

The Missionary Miracle ■ Christ's Call to Cross a Culture

by John Piper

This sermon emphasizes the profound mystery of how Jesus works through the Holy Spirit to call and transform individuals into missionaries. It explores the motivation and method of Paul in missions, highlighting the importance of finding identity in Christ, being willing to adapt to different cultures while challenging them, and deriving joy from sharing the gospel blessings with others.

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 9:19, 2 Corinthians 5:17, Ephesians 2:19, Colossians 3:3, Philippians 3:20, Romans 5:9, 1 Thessalonians 1:10, Galatians 1:4

Topics: "Identity in Christ", "Missionary Adaptation"

Description

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Transcript

If Jesus were here in person instead of me, and he is here in person in the Holy Spirit, but he's not here in the flesh, and if he were, if he were standing here, he could walk down and walk among you, and he would be able to put his hand on a shoulder and look into your eye and say, you, you, you follow me and I'm going to make you a missionary. And then he could move to another, put his hand on the shoulder, look him right in the eye and say, you, you follow me, I'm going to make you a missionary. He could be that specific.

He is doing that. How does he do that? Not here in the flesh. How does he do that? He did it last night.

He will do it during this message. He will do it tomorrow morning when David preaches. He will do it on your way home.

He'll do it in the coming year. He's been doing it for 2000 years. How does he do it? And the answer is, we don't know.

We don't know. It is a great mystery. A hundred people listen to the same sermon.

They read the same Bible. They have the same Savior. They have the same passion for Jesus.

They have similar gifts. They listen to the same message. They sing the same songs, and 75 out of that 100 are fired to live totally for Jesus right where they are.

And 5 or 10 are never the same again. A miracle happens. Absolutely inexplicable, a missionary comes into being.

I've seen it happen for 50 years. A shoe salesman, a financial planner, a counselor, a building contractor, a student, and then inexplicably a missionary for 40 years. Nobody can explain it.

So my prayer is that that will happen. There's a lot of other good things happening here, but my prayer is that that will happen while I'm preaching, during the panels, as you pray and fall off to sleep tonight, that the miracle happens. It doesn't make you better than anybody.

It's just an amazing miracle that God sends workers. He does it. He creates in a room like this under the preaching of the Word.

He creates missionaries. Amazing. You don't need to try to explain it, but pray for it.

Be open to it. Long for the miracle. Would you open your Bible and turn to 1 Corinthians chapter 9? I'm going to pray.

I'm going to read the entire chapter, and then I'm going to talk about Paul's motivation in missions and Paul's method in mission. As it shows up in this text, I think you will see some surprising things. Father, I ask that as I read the text and as I preach on these two dimensions of the text, Paul's motivation and Paul's method, that you would create lifelong missionaries.

Inexplicably, not my doing, and do a lot of other things too, Lord. I have a few in mind, but I'll leave that unspoken for now. In Jesus' name, amen.

Are you with me? Chapter 9, 1 Corinthians. We're going to look at a lot of verses, and I want your eyes on them when we do, because my authority counts for nothing here. This counts for everything.

I want you to see it for yourself. Let's get the big picture. Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are not you my workmanship in the Lord? If to others I'm not an apostle, at least I am to you, for you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord.

This is my defense to those who would examine me. Do we not have the right to eat and drink? Do we not have the right to take along a believing wife, as do the other apostles and the brothers of the Lord and Cephas? Or is it only Barnabas and I who have no right to refrain from working for a living? Who serves as a soldier at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard without eating any of its fruit? Or who tends a flock without getting some of the milk? Do I say these things on human authority? Does not even the law say the same? For it is written in the law of Moses, you shall not muzzle an ox when it's treading out the grain. Is it for the oxen that God is concerned? Does he not certainly speak for our sake? It was written for our sake that the plowman should plow in hope and the thresher thresh in hope of sharing in the crop.

If we have sown spiritual things among you, is it too much that we should reap material things from you? If others share this rightful claim on you, do not we even more? Nevertheless, we don't make use of any of this, any of these rights, but we endure anything rather than put an obstacle in the way of the gospel. Do

you not know that those who are employed in the temple service get their food from the temple and those who serve at the altar share in this sacrificial offering? In the same way, the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living from the gospel. But I have made no use of any of these rights, nor am I writing these things to secure any such provision.

