



## Becoming a neighbour

Message by Pastor Andrew Kulasingham 13<sup>th</sup> September 2020

### Scripture Reading: Acts 8: 4-8

*Acts 8:4 Therefore those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word.*

This was the entire history of the early church. They were scattered and went everywhere. Today we have a tendency to huddle. We like gathering in our little groups. We enjoy being with those similar to us. We tend to settle, to get into our comfort zones.

God's purpose for His people, however, has always been to have us scattered. In Genesis, God said, "Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth." Man decided he will do the exact opposite.

*Genesis 11:4 (NKJV) And they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower whose top is in the heavens; let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be scattered abroad over the face of the whole earth."*

The church through the ages has had to battle this same temptation to ignore the instruction of our Lord and fall into the thinking patterns of the people at the Tower of Babel. I can't get away from the similarities in some of our thinking today.

### Protecting from being scattered

Just like the Tower of Babel, churches tend to speak the same language, build cities and towers and make a name for ourselves – "lest we be scattered".

The context of the story of the Tower of Babel was that they all spoke one language at that time. Don't we do that in our churches? We create an atmosphere where we all speak the same thing, have the same ideas and create a uniformity that makes us feel comfortable. We don't like those who rock the boat. We use language like "church culture" or "the way we do things here". This "one language" environment does not accommodate other opinions or ideas. There is no room for conversations around trying something new. The trend is to get everyone to conform to a uniformed way of speaking and behaving in church.

We "build ourselves a city". A place we can settle and call home. A place where we are comfortable doing things our way. We sing the songs we love. The very "city" we build ensures that those who come and join us are comfortable with the way we do things – if not there are other "cities" they can go to where they may feel more comfortable. If the music is too loud, we move. If the music is not contemporary enough we move. If the preacher does not hit the sweet spot we move. If the sermon is too long we move. If folk aren't warm enough we move. If people are too involved in our lives we move.

Once we build our "city", we ensure we keep this way of doing church protected. We build a "tower" to protect ourselves from any outside influence. We promote a culture and maintain that culture by

ensuring every person who identifies with us knows what our church culture is. Sometimes our beliefs and ways of doing things have become “towers” as high as the heavens, keeping God outside and unable to influence us.

So, pleased with our “cities” and “towers”, we enshrine them by making “a name for ourselves”. We lock ourselves into “isms” and “ists” secure and free from change. All this we do because we fear one thing - lest we be scattered.

## **We are commissioned to go everywhere**

The Head of the church has a different idea for His church. He gave us a single purpose and focus. We even call it the Great Commission.

*Matthew 28:19 (NKJV) Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations...*

Again we see similar instructions from our Lord in the book of Acts.

*Acts 1:8 (NKJV) But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”*

Go, scatter yourself – and make disciples – everywhere you go. The early church was obedient to that great commission. Wherever they were scattered they preached the word.

*Acts 8:4-8 (NKJV) Therefore those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word.*

The story of the early church was a progressive movement out of Jerusalem:

- *From the upper room to the streets of Jerusalem* – Acts 2. The temptation to stay and enjoy the atmosphere in the Upper Room that day would have been so great. Cuddle up together, speak in tongues all day and keep warm in the fire of the Holy Spirit. They, however, scurried down to the streets of Jerusalem to tell others the good news.
- *From the Hebrew-speaking Jewish community to the Greek-speaking diaspora* – Acts 6. All their lives they lived comfortably with the prejudice that Hebrew speaking Jews were superior to the Jews who did not speak or read Hebrew. How could someone possibly know God as well as us when they only read a translation of the Scriptures from an unholy and vulgar Greek language. Bigotry, however well concealed, will eventually come out through our actions. The early church had to deal with that. They were finding that those ministering to the needs of the poor among them were showing partiality towards the Hebrew speaking poor. The choice was clear. They had to “scatter” from the deep rooted prejudice into a God pleasing love for all brethren.
- *From Jerusalem to Samaria* – Acts 8. Go everywhere means everywhere. Including among the Samaritans whom they have never mixed with for generations. For generations they have been successful in avoiding these half cast people, even to the point of diverting their travel to avoid the region. Now they found themselves scattered to Samaria.
- *From Jerusalem to God fearing Gentiles* – Acts 10. Peter could not possibly ignore the command of God coming through vision and the voice of the Spirit. Some may say at least it was to God fearing Gentiles. But the scattering didn’t stop there.

