

Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,  
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, January 8, 2017

THE MASTER'S PLAN  
Luke 5:1-11

**A MISSION FROM GOD**

Back in the previous millennium – in 1980, to be precise – John Belushi and Dan Ackroyd starred in a movie called *The Blues Brothers*, the story of how Jake Blues, just released from prison, and his brother Elwood decide to take on “a mission from God” and resurrect their old blues band in order to raise \$5,000 to save the Roman Catholic orphanage where the brothers grew up.

The movie was a comedy. It was meant to be funny, and it was. But in a much more serious sense, you and I are on a mission from God. *You* have a mission from God. *I* have a mission from God. *We* have a mission from God. *The church* has a mission from God. It seems to me that the start of a new year is a good time to revisit and renew our commitment to the mission we have received from God.

In general terms, the word “mission” conveys the idea of being sent to perform a particular task or to carry out a designated duty. It may be a diplomatic mission undertaken to ease tensions between nations or governments, say, between the US and Russia. Or it may be a military mission to liberate a people, or to take or retain control of a strategic area. In the movie *Saving Private Ryan*, US Army Captain John Miller (the character played by Tom Hanks) and his unit of Rangers were given a very specific mission during World War 2 – to find and “save” Private James Ryan, whose brothers had been killed in action, so that at least one of Mrs. Ryan’s sons would return home safely from the war. The mission may also be a humanitarian effort to alleviate suffering, to assist refugees, or to provide aid for the poor, the hungry, or the homeless.

For you and me, and for us together as the church – as the called-out people of God in the world, the word “mission” contains within it a distinctively spiritual purpose and a holy calling, a calling from God Himself.

Ed Stetzer, the Executive Director of the Billy Graham Center for Evangelism at Wheaton College, defines the word “mission” as “the entire task for which the church is sent into the world.”

One way to describe our mission is to say, as Paul says of David in Acts 13:36, that we are here to serve God’s purposes in this generation – to carry out the purposes of God in this place and time in history. This is *your* mission from God. It is *our* mission. It is the task for which the church, and each one of us, has been sent into the world by God.

In his book *Multiply*, Francis Chan writes that “the church has one mission. It is the mission that characterized Jesus’ ministry on earth, and it is the mission He left to the church when He returned to the Father. Our mission on this planet,” he says, “is spelled out in the Great Commission. We are called to spread Christ’s rule on earth through making disciples” (Chan, *Multiply: Disciples Making Disciples*, 268-269).

The most familiar form of the Great Commission is the one found in Matthew 28, where Jesus instructs His followers to “go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:19-20). This is *our* mission from God. It is the task for which the Lord Jesus has sent the church into the world.

Or, as Jesus said to His disciples in Acts 1:8, our mission is to be His witnesses starting right where we are, right where God has placed us, and wherever He chooses to send us, even to the ends of the earth. This is *your* mission, *my* mission, *our* mission from God.

Our mission is the same one to which Jesus called Peter and the others who became His disciples: To become “fishers of men” (Matthew 4:19; Mark 1:17) and to “catch men” (Luke 5:10) and women for life in the kingdom of God. This is *your* mission, *my* mission, *our* mission from God.

Our mission is to be Christ’s ambassadors, appealing to everyone we can to be reconciled to God (2 Corinthians 5:20) and then to grow – and keep on growing – in the grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ (2 Peter 3:18).

To say it yet another way, our mission, as it says on the front of your church bulletin, is *to know Christ and to make Him known*. To know Jesus personally and savingly. To know Him and believe in Him as the Son of God, Savior of Sinners, and Lord of your life. And to make Him known, so that people everywhere, including where we live and work and shop, may also come to know Him, believe in Him, love Him, and follow Him. This is *your* mission, *my* mission, *our* mission from God. It is the reason for which God has sent the church and you and me into the world.

God did not put us here in this world just to have a good job. We are not here to have a comfortable, even enviable, standard of living. We are not here simply to have a nice family or lots of friends. We are here to be part of something much, much bigger. We are here on a mission from God. We are here to carry out the Master’s plan for our lives and for the world.

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### **A TURNING POINT FOR SIMON PETER**

Having said all that, let’s look at what is happening in the verses we read from Luke 5. It is the story – the *true* story – of a miraculous haul of fish and a life-altering encounter with

Jesus that results in a new calling, a new purpose, and a new direction in the life of Simon Peter.

It starts out with Jesus teaching a crowd of people at the edge of the Lake of Gennesaret (which is another name for the Sea of Galilee). It is in the middle of the day. Because of the crowd, Jesus climbs into Peter's boat and uses it as a pulpit or platform from which to preach. When He is finished teaching, Jesus tells Peter to take the boat out into the deep water and go fishing. This is not the first time Peter has met Jesus or heard Him speak, but still it must have seemed odd to him that this itinerant preacher – a carpenter's son – would give him fishing advice. After all, Peter is a professional fisherman. Fishing is his livelihood. Everybody who knew anything about fishing on the Sea of Galilee in those days knew that nighttime was the right time to go fishing, and the best place to catch fish was in the shallow water. So, what Jesus tells Peter to do is contrary to everything Peter knows about fishing. But Peter had been out fishing all night the night before without catching a single fish. So, he does as Jesus directs.