I'd rather die than have anyone deprive me of my ground for boasting. For if I preach the gospel, that gives me no ground for boasting. Necessity is laid on me.

Whoa to me if I don't preach the gospel. For if I do this of my own will, I have a reward. But if not of my own will, I'm still entrusted with a stewardship.

What then is my reward? That in my preaching, I may present the gospel free of charge so as not to make full use of my right in the gospel. For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win them all. To the Jews, I became a Jew in order to win Jews.

To those under the law, I became as one under the law, though not being myself under the law, that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law, I became as one outside the law, not being outside the law of God, but under the law of Christ, that I might win those outside the law. To the weak, I became weak, that I might win the weak.

I have become all things to all people that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I might share with them in its blessings. Do you not know that in a race, all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it.

Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. So I do not run aimlessly.

I do not box as one beating the air, but I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others, I myself should be disqualified. So let's talk about motivation for a few minutes, and I'm going to start with verses 15 to 18, a very puzzling passage to me. I think I've got it, but you test.

Verses 1 to 14 have one main point. I've got a right to be paid for preaching. Verse 7, for example, who serves as a soldier at his own expense? Answer, nobody but me.

Then verse 15, he explains why he doesn't take a salary, and in explaining why he doesn't, he tips us off pretty clearly about his motivation. So let's go to verse 15. I have made no use of any of these rights to be paid, to have a wife to go with me, for example, nor am I writing these things to secure any such provision.

I'd rather die than have anyone deprive me of my ground for boasting, for if I preach the gospel, that gives me no ground for boasting, because necessity is laid on me. Woe to me if I don't preach the gospel. In other words, when the king of the universe knocked me off my horse on the Damascus road, he conscripted me.

He didn't even ask me. He conscripted me into his army. I was drafted.

He made me a slave in his house. That's Paul's favorite word for himself, slave of Christ. He bought me.

You don't go AWOL on the king of the universe unless you want, whoa, whoa, whoa, hell, hell, hell over you. I got to do this. Therefore, Paul says, I'm not going to settle for serving like that.

I'm not going to serve my commander like that. I'm not going to serve my owner that way, because I want to boast. I will have a reward.

What is it? Can't get it just by preaching the gospel. Got to do that. Go to hell if you don't.

In my circumstance, woe to those me. I'm under necessity. Woe to me.

That's a big word, woe. That's not like a headache. What is the reward and the boast he's after? Verse 17.

You with me? Verse 17. When a pastor says verse 17, you should look at verse 17. For if I do this, that is this ministry of mine, of my own will.

Now that could be just as well translated willingly, gladly. If I do this willingly, if I do this gladly, not like slave, not like a conscripted soldier, I have a reward. But if not of my own will, that is if I do it begrudgingly, slavishly, I'm still entrusted with a stewardship.

Got to do it, like it or not. There's no escaping this master. What? Verse 18.

Some of you are looking at me. I guess that means you don't have a Bible. Okay.

What then is my reward? Here's his answer. It's kind of puzzling. That I may preach or that in my preaching, I may present the gospel free of charge so as not to make full use of my right in the gospel.

That's an odd reward. I could be motivated by the desire for money, or I could be motivated by the full use of my rights and throw around the weight of my apostolic power. And he says no to both of those.

I will not be motivated by money. I will not be motivated by my rights and my power. I will present the gospel free of charge.

That's my boast. That's my reward. So by the grace of God, maybe this way to say it, by the grace of God, I will be the kind of person who doesn't find reward in the pleasures of money.

I don't find my reward in the pleasures of rights demanding power. I will find my reward in presenting the gospel in such a way that it will be plain that the fruit of the gospel itself is my satisfaction. Is that okay? Is that a fair paraphrase, perhaps? I will commend the gospel.

I will magnify the worth of the gospel and the worth of Christ by showing that the satisfaction he gives or it gives, the gospel Christ gives, does not need to be supplemented by money or power. So far then I would say Paul's motivation is to do his mission in a way that magnifies the all-satisfying worth of Christ in his gospel apart from the pleasures of money and the pleasures of power. You don't need to supplement Christ in the gospel by giving me your money or me demanding power.

Now, I'm not satisfied with that answer as to what his motivation or reward or boast is yet. So let's press in further, and I say that just because he invites me in. He has more to say, and I want more.

