

“Meeting the needs of the community”

You’ve probably heard the story of the young man who was deeply in love with his high school sweetheart. They wanted to get married but he was called to military duty and he had to leave for a year and he promised that he would write to her every single day and he kept that promise. And every single day he sent her a letter, telling her of his undying love. And when that year was over and he got to come back home, you probably guessed what happened next. Yes she had married the postman.

And that’s because nothing can take the place of personal contact. You see that’s the message of the incarnation, when God saw a world desperately in need of knowledge of His love for them. He didn’t write it in the sky or shout it from the clouds, He sent his Son, because He wanted personal contact.

You see God was motivated by compassion for a lost people and so He sent His Son to deliver His message. And when God came to earth in the form of Jesus the Christ, He continued to show that compassion for the lost. **Matthew 9:35+36** “Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.”

But notice that Jesus didn’t just show compassion for the lost, He didn’t just talk the talk, He did something about it. **Matthew 9:37+38** “Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.”

Matthew 10:1 “Jesus called his twelve disciples to him and gave them authority to drive out impure spirits and to heal every disease and sickness.”

Matthew 10:5-7 “These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: “Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel. As you go, proclaim this message: ‘The kingdom of heaven has come near.’”

Jesus starts off by having compassion for the lost but that compassion moves on to asking the disciples to pray that God will send some workers to work in his harvest. But notice, that compassion doesn’t stop there, it continues to move forward as Jesus selects and send out His apostles.

You see loved ones its one thing to be filled with compassion for the lost but it’s another thing to actually do something about it. And so if we’re ever going to meet the needs of those in our communities we need to have the right motives.

And that motive is the same motive that God has, that motive is the same motive that Jesus has. It was and still is a motive driven by compassion and a love to save the lost. **John 3:16** “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”

Luke 19:10 “For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.”

And so we’re moved by compassion and motivated by the love of God to reach out to those who are lost in our communities. Now there is something else we need to do before we actually go ahead and try and help those within our communities. We need to let God do what God does best and that is open doors for us to reach the lost.

Colossians 4:3 “And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ.”

You see if we pray and ask God to open doors for us, this not only reminds us that we have faith in God to do so but it also tells God that we’re serious about reaching the lost. And I believe that one reason the church doesn’t grow as quick as it could is because we try to go it alone. We host different events and deliver a thousand leaflets, knock on doors and try everything under the sun to try and reach the lost. But God says before you go and do anything, you need to plough people’s hearts with prayer and ask Me to open some doors first.

Let me show you what I'm talking about from the **Book of Acts**. In the **Book of Acts**, we can clearly see that God worked in some way to create the opportunity for a person to hear the gospel. **In Acts 8 who did God send to meet the Ethiopian Eunuch?** He sent Philip on the road to Gaza and whilst he was on his way he met the Eunuch.

And so it was God who created the opportunity for Philip to share the good news about Jesus with the Eunuch. **In Acts 9 who created the opportunity for Saul and Ananias to get together?** It was God. **In Acts 10 who created the opportunity for Peter to share the Gospel with the household of Cornelius?** It was God. **In Acts 16 who created the opportunity for Gospel to be heard throughout Europe?** It was God.

The point I'm trying to make is that we need to ask God to open doors of opportunity for us, in order for us to share the Gospel with others because we don't know who it is who is truly searching for God but God does. **2 Chronicles 16:9 "For the eyes of the LORD range throughout the earth to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him."**

Let me ask you, **do you know anyone within your community who is truly willing to listen to the Gospel?** Now you may have an idea of a couple of people who are willing to listen to the Gospel. But let me tell you loved ones, not only does God know every single person within our communities but He also knows every single person who is really going to listen to His message.

