

UNDER HIS ORDERS - Luke 10:1-11, 16-20
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A Sermon By
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Luke 10:1-11; 16-20

After this the Lord appointed seventy others and sent them on ahead of him in pairs to every town and place where he himself intended to go. He said to them, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest. Go on your way. See, I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves. Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and greet no one on the road. Whatever house you enter, first say, 'Peace to this house!' And if anyone is there who shares in peace, your peace will rest on that person; but if not, it will return to you. Remain in the same house, eating and drinking whatever they provide, for the laborer deserves to be paid. Do not move about from house to house. Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, eat what is set before you; cure the sick who are there, and say to them, 'The kingdom of God has come near to you.' But whenever you enter a town and they do not welcome you, go out into its streets and say, 'Even the dust of your town that clings to our feet, we wipe off in protest against you. Yet know this: the kingdom of God has come near.'

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"Whoever listens to you listens to me, and whoever rejects you rejects me, and whoever rejects me rejects the one who sent me."

The seventy returned with joy, saying, "Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us!" He said to them, "I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning. See, I have given you authority to tread on snakes and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy; and nothing will hurt you. Nevertheless, do not rejoice at this, that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven."

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"See, I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves. Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and greet no one on the road." (Luke 10:3b-4).

About this passage, James W. McClendon Jr., in his book, *Making Sense to a Troubled Church*, writes:

*Boy, Jesus, for young ministers starting out on the road to ministry, that is pretty poor advice, don't you think? Surely what you would want young ministers at seminary to hear is just the opposite: "Get a bank account, and don't let the balance get too low. Establish your credit; there will be a time when you will need to make installment purchases. Wear nice shoes; people notice these things. Get some good luggage, you will travel a lot. And whatever you do, be friendly to everyone." Isn't that the kind of advice Jesus should have been giving the seventy? (James W. McClendon Jr., *Making Sense to a Troubled Church* [Cleveland: 'Me Pilgrim Press, 1995, p. 24.]*

A few years ago, with a grant from the Lilly Foundation, a group of seminary professors got together and tried to devise a means of measurement to determine when people were ready for ministry. When it was finally published, I got

exhausted just reading all of the characteristics that they listed as essential for readiness for ministry. Church history. A knowledge of the Bible, preferably an ability to read the Bible in one of the original languages. A pleasing personality. Psychological knowledge. And so on, and so forth.

Picture in your mind Jesus sending the seventy off that day. A big crowd stands there. Seventy people is a fair number of people. Jesus says that he is getting ready to send them out. He tells them that they must go out two-by-two. Why two by-two? What would you think if Jesus said, "Now I don't want anybody going out there alone. There are wolves out there waiting for you. We are going to use the 'buddy system.' I want everybody to get with a buddy"?

What would you think?

You would know that the task ahead was going to be very, very tough. Wasn't that the rule of summer camp? You are not allowed to go out into the really deep, dangerous water unless you swim with a buddy?

Then Jesus tells them to go with an exact message, a message telling people to get ready for some mysterious future brought about by God.

Note that, though Jesus is very explicit about how they are to travel, and where they are to go, he never tells them exactly what is going to happen after all of this. Obviously, something very risky and dangerous is going on here. But what?

It's as if they are under sealed orders. Don't open the orders until you get there. You will know when you arrive.

I believe this is exactly what Luke is telling us. The seventy were sent out under sealed orders. Somehow, in their work, they were going to be part of the victorious completion of some larger battle.

Jesus tells them to keep silence on the way.

Why?

Did he not want them mouthing off in case there were spies who would use this information against the plan of attack?

During World War II there were posters that said, "TALK KILLS." "LOOSE LIPS, SINK SHIPS. Often the poster showed a soldier, sitting at a bar, bragging to a woman whom he had met, with an evil-looking spy over in a dark corner taking notes. All of these details are surely intended to demonstrate that something big, something risky and dangerous, was taking place here.

We can identify with this. Like these early disciples, we also are sent out. Maybe we don't think of ourselves as numbered among the inner circle of the Twelve. But we certainly do qualify as disciples in the larger gathering. We are more like the Seventy than the inner Twelve.

This story tells us a number of things about discipleship, our discipleship in 2010.

First, it tells us that being part of the seventy, being part of those who are sent out, is not easy. There is stress, tension, an element of risk, and great uncertainty.

I recall my own anxieties in the early days of my ministry in

the mid-1960's. I watched the lives of older pastors. I saw pastors who were forced to move because of their stands on issues of racial justice. I felt the squeeze myself from some church members in two former congregations I served. I was intimidated, threatened with loss of my positions. I might have been dumb but I wasn't stupid. It didn't take me long to learn that ministry, discipleship, can be rough!

But if we intend to live under Jesus' orders, follow his way, it's going to be rough. This story in Luke about the first followers of Jesus is there to remind us of that.

The second thing this story tells us is that being sent out requires letting go of a lot of baggage. We must be able to move quickly, without unnecessary hindrances. Some of the things that burden other people should not burden us as disciples, not because we want to be free of all burdens, but because we want to bear the right burdens.

Yet, despite all the forebodings, the fears, the anxiety of the task ahead for those in Luke's story, there had to be a good deal of excitement and anticipation. We are reading here about an adventure. Part of the adventure of an adventure is that we aren't sure how things are going to end, where the journey will end, how things will turn out. And we all long for adventure, I think.

I remember meeting with my pastor, Dr. Thornton B. Penfield, Jr., in 1958 to discuss with him my interest in entering professional ministry.

In the course of the conversation, he asked me, as a sort of test I guess, if I would be willing to give my life to God to be a missionary, perhaps even to be sent to Africa and endure dangers and hardships there.

I answered enthusiastically, "Yes!"

Now I know how little Dr. Penfield knew about my eighteen year old mind! We all like challenges. At certain stages in our lives, the bigger and riskier the better. All of us are busy expending our lives for something, why not expend our lives for something exciting?

Jesus tells the seventy to keep quiet about themselves, to do as they are told, to move quickly and move lightly about their mission. But it is clear that they are part of a larger mission, a mission that is not yet completely unfolded, a mission whose final goal is even yet unfolding, a fierce battle whose end is not yet in sight.

Isn't this a description of our work as well?

You and I are part of the mission that is not ended. Perhaps Jesus was sending them out as sort of an advance party. Luke says they are being sent out where Jesus himself was about to go. Much had to be done. This occurs early in Luke's Gospel. There was more teaching, more witnessing, and yes, more suffering, and even more death. They were traveling under sealed orders. They didn't know the whole battle plan. They might know some of the tactical objectives, the immediate objectives in this campaign, but they had no clear idea of the strategic objectives, the long-term goals. All of that had yet to be revealed.

And so has it yet to be revealed to us.

We go out, we leave church, we go back to wherever we live. We labor in our little situations. We try to be as faithful as we can. But like them, we are working under sealed

orders. It has not yet been revealed to us how all of this will work out.

The good news is that Jesus has graciously chosen *us* to send out and goes with us and within us. How privileged we are to be part of God's way of turning the whole world upside down! What an adventure this adventure. Take care on the road.

Elsewhere, Jesus says to us, "*You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand*" (Jn 13:7). And so we shall.