million.

Now there are 100 million Christians and the Chinese church is one of the fastest growing in the world. It is possible that within the lifetime of some of us in this room China will become the largest Christian population country in the world. China is already one of the top Bible publishers and distributors in the world. This was virtually unimaginable just one generation ago.

- 5. USA continues to be a leading missionary-sending nation but that is fast changing.** Among the top countries sending and supporting cross-cultural missionaries are South Korea, Brazil, India and China.

One interesting example of how much things are changing is the challenges of getting visas for missionaries. I have prayed thousands of times for American missionaries to get visas into countries that are highly restrictive. Often our people have had to get student or business or tourist visas to spread the gospel in hard-to-access nations. In Cape Town I was again asked to pray for missionaries who are ready to go, have their support but can't get visas into the United States of America. It's easier for missionaries headed to China than headed to America.

- 6. Almost every Cape Town delegate that I heard talk about the many speakers from around the world chose the same one as the very best.** I think she stirred the hearts of the 5000 most of all. She's an 18-year-old North Korean whose family became refugees in China. (She didn't say so but we know that many of the North Koreans in China are illegal immigrants and have a very hard life there. If they are deported back to North Korea they face probable prison and possible death.)

Her mother died and her father returned to North Korea to share the good news of Jesus. His daughter made her way to South Korea while her father was imprisoned and died under the harsh anti-Christian government of North Korea. With stirring emotion, this teenager declared her plans to return to North Korea and take the love of Jesus to her people. My heart was full and my tears flowed.

She showed nothing but love for her homeland and spoke no criticism of the government that had made her an orphan. She epitomized a biblical approach to government and political leaders. And, I couldn't help but compare to the way some Christians in America speak and email about our government and politicians. It seemed that this teenage orphan of a North Korean martyr had a bigger gospel than we Americans.

- 7. As I listened and talked to fellow Christians from Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Middle East my heart was touched with their compassion for the poor.** They prayed and worked and cared for the billions who live on less than \$2 per day. Christians care for those with HIV/AIDS and take AIDS orphans into their homes. There is deep concern for social justice in places where widows have their homes and land taken away when their husbands die. Some face the awful choice between letting their children starve and becoming prostitutes in order to get food. And, there are so many who are stuck in perpetual poverty because they cannot read or write—especially girls for whom there is no schooling.

Around the globe Christians and churches are leading the way in alleviating human suffering. Sometimes it is food. Sometimes it is adoption. Sometimes it is schooling, or clean water, or retroviral drugs or legal services. One example comes from Christians who plant trees—because firewood is needed to cook food and stay warm; climate change and deforestation forces women to travel farther and farther for firewood; the farther they travel from their villages the more likely they will be raped by strangers. So, Christians plant trees.

I tried to compare the actions of Christians in other countries to those in our country. Some Americans worry that emphasis on meeting physical and social needs will somehow reduce the place of evangelism that brings sinners to repentance and faith in Jesus. But, it is most often that people believe in Jesus when they experience the love of Jesus through Christians and churches that meet physical and social needs. After all, that’s usually the way it works here as well—when we drive a neighbor to the hospital, when we tutor a child, when we help the unemployed find work, when we pray for someone with cancer . . . we are meeting physical and social needs in the name of Jesus. When others experience the presence and power of Jesus in everyday life they are drawn to him and his eternal salvation. *“Evangelization requires the whole church to take the whole gospel to the whole world.”*

- 8. I don’t want to be critical of American Christians or American churches. I love America and I am proud of Christians and churches.** But, I worry that we are missing out on what God is doing in the rest of the world.

I listened to a speaker from the Middle East, from a country where government and culture are vehemently opposed to the gospel and where the number of Christians and churches are booming—secretly, but booming! He said that they gather by the hundreds for worship services at 3 a.m. Hey, we’ve tried a couple of times to have services at Wooddale Church at 8 a.m. and hardly anyone wanted to come. We all want to sleep in, have church and finish in time for the Vikings’ game.

After the speaker talked about 3 a.m. services I was in a discussion group with men from Bulgaria and from East Africa and I remember hoping no one would ask me what would happen if Americans had to get up early to worship God.

We have so much. We have been so blessed. Our freedoms are so many. And, it is so easy to become soft, lazy, greedy and critical.

The explosive growth of the church of Jesus Christ is not in the easy places. It is in Africa, Asia, Latin America—not in America, Europe, Australia, Canada and all the easy places.

### **Matthew 11:1-6**

- 1. I’ve been studying the story of Jesus in Matthew 11:1-6.** It’s about Jesus and John the Baptist.
- 2. John the Baptist was a bold and loud prophet of God.** He was enormously popular in 1<sup>st</sup> Century Israel. He drew crowds of thousands to hear him preach. And, he was unafraid to name names and call out specific sins. His was a message of confrontation and repentance.

