



MISSION IMPOSSIBLE

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 Acts 8:26-40
 First Message
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If God had been part of the old television series “Mission Impossible,” we might have received a message like this:

“You have been chosen to be a member of a special forces team for a covert operation. Your assignment is to infiltrate enemy lines and release captive prisoners. The enemy force’s commander has been given the code-name Satan, a.k.a., the devil, the serpent, the prince of this world. His schemes are notoriously diabolical. He is the master of disguise. At times he appears as an angel of light; at other times an angel of darkness. He plays on people’s great weakness — the notion that that they can find real life on this planet. He fills them with false hope and false despair, and they cannot discern his lies. The members of your team will be others like you, not the rich and powerful, just ordinary people who believe in Jesus. But they have the same secret weapon that you have – the Holy Spirit. Your assignment, if you accept this mission, is to share the good news of Jesus Christ so that many will believe in our Leader and his Son and be freed from the power of the enemy. The mission you have been called to will not just be difficult, it will be impossible. You will have to rely on every resource available to you from our Leader. And if you or any member of your team is captured, our Leader will never disavow you, but will claim you as his son or daughter for all eternity. Therefore, live with reckless abandon and do not fear. This preacher will self-destruct in 10 seconds. May God be with you.”

Christians are called by God to be his sons and daughters. As believers, we are the church; our bodies are God’s temple, his dwelling place on earth. As such we are called to a great mission — to be witnesses to Jesus Christ throughout the world. We haven’t been called merely to take care of ourselves and hoard the life that we have been given, but to share this life and the good news of Jesus Christ, to be a light to the nations. John Stott describes the Christian life in these words, “The church is the only organization that exists for the purpose of its non-members.”

This morning we begin a summer series on evangelism, sharing the good news of Jesus Christ. Today and over the next four weeks we will discuss different aspects of this subject. We will be led by different teachers, culminating with a message from John Fischer, on August 6th.

It is appropriate that our study on evangelism follows our series in the book of Mark. After the resurrection, Jesus appeared to his disciples and said to them: “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth” (Acts 1:8, NASB).

Immediately after he said this, Jesus was lifted up into a

cloud and disappeared into the heavens.

When the disciples began their ministry of witnessing, their mission seemed impossible. Their crucified Leader had left his band in seeming disarray. But on Pentecost, the Spirit came with power, and 3,000 people believed. The message spread and the church began to grow. Today, the church is still a part of this “mission impossible.”

I do not plan to share a theology or a program of evangelism, but, rather, a vision for evangelism, a vision for how we can live for Christ in Silicon Valley. Our text is from Acts chapter 8, the story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch. We will focus on six simple principles of evangelism which we find in this encounter.

Acts 8:25-40:

So, when they had solemnly testified and spoken the word of the Lord, they started back to Jerusalem, and were preaching the gospel to many villages of the Samaritans. But an angel of the Lord spoke to Philip saying, “Get up and go south to the road that descends from Jerusalem to Gaza.” (This is a desert road.) So he got up and went; and there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasure; and he had come to Jerusalem to worship, and he was returning and sitting in his chariot, and was reading the prophet Isaiah. Then the Spirit said to Philip, “Go up and join this chariot.” Philip ran up and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet, and said, “Do you understand what you are reading?” And he said, “Well, how could I, unless someone guides me?” And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.

Now the passage of Scripture which he was reading was this:

**“He was led as a sheep to slaughter;
 And as a lamb before its shearers is silent,
 So He does not open His mouth.
 In humiliation his judgment was taken away;
 Who will relate His generation?
 For His life is removed from the earth.”**

The eunuch answered Philip and said, “Please tell me, of whom does the prophet say this? Of himself or of someone else?” Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning from this Scripture he preached Jesus to him. As they went along the road they came to some water; and the eunuch said, “Look! Water! What prevents me from being baptized?” And Philip said, “If you believe with all your heart, you may.” And he answered and said, “I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.” And he ordered the chariot to stop; and they both went down into the water, Philip as well as the eunuch, and he baptized him. When they came up out

of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; and the eunuch no longer saw him, but went on his way rejoicing. But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he passed through he kept preaching the gospel to all the cities until he came to Caesarea.