The result is an extraordinary, miraculous catch of fish. It is so huge that the nets begin to break from the weight of the fish. Then, when Peter calls for help from his fishing buddies in the other boat (James and John, who also become disciples of Jesus), the haul of fish nearly sinks both boats.

Peter knows instinctively that Jesus is no ordinary man. He doesn't yet know who Jesus is in full. But he recognizes that God is at work in some way in and through the life of Jesus. He knows that only an instrument of God could produce such a phenomenal catch in the middle of the day. The miracle is a sign of the presence and activity of God.

This awareness of God's presence and power also awakens Peter to his own sinfulness and unworthiness before God. He is uncomfortable in the presence of holiness. So, what does he do? He asks Jesus to go away. His reaction is reminiscent of Isaiah's despairing response in Isaiah 6 when he had a vision of the Lord and His glory in the temple. Isaiah cried out: "Woe is me! I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips" – in other words, I am a sinner who lives in the midst of sinners – "and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty" (Isaiah 6:5).

Like Isaiah in the temple, Peter is seized with a sense of his sinfulness in the presence of Jesus. He knows He is not worthy, not qualified to be in God's presence. But just as the Lord spoke graciously and reassuringly to Isaiah, so Jesus speaks reassuringly and graciously to Peter. He tells Peter first to stop being fearful – fear being the usual response when an unholy person finds himself or herself in the presence of a holy God. Because of God's grace, which comes free of charge to people who don't deserve it and never will (like Peter and you and me), Peter is no longer held hostage to fear. Jesus sets him free from fear. Free to live fearlessly with God. Free to live dangerously for God. Free to serve God's purposes.

That Jesus has a mission for Peter is evident in His next words to Peter: "From now on," He says, "you will catch men" (Luke 5:10). Jesus intends – and did in fact – to make a new

kind of fisherman out of Peter, as well as Andrew and James and John, showing them how to catch men and women instead of perch and bass and whatever else one can catch when fishing on the Sea of Galilee (Matthew 4:19; Mark 1:17, *MSG*).

It was a turning point in Peter's life. It was one of those encounters, one of those moments that changed his life and outlook forever.

To "catch men and women" simply means to bring people, young and old, rich and poor, red, yellow, black, white, and brown, into the kingdom of God in a personal, saving relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ, and to help them grow to maturity as Christian disciples.

What I want you to see today is that the call and mission of Peter are really no different from your call and mission, and mine, as followers of Jesus and members of His church. The call and mission of Peter are no different from the call and mission of the church in the world today, tomorrow, and 'til the end of time. We have a mission from God just as Peter had a mission from God.

While this mission is the same for each one of us, it takes different forms in different lives. Not everyone is called to "leave everything" in order to follow Jesus, as Peter, Andrew, James and John did, when they left their fishing business and their jobs to become His disciples. If Jesus calls you to leave a job or a place in order to carry out His mission, the best thing you can do is to leave and go wherever He leads you. But more often than not, I think, Jesus calls us to stay and serve Him right where we are. Right where *you* are. Sometimes work or school or the community where God has planted you is the best place to serve God's purposes. To be Christ's ambassador. To make Christ known.

### **A MODERN-DAY MISSIONARY AT McDONALD'S**

Take a young man named Peter – not the fisherman, but another Peter – for example. In his book *Great Commission, Great Compassion*, Paul Borthwick tells of stopping in at a McDonald's in Cambridge, Massachusetts one day, and spotting Peter working behind the counter. He recognized Peter from church, and he knew Peter had just gotten his master's degree from Harvard. Borthwick greeted him and managed to get Peter to break free for coffee.

"What are you doing here?" he asked Peter, knowing that Harvard master's degree graduates don't usually aspire to work the counter at McDonald's. Peter explained: "I graduated in May but I went four months without finding a job, so I said to myself, 'I need some income to pay bills.' So this is where I've ended up, at least for now."

"Sorry to hear that. It must be hard," replied Borthwick. But Peter cut him off.

"No, don't be sorry," he said. "*God has me here.* This place is giving me awesome opportunities to share my faith. I'm on a shift that includes a Buddhist guy from Sri Lanka, a Muslim fellow from Lebanon, a Hindu lady from India, and a fellow Christian from El

Salvador. It's (fantastic). I get to be a global missionary to my coworkers while asking 'Would you like fries with that?'"

"(Peter) laughed, and so," says Paul Borthwick, "did I. Peter found himself in a setting he never would have chosen as part of his long-term plan, but his mindset of living as a sent person shaped the way he looked at his circumstances and at the people around him" (Borthwick, *Great Commission, Great Compassion*, 46).