- *From Jerusalem to Antioch* – Acts 11:20. Some unnamed believers got a little more extreme. You could say that it was not part of the church’s mission statement, but revival broke out among the Gentiles in Antioch. The scattering began to snowball.
- *From Antioch to the then known world* – Acts 13–28. God’s plan and purpose for the church had become quite clear by this time. Go means go – everywhere means everywhere – uttermost part of the world means the entire then known world.

The movement was not strategic but organic. It wasn’t like the apostle sat down the day after Pentecost and planned a 10 year mission plan. They didn’t run a Mission conference on how to reach the world by 77AD – The Vision 77 project. It just happened out of life circumstances. In response to a supernatural experience in Acts 2, they had to go down and explain to the crowd. Three thousand people come to Christ that day. Out of a practical necessity to care beyond partiality (Acts 6) they break down barriers that may have split the believing community. You can’t be Christlike and allow impartial treatment of the poor – so change.

Being forced out due to persecution (Acts 8) they scatter but it doesn’t change anything. They stay the course and stick to the plan – preach the gospel everywhere. In obedience to a heavenly vision (Acts 10) Peter steps into the house of a Gentile for the first time in his entire life and Cornelius’ household is saved.

Seeking safer cities due to continued persecution (Acts 11), Christians continue the Great Commission - different venue, same plan. In obedience to the prophetic word coming from a time of fasting and prayer (Acts 13), Paul and Barnabus are sent out from Antioch. Missionary journeys were made out of the need to visit Christians spread out all across the world (Acts 13-28). Throughout the entire book of Acts, the church was constantly scattered but kept to the same mission – go, preach the gospel, make disciples.

## **The Great Commission co-existing with the Great Commandment**

What was it that kept the church effective even though they were consistently being scattered? These men and women were guided by another life principle – the Great Commandment of God.

Ingrained in them was this understanding that resting on all the laws that guide a person to live a godly life was two great laws. If they lived their lives governed by these “two commandments” they would be fulfilling the law and the prophets.

*Matthew 22:37-40 (NKJV) Jesus said to him, “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.”*

in the midst of all the scattering the early church was experiencing, they held closely to these two guiding principles: the Great Commission and the Great Commandment. They embraced the circumstances that required them to go, but in the going they kept preaching the Gospel. Not only did they preach the gospel, they lived the gospel by expressing it through love. Love for God and love for their neighbour.

## **Love your neighbour**

One thing was clarified for these disciples earlier on when Jesus was still on the earth. This question – “who is my neighbour?” The parable is set in the context of a conversation Jesus had with an expert of the Mosaic law. When Jesus had spoken of the two-fold commandment where all other laws hinge on, the lawyer asked the question, “Who is my neighbour?”

*Luke 10:28-29 (NKJV) And He said to him, “You have answered rightly; do this and you will live.” But he, wanting to justify himself, said to Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”*

Using the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus responds to the question. The answer, though, didn't really address the lawyer's question. Jesus seem to be saying, "Don't look for a neighbour, become a neighbour." We spend all our lives looking for our neighbour. We won't find a neighbour until we become a neighbour.

I want to look at the parable briefly, to focus on this theme - becoming a neighbour. From the parable we can see two things that hinder us from becoming a neighbour and one very important response that will shape us into the neighbour God is calling us to be.

## THINGS THAT HINDER US FROM BECOMING A NEIGHBOUR

### A legalistic mind as seen in the expert of the Jewish law

As a legal expert he knew where to get the definition of a neighbour - Leviticus 19:18 & Lev 19:34

*Leviticus 19:18 (NKJV) You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the children of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD.*

*Leviticus 19:34 (NKJV) The stranger who dwells among you shall be to you as one born among you, and you shall love him as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God.*

Both these passages seem to suggest that our "neighbour" is a fellow believer and also the stranger who is "dwelling among" us. It should be clear that everyone is your neighbour. If you read these passages with a legalistic mind you may interpret it as those who practice the laws of God and foreigners who have decided to conform to the laws of Israel. The situation in Israel during Jesus' time had become more complicated. Israel was not just occupied by Jews. It had become a melting pot of Jews and Gentiles and as far as many religious leaders were concerned most of Israel were not living according to the laws of Moses. The lawyer seems to suggest that the lines have been blurred and it has become difficult to discern who would fall under the definitions given by Moses in the book of Leviticus. You can't possibly love your neighbour if you don't know who your neighbour is.

