

**To You First**  
Matthew 10:5-8  
*Halifax: 3 April 2005*

Who is the gospel for?

- I suppose you all know what the answer to that question is.
  - Jesus clearly commissioned His church to preach the gospel to everyone.
  - The message is that whoever believes on the Lord Jesus Christ will not perish, but have everlasting life.

But when Jesus first sent the twelve disciples out to preach,

- He did something that might puzzle us at first:
  - He strictly forbade them to minister to anyone outside of Israel.
    - In Matthew 10:5-6, we are told:
      - Matthew 10:5-6: "These twelve Jesus sent out and commanded them, saying: "Do not go into the way of the Gentiles, and do not enter a city of the Samaritans. "But go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."
    - This is a very firm statement—
      - The word translated "command" has an authoritarian ring to it.
        - It was often used to refer to orders issued by a commanding officer in the military...
        - It was also used to refer to a legal command, such a court summons or a subpoena.
        - It was used to speak of a doctor's prescription or of the rules for writing a proper speech.
      - Always, it had to do with that which was binding upon a person.
    - And interestingly enough, Jesus binds His disciples, ordering them not to go to the Gentiles.
      - He even tells them not to go to the Samaritans who were a sort of half Jewish people—
        - Some seven hundred years before Jesus came, the King of Assyria had conquered Samaria where the northern tribes of Israel lived.
          - As was his policy, he deported all but the poor and brought in persons from other nations he had conquered take their place.
          - Over the years, these persons intermarried with the Israelites who remained and so mingled not only their genes, but also their

various forms of superstition and religion with the already corrupted religion of Israel.

- Jesus forbade His disciples not only to go the Gentiles, but also to these half-breed Jews—
  - They were to go only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.
- Now of course if you know much about what Jesus' disciples were like,
  - you know that going to Gentiles or Samaritans was one of the last things they would have ever thought of doing!
  - It seems very odd that Jesus should begin His charge with such a restriction!
  - His disciples would never have even thought of doing such thing.
    - It seems that Jesus was going out of His way to draw attention to the fact that He came to minister to Jews only.
- Further to the point,
  - If you read on the gospel accounts,
    - you will find that Jesus Himself also avoids ministering to the Gentiles as much as possible—
  - There are a few exceptions where Gentiles come to Him,
    - And when they cast themselves upon Him for mercy, He responds to them...
    - But for the most part, He tries to avoid them and even says that He had not come to minister to them, but rather to Israel...
      - The few exceptions when they come to Him He uses as occasions to prophesy of the future calling of the Gentiles...
      - and to shame Israel for not being as ready to receive Him as even these Gentiles were.
  - Nevertheless, as long as He was on the earth, He was rightly called “a minister to the circumcision...”
    - He limited Himself as well as the work of His disciples to the Jews, to the house of Israel.
    - And not only did He do this, but He made sure it was clearly known that He was doing this.

What are we to make of this?

- Why did Jesus wish to draw attention to the fact that He did not come to minister to the Gentiles, but only to the Jews?

- What is He trying to show us?

Well, if I may put it in figurative language, I believe it is this:

**I. By restricting His ministry to the Jews, Jesus is showing us that He only has one tree and is not interested in planting another.**

A. Now bear with me, I know this needs some explaining.

1. From time to time in the Bible, Israel is presented to us under the figure of a tree or a vine.

a. She is a tree that God planted for Himself and that He tends and cares for.

- This tree was first separated out after God had brought confusion of languages at Babel...
- It was there that the sons of men built a tower dedicated to heaven and sought to make a name for themselves lest they be scattered.
  - Much like Nebuchadnezzar in later days, their tower was a symbol of the greatness of the kingdom of man and of his security to live without God.
  - As a judgement, God confounded their languages and scattered them all over the world.

b. Yet, in His great mercy,

- God came to the head of one of those families and declared to him that He had chosen him from all the other families to bless him...
- As the men of the earth had sought to make a name for themselves at Babel in rebellious independence from God,
  - God promised to this man that He would make his name great.
- And as the men of the earth had sought to unite themselves in their rebellion,
  - God promised to this man that He would bless all the families of the earth through His seed.
- The very things man had tried to achieve without the true God would be accomplished by the grace of God.

c. Of course, that man's name was Abraham!

