

*Very truly I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these because I am going to the Father. John 14:12*

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## The Essentials: Evangelism

Our 40 days of prayer have come to an end. I trust, however, that our commitment and devotion to prayer is ongoing. Throughout this time, we've been thinking through the essential characteristics and distinguishing marks of a New Testament congregation. Our theme today is evangelism, and our text is John 14:12. This verse does not use the word evangelism or even mention witnessing, but in fact, it is about evangelism and is very encouraging. "Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing. And they will do even greater things than these because I am going to the Father" (John 14:12).

Our Lord Jesus spoke this promise just hours before His arrest, trial, and eventual crucifixion. He and his disciples were gathered in an upper room in Jerusalem. In chapters 14 through 16, Jesus gives many promises, and this is just one of them. We call this section the "Upper Room Discourse." Throughout this discourse, Jesus says he goes to prepare a place for us, a promise that will ultimately be fulfilled when we arrive in heaven and see the face of our God. He promises to send us the Holy Spirit, whom He calls the Spirit of truth and whose purpose is to guide us in all truth.

There is also a promise that we will face difficulty and hatred. Jesus says, "If the world hated me, take courage, it will hate you also." But Jesus also promises us he will give us his peace in the midst of that trouble and hatred. In chapter 15 Jesus says, "if you remain in me and I in you, you will bring forth much spiritual fruit to the glory of God." Three times Jesus says that if we pray in His name and in agreement with what Jesus' name represents, he will answer us for the glory of God the Father, and for the joy of the believer. In John 16:8 Jesus tells us he will send the Holy Spirit and the Holy Spirit will do his convicting work. He says, "When he comes, he will prove the world to be in the wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment: about sin, because people do not believe in me; about righteousness, because I am going to the Father, where you can see me no longer; and about judgment, because the prince of this world now stands condemned." In other words, the Holy Spirit is involved in evangelism, he is the one