

Seeing the Mission Field in Our Own Backyard

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[0:00] I want to thank you first of all though for what you do to support what we do at North Greenville University. I hope you're aware that North Greenville University is one of your three South Carolina Baptist Convention Universities along with Anderson University, Charleston Southern University and North Greenville University.

I just want to thank you for what you do to pray for us, for your giving through the cooperative program which helps support our work on the campus there in Tigerville, South Carolina as we seek to minister to these emerging generations and raise up transformational leaders for church and society.

I cannot thank you enough for that. By the way, my wife and I and our family were also recipients of your prayer and your giving as we served as your International Mission Board missionaries in the country of Ecuador.

So we thank you for that. You helped educate our kids while we were there. You provided a house for us, a car for us, a salary for us and you will never know what that means. So we are indebted to you both as former missionaries and now teaching on the campus of North Greenville University. Keep on praying for us. If you have your Bibles with you this morning, I want us to turn to a text. It's a bit of a lengthy one, but I do want to read it. It's found in Acts chapter 17.

[1:30] So if you have your copy of God's Word with you this morning, I'm going to begin reading with verse 16 in Acts chapter 17. You follow along in your copy of God's Word as I read.

Verse 16 of Acts chapter 17. Now, while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols.

So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and devout persons and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there. Some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers also conversed with him.

And some said, what does this babbler wish to say? Others said, he seems to be a preacher of foreign gods because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection.

And they took him and they brought him to the Areopagus saying, may we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting, for you are bringing some strange things to our ears.

[2:35] We wish to know, therefore, what these things mean. Now, all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling and hearing something new.

So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus said, Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, To the unknown God.

What, therefore, you worship as unknown, this I now proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, being the Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything.

And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined their allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, that they should seek God and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him, yet he is not far from each one of us. For in him we live and move and have our being, as even some of your own poets have said, For we are indeed his offspring. Being then God's offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man.

[4:05] The times of ignorance got overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man

whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.

Would you pray with me? Heavenly Father, we are grateful this morning for your word. We pray now that that which we have read, written in pen and ink, might become in these moments truly a living word for us as your Holy Spirit becomes our teacher.

Father, we commit this time to you, and we ask you to speak your truth into our hearts, and we ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Okay, this morning I want to ask you to think about something. I want to ask you a question. What do you see? What do you see when you look around you?

What do you see when you drive through the town of Pickens? What do you see when you go to Easley? What do you see when you head toward Anderson or Clemson?

[5:23] What do you see when you travel down toward Greenville? What do you see when you look at the communities and the neighborhoods that are scattered across this part of upstate South Carolina?

Do you see homes? Do you see businesses? Do you see schools? Do you see churches? Do you see traffic?

Oh boy, don't get me started on that. Do you see people going to work? Raising their families? Going about their daily lives?

What do you see, really? I want to say to you this morning that one of the most important things that can happen in the life of a church is for us to begin seeing our community the way that God sees it. Because if we only see neighborhoods, you know what? We'll just live in our neighborhoods. If we only see businesses, we'll just simply work in our businesses.

[6:34] If we only see schools, we'll just simply send our children to school. But if we can begin to look at the people around us as a mission field, then church, everything changes.

So this morning, I want you to see and understand that God has not just placed Pickens First Baptist Church and you in the town of Pickens.

God has placed Pickens First Baptist Church and you right squarely in the middle of a mission field. I want you to see this morning as we especially focus on one group of people who are becoming increasingly visible in the upstate of South Carolina.

And they are members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, more popularly known as the Mormons.

Now, by the way, if you encounter some of them, don't ask if they're a Mormon. That term has gone out of vogue. They don't like it anymore. They need to be referred to as members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

[8:00] These people are not part of a statistical table. They are not part of a religious system.

Church members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints are people. They are people who live here. They are people who work here.

They are people whose children attend school here. They are people you may encounter in the grocery store or at work or in your neighborhood or maybe even at your door.