I need help to understand. I'm not sure how that's working, Paul. What more specifically is the gain, the reward? Because he says in verse 18, "What then is my reward?' He's motivated by reward.

What is it? He said it, but he said it to me anyway in a very perplexing way. So I want to know what's the gain? What's the reward you're after that's motivating you to do what you do? Since it's not money, it's not power, and the way you've said it isn't quite satisfying to me anyway, so he helps me. His answer, what

the gain is, is in verses 19 to 23.

He says it five times. "I gain people. I gain fellow lovers of Christ.

I gain double joy. I gain glory. I gain my crown of boasting." He says it that way in Philippians 4. He says it that way in 1 Thessalonians 2, 19.

So Paul turned away from serving in order to get money. He turned away from serving in order to get power, and in the middle of verse 19, he says, "I become a servant of all in order to gain people." So let's see it five times. You just can't miss this.

Verse 19, at the end, "that I might win the more." Verse 20, at the beginning, "in order to win Jews." Verse 20, at the end of the verse, "that I might win those under the law." Verse 21, at the end of the verse, "that I might win those outside the law." Verse 22, at the beginning of the verse, "that I might win the weak." Now, the word win in English is ambiguous. You can win a prize, and you can win an argument. What does Paul mean by win? Win all these people.

If you win a prize, you gain it. You got it. I have it.

Mine. If you win an argument, you defeat somebody. What's Paul's meaning? There's no doubt what his meaning is.

It's on the face of it, but it's even more clear in the original language. He means, I win a prize. I gain a prize.

How do I know that? Well, it's just obvious from the context, I think, but test me on this, the hundreds of you who know your Greek. Cardino is the verb for win. It's almost always, except for two places, here and one other place, it's almost always translated gain, like Matthew 16, 26.

What will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? That's cardino, the word win here, or Philippians 3, 8. I count everything as rubbish in order that I might gain Christ. That's the word win here. So, his point is, I want to gain Jews.

I want to gain Gentiles. I want to gain the weak. I don't want to gain money.

I don't want to gain power and rights. The gospel has assured me, I get great gain in fully enjoying Christ. So, what can I add to that? More enjoyers of Christ for me to enjoy.

What does that even mean? I've got one more press in. It's not satisfied yet. I got press in just a little further on this.

What does it mean? And he tells us what he means by the reward of gaining people in verse 23. All right, everybody looking down, unless you don't have a Bible. I do, 23, I do it all for the sake of the gospel.

Here comes the purpose statement, that I may share with them, that is all those gained people that I gained, that I may share with them in its blessings. So, he wants to gain more and more people so that he might share in the gospel blessings with them. Now, notice the wording carefully.

He does not say what I would expect him to say, and it would be true, so that they can share with me in the gospel blessings. Nothing wrong with that. That's absolutely true, right? Missionaries go out to bring

people to share with them in the gospel blessings.

That's not what he says. He says that I may share with them in the blessings of the gospel. I want to gain people, all kinds of people, so that I can be a sharer with them as they enjoy gospel blessings.

That I might enjoy their enjoyment of Christ. Now, what does that imply about the nature of joy in gospel blessings? What do I mean by gospel blessings? Forgiveness of sins, declaration of your righteousness before Christ, before God, removal of all condemnation, reconciliation with God, adoption into his family, fellowship with Christ, hope of eternal life. What does what Paul just said imply about my enjoyment of that, those gospel blessings? Here's what it implies.

Our gospel joy is authentic and satisfying only if we desire to taste this joy in the hearts of other people. Our gospel joy in those blessings is authentic and satisfying only if we desire to taste those blessings and that joy in the hearts of other people as they experience those blessings. I want to gain people.

I want to gain people of all kinds in order that I might share in their experience of gospel joy. Do you? Let me just pause here because this is relevant for missionaries. It's relevant for every believer and I just have a little practical, earnest plea.

Most of you have shared the gospel with a dad or a mom or a brother or a sister or a son or a daughter or a roommate or a colleague or a friend or a stranger. And if you've never done this, I really encourage you to do it. Next time where the situation allows it, that is there's enough solitude and earnestness.

You sit down across the table at a restaurant and you look them in the eye and you say, I want you. I really want you. I want you to be my friend forever.