A. The call to be a witness is given to every Christian

So, when they had solemnly testified and spoken the word of the Lord, they started back to Jerusalem, and were preaching the gospel to many villages of the Samaritans. But an angel of the Lord spoke to Philip saying, “Get up and go south to the road that descends from Jerusalem to Gaza.” (This is a desert road.) (Acts 8:25-26)

Philip was not a member of the apostolic band. He was one of the deacons of Acts 6 who was chosen to deal with a difficult situation regarding some widows. He was an ordinary Christian whom God used in extraordinary ways. Following the persecution of Christians in Jerusalem after the death and resurrection of Jesus, Philip set out for Samaria. This was how the gospel spread from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria. Actually, Philip was the first person to take the gospel outside of Judea and into Samaria. God always does this when the church becomes ingrown: he scatters the church, forcing Christians out into the world in order to gather his church.

In Samaria, Philip was joined by Peter and John, who came to lay an apostolic foundation for the gospel. The two apostles left to begin preaching in local villages, but Philip got a different assignment from an angel of the Lord. My natural tendency would be to hang around with the apostles, content to man the information table at the back of the synagogue and sell the books and CDs. But God had other ideas for Philip.

Our very lives are a witness. We don't need a title or a degree. We don't have to be government-certified or board-approved. Evangelism is not limited to the professionals. We are free to break away from the group and follow the Lord in what he has for us. Some people are particularly gifted evangelists, but all of us are called to be witnesses. We gather on Sundays as God's body to worship our King, and then he scatters us into our community throughout the week so that we can share the good news.

B. The audience to our witness is all people

The book of Acts makes it clear that the gospel is available to everyone. It breaks down every barrier and every prejudice between people, reversing what occurred at the tower of Babel. In our text the good news had spread not only to Samaria, those people who were in constant friction with the Jews, now it would be shared with an Ethiopian. This man was a foreigner, a court official of Candace, queen of Ethiopia, and a eunuch. Because eunuchs posed no threat to the harem, it was quite common for them to serve as court officials in oriental lands. This man held a very trusted position, that of court treasurer.

Philip could well have rejected this encounter, remembering the text from Deuteronomy 23:1, which says: “No one who is emasculated, or has his male organ cut off, shall enter the assembly of the Lord.” But Philip knew that through Christ all nations were to become one body, in fulfillment of the words of the prophet Isaiah: “Let not the foreigner who has joined himself to the Lord say the Lord

will surely separate me from His people. Neither let the eunuch say, ‘Behold, I am a dry tree.’ For thus says the Lord to the eunuchs who keep My sabbaths and choose what pleases Me, that hold fast My covenant, to them I will give in My house within My walls a memorial and a name better than that of sons and daughters” (Isa 56:3-5). Philip may also have been familiar with another text, from Zephaniah: “From beyond the rivers of Ethiopia My worshippers, My dispersed ones will bring My offerings.” (3:10)

The gospel is for all people, every nation and every tribe. God's grace and salvation is available to everyone, regardless of race, education, economic circumstance or personal appearance.

Let us consider for a moment our own church. Silicon Valley is the hub for much of what happens in the world, both economically and technologically. All the world comes here to the Bay Area, just as all the world came to Jerusalem centuries ago. We could not be more strategically located. The conditions for evangelism are similar to those of the first century, when the Roman roads and the Greek language allowed for the spread of the gospel. So we live in an exciting place at an exciting time. What an opportunity we have to share the gospel!

C. The nature of being a witness is relational

So he got up and went; and there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasure; and he had come to Jerusalem to worship, and he was returning and sitting in his chariot, and was reading the prophet Isaiah. Then the Spirit said to Philip, “Go up and join this chariot.” (Acts 8:27-29)

The word “join” in verse 29 means to cling or be attached. The term is used in the New Testament to describe the cleaving process in marriage. Here, Philip is directed to identify with this traveler on the road and spend time with him.

We are not called to a place or ministry; we are called to minister to people. Being a witness is not about a program or an organization; it is about people, first and foremost. God loves people, and we are to have the same heart towards them that he does. If we don't, then we will be reluctant Jonahs, refusing to go Nineveh.

Sometimes these relationships come about spontaneously, as with Philip and this man from Ethiopia. While Philip was directed to join himself to a stranger, more often than not, God asks us to be joined to those people who are on the road of our natural relationships – our neighbors, those we work with, students and teachers, etc. You may think you are part of a dot.com company in order to get stock options, make a lot of money and retire early. But no, you are there to be with people and be a witness. You may be perturbed by the negative influences this area has on your children and you may want to stay separate, but that would be wrong. You are in this community, you and your family, to be a witness. Our calling as Christians takes precedence over what we do, how much we have, or where we live.