- It was to him that God said,
  - "I will bless you and make your name great. I will be your God and you and your descendants will be my people."

- It was a remarkable promise for God to make to a man who was also a sinner, just like all the other families of the earth.
  - From the roots of this man,
    - a great tree would grow up that would belong to God and that God would bless...
    - A tree that God would put His name upon and claim as His own:
      - “I will be your God and you will be my people!”
      - That was the gospel as it was promised to Abraham.

2. And so it was that from the descendants of Abraham,

a. God raised up prophets who brought forth God’s promises to bless and foretold how He would bless them in Jesus Christ...

- Over the years, these prophets maintained the promise of blessing in Christ among the people.

1) And God also raised up priests from among the seed of Abraham to intercede for the people and offer sacrifices for them...

- By these priests, He showed Israel that He was reconciled to them....
- And that He accepted them on the basis of the blood of the blood of the covenant that was shed on the altar to atone for their sin—
  - the blood that was signified by the priests and that would be shed once and for all by Jesus Christ Himself in the days of come.

2) And God raised up kings to rule them and discipline them and guide them in His ways.

- These kings were given to restrain covenant breaking in the nation and keep the people together—
  - which under God’s providence they did in a rather remarkable way...
  - In spite of their unfaithfulness, Israel maintained their identity as a nation set apart from other nations.

b. All prophets, priests and kings grew up from this one tree,

- and all of them had a part in the preservation of this tree until God’s promised blessing should come.
- Although they were by no means always faithful,
  - God still used these prophets and priests and kings to bless His people...

- and to keep alive the promise that He would bless this tree and that by this tree all the families of the earth would be blessed...
  - There would be no other fountain of blessing apart from this tree.
3. And I say that even though this tree was often a very rebellious tree,
- a. God never decided to plant another tree.
- On one occasion, when Israel worshipped the golden calf, He threatened to destroy this tree and plant another tree,
    - but the prophet Moses reminded God that He could not destroy them because of His promise to bless **this** tree—
      - A promise made to Abraham and a promise known in all the world...
  - This incident is recorded for us in Exodus 32.
    - After Israel had worshipped the golden calf, we read about what happened in verse 9:
      - Exodus 32:9-14: And the LORD said to Moses, “I have seen this people, and indeed it *is* a stiff-necked people! Now therefore, let Me alone, that My wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them. And I will make of you a great nation.” Then Moses pleaded with the LORD his God, and said: “LORD, why does Your wrath burn hot against Your people whom You have brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? Why should the Egyptians speak, and say, ‘He brought them out to harm them, to kill them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth’? Turn from Your fierce wrath, and relent from this harm to Your people. Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, Your servants, to whom You swore by Your own self, and said to them, ‘I will multiply your descendants as the stars of heaven; and all this land that I have spoken of I give to your descendants, and they shall inherit *it* forever.’” So the LORD relented from the harm which He said He would do to His people.
  - Of course God did not really forget His promise...
    - He only did this in order that He might highlight all the more the fact that He only has one tree...
    - He used the prophet Moses to draw attention to that fact by publicly reminding Him that He was bound to His promise...
      - that no matter what the tree did, it must be blessed.
      - And to made the promise even more secure to the people,
        - God also gave them sacraments by which they publicly reminded Him of His promise—
          - Circumcision and the Passover.

- By these, God was publicly reminded and publicly declared that He would not forget.
- Concerning the Passover, He said:
  - “When I see the blood, I will pass over you.”

b. And so it was that all through the years,

- God never planted another tree because He had made promises to bless **this** tree (the house of Israel and the seed of Abraham) and to make them His people.
- Even though He often chastened them severely and cut off many of the branches...
  - He never destroyed the roots of this tree and He never utterly forsook this tree.
  - Even when He delivered this tree over to captivity in Babylon,
    - His goal at last was not to destroy the tree, but to restore the tree.
    - And so He said to them by the prophet Isaiah:
      - Isa 54:8: “With a little wrath I hid My face from you for a moment; But with everlasting kindness I will have mercy on you,” Says the LORD, your Redeemer.
  - Like a good gardener,
    - He was only pruning the branches on His tree so that it could live and bear fruit.
    - This tree is the house of Israel, the descendants of Abraham whom God chose for Himself...
      - And this is the only tree that He chose.

B. And so it is that when Jesus came to bring salvation, He sent His disciples to declare to Israel that the kingdom of heaven had come to them.

1. This is the message He sends them to preach to Israel alone as you can see in Matthew 10:7

- Matthew 10:7: And as you go, preach, saying, “The kingdom of heaven is at hand.”
- a. This message informs Israel that the promised blessing to Abraham has finally come near,
  - He describes it as “The kingdom of heaven being at hand.”
  - The word translated “**at hand**” means “drawn near.”

- After 2000 years, God was going to fulfil His promise to Abraham to bless him and his descendants.
  - Jesus is sending the disciples to announce that the promised blessing is right at the door—it is “at hand.”
    - For all those years, God had preserved the nation for this blessing!
- b. By calling it “the kingdom of heaven” Jesus tells us what the blessing entails.
- 1) It has to do with God’s reign established among His people.
- God has come down from heaven in the person of His Son, Jesus Christ, to rule in the midst of His people.
  - I should mention that when Jesus speaks of the “kingdom of heaven” He is using the word “heaven” as a synonym for “God.”
    - The other gospels use “kingdom of God” where Matthew used “kingdom of heaven.”
    - The reason for this was that Matthew’s gospel is written especially to the Jews,
      - and they were hesitant to say the name of God.
      - Thus, when they spoke about the “kingdom of God” they referred to it as the “kingdom of heaven.”
      - Matthew sees no reason to offend unnecessarily when it is just as easy for him to call it the kingdom of heaven.
        - After all, it was a good thing for them to reverence God’s name.

TRANS> So what Jesus is saying is that God has come to bless His people by ruling among them, just as He had promised to Abraham!

- 2) This is the blessing that the whole world desperately needs!
- You see, we were created under God to live under His care and rule.
  - But we, (the whole human race), rebelled against God in our first father Adam—
    - and so in anger He cut us off from Himself and sentenced us to His dreadful curse.
    - We died because we were cut off from life—true life—which is to live in this world as God’s image.
    - We were created to live under God’s gracious rule,
      - but because of sin we are cut off from His blessing and live only under His curse.

- 3) And so it was that when God told Abraham that He would bless him,
    - He was saying nothing else but that He would do all that was necessary to re-establish him under His gracious rule!
      - He would again be His king!
    - Abraham and His descendants would again be beautiful, living under God's rule in perfect love...
      - Their corruption would be taken away and they would be pure...
    - And not only that, but all their sins would all be forgiven and remembered no more so that God's favour would be restored...
      - God would pour out His goodness upon him and fill him with perfect happiness and peace.
2. This is the blessing that Jesus sends His disciples to preach in Israel...
    - a. "Tell them," He says, "that this kingdom has drawn near."
      - 1) The disciples did not yet understand all that Jesus was going to do to establish His rule among them,
        - but they knew that this is what He had come to do—somehow...
        - and they knew that Jesus was the one who as going to do it.
      - 2) And they were able to see that when Jesus was present, the curse of God was chased away...
        - Sickness and death and Satan could not remain where Jesus was...
        - Wherever He went, these were all banished.
          - The disciples could see this, but they could not see how Jesus would have to suffer to secure the blessing,
          - and how the fullness of the blessing would be purchased, but not fully realised until the final resurrection.

TRANS> Nevertheless, as much as they knew, they were His true messengers—

    - They were to go forth and proclaim that the kingdom had drawn near
    - b. And to confirm that they were truly His messengers,
      - Jesus gave the apostles the power to work these same miracles that He worked—
        - Which were but foretastes of the blessing that would come in heaven when death and suffering would be banished forever.



- It was their privilege to bear the glad tidings to Israel that Messiah had come to establish His rule among them.
  - That was all they knew at this point,
    - And that was all they were to say at this time.
    - They were not able to preach about the cross and the resurrection yet because they did not understand about this,
      - but they were to preach what they knew.
- C. But now we know a lot more about this blessing of the kingdom than the disciples knew at this time...
1. That's right Christian, you know more about what Jesus came to do to bless Israel than any of the disciples knew at this time...
    - or at least you should know more!
      - Even though they saw Him work miracles and were able to do miracles themselves,
        - you have access to far more understanding of His kingdom than they did when Jesus first sent them out.
  2. You can see what they saw...
    - That the Son of God came down from heaven to be their gracious king...
      - a. But you can also see how He went to the cross to offer Himself as a sacrifice to atone for all their sins!
        - You can see how He willingly took upon Himself all the wrath and punishment that His people deserved in order to release them from the curse.
      - b. And you have seen how God accepted His sacrifice and raised Him from the dead,
        - declaring that by His self-offering all who belong to Him are justified.
        - They are completely forgiven and declared righteous through faith in Him.
  3. And you have seen how after He had offered Himself and risen again,
    - He went to sit at God's right hand...
      - And that from this heavenly throne, He poured out the Holy Spirit to transform His people...
        - The Spirit who first works to turn their hearts to God, against sin, and to trust in Christ and His salvation...

- And the Spirit who continues to work in them so that the rule of God is more and more established in their hearts...
- And the Spirit who will finally glorify them and make them perfectly pure and holy so that they can serve God without sin in heaven.

TRANS> All of this was done for the tree that God had promised to bless—for Abraham and his descendants.

- How Jesus loves these lost sheep!
  - See what He is willing to do for them!
  - See how He sends His disciples out to proclaim the good news to them.

## **II. But what does all of this have to do with you who are not of Israel or of Abraham’s seed according to the flesh?**

- If God blesses only this one tree, what benefit is that for you who are (at least for the most part) not Jews?

A. Well let me begin by saying that God still only has this one tree!

1. This is the tree that Jesus came to bless, and did bless, and there is no other.
  - He did not come to plant any other tree than the tree of Abraham,
    - and He never will plant another tree.
2. But still, you have reason to rejoice in what God has done for this tree!
  - Not only because you see that it is such a great blessing for the Jews,
    - but also because it is a great blessing for the whole world.
  - a. You see, God promised Abraham that “in your seed, all the families of the earth would be blessed.”
    - The Lord never had any intention of planting another tree in another nation,
      - but He had every intention of blessing the nations of the world by this tree.
      - And after He had blessed this tree by sending Christ to accomplish their redemption,
        - He then began to graft the nations into this tree!
        - He brought Gentiles to become a part of this tree that had been blessed with God’s salvation!
    - b. The Apostle Paul was raised up by the Lord Jesus especially to be His apostle to the Gentiles...

- And he explains how instead of planting a new tree,
  - God grafts Gentiles into the tree of Israel that God has so richly blessed.
- Let me show you 3 very clear passages that speak of this...
  - 1) First there is Romans 11:17-18.
    - This is one of those places where the Bible uses the tree illustration that I have been using.
    - And look what Paul says here to the Gentiles!
      - Romans 11:17-18: “And if some of the branches were broken off, and you, being a wild olive tree, were grafted in among them, and with them became a partaker of the root and fatness of the olive tree, do not boast against the branches. But if you do boast, *remember that* you do not support the root, but the root supports you.”
      - Paul is showing that Gentiles have been grafted into the tree of blessing—the tree of Abraham—and now receive the blessing!
  - 2) In Galatians 3:26-29, he shows that Gentiles who believe have the very same blessing that was promised to Abraham...
    - not from a new tree or a new promise, but from the same tree and the same promise.
    - He says:
      - Gal 3:26-29: “For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you *are* Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.”
      - Notice that here Paul even calls believing Gentiles “Abraham’s seed and heirs according to the promise!”
      - In Romans 10, he makes the distinction between those who are Abraham’s seed according to the flesh (merely offspring) and those who are his seed according to the promise.
        - Those who believe in Christ are the seed according to promise who receive the blessing promised to Abraham whether they are Jews or Gentiles.
  - 3) Third, I want to look at Ephesians 2:11-22.
    - Here Paul explains that Gentiles have been brought near by the blood of Christ...

- Eph 2:11-13: “Therefore remember that you, once Gentiles in the flesh—who are called Uncircumcision by what is called the Circumcision made in the flesh by hands—that at that time you were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.”
- Look at what else he goes on to say:
  - In vs. 18, he says that we both (both Jew and Gentile) have access by one Spirit to the Father...
  - And in verse 19, he explains that we are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, founded on Jesus Christ.
  - And in chapter 3 verse 6, he declares that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, of the same body, and partakers of God’s promise in Christ through the gospel.
  - So, as you can see, there is no difference!
    - Believing Gentiles are brought into the full promise that was made to Abraham!

TRANS> So you see that God still only has one tree that He blesses.

- It is the same tree that it ever was—the tree of Abraham and His descendants.
  - If anyone wishes to be blessed,
    - He must come to this tree and partake of Christ.
    - There is no other place to go for God’s blessing.
    - But the good news is,
      - You who have come to Jesus Christ and have been baptised in His name are joined to this tree!
- But now let me make an important distinction.

B. There are two ways to be connected to this tree.

1. With faith or without faith.

a. A person with faith is a living, fruit-bearing branch on the tree.

- He is vitally connected to Jesus Christ by faith so that He receives life from Him...
  - He is forgiven because Christ had died for His sins and He is resting in that...
  - And he is a partaker of the Spirit because Christ is continually supplying him with the Spirit to believe and grow in grace.

- That is the branch that is connected by faith.

TRANS> But there are also branches on the tree that are connected without faith.

b. The other way is to be connected without faith.

- They are baptised and are outwardly part of the church,
  - and outwardly they are joined to Christ...
  - but there is no life giving sap flowing into them from Christ because there is no genuine faith.
- The connection is merely structural, but it is not living or life-giving.

2. The sap is the life of Christ that is given through the means of grace that both the dead branches and the living branches are exposed to.

a. The means of grace include the word, sacraments, and prayer.

- The difference between the living branch and the dead branch is this...
  - Both are exposed to the means of grace,
    - but the living branch receives life by them and continues to receive life by them so that they rest upon Christ.
  - The dead branch hears the word
    - but does not believe the word and so is not led by the promises to truly rest in Christ.
- The difference is that in one with faith, the means of grace produce life,
  - but in the one without faith, they produce nothing.

b. The difference is made by election.

1) In Romans 9-11, Paul explains that many in Israel did not benefit from being part of the tree...

- They were connected to the root, but they did not bear fruit because of unbelief...
- And He goes on to say that the only ones who did benefit were those who were elected of God to receive His grace.
  - The others did not believe and so were hardened.

2) The Westminster Catechism explains that the difference is election in Question 88

- It says that the means of grace are only made effectual to the elect for salvation.

- If a person who is not elect is exposed to them, they do not benefit him.
- Q. 88: “What are the outward means whereby Christ communicateth to us the benefits of redemption (this includes justification, adoption, sanctification—this is saying that these are communicated to us or given to us by the means of grace)?
- A. The outward and ordinary means whereby Christ communicateth to us the benefits of redemption are the word, sacraments and prayer, all of which are made effectual to the elect for salvation.
  - In other words, when an elect person is exposed to the means—when he is connected to the tree—he is drawn to Christ and receives Christ and rests upon Him for salvation.
  - The means are used by Christ to communicate Himself to the believer through faith.

C. But now I want you to consider that there are two things that contribute to unbelief... and so make for dead branches on the tree...

1. First, there is the problem of hardness of heart so that no matter how purely the gospel is preached and how rightly the sacraments are administered,
  - there is no faith in the person who receives them.
  - In such a case He is like a dead branch in the midst of living fruit-bearing branches.
2. But secondly, there is the problem of the corruption and the perversion of the means of grace.
  - When the word is not faithfully preached and the sacraments are not rightly administered, it is God’s judgement upon the branches.
  - Obviously if a false gospel is preached, it is impossible for the branches to obtain life by that gospel...
    - If the sap is poisoned and corrupted, then how can it bring forth fruit?

D. Now from this perspective you can see why Christ made (and makes) it the number one priority to preach the gospel to His people first!

1. It is because the gospel is the way that He communicates salvation to His people.
  - There were many in Israel that were “lost sheep.”
  - a. Because of false teachers, many of them did not regularly hear the truth of the promise given to Abraham.

- Although they were outwardly part of Israel, they had no faith—
  - and in their case, it was because the means of grace had been corrupted by false teachers.
  - Jesus had found this to be the case with many in Israel, and so He sends His disciples out to them first.
  
- b. The same problem holds true today.
  - There are many people in the church who have very little access to the truth of God because the ministers do not preach the word...
  - And the sacraments are not rightly administered.
  - They are baptised and are structurally part of the church, but they are not connected to Christ by faith.
  
- c. And so we ought to learn here that the gospel is first of all for covenant people.
  - Jesus wants them to hear the gospel first because they are in the place where the gospel is supposed to be heard.
  - He has a special love for them and wants them to have the word and sacraments without corruption.
  - He will have His own children fed first because on them He has set His love.
  
- d. This means that if you are in step with Jesus and what He wants, your first concern will be to reform the church!
  - It will be for those who are in the covenant rather than those who are outside.
  - Even after the door had been opened to the Gentiles, Paul always went to the Jew first...
    - That is, he went to those who were already in covenant with God.
  
- 2. And it was in this way that he then reached out to those who were outside the covenant altogether, that is, the Gentiles.
  - a. Ordinarily, He reached them first though preaching in the Jewish synagogues.
    - You see, if the church is not reformed, we have nothing worthwhile to bring unbelievers too!
      - And the Lord is not interested in starting another tree.
      - He only has one bride, and He will reform her first and then by her will bring forth children from among the Gentiles...
        - He will never go out and get another wife.

- He will always restore the one He has.
- If she is dead and not reformed, there is nothing to bring unbelievers to.
  - What good would it do to graft them into a dead branch?
  - What good would it do to bring them into a place where the gospel is corrupted and twisted?
- b. You see, it was only after a remnant of the Jews had believed on Christ that the gospel was carried to the Gentiles...
  - There had to be something to build on—living branches within the tree.
  - This was how Jesus operated...
    - He sent His apostles first to restore the Jews to Himself...
    - After a faithful remnant was restored,
      - Then He sent them forth to those outside the covenant.
      - Before grafting outsiders into the tree,
        - He first restored the tree.

**Here is the application for you in all this**

1. First, see the great love of Jesus for the tree...
  - See how He gave Himself for the tree and never forsakes the tree and will love the tree forever!
  - See how he yearns for the gospel to be preached to the tree and sends out His servants to see that it is done
  - And let His great love melt your heart into tender and living faith...
    - That you might sincerely and joyfully cast yourself Him to receive life by Him.
2. Secondly, let your first concern be for the health of this tree.
  - As Christ was earnest that the disciples preach the gospel, so should you.
  - Let us concern ourselves in the first place with those who are baptised.
    - Some of them do not know the true gospel.
    - Let us go forth like these disciples and point them to Christ... and call them away from false churches with false doctrine.
  - Let us pray first for the church and that the means of Christ by which Christ is communicated to us would be pure and uncorrupted so that we might grow.



And so you see the gospel is first of all for the church.

- It is here that Christ calls you together to receive the word, sacraments and prayer.
- It is for this cause that the principle still applies...
  - To the Jew first!
  - In our day that means, “To the Christian first.”
    - We start with the baptised, we start with the reformation of the church, we start with our own children...
    - Then we reach out to others who are outside God’s covenant.