- 3. The king in Israel was Herod Antipas.** He took a vacation trip to Rome to visit his brother and while there he seduced his sister-in-law. When he came home to Israel he dumped his wife and married his brother’s wife in her place. John the Baptist loudly and publicly condemned the immorality of the king. Rebuking a sinful dictator is a very dangerous thing to do. Herod had John arrested and placed in a dungeon near the Dead Sea. Eventually, he was executed by decapitation.

The story picks up in Matthew 11.

**Matthew 11:1-6**

*After Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and preach in the towns of Galilee.*

*When John heard in prison what Christ was doing, he sent his disciples to ask him, “Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?”*

*Jesus replied, “Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor. Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me.”*

- 4. John the Baptist had boldly announced that Jesus was the Messiah but now wanted some extra confirmation.** *Are you really the Christ?*

Jesus gave a very practical answer. Not theory but practice. *Tell John what you see and hear—practical help for the blind, lame, diseased, deaf, dead and poor.*

Jesus wasn’t minimizing the truth that he had come to seek and to save the lost. He wasn’t deviating from his purpose to save sinners for heaven. But, he told John that the proof was in the practice. It was how he treated those with needs that proved his gospel.

Jesus knew that some wouldn’t like this. There would actually be people who were turned off by his helping the hurting. So, he gave a special blessing to all who would stick with him as he helped others: *“Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me.”*

John was absolutely right to condemn the sins of Herod Antipas. But, Jesus was absolutely right to show the love of God by acts of compassion. It is a vivid reminder to us that our faith is proved by our actions—it is how we love, how we show kindness, how we give our time and money to others. Jesus proved who he was by what he did. We prove that we are his by what we do.

**So, how big is the good news?**

- 1. So, how big is the good news of the Gospel of Jesus Christ?** It is big enough to bring all kinds of people to Jesus—people of every tongue, tribe, nation and race. It is bigger than the USA. It is big enough to transform lives here and now and keep them transformed for eternity. It is big enough to forgive the worst sins anyone could ever commit. It is big enough to reach out to enemies as well as friends. It is big enough to heal the sick, care for the orphan, welcome the alien and help the poor. It is big enough for the best of people and the worst of people. The biggest we can imagine the gospel to be . . . it is bigger and better than anything we could imagine.

2. **So, then, here is our challenge and opportunity to engage this big gospel.** Not as consumers who get what we want but as disciples who are like Jesus.
3. **As we have been blessed, let us be a blessing to others.** Let us confess that we have been selfish and self-centered. Let us resolve to care about what Jesus cares about—and he cares about suffering and salvation. Let us care and do something.
4. **Start with the poor.**

Let us have hearts of love and compassion for those who are in need. And, I know you do that. Earlier this year you gave the money and packed over a million meals to feed the hungry in Mozambique. You are among the most generous sources of food for Twin Cities food shelves. You give money to help those with HIV/AIDS in Africa and to free women from prostitution in Calcutta. Good for you. God bless you.

And, care for the poor around us. We’ve just come through another major election in America. It seems to me that our nation is more politically polarized now than at any time since the Vietnam War. As someone who doesn’t like conflict, I sometimes find it wrenching. As a pastor I feel that anything that can be interpreted as the least bit political will upset someone. There are extreme opinions on economic policy, health care, immigration and taxes. And, sadly, there is sometimes unchristian hatred toward those who differ.

I had a really interesting conversation with someone this week whose name you might recognize, not from Minnesota and a very politically conservative Christian. He told me that he prays that our government will lower taxes so that he can give more money to the poor. Wow! That’s something I don’t often read or hear. Not lower taxes for me but for others. Not so that I can have more but so that I can help others. How wonderfully Christian!

Did you see the news story this week about the couple in Canada who won \$11 million in the lottery and spent it all in four months? They gave it all away! They wrote checks to charities, churches, fire departments and needy people. And, they are now buying more lottery tickets with the hope of giving away more money.

The point here is simple—to care about others. To genuinely care about others. To help them and not blame them. To love them and not condemn them. To care about others and turn caring into action.

5. **Make disciples.**

As followers of Jesus we are called to make more followers of Jesus. It is at the epicenter of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

We believe that all are sinners who are eternally lost from God without personal faith in Jesus Christ as Savior. We care about people. We care about their eternal destiny. We tell them about Jesus dying on the cross for sinners and rising from the dead. We invite them to receive Jesus as Savior and Lord and to receive salvation that guarantees heaven.

There are thousands of ways to make disciples. Often we start with the other person’s needs and God leads us through a process of disciple making. It may take years. It includes prayers and loving and righteous living.

Making disciples includes sending others to people and places we cannot go. All of

us aren't headed to India or Mozambique or Minneapolis. So, together as a church we send and pray and support others. We're in this together.

## **Conclusion**

- 1. We have a big God with a big gospel for a big world.**
- 2. Let us care for those that Jesus cares for.** Let us love our enemies. Let us help the hurting. Let us share Christ's salvation. Not just evangelize. Not just give to the poor. Not just love our neighbors and enemies. It's all of the above. Because, we have a big God with a big gospel for a big world.

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