

Part 3: Teamed as Gifted

[Luke 9:1-6](#)

Jesus' Pathway of Discipleship

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Worship at 9:15 and 11 a.m.

Let us pray. Lord Jesus Christ, you have walked this earth—the valleys and the mountains—and you have preached peace to us. You have shown us peace in your presence, and you have called us to peace in our relationships. Teach us now the way of peace, of your discipleship pathway. And may we hear your word and put it into action. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

This is the third in a series of sermons on the pathway of discipleship that Jesus led his disciples to follow. The first one is the awareness that Jesus touches each person with grace—the grace of God poured out in an individual's life because they have come to know and love Jesus Christ personally. Jesus does this through healing, through experiences of worship, through being in Jesus' presence. The second stage is that Jesus invites us into communities and families; we do not go it alone. We follow Jesus with a group of people, and together we learn what it means to walk in Jesus' way. Today we look at the importance that Jesus also sends people out into responsible tasks to do in the world, and that we do not go alone. We are sent out in teams; we are sent out with gifts. One of my favorite cartoons is of a slave driver seated at the top of a large stone. The slaves are pulling that stone slowly up to the pyramid. The statement underneath the cartoon says: "Believe me fellows, from Pharaoh on down, each of you is an equally-valued member of the team." Now we know that in being a part of a team, it is important that we share power, that we have a common task; but, most importantly, that we have relationships that build a team.

When Jesus called the twelve disciples to go out into the world, he did not send them out alone. He sent them out two-by-two. He sent them out two-by-two because, not only were they bringing themselves as gifts, they were bringing their relationship with him and with each other as gifts. Jesus himself said, "Wherever two or three are gathered in my name [whether they are seated or on the move], there I am in their midst." And he calls the church—the disciples—those who are called out from the crowd, to be together and to be sent out into mission and ministry.

The grace of Jesus calls us together and sends us out. The grace of Jesus in this text clearly gives the disciples power. Jesus calls them together and says, "I give you power and authority to go and do the things that I do—to heal people, to cast out demons, and to proclaim the kingdom of God." It is important that we see that this general call to ministry applies to all disciples. And we are not called to go it alone. In fact, the strong implication in the gospel is that one person cannot, by himself or herself, do the healing, do the casting out of demons, and do the proclamation. We must be together in some way because the power is worked in community—not just among individuals. We go to give the power away to other people. So Jesus passes on to us the ability, the leadership, and the opportunity to serve, so we can share that with other people with whom we come in contact. We are called to exorcise demons, particularly. Demons come in all shapes and sizes. Recently, one of the most popular books on teams has identified five demons that haunt every team; it is called *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, by Patrick Lencioni. Those five dysfunctions are: 1. the absence of trust; 2. the fear of conflict; 3. the lack of commitment; 4. the avoidance of accountability; and 5. the inattention to results. These are the five things that teams struggle with in doing well, and Christian teams—followers of Jesus in teams—struggle with the same things.

When we go out in those teams, we are called to put away the things that block us from accomplishing the mission. One of those demons a team has to deal with is the demon of selfishness, or self-centeredness: as if 'I am the only person who counts.' In the American context, it is this rugged individualism or, as we would also call it, that "star power" that tends to undermine the importance of the team. I remember reading an article on Michael Jordan and the Chicago Bulls during the time when they were accelerating to become not just a good team, but a great team. The difference between the good team of Michael Jordan and the great team of Michael Jordan was that Michael Jordan changed his *modus operandi*. He stopped being the star to whom all of the passes were made; he became a part of the team and began giving the ball away to empower the rest of the team. He took a lot of time during that growth period, particularly to play one-on-one with Scotty Pippin, and to show Scotty Pippin some of his special moves so that they could work more closely together. It was at that period of time that the Bulls became not just a good team, but a great team. Michael Jordan, in a sense, cast out that demon of self-centeredness that haunts many teams.

The grace of Jesus Christ calls us not only to go and confront and to do the mission and ministry of Jesus, but also to proclaim the Good News. It is in that sending out process that we are invited to go out of our comfort zones and go into places with which we may not be familiar. Jesus does not send us out alone; he sends us out in teams of people and communities of people—among whom, and with whom, we can share the responsibility of doing the ministry of Christ. Those who are gathered around Jesus are sent out and scattered throughout the world. But they are never sent out alone.