I want you to be my brother, my sister forever. I want to gain you. I want your joy to be my joy because they've never had anybody say that to them.

I mean, many people have explained the facts to them, right? How many people have looked into their eyes and said, I want you. I want you to come in, be in my life, be in my church, be in my forever. That's I think what Paul was saying.

I want to gain people. And I would just say right here to the unbelievers in the room, I want you. I know about some of you.

We've had emails. You're here. You may still be resisting and just hear John Piper say, I want you forever.

My brother, my sister, my friend. I mean it. Do you notice where I stopped in my list of people that he is trying to gain? You should have said, why do you stop there? Because there was another thing.

I stopped right in the middle of verse 22. What did I leave out? Why do you do that? Let's pick it up in the middle of verse 22. I have become all things to all people that I might.

And he switches from win to save. That I might save some. What does save mean for Paul? I want to save people.

Well, he doesn't mean that he's the savior. He means he's the means of people's salvation. What does he mean? Romans 5, 9. Since we are now justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved from the wrath of God.

Or 1 Thessalonians 1, 10. Jesus saves us from the wrath to come. Being saved in biblical language means first and fundamentally.

Those are two important words. First and fundamentally. There are other things it means.

But first and fundamentally, it means God, by means of the substitution of Christ bearing our condemnation, God saves us from God. And if you don't get that, I don't know how you get the gospel at all. We are saved by God from God.

We're saved by the love of God from the wrath of God. And Christ was sent by God to reconcile us to God and escape, lead us out of wrath. Then, verse 23, right after 22, he says, I want to share with them those that I'm saving.

I want to share with them in their enjoyment of the gospel blessings. Meaning now, the reason I left it out so I could emphasize it now, now it means I want to share with what happens when they hear the verdict in the courtroom, not guilty, and they run out of the courtroom and do handsprings down the sidewalk in front of the court saying, I'm not going to be executed. I'm not going to be killed.

I'm not going to be spending eternity in hell. I am free. I want to be, Paul's saying, I want to be there.

I want to share in that. I want to watch that happen all over the world with Jews and Gentiles. Do you? It's a glorious thing.

If it only happens to one person in your life, it will be one of the sweetest moments of your life to have a person thank you and watch them come into the enjoyment of no condemnation forever. Maybe that's enough on motivation. Let's go more briefly to... I think we're okay.

Look at my clock here. They didn't turn it around. What if that means I don't have to pay attention to it? I'm okay.

It's gonna work either way. Let me sum it up. Paul's motivation for his mission is not the pleasures of money.

I don't need your salary. Nothing wrong with salary, Paul said. I'm not going to go there.

That's not what my motivation is, and I'm not going to use my rights. I'm not going to get the pleasures of throwing my apostolic rights around. I am going to be motivated.

This is going to be my reward. This is going to be my gain. This is going to be my boast.

I'm going to be motivated by the pleasures of blood-bought joy tasted as they well up in people I gained. In other words, I get them directly from Jesus, and now what could add to that? Answer, my enjoyment of that experienced in them. Method.

And the method of Paul is very closely connected to his motivation. Let's sum it up with verse 22. I have become all things to all people that by all means I might save some.

Or, verse 19, in the middle of the verse, I believe it's the same thing. I have made myself a servant of all to all. So, become all things to all people and become a servant of all, I think, are saying basically the same thing, and he says that I might win the more.

So, save some, win the more. Then, in verse 20, and this is going to be the key that unlocks everything for me, he says, to the Jews I became a Jew. That's verse 20.

To the Jews I became a Jew in order to win the Jews. Or again, verse 21, to those outside the law, that is Gentiles, nations, I became as one outside the law, and so on. Five times he says that.

Now, we could talk for hours, and maybe you were hoping we could. We'll do the on deck thing afterwards. We'll see.

We could talk for hours about how you become all things to all people. What are the limits on that? But given the constraints of this message, I'm going to cut to the chase and go to what I regard as the single most important reality behind Paul's missionary method in this text, in chapter 9, and the clue of this single most important reality for is in verse 20. To the Jews I became a Jew.

I think Don Carson is exactly right to point out, Paul, you are a Jew. You don't need to become a Jew. That's a sharp observation, and it opens the window on everything.

Think about it with me for a few minutes. You don't have to become a Jew. You are a Jew.