Just like He said to the apostle Paul when he was afraid of staying on in Corinth. **Acts 18:9-11 "One night the Lord spoke to Paul in a vision: "Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. For I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city." So Paul stayed in Corinth for a year and a half, teaching them the word of God."**

And so, if we prayerfully ask God to open doors for us to share the good news with those within our communities, and believe that He can. He will open doors to give those who are seeking the truth the opportunity to be reached by those who are prepared to do the teaching. Alright it may not happen straight away but if we just let God do what He does best, the Lord will see to it that at some point in that person's life, they will have an opportunity to hear the Gospel.

The question is, **are we ready to take advantage of those open doors?** You see that's where our motive for witnessing for Jesus comes in. Like I said at the start, we cannot meet the needs of the community if we don't have any personal contact with the community. God sent Jesus into the world because He wanted to make some personal contact with people in order to share with them the good news.

And it's our job as witnesses for Christ to do the same. Paul says in **Romans 10:14 "How then can they call on the one they have not believed in and how can they believe in the one in whom they have not heard and how can they hear without someone preaching to them?"**

The apostle Paul is saying, **"How can they believe a non-given report?"** You see loved ones if we are going to meet the needs of our communities, there needs to be some personal contact and Jesus had a plan to make sure that would happen. Just before He ascended, the last thing he said was this, in **Acts 1:8 "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth."**

I would like us to really concentrate on that one verse for a moment and make some points that I think are very important. Because if we are going to try and help meet the needs of those in our communities, we really need to understand not so much who we are but what we are as a people.

Let me ask you, **what is the difference between you a Christian and a moral humanitarian?** Now you might say, **"Well I'm a Christian and so I keep the 10 commandments."** But loved ones, many people keep the 10 commandments; they just don't believe that God wrote them. You might say, **"But yes, because I'm a Christian I do many good deeds for people."** Well again, let me tell you that there are many secular people who do a lot of good deeds for people. Now all of those things are important and of course you should be moral and you should do good things.

But what's the difference between you and a moral humanitarian? The difference is this; you bear witness to your Lord Jesus Christ.

I want you to notice something, according to **Acts 1:8** witnessing is something you are, not something you do. Jesus did not say, **“You will do witnessing.”** He said, **“You will be witnesses.”** It’s what you will be. In other words, no matter what you do, when you show up, the kingdom of God shows up because you are a witness.

Remember Jesus promised, **“He would make us fishers of men.”** In other words, He didn’t just say, **“if you follow me, I’ll change your priorities.”** He said, **“If you follow me, I’ll change your identity, I will change who you are.”** And so loved ones, the question today is not, **are you a witness for Jesus?** The question is, **what kind of witness will you be?** Because you will be a witness for Jesus, but the real question is, **what kind?**

You see, this is God’s plan **“A”**, for letting the world hear the message that can save them and God doesn’t have a plan **“B”**. He sent the Holy Spirit in power to people who would be witnesses wherever they go for Jesus Christ. And that’s what you are and that’s what you are as soon as you accept Christ into your life.

A man named Hudson Taylor, who was a well know missionary to China tells a story. One time he was travelling with a Chinese minister and they came across a fairly new Christian. And the Chinese minister said, **“How long have you been a Christian?”** And the new convert replied, **“about 3 months.”** And the minister asked, **“and how many have you brought to the Lord?”** And the new believer said, **“well none, I’m just a learner.”** To which the minister said, **“well, you may never be a full pledged minister like me, but you must immediately begin to be a witness for Christ.”** And then he said, **“let me ask you something, when does a candle begin to give off light? When it’s about half way burned up?”** And the new convert said, **“Oh, no, as soon as its lit.”** And the minister said, **“and you must shine right away.”**

Now that’s what **Acts 1:8** says loved ones, you must shine right away. It’s not, **“well, after I’ve studied enough, or after I’ve fixed a few things or after I’ve been to church 10 or 15 years, been to some fellowships weekends, heard some sermons, take some classes, then I’ll start witnessing.”** No. You are a witness for Jesus Christ when you receive the Holy Spirit.