Who has God asked us to be joined to? It doesn't have to be the whole school or the whole company, just one person, one couple, one family. Has God laid someone on

your heart: a fellow worker, a neighbor, a parent of a child on your baseball team? Take them to lunch, ask them to a ballgame, invite them over for dinner. Find out who they are and build a relationship with them.

Some years ago, a member of our body lent a helping hand to a Vietnamese woman who was having a language problem at the supermarket checkout. Their brief encounter led to an English class for the Vietnamese boat people in the area, and several of the young people who attended came to faith in Christ – all because one woman joined herself to where the Spirit was leading.

Another question we need to ask ourselves is: Do we have time to join ourselves to someone? Do we have time to be spontaneous? to listen to someone's life story? to be open to the Spirit's leading? It may interrupt our schedule and it may not be logical or cost-effective. Philip was probably wondering why he should go out on a desert road. But we need to be available to the relationships that God brings to us. We need to build time into our schedule to be spontaneous.

Years ago, when I was an intern, I was on a flight to Washington D.C. I planned on studying Greek during the flight and was looking forward to getting a lot done. A woman sitting next to me seemed very interested in what I was doing, but I kept my head down and studied. Half-way through the trip, in response to the Spirit's constant prompting, I began to talk to her. She said she was making the trip to visit her dying father. She was in a lot of pain and she needed to talk about God. This is the kind of thing that happens when we are available and opened to be joined to others.

D. Being a witness can be creative and interesting

Philip ran up and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet, and said, "Do you understand what you are reading?" And he said, "Well, how could I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. (Acts 8:30-31)

When Philip heard the eunuch reading from the prophet Isaiah, he simply asked him, "Do you understand what you are reading?" What a great question to gain entry into this man's life! A wonderful way to begin a conversation is to simply ask someone a question. Unfortunately, most Christians are so filled with evangelistic technique and information they are mainly concerned with what they are going to say. Then the focus is on them. They unload everything they know about the Bible and about God and never really engage people. So Christians come across as rigid, inflexible and boring. They create an awkward tension and shut off all possibility of dialogue.

Evangelism in this account is characterized not by coercion but by creating interest. Philip demonstrates a skill that we can learn from. Don't worry about what you are going to say. Begin with the person you are speaking to and ask questions that break through barriers so that you can get to the heart of the issue.

God demonstrates this wonderful skill throughout the Scriptures. In the garden, he said to Adam and Eve, "Where are you?" To Elijah in the wilderness, he said, "What are you doing here?" Jesus said to the Samaritan woman at the well, "Give me a drink." Then he said to her, "If you would have asked, I would have given you living

water." To the paralytic, he said, "Do you want to be well?"

There are so many ways we can enter people's lives without threatening them and creating barriers. We can ask questions like: What are your dreams? What gives you peace in your heart? Are you confused about suffering? Do you understand what the Bible says about marriage? If you could have anything in the world, what would it be?

When I worked as an engineer, I noticed that on occasions, conversations at work turned to religion. When that happened, I would always try to come up with some one-liner that would win the day for Christ. I would find a way to insert myself into the conversation. It was always awkward and never very productive, however. This principle really helped me. One day I was talking to a colleague at work and he told me that he was divorced. I asked what had happened, and he said that he used to beat his children. I asked him, "How do you live with that guilt? I know Someone who can help you with it." I didn't have to think about telling this man something; all I had to do was ask a question.

E. The content of our witness is the truth as it is in Jesus

And he said, "Well, how could I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. Now the passage of Scripture which he was reading was this:

**"He was led as a sheep to slaughter;
And as a lamb before its shearers is silent,
So He does not open His mouth.
In humiliation his judgment was taken away;
Who will relate His generation?
For His life is removed from the earth."**

The eunuch answered Philip and said, "Please tell me, of whom does the prophet say this? Of himself or of someone else?" Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning from this Scripture he preached Jesus to him. (Acts 8:31-35)

This man from Ethiopia was returning home after visiting Jerusalem. He probably was a Gentile who believed in the God of Israel and was seeking spiritual direction, but no one in the city could answer his questions. On the road home he wrestled with the text from Isaiah. In response to Philip's question, he replied, "How could I understand unless someone guides me?" Then he asked, "Please, tell me, of whom does the prophet say this?" So, from this text in Isaiah 53, Philip told the man about Jesus. He told him about the Suffering Servant who was led like a lamb to the slaughter, his blood shed for man's sins. He told him about a crucified Jesus and a resurrected Lord.