For goodness sakes, you said in Philippians 3, 5, I'm a Hebrew of Hebrews. I am the quintessential Jew. So, what in the world do you mean that you have to become a Jew to win the Jews? Here's my inference from that penetrating observation that Carson made, and I think is right.

When a person becomes a Christian, that person's deepest, truest identity is no longer the identity of his family, his tribe, his ethnicity, race, political party, nation of origin. Why? Why are those identifiers not the truest, deepest identity of a born-again Christian? And the reason is because of what happened to you. I'm talking to you Christians now.

What happened to you? You really should know this. You were born again. That's profound.

A new you came into being, born again. You were and are a new creation. So, born again, 1 Peter 1, John 3, new creation, 2 Corinthians 5. You have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God, Colossians 3. You are seated with Christ in the heavenly places, Ephesians 2. God has transferred you out of the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of his beloved son, Galatians, I mean Colossians 1. You are members of God's household, Ephesians 2. Your citizenship is in heaven, Philippians 3, 21.

In other words, the Jewish man, Paul, was so profoundly and pervasively redefined, given a new identity, new birth, new creation, new homeland, new kingdom, new citizenship, new family. By union with Christ, in conversion, by faith. That's happened to every Christian in this room.

Amazing. That Jewishness was not his truest and deepest identity, so that he had to become a Jew in order to win the Jews. He wasn't a Jew, not in his essential being.

When you become a Christian, your family roots, your tribal connections, your ethnicity, your race, your nation of origin, all of them become, at best, secondary. And the real you is something supernaturally new and different. A new creation, a new family identity in Christ, a new citizenship.

That may be the most important for missions, a new citizenship of the kingdom of heaven. Every other identity is relativized. Now, what are the implications of that for his method of mission, missions? When you become a missionary, a cross-cultural person, learn a language, you do not go as an emissary of your

nation of origin.

You don't. You go as an emissary of the kingdom of Christ. You're in another realm.

Your aim is not to create cultural enclaves replicating your earthly home. Your aim is to establish outposts, or I heard them called this morning, embassies of the kingdom of Christ, the kingdom of heaven. Yes, it is complicated by the fact that Paul really was a Jew ethnically.

And you, every person in this room, every person watching online, every one of you is embedded in a cultural and ethnic identity. But as a Christian, you are both embedded in human culture and transcending human culture. The gospel came to you in cultural familiar dress, but it began re-identifying you, turning you into an alien and a sojourner in your own culture.

Christians are always embedded in a human culture and always at odds with human culture. Always. So, when we cross a culture in missions, we find ourselves adapting to culture and challenging culture.

Always, everywhere. We never are at home in any fallen culture, ever, because our citizenship is in heaven. Yet, we are always at home because our father owns the world and you will inherit all of it.

As missionaries, we leave as aliens and we arrive as aliens. You don't leave a place where you're at home and go to a place you're not at home. You leave a place where you're an alien and you go to a place where you're an alien, because your kingdom is heaven.

The law of Christ is your constitution, not the U.S. Constitution. Yet, we leave our father's land and we go to our father's land. You found ways to be a Christian in your home culture and you will find ways to be a Christian in your new culture.

As an alien, God will help you. The Holy Spirit is the spirit of your homeland in heaven and he's in you. The law of Christ that Paul said he's under, even though he's without the law when he relates to the Gentiles.

The law of Christ and the spirit of heaven are your guide. They will keep you, when you become all things to all people, they will keep you from doing anything that involves sin or doing anything that distorts truth. So, let me end with this summary.

If you find your deepest identity and your most decisive citizenship in the kingdom of Christ, and if you know yourself to be an alien and a sojourner wherever you are, and if you pursue your joy not in the pleasures of money or power, but rather in tasting the joy of others as they enjoy the gospel, then you will be useful to your own people and you will be a very likely candidate for that inexplicable miracle of the missionary call. Let's pray. Father, I pray now that you would grant us to be motivated in this gospel-centered, Christ-exalting way, that our boast would be this and not money or power, and I pray that our method would be that we operate out of an absolutely radical new identity as part of your family and citizens of your kingdom, so that we are aliens here or in our so-called native land, and that we are aliens where we go, and that in both cases we are very faithful ambassadors of the kingdom of Christ.

In his name I pray. Amen.

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