You know we’re very good at quoting the first half of **Acts 2:38** **“Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins.”** But what about the other half of that verse? **“And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit”**. One of the reasons we have the gift of the Holy Spirit in our lives, is not only to help us live right for Jesus and look more like Jesus. But we were also given the gift of the Holy Spirit to help us share Jesus with others and that’s a problem many people face today as Christians.

Some Christians can be filled with compassion for the lost and be moved to do something about it but when it comes to sharing Jesus and His word with others, they find it difficult. You see not only are we to be filled with compassion for those within our communities, and not only are we to ask God to prepare people’s hearts through prayer but we also need to know what to say to people when God finally does open up that door.

And I believe that every single Christian should be able to explain God’s offer in Christ. I want to strongly encourage every Christian who is here today to make this a high priority if this is something you cannot do today. You see, most people have some data about God, but they do not know the whole story. And so one thing you might do with those who are your friends within the community is simply to ask them, if they would like to know the difference between religion and Christianity.

Now that might perplex them, but you need to understand that every religion in the world says, **“You can be saved”**. That is not what makes Christianity special, that is not what makes our Gospel good news. What makes our Gospel good news, is not that you can be saved because every religion in the world says that. What makes our Gospel good news is that the Christian faith is the only religion in the world that says, **“You could be saved by grace and not by works.”**

Now people need to know that about God, because most people don’t. Most people do not know that works and morality have nothing to do with working for salvation. And so they need to know about God through the lens of the cross. And when we understand the cross, we see that the love of God was expressed, the holiness of God was upheld and the justice of God was satisfied.

Now you may not be able to explain every mystery in the Bible, you may not understand all the millennial theories, I don’t either.

You may not have a lot of knowledge about minor prophecy, and few do, but you need to be able to explain what the cross was about. You need to be able to explain to your friends within the community that God has made an offer in Christ Jesus that no other religion in the world can match.

Now there are many ways you can do this, I don't have a set way, sometimes I've explained it in the words "Do" and "Done". And I explain how most religion's theories of how you get to heaven is summed up in the word "do", they just have a different list of what you have to do. But the Christian religion is summed up in the word "done". Jesus said, "it is finished," on the cross and I use those three words to explain the offer of God in Christ Jesus.

Or some people like to use the bridge illustration, where you have man on one side and God on the other with a big gulf in between. And you explain how that the only thing that can bridge that gulf of sin that has separated man and God is the cross of Jesus.

Some Christians like to use what they call the Roman's road. **Romans 3:23** says, "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." **Romans 6:23** says, "The wages of sin is death but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ." And in **Romans 10:13** says, "All who call in Christ's name will be saved." But the point I'm trying to make is this, every single Christian needs to be able to share what happened at the cross.

Sometimes I just turn people over to **2 Corinthians 5:17-21**. Now we know it was written to Christians but it can be shown to non-Christians to show what God has offered. "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."

Loved ones, we know about the greatest give away in the universe and it all hinges on whether or not a person believes in the claims of Jesus Christ. I think there is a reason that **John 3:16** is the most quoted verse in the world. "God so loved the world he gave his only son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." People need to know that God has made an offer through Christ and they can receive salvation. And listen loved ones I think we greatly under estimate the knowledge of most people on the street about this offer. Most people know something about religion but they know nothing about grace.

There was a man who was hiking and he met another man in a cafe who offered to give him a lift back to the camp where he was. And so they got into the car and started to leave the town and the man's new friend said, "I probably ought to tell you that I'm gay." The man replied, "I probably ought to tell you that I'm a Christian." He said, "Well, do you want to get out of the truck?" He said, "No, it's still getting dark and my camp is still four miles up the road." He said, "But I thought Christians hated gays?"