As Latter-day Saint missionaries come to your house. These are people who need to hear the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

So we're going to look at Acts chapter 17 today because the Apostle Paul shows us exactly what it looks like when we begin to see our communities the way God sees them.

[9:01] I have five things I want to share with you this morning very rapidly, very quickly, but I want you to follow along and perhaps even jot these things down in your Bible. Here's the first thing I want you to see.

We must, as a church, as evangelical Christians, we must begin to see our context, our neighborhoods as a mission field.

Look at Acts chapter 17 again, verse 16. It says, Now while Paul was waiting for them in Athens, his spirit was provoked within him because he saw that the city was full of idols.

He saw something. Do you see that? He saw something. Now let me tell you something about Athens, and I've been blessed to go there on a couple of different occasions.

Even today, it is a remarkable city. In Paul's day, it was intellectually sophisticated. It was culturally influential. It was filled with history, philosophy, art, religion, learning.

[10:07] Paul saw all that, but he saw something underneath all of that. He saw a city full of idols. He saw people following a false religion.

And I want you to notice something else that's very important. Paul did not look at Athens and say, oh my goodness, what a terrible place. He did not say, oh my goodness, these people are beyond hope.

He didn't withdraw from the city. He didn't simply complain about the culture. He saw a mission field.

And this is what we must learn to do when we look at our own cities and towns and communities. When you look at the upstate, do you see a mission field?

I want to tell you, we are blessed to live where we live in this part of the country, right? It is a beautiful part of the country. We have strong families here. We have good churches here.

[11:17] We have communities that still have a strong Christian influence here. But we must never, ever confuse the presence of the church with the presence of the gospel of Jesus Christ in the hearts of people.

And we must never assume that just because people seem to be religious that they know Jesus. That is why Acts chapter 17 is so critically important.

Athens was not an irreligious city. It was a very religious city. Deeply religious. The problem wasn't that people believed nothing about God.

The problem was they believed many things about God. But they did not know the true God of Scripture. That ought to make us think carefully, church, about our own mission field.

Because I can promise you, there are people all around you today who are religious. There are people all around you who talk about God, who talk about Jesus.

[12:24] There are people who pray. There are people who read religious books. There are people who sincerely want to please God. And yet sincerity is not the same thing as knowing Christ.

And that is why we're focusing this morning particularly on our Latter-day Saint friends and neighbors. Because they do all of those things. All of them. And they are growing.

And this is not something that's happening far away. It's happening right here. In fact, according to the Latter-day Saint Church's own current statistics, there are almost 50,000 Latter-day Saints living in South Carolina, meeting in more than 90 congregations.

Did you know that in the 50 United States over the last 10 years, the LDS Church has grown in 49 of those 50 states?

The only exception being the state of California. And their missionary presence. Do you know how many Latter-day Saint missionaries there are around the world today?

[13:42] Anybody want to take a wild guess? This past month, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints officially published that they have more than, listen, 90,000 full-time missionaries.

Do you know how many we have a Southern Baptist? About 3,500 international and about that number North American. They have 90,000. It is the largest missionary force in the world.

Now, there are no definite statistics. The Church doesn't publish actual numbers of the number of Latter-day Saint missionaries here in South Carolina, but it is estimated to be somewhere between 300 and 400 of them right here in South Carolina.

That should mean something to us. Not because we should be afraid. Not because we should become angry.

Not because we need to start some kind of religious battle. But because there are Latter-day Saints who are actively seeking to share their understanding of the gospel with the people in our communities.

[15:01] And Church, we need to ask ourselves, Are we going to be willing to share the New Testament gospel, the biblical gospel, with them when they come our way?

You may be aware that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is in the process of building a temple in Greenville.

The temple is the locus. It is the center of Latter-day Saint belief and practice. This will be the second temple built in South Carolina. The other one is in Columbia.