When you go out into the marketplace and you are doing the ministry that Jesus has given you, personally to perform, you may be out there in the office alone. You may be out there on the field alone. Do you have a team of people who are praying for you as you go out there? Do you have a group of people whom you meet with, who know what you do and what you struggle with, who can support you as you go? If there is anything clear, it is that Jesus will send us out; and we do go out, but we do not go out alone. We need partners. We need support people. We cannot do it alone and do it well.

I was talking with a group of Wycliffe missionaries not long ago. They each go into far away parts of the world. They work hard, alone or in groups of two, to translate the Bible into the native language of the people among whom they live. But all of them agreed that they were starved for a sense of community. They were starved to be part of a team of people who loved them, who cared for

them, who supported them, and who could share their concerns about life. It is important, even among missionaries on the field, that they have a sense of being built into a team. As Patrick Lencioni says in his book, *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, the number one issue for every team—the foundational concern that dismantles a team—is trust...the lack of trust. If we do not have relationships among people with whom we have built trust, we will probably not do well in the work that God has given us to do. The number one thing we are called to do, in fact, when we go and do the thing that God has given us to do, is to build a community of trust. One of the things that we Presbyterians struggle with is that we are known as “committee people.” Wherever there is a gathering of Presbyterians you can find a committee not too far away. But what we have discovered is that committees are often good at doing tasks and making decisions; however, they are not very good at building community.

I was with a group of Presbyterians just this last week and we were talking about this for our meetings of our Presbyterian gatherings. We meet and we decide, and we discuss and we debate. We meet and we perform tasks, but we hardly know each other. The bottom line, as we discussed it together, is that this is killing us. If there is a disease or a demon that haunts the Presbyterian church, it is that sense of being driven to meet together over and over...to do, do, do... and never 'be' or relate.

In a good team there is always a balance between the task and the relationship. Jesus built community with his disciples before he sent them out so that they would learn to love one another—or at least talk to each other—even if they didn't always agree along the way. It is this lack of community that kills us in being sent out, into getting the jobs done that we are called to do.

The grace of Jesus, according to this text, invites the disciples to travel light, to take no baggage with them. I don't think that refers only to physical baggage; I believe it means emotional baggage as well. We come to worship today probably with a lot of emotional baggage, and we come here with the hope that we can just leave it here at the feet of the cross in the presence of Jesus, and go out of here free from all that baggage.

We are called, when we go out, not to take the baggage with us—to travel light. To release the burdens...the blockages...the biases...the assumptions that haunt us...and to go out traveling light. Jesus did say, “Come to me, all you who are heavy-laden and burdened, and I will give you rest.” And part of that rest is: leave it here; don't take it with you. Jesus is clearly saying to the disciples, “You can do more with less.” And that less is also a physical less as well.

When we go to places that are new, let us not take all the prejudices of life and cultural assumptions with us that haunt us from the past, because often these things keep us from experiencing the new life that Jesus has for us. I was reading the book by Dolphus Weary, *I Ain't Comin Bac*; it is his biography regarding his life in Mendenhall, Mississippi. He did not want to go back to Mississippi. He had an opportunity to go out to California and play basketball in college; he and another young man by the name of Jimmy Walker went together to play basketball. They discovered themselves in California as the only two black young men in a totally white community. They discovered that they needed to travel light. They couldn't take anything with them because they didn't have much. All they could bring with them, in fact, was their humanity, their race, and the reality of their commitment to Jesus Christ. And so as they went, they became two people, a team, to go play basketball and to build relationships among Anglos—among white people in Southern California. They could take nothing else.

When we travel light, it is our responsibility not to take the stuff of our assumptions with us when we go into places that are culturally different. This church, and many churches like it, is sending people into cross-cultural service on a frequent basis. We send people into other cultural situations, and when we go there, the main training process of preparation has to do with not imposing our own culture upon the new. Jesus said, “When you go, eat what they put in front of you. When you go, live on what they give to you. When you go, lean into their culture and their household.” One such group was going to a large city in South America, and early in their trip they saw this young man playing soccer on a street. The ball was kicked into the street and flattened by a car that ran over it. Immediately, one member of the team said, “We can go out and buy a new soccer ball. Let's do that.” And they did. They gave it to the young boy on the street. Feeling really good about themselves, a little bit later they went into a worship service. No money was put into the offering plate, because the people were so poor. One of the members of the team decided to put a hundred dollar bill in the offering plate. “I can do that,” he thought. It was the only bill in the entire offering plate. The missionary coach took them aside and said, “What you are doing is not good. You have brought all of this wealth and assumption with you, and you are laying upon this culture that expectation. What you are doing is creating dependency, not partnership.”