You don't have to work at McDonald's to be a missionary. You don't have to go to Haiti like Stephanie Fry, or to Germany like Nico Chantel, or to Mexico like Susan Service and Stella and Sylvia and Nohemi, or to France like the Orsinis and many others to be a missionary. You don't have to go to Malaysia or Ethiopia or Russia or Europe to be a missionary. If God calls you to any of these places or somewhere else, GO! If God calls you to stay and serve Him where you are, accept your mission, embrace your mission, and carry out your mission to be Christ's witness and to catch men and women for the kingdom of God in your particular mission field. In your particular sphere of influence.

Today we have ordained and installed elders and deacons for service in the life of our church. We have also commissioned the members of our new Great Commission Vision Team, as they embark on a mission to help us discover and discern God's vision for our church in our community at this time. The elders and deacons and vision team all play vital roles in the life and witness of our church. But each of you plays a vital role as well. There are no unnecessary, expendable parts of the body of Christ. We have a mission from God to fulfill together. And each of us personally has a mission from God that is part of the larger picture of God's mission for us.

### **OWN YOUR MISSION**

What I am asking of you today – each and every one of you – is to take personal ownership of your role in the mission and movement of God in and through this church. No church can effectively carry out its mission from God if only a third or half or even two-thirds of its members are personally committed and personally involved in God's mission. It takes all of us, giving of our time and resources. It takes all of us, using our gifts and abilities to serve Christ and to care for people. It takes all of us, letting our light shine for Jesus wherever we are. It takes all of us, becoming "fishers of men" and intentionally seeking to catch men and women for life in the kingdom of God. It takes all of us, not just elders and deacons and ministry leaders and teachers and others who serve behind the scenes. It takes all of us to take the message of Jesus and His love to people who have not yet heard. It takes all of us to fulfill our great commission to make disciples of all nations.

It was the Master's plan to give Peter a mission from God, to teach and train and equip him, and to give him power from God – the power of the Holy Spirit – to carry out his mission. It is the Master's plan to do the same in us. *Through* us. To do the same in and through *this* family of believers, *this* fellowship of redeemed sinners, *this* living body called the church.

## **THE DOMINO THEORY OF SPIRITUAL IMPACT**

Let me tell you one more thing that relates to what I've been talking about this morning. Rich Stearns, the president of World Vision, calls it the domino theory of spiritual impact. Imagine a long line of dominoes. When one falls, it sets off a chain reaction that can cause dozens or hundreds more dominoes to fall. Jesus, for example, set up 12 dominoes (His disciples, one of whom was Peter). He taught them, mentored them, disciplined them, commissioned them, empowered them with the Holy Spirit, and then sent them off to carry out His mission. Now there are more than 2 billion followers of Christ in the world, which is a lot of dominoes!

Stearns then tells this story to illustrate the spiritual impact a single individual can have. In the 1880s, a missionary kid named Robert Wilder was preparing to return to the mission field. While in college, along with several friends, he signed a pledge to become a missionary. Health problems prevented him from ever fulfilling his pledge. So, instead, he encouraged others to take up the task. *One domino fell.*

During a speaking tour that took him through Chicago, Wilder spoke to an audience that included Samuel Moffett. Moffett signed Robert's pledge, and within two years he landed in Korea. He was one of the first Protestant missionaries to take the gospel to Korea. (I recognize his name, because his son, also named Samuel, served as a missionary in China and then South Korea for more than 30 years, before returning to the US and serving as Professor of Missions at Princeton Seminary, where I had the privilege of sitting under his teaching.)

A few years after arriving in Korea, the elder Moffett shared the gospel with a man who had become disillusioned with his Taoist practice. Kiel Sunchu trusted Christ, and *another domino fell.*

In 1907, Kiel was one of the leaders of the Pyongyang revival. In January of that year, spontaneous prayer and confession broke out during regular church meetings. *Thousands of dominoes fell.* Those days of fervent prayer are now considered the birth of an independent, self-sustaining Korean church.

When Kiel died in 1935, five thousand people attended his funeral. The church in South Korea now numbers around 15 million believers, and it sends more foreign missionaries than any country other than the US. *Millions of dominoes continue to fall.*

As followers of Christ, Stearns points out, we are all dominoes in the chain reaction set off by Jesus two thousand years ago. The amazing thing about dominoes is that the chain often starts small, with just one, seemingly insignificant domino – whether it is giving a gospel witness, doing an act of mercy, sponsoring a needy child in an underdeveloped country, teaching Sunday school, going on a mission trip, praying for missionaries, praying for people you know who don't know Christ, or inviting someone who is unchurched to come to church with you and then taking them out to lunch. Whatever it is, you really have no

idea how big the impact will be as God multiplies your faithfulness. (Source: Rich Stearns, "Spiritual Dominoes," *World Vision Magazine*, Winter 2011)

The church has a key role in the Master's plan for the world. A central role. And so do each one of us. So do you. So do I. May we never neglect the mission we have from God as a church. And may each of us discover and devote ourselves to the mission, the Master plan, the Lord has for us personally.

Lord, let it be so, to the glory of Your name. Amen.