It's going to be built right in one of the strategic areas of Greenville, right around Interstate 385 and Roper Mountain Road. I've seen the artist's rendering of the temple.

It is going to tower over that landscape. Now, I understand Pickens is not Greenville, but this isn't about Greenville.

[16:02] This is about the upstate. Greenville is just the very visible reminder that something is happening in our region.

So when you drive through Greenville in a year and a half or so and you see that temple, please don't just see a building. See people.

people who live in the upstate, people who have families, people who have hopes and fears just like you do, people who want to know God, people who need the gospel. So when you see that temple, I want you to think, God, you have put a mission field right in my backyard.

That's the first thing we must understand. We must begin to see our context as a mission field. The second thing, we have to let what we see burden us.

We have to let what we see affect us. Verse 16 of Acts chapter 17, when Paul walked through Athens, it says, His spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols, full of false worship.

[17:17] What Paul saw affected him. His spirit was provoked. He was troubled. He was burdened. He did not just simply walk through Athens, see the false religion, shake his head, say how bad it was, and then go on with his life.

What he saw got inside of him. That is where missionary vision begins. Not with anger. Not with a sense of superiority.

Not with a desire to win an argument. But with a burden for people. You know, I can't help wonder sometimes if one of the reasons we don't engage more of the people around us with the gospel is because we've never stopped long enough to see them as God sees them.

What do you see when you see that Latter-day Saint missionary riding his bicycle through the neighborhood? What do you see when you see that sister missionary walking through your neighborhood?

What do you see when you see that temple being built? Oh, we can see the signs, but do we see the person? Do we feel the burden? Do we wonder what he believes?

[18:38] what she believes? Do we wonder what they believe Jesus has done for them? Do we wonder whether they really understand the gospel of grace?

Do we wonder what would happen to them if they died tonight? See, Paul's heart was troubled because he knew that behind all of those idols there were people who were desperately searching after God, but they did not know him.

Do you imagine? Do you think maybe that's what God's wanting to do in our hearts today? To give us that burden? To give us that feeling of being provoked in our spirit?

Perhaps God wants to take something that we have simply noticed and turn it into something we really care about.

We're really burdened about. You see, there's a huge difference between just saying, you know what, there are more Latter-day Saints around here than I've ever seen before.

[19:46] There's a difference between saying that and saying, you know, there's a whole lot more people around here today who need Jesus than I've ever seen before. One is merely an observation.

The other is a burden. The first produces mindfulness. The second produces mission. So, we have to let what we see burden us.

Number one, we have to see our context as a mission field. Number two, we have to let what we see burden us. Number three, we then have to move toward people. Notice what Paul does with his burden.

It doesn't just stay within him. Verse 17 says, so he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there.

Paul took his burden and he moved toward people. He went where the people were. He talked with people. He listened to people.

[21:01] He engaged people. And I want you to notice those two little words, every day. Every day.

You see, Paul did not treat evangelism as an occasional event. He treated ordinary, everyday life, wherever he was, as an opportunity to have a gospel conversation with somebody.

The marketplace became a mission field. The synagogue became a mission field. The streets became mission fields.

the places where people lived their ordinary lives became places where Paul talked about Jesus. Church, mission is not something we do somewhere else.

Mission is something we do right here. You don't have to get on an airplane. You don't have to learn another language. You do not have to go to another country.

[22 : 21] You may simply need to talk to your neighbor, your co-worker. Maybe there's a Latter-day saint family living near you. Maybe you work with someone who's a Latter-day saint.

Maybe your child has a classmate whose family is Latter-day saint. Maybe you meet a Latter-day saint missionary. Maybe the first step you need to take is not to give them an evangelistic tract. Maybe it's not to ask them if they're saved. Maybe it is simply to become their friend. Maybe the first step is to ask them questions and then just listen to them.

Hey, would you tell me about your faith? Would you tell me what Jesus means to you? I wonder, what do you believe happens when somebody dies?