Jesus said clearly: when you go, do not take the stuff you have with you. The grace of Jesus Christ says that you are the gift, as you go—not your money, not your stuff. You are the gift. Your relationships with the others in the team, the people you love and with whom you serve together are the gift. Teams have gifts, and the gifts are the people who are on the team. The team's giftedness is not about the individual functions that a person performs while they are going; it is chiefly about you, who you are, with your abilities and disabilities, with your freedoms and your hesitations. You are the gift on the team, and your team is the gift to the people. When you go and visit in another person's household—you and your spouse, or you and your family—you are the gifts that you bring. You can bring other things along with you but, essentially, it is about how you build relationships. Jesus says: if you go to a house, then stay in that house and build a deep sense of relationship. It is important that, when we go, we do not undermine the gifts that we have to give. We are hesitant about who we are, and who we are in relationship. Os Guinness says in his book, *Rising to the Call*, that God calls us along the line of our giftedness. The calling says: Do what you are, not according to the world's expectation of you, or what you do. Who you are in Jesus Christ is the most important gift you can ever give in any situation. That gift is not for yourself; it is to be given away. Do not rely on gift lists, though it is often given in churches—as if you are ‘forty gifts that you can have by the power of the Spirit.’ Those lists are insufficient because they never totally capture the person. You are the gift, with everything about you—the way you were born, the way you are growing up, the way the Spirit empowers you. That is a tremendous sense of huge giftedness.

One of the problems of those gift patterns and lists is that there is no communal reflection; it's all about what I think about myself, not what you think about me. You know that if we did surveys on each other, our own self-perception would never be as great as the perception of the people around us. It is important that we allow the community to help us see our giftedness. Jesus understood that the person is the gift.

I took a gift-list test not too long ago, and the gifts that I came out with at the top were four: teaching, leadership, pastoring, and organizing. But beware of the gifts that were at the bottom: evangelism and hospitality. Do not ask me to do evangelism or hospitality; you'll be in big trouble. Now I believe that God is able to give us giftedness that is far beyond our imagination, according to who we are. But that giftedness is built home-by-home, house-by-house in communities and intimate relationships. John Stott, an apostle from the Anglican Church, goes around the world sharing his humanity with people, his gift of teaching. I saw him in action one day as he was staying in a home of a family in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. He goes to the same home every time he visits the same city because of this principle. Here is the amazing thing he would do: He would take a three-by-five card for every person he met in the home, and he would keep a written log of all his experiences with that person. He would build a deep, and deepening relationship with each person; and he would keep going back because he understood that the gift was his humanity, with his or her humanity. He did that with little children and with the older adults.

In the book *I Ain't Comin Back*, Dolphus Weary and Jimmy Walker, those two basketball players, discovered one day in 1967 when they heard that Martin Luther King had been shot, that people down the hall of their dormitory were cheering and laughing about that fact that King had been shot. It was shocking to them. They were concerned about their own lives until they heard the voice of the Lord speak to them and say, "You two are a team; and how you communicate Jesus Christ in your African-American viewpoints, how you carry yourself among Anglo people, how you relate and respond to their anger or their support, is how the gift will be for the development of community and mission and ministry that you have for the future." And he went on with that basketball team with his friend, Jimmy Walker, to confront bigotry...to deal with bias... and to show love to people who had hate.

We are called in the mission of Jesus Christ to go as a team—to go as a gift of our humanity, and to share the love of Jesus Christ wherever God sends us: in the home, in the marketplace, or in the world. Let us go with a clear sense of call that Jesus has sent us out in community.

Let us pray. Lord Jesus Christ, now send us to the places that you call us to go. It is not good for us to be alone. Help us to find teams of support and prayer. May your will be done through us as you gift us in terms of our relationship with you and the humanity that you give to us. It is in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit that we go, as whole people, in your love. Amen.