He said, "Well that's weird, because my understanding of what Christ told us, is that Christians were to love, I didn't know there were a lot of boundaries set on that." He said, "I thought God hated gays?" The man replied, "Well that's funny because I thought God is love and he has no choice but to love because that's what he is." He said, "Do you believe aids is God's punishment on gays?" The Christian replied, "Well, possibly in the same sense that the prime minister is God's punishment on voters. I mean, we make choices, that have consequences and there are natural consequences for those choices"

Listen to the next question. "Will I go to hell for being gay?" The Christian wanted to say, "of course you'll go to hell for being gay" But he remembered the Gospel and so what he did say was, "no of course you won't go to hell for being a gay anymore that I would go to hell for being dishonest. The only reason anybody went to hell was because they rejected the grace God so longed to give them." The man replied, "I grew up in the church and I never heard anybody say, that God loved me."

Now, you cannot make somebody accept God's offer, but all Christians need to be able to explain it. We all need to be able to explain to the world that God has made an offer in Christ Jesus and they need to know that it is an inclusive offer. All who believe in Christ can be saved.

But it's also an exclusive offer; anybody that rejects Christ will perish. Jesus said in **John 8:24**, “Unless you believe I am he, you will die in your sins.” And if Christians are not able to share with people what God's offered in Christ Jesus, we need to remind them that they have people within their home congregations that can equip them. And in turn those same Christians need to find someone within their home congregations and say to them, “Now sit down with me and show me how to share with somebody else, the offer that God has made in Christ Jesus, in my Bible.” And that ought to be the ultimate desire of ever-single Christian, whether they have been in Christ for one day or 50 years, to be able to explain what God did for us at the cross.

Let me ask you **why do we even want to meet the needs of those within our communities?** The main reason we want to help meet the needs of those in our communities is because we really want them to enjoy the blessings as we have as Christians. We help them because ultimately we want them to get to heaven with us. And so if we're going to effectively help those who need help within our communities, **what is the best way to do that?**

A few years ago I got hold of a survey which was asked to over **10,000 Christians** and they were asked only one question. **What was responsible for your coming to Christ and this church?** Let me share with you the results of that survey. **I had a special need - 3% I just walked in - 3% I liked the minister - 6% I visited there - 1% I liked the Bible classes - 5% I attended a gospel meeting - 0.5% I liked the programs - 3% A friend or relative invited me - 79%**

This tells me that the way we used to reach out to our communities has changed over the years. Gospel meetings don't have the same impact as they used to do. It also tells us that we need to be careful when it comes to those who are preaching and we need to choose our Bible study topics wisely. But if there is anything we can learn from this survey is that if the church wants to grow, it really comes down to each and every member being actively involved in reaching out to the lost.

Let me ask you, **do you know what's going on within your community? Does it have a neighbourhood watch group? Does it have a community centre? What activities does the community centre have on? What other religious groups meet within your community? What events have they got going on? Are there problems with drugs and alcohol within your community? Is there any help for those people? Is there a homeless problem? Is there a poverty problem? Are there any retirement homes in the area? Are there any hospitals in the area? What youth activities does your community have to offer? What schools are there in the community? Do they need some sort of help?**

If you have a church building, **are your doors open to invite groups in so they can have a place to meet regularly or are your doors just open for when you use the building? Can you open the doors to help feed to homeless? Can you use it as a food bank or a clothing bank?**

You see loved ones we have to identify the need before we can meet the need. But we will never know the needs of anyone if we don't make any personal contact with anyone. So find out if you can be a volunteer for something within your community and get involved and make that personal contact with people.

If you're into painting, find out if there are any art classes you can get involved with and go along and make some personal contact with people. If you have a few members who are reasonably good at singing, go along to a retirement home and sing the Gospel and make some personal contact with people.

Now remember what Paul wrote to the churches in Galatia, he tells them in **Galatians 6:9+10** “Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.” And so we need to keep on doing good to all people.