When we are asked to give testimony about Jesus, let us simply give witness to his life, death and resurrection, nothing more, nothing less. We don't have to water down or sugarcoat the gospel. We don't have to solve questions about religion. And we don't have to worry about the response; that is up to God. Our job is simply to give testimony. Dr. Martyn Lloyd Jones said: "Do not give up hope for any sinner. Pray to God to save them. Let not any conversion astonish you; be astonished rather, that anyone should possibly remain unconverted."

Like Philip, we are spiritual guides to the truth. Our task is to take people through unfamiliar territory. The

work of evangelism is the work of being a guide, of leading people through the uncharted wilderness to the glorious destination that is Jesus Christ.

F. Our witness is to be free of any organizational ritual or control

As they went along the road they came to some water; and the eunuch *said, "Look! Water! What prevents me from being baptized?" And Philip said, "If you believe with all your heart, you may." And he answered and said, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God." And he ordered the chariot to stop; and they both went down into the water, Philip as well as the eunuch, and he baptized him. When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; and the eunuch no longer saw him, but went on his way rejoicing. But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he passed through he kept preaching the gospel to all the cities until he came to Caesarea. After Philip had preached Jesus to the eunuch, they passed by some water. The eunuch, delighted with his new understanding of the gospel and belief in it, said, "Look! Water! What prevents me from being baptized?" So Philip baptized him on the spot. (Acts 8:36-40)

The point here is not that baptism is necessary for salvation. Water baptism is a physical symbol of a spiritual reality. The Lord instructs us to be baptized, but Philip was not pressing baptism on him; in fact, it wasn't even his idea. When we come to faith in Jesus, nothing stops us from achieving full identity with the Lord and full association with the Body of Christ. No ritual is required before baptism. We don't have to attend some class before we can have full fellowship. Sadly, this is what happened in the early church. A new believer could not partake of the sacraments until he had gone through the required training. In fact, verse 37 is a baptismal creed, which was later inserted into the text to verify the fact that this man had indeed professed Christ as Lord. Belief in Jesus doesn't require a ritualistic and formal relationship with ecclesiastical authorities. Believers are new creations in Christ.

In a curious ending to the story, Philip is snatched away to Azotus, a city on the coast. From there he proceeded

northward, preaching the gospel until he came to Caesarea, where he settled, never to see the Ethiopian man again. Why do you think Philip was snatched away like that? It was because his work was finished. He didn't have to stay with this man and meet his every need. He didn't have to control his growth in Christ. The eunuch did not expect anything else. He went on his way rejoicing, because he had been saved.

Sharing the gospel with someone is not about formalized ritual and ecclesiastical control over people's lives. We may be only a paragraph or a chapter in someone's life, but we can trust that God will grow up his children. Of course, we should be concerned about a new believer's growth in the faith. When we have opportunity to help, then by all means we should do so. But we are not to act as though we are lords of their life. We can trust the Lord that he will be fully that. Oftentimes the work of evangelism is knowing when to join ourselves to people and when to let go.

This is the vision of being a witness, of being a church of Philips, ordinary people who are responsive to the Spirit's leading.

When I first came to PBC in the early '70s, it was a special time. People from all age groups were coming to faith in Christ. I was single at the time and I had a lot of single friends. What I often recall about those times was that hardly a day went by that we didn't gather to share a meal. People would bring their friends and we'd have a great time of fellowship. All of us were new believers who made a point of including whoever wanted to come along with us in whatever activity we were involved in at the time.

This is still the vision for the church. Evangelism is not concerned with new opportunities or programs, but redeeming opportunities. As we live our daily lives let us join ourselves to others and become spiritual guides to lead them to Jesus. The mission is impossible, yes, but then, it doesn't depend on us. Why would we want to live any other way? Everything we are and everything we do is a testimony for others. As St. Francis of Assisi said, "Preach the gospel constantly, and if necessary, use words."

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