How do you know that you're right with God? What do you believe Jesus actually accomplished on the cross? Those are not hostile questions, church. Those are loving questions.

[23 : 40] I'm going to let you in on a secret this morning, okay? It's just between you and me so don't tell anybody. All right? Our secret this morning. You ready? Sometimes the best evangelistic conversation you can have with a Latter-day saint is for that Latter-day saint to realize, oh my goodness, you know what?

This person I'm talking to actually wants to understand what I believe. Talk to them. Move toward them.

Be friends with them. Love them. That's the third thing. Number one, I must see my context as a mission field. Number two, I must let what I see burden me.

Number three, I must move toward people. Number four, I must begin to understand the people I'm trying to reach.

I've got to understand the people I'm trying to reach. See, Paul didn't just walk into Athens and start shouting. He didn't just walk into Athens and start telling people how wrong they were.

[24 : 49] No. He paid attention. He observed their culture. The text says he had listened to their philosophers. He had understood some of their poets.

He understood the people he was trying to reach and once he understood them, then he was able to find a point of connection for the gospel.

Look at verse 22. Men of Athens, I perceive in every way that you are very religious.

I need to tell you something about Latter-day Saints. They are some of the most sincerely religious people you will ever meet.

And they are some of the nicest people you will ever meet. They want to please God. They want to follow Jesus.

[25 : 46] I can promise you they are not knowingly following a false religion. They regard the Bible along with the Book of Mormon and a couple of other texts as the Word of God.

They use a lot of the same vocabulary we use. They talk openly and sincerely about God, Jesus, salvation, the atonement, repentance, grace, faith, the gospel, and eternal life.

Now those words mean something radically different than what we understand them to be in that LDS context. But they use that vocabulary.

They want to please God. They want to know God. They are just following a false religion. That is why we need to ask Latter-day Saints questions. And then we need to listen to them.

Not argue with them. Not debate with them. Just start by listening to them so that you can understand. I'm going to make you a promise this morning.

[26 : 53] This is true whether you're dealing with a Latter-day Saint or anybody else. You will never effectively be able to share the gospel with people that you have already decided you know and understand without ever having listened to them.

That's a promise. I'm going to say it again. You will never effectively share the gospel with people that you have already decided you understand and know without ever having listened to them.

Paul was effective because he understood the people he was trying to reach. He took what he learned as he listened to them and then he was able to use it as a bridge to share the gospel.

That's why I could say in verse 23 and this is my favorite verse in this text. Verse 23 Paul says as I observed the objects of your worship I found an altar with the inscription to the unknown God.

But what you worship as unknown I can now proclaim to you. Do you understand church? This is what we get to do.

[28:03] As we understand the people we're trying to reach we can begin to say to them we understand what you're looking for. We understand what you're searching for we can now tell you exactly what that is.

It is the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul took what he'd learned about the Athenians worldview and he used it to build a bridge to the gospel and that is essential if we're going to reach Latter-day Saints. We should never approach them with caricatures. We should know what they actually believe. We should ask them questions and we should listen carefully. Now we don't compromise the truth of what we believe but we need to understand the people we're trying to reach with the gospel.

I want to tell you you do not have to be afraid of a conversation with a Latter-day Saint. You don't need to be afraid of questions. You don't need to be afraid of their religious background.

All you've got to do is listen to them carefully, love them genuinely and then open this book and tell them about the Jesus and the difference he's made in your life.

[29:14] Okay, number one, we have to see our context as a mission field. Number two, we have to let what we see burden us. Number three, we have to move toward people.

Number four, we have to understand the people we're moving toward and wanting to reach. And number five, we must proclaim Christ. This is where Paul ultimately takes the conversation.

He doesn't simply tell the Athenians to become better people. He doesn't tell them to become more religious or to add Jesus to everything else they were doing. He opens the scriptures and he tells them about God, creation, humanity, repentance, the resurrection.