So let me spend the rest of our time together looking at a few practical ways we can reach our communities by doing good. I've picked out a few Scriptures which should give us some ideas which your congregations could get involved with within your community. Now we all know that the greatest need in the world today which needs to be met is people's spiritual needs.

And that is one area the church should be striving to meet within each of our communities. A great way of meeting the needs of our communities is by simply reminding ourselves of how the church met and continues to meet our needs. **Remember in John 9 the religious rulers began to attack this man who was praising Jesus for healing him?**

The leaders were saying, “He couldn’t possibly be from God.” Look at **John 9:25** “He replied, “Whether he is a sinner or not, I don’t know. One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see!”

When we meet people within our communities we can share with them how Jesus met our every need. We can tell them that we didn’t know a lot, but we can tell them for a fact how our lives are different since we became Christians. Now when we all have our normal Sunday services or our mid-week Bible classes, but ask yourself, **does your community know where you are and what times your meetings are? Do you send your community an invitation to special events?**

Now we looked at that survey earlier and we saw quite clearly that most people come to meetings because they were personally invited. And I read a few years ago that **25%** of un-churched people in Britain say that they would attend a church service if they were invited to do so. We’ve all heard the saying that **“people don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care.”**

And I think that’s true and a simple invitation sends clear message that we care enough for you to send you this invitation. And I also think that we totally underestimate the power of a personal invitation. Let me show you what I mean from the Scriptures. We all remember the Samaritan woman whom Jesus spoke to at the well. In **John 4** after talking with Jesus, she leaves her water jug and goes back into town, **verse 29** says, **“And she said to the people in town, Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Christ?”**

And do you know what happened? A bunch of people from that town went to check Jesus out. So many that Jesus said to his disciples in **John 4:35**, **“look up, the fields are ripe for harvesting.”** Now that’s what we need to do at the very minimum to try and meet people’s spiritual needs within our communities. We need to send out invitations which say, **“Come see a man I’ve met, you’ve got to check him out, come with me.”**

Our communities need to know that our congregations don’t just do weddings and funerals. Our communities need to know that there are people within our congregations who can help meet their needs not just physically but spiritually. And when we’re getting involved within our communities and we discover there is a need, invite them along to a meeting, so the church can try and help meet that need.

Now I mentioned earlier that we need to make personal contact with people to find out what their needs are and one way to go about doing that is by hosting a party in your home. Just like Matthew did in the New Testament. **Remember that Matthew was a tax collector and sometimes he’s called Levi in your Bible?** Jesus said, **“Come follow me”** and he did. Now look what he did in **Luke 5:29**, **“Then Levi held a great banquet for Jesus at his house, and a large crowd of tax collectors and others were eating with them.”**

Now let me tell you what Matthew did, he had some new friends in Christ called disciples of Jesus, Peter, John, those guys. But he also had his old tax collecting mates and so as soon as he followed Christ, **do you know what he did?** He threw a party and he intentionally mixed the two crowds. He said, **“I want all my new mates that follow Christ and I want my old tax collecting mates at my house, I’m going to throw a big party and I’m going to let them mingle.”**

Now, is that Ok to do? Well, the Pharisees didn’t think so. And so they criticised Jesus and said, **“Why do you hang out with those kinds of people?”** But when you hear Jesus you realise not only is that acceptable, you actually discover that is absolutely essential. Remember the Son of God came to be among the sick. And so what I’m saying is, one very effective way of finding out the needs of your community is by simply throwing a party.

Get some of your friends who don’t know Christ and some of your friends who do know Christ, get together in your home, have a party and let them mix. And if you find there is a need, go and help meet that need but if you can’t help meet that need, go and ask the church to help meet that need.

One of the best ways to reach a community for Christ is to reach out to their material needs. And I believe we see this principle acted out very powerfully in the **Book of Acts**. And I personally believe along with the preaching and teaching from the apostles, this was one of the ways the early church grew so quickly. **Acts 2:44+45** **“All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need”.**

The newly born church sold their properties and their possessions and gave to anyone who had a need. And notice what happened after they did this. **Acts 2:46+47** "Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved."