A legalistic mind cannot see beyond the behaviour of people. Instead of seeing the needs of others, they focus on the deeds of others. When all we see are the sins of those around us, we become preoccupied with laws that have been broken and the impending judgement that is to come. The Gospel is presented through these lenses. Instead of being a neighbour we become both judge and jury.

### A religious mind as seen in the priest and the levite

The behaviour of the two religious leaders may seem bazaar to the non Jewish listener but to the audience that first heard the parable I wonder if there were some sympathizers. The levitical laws did give very strict guidelines on the handling of dead bodies. If the victim of the violent assault was indeed dead, the two temple staff would have a dilemma when they touched the body. The law was clear.

*Lev 21:1 (NLT) "A priest must not make himself ceremonially unclean by touching the dead body of a relative.*

*Numbers 19:11 (NLT) "All those who touch a dead human body will be ceremonially unclean for seven days.*

Surely one can understand the challenge the priest and levite had. Stay ceremonially clean or go check if the person is dead. Isn't keeping oneself pure of utmost importance? A religious mind has a skewed idea of "purity" towards God. The zeal for purity justifies a life free from those who do

not share the same “pure” living as they do. The apostle Paul showed us that holiness towards God must include a life lived among all men.

*1 Corinthians 9:19-23 (NLT) Even though I am a free man with no master, I have become a slave to all people to bring many to Christ. When I was with the Jews, I lived like a Jew to bring the Jews to Christ. When I was with those who follow the Jewish law, I too lived under that law. Even though I am not subject to the law, I did this so I could bring to Christ those who are under the law. When I am with the Gentiles who do not follow the Jewish law, I too live apart from that law so I can bring them to Christ. But I do not ignore the law of God; I obey the law of Christ. When I am with those who are weak, I share their weakness, for I want to bring the weak to Christ. Yes, I try to find common ground with everyone, doing everything I can to save some. I do everything to spread the Good News and share in its blessings.*

A religious mindset will separate us from the world we have been called to reach. It will prevent us from becoming a neighbour.

## **Becoming a neighbour**

The one way of life that will shape us into good neighbours is seen in the life of the good Samaritan. It is a heart of compassion.

*Luke 10:33 (NKJV) But a certain Samaritan, as he journeyed, came where he was. And when he saw him, he had compassion.*

Notice these words – the Samaritan came where he was, he saw, he had compassion. The Samaritan wasn't looking for a neighbour, he came as a neighbour. He lived his life being a neighbour, so when he stumbled on the victim on his journey, it was natural to see the man as his neighbour.

*Luke 10:36-37 (NKJV) So which of these three do you think was neighbor to him who fell among the thieves?" And he said, "He who showed mercy on him." Then Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."*

Jesus' answer to the question “who is my neighbour” was to ask a more pertinent question – “who was neighbour” to man in need? Jesus did not define a neighbour. He showed us that the only way we will discover who our neighbours are, is to first become a neighbour. When you live your life as a neighbour, then everyone around you is a neighbour.

**DON'T LOOK FOR A NEIGHBOUR, BECOME A NEIGHBOUR.**

A neighbour shows mercy - “kindness towards the afflicted, joined with a desire to help them”. The mandate to go and make disciples assumes that the believer loves God and loves his neighbour. When one lives their life being a neighbour to all, then wherever we find ourselves scattered for the day, we will come across a neighbour to love as ourselves.

**WE SPEND ALL OUR LIVES LOOKING FOR OUR NEIGHBOUR. WE WON'T FIND A NEIGHBOUR UNTIL WE BECOME A NEIGHBOUR.**

**BE A NEIGHBOUR. BE KIND, BE MERCIFUL, ALWAYS READY TO HELP ANYONE, EVERYWHERE. YOUR NEIGHBOUR WILL TURN UP.**

**DON'T LOOK FOR A NEIGHBOUR – BE A NEIGHBOUR.**