His goal was not to tear down their false religion. His goal was to introduce them to Jesus. And that must be our goal too because if we're going to reach our LDS neighbors, coworkers, our goal is not to defeat them in an argument.

It is not to try to embarrass them about their beliefs. Our goal is not to collect some kind of theological victory. Our goal is to help them see Jesus as he is revealed in the scriptures.

[30:23] That means we need to talk about the Jesus of the Bible. A Jesus who is not merely a spirit child who became exalted, but the Jesus who is the eternal Son of God.

The Jesus who is truly God and truly man. The Jesus who came into this world to save sinners completely. The Jesus who offered himself once for all. The Jesus who doesn't need another priest to mediate his sacrifice.

The Jesus who doesn't need another temple sacrifice added to his finished work. The Jesus who is our great high priest who is the one mediator between God and man.

The Jesus who died. The Jesus who rose again. The Jesus who was resurrected. Who reigns and who will come again. That is what we must proclaim. That salvation is found in Christ alone.

Through grace alone. By faith alone. That is the Jesus we proclaim. Paul never once said to the Athenians, listen to me, you are wrong.

[31:27] He never said that. He said, let me tell you who God really is. I understand what you're searching for. I've got the answer.

What you worship is unknown. I can now proclaim to you. You see church, pick in South Carolina is not merely where you live.

It is the mission field God has placed before you. So when you see that LDS missionary walking down the street, don't think, oh my goodness, I hope she doesn't come to my house.

I hope he doesn't knock on my door. Instead, start thinking, God, maybe you're going to answer my prayer and give me an opportunity to be a missionary in my own backyard.

See, the question is not whether God has given you a mission field. He has. The question is whether you're going to see it. Open your eyes.

[32:31] See the people. Let God give you his heart, his burden for them. Move toward them. Love them.

Listen to them. Simply tell them about Jesus. Because the mission field church is not somewhere else.

It is right here in your own backyard. This past Wednesday, I was seated at my desk in my office on North Greenville University campus. And a couple of students came to my door.

They were out of breath. They said, Dr. McQuite, there are two Latter-day Saint missionaries out in front of this building. Now, do you know what I was doing when they came and told me that I was working on this message?

I was working on this message. I thought, well, I can't sit here and keep working on this message. I've got to do what this message says, right? So I went out, engaged with them, had a wonderful conversation with them.

[33:28] So proud of some of my students who came alongside of them. In fact, my wife Ruth this past Friday saw three of my students and these two missionaries that they had met on our campus and they had taken them out to lunch.

Building relationships with them. Loving on them. I invited Friday, I invited, I mean Wednesday, I invited these two sister missionaries, they're female, somewhere between 19 and 20 years of age, see if they would come to my house for dinner.

They're coming tonight. So you can be praying about that. I won't tell you their names just because I'll keep that, I don't want to get that out in the open.

But pray for them. They're going to be at my house tonight along with several other of my students. For a time, we're just going to, we're not going to try to debate with them, we're not going to try to argue with them, we're not going to try to win some theological argument with them.

We're going to love them. We're going to listen to them. And we're going to let them see Jesus in us. You can do the same thing.

[34:37] Because the mission field is not somewhere else. It is right here in your own backyard. Heavenly Father, thank you for your word.

Thank you for how it encourages us at times. Thank you for how it challenges us at times. Thank you for how it convicts us at times.

And Lord, what we've said this morning about Latter-day Saints would apply to anybody in our community who does not know you. Help us to see, Father, that the mission field is right here in our own backyard.

And as we come to this time of invitation and commitment, Lord, if there are decisions that need to be made of any sort, I pray that your people would bow their hearts and their knees before you and say, Lord, I'll be that missionary.

I'll make a difference here in my community. I'll see it as a mission field. I'll be burdened by what I see. I'll move toward people. I'll try to understand them and I will share Jesus with them. God, may this be the prayer of each of our hearts, we pray in Jesus' name.

[35:48] Amen.