Do you see what's happened? These brand new Christians realised they were blessed not only spiritually but also materially. And so they sold everything they had and gave it to those who needed it. And when they did this they found favour with all the people and then the Lord added to their number daily. The point is, when we do good to people within our communities, people are going to talk about it and Lord willing this will prompt them to think about what it means to be a Christian.

And if the Lord opens up a door, we can plant that seed and water it when we get a chance and then let God do what only He can do and that is add to His number. Look at what Dorcas did in the **Book of Acts. Acts 9:36** "In Joppa there was a disciple named Tabitha (which, when translated, is Dorcas), who was always doing good and helping the poor." And so Dorcas was well known all over town because she was a woman of good deeds.

But what was she doing? She was doing what her Saviour Jesus was doing when He was on Earth as Luke records in **Acts 10:38**. Over and over again in the Bible we see Jesus reaching out to the dirty, the sick, the hungry and the hurting. And as His church we should be doing the same.

You know when you think about people's material and physical needs today it can become very overwhelming. But we need to remember that meeting those needs doesn't have to be with big events. Even the smallest things can make a big difference.

I love the story of a man who was walking along a beach, and he saw someone in the distance leaning down, picking something up and throwing it into the ocean. As he got closer, he saw thousands of starfish the tide had thrown onto the beach, unable to return to the ocean during low tide, the starfish were dying. He observed a young man picking up the starfish one by one and throwing them back into the water. And after watching this seemingly futile effort, the man said, "There must be thousands of starfish on this beach. It would be impossible for you to get all of them. There are simply too many. You can't possibly save enough to make a difference." The young man smiled as he continued to pick up another starfish and tossed it back into the ocean and said, "It made a difference to that one."

There are people starving on our doorsteps and we could help them by giving them some food to help them get by for a few weeks. There are people who need some financial help to pay for their gas bill so they can have some heating on for at least another month. There are parents out there who need some clothes for their children so we could take them to the shops and buy them some clothes. There are many lonely old aged pensioners out there who would just love a visit.

Now these are things we could practically do as individuals but we can get the whole church involved. We could get the whole church to get some items together to put in a simple carrier bag. Things like toiletries, sandwiches, water bottles and small Bibles for the homeless. We can put larger boxes of food together to give to anyone who really needs some food.

If there is someone you know in your community who has just had a baby, why now put a bag of baby items together to give to them. If you know of someone who is in desperate need of a carpet why not get together to get one for them. If you know someone who needs their house decorated why not get a group together go along and ask if you can help. If someone is sick and in hospital why not pop along and visit them, taking a card which the children from the Sunday school have made and give it to them. If someone isn't well, why not prepare some warm food and pop in and give it to them.

You see loved ones, this isn't rocket science; these are all simple ways of meeting the needs of our communities. Yes it may be challenging at times, **but didn't Jesus tell us that following Him and His example would be challenging at times?** When you think about it, **isn't that what Jesus did for us?** He gave everything He had to ransom us and set us free. And remember this, when we give a cup of water in Jesus Name, it often opens the way for us to offer them living water.

After all, that's the whole purpose of us trying to reach out to our communities in the first place. Jesus says in **Matthew 28:19** "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations." He didn't say how we should go but He did command us to go. And yes there may be people who will abuse our generosity but that shouldn't stop us from helping others. When Jesus fed the five thousand, the Bible says in **John 6:15** that Jesus knew exactly what their motives for following Him were. But the point is Jesus still fed them no matter despite those motives.

I hope and pray this sermon has been useful to you all today, but I hope and pray more that we will all be filled with compassion and motivated by the same love that the Father and the Son had to reach out and save the lost.

Let me leave you with the words of Jesus Himself from **Matthew 5:14-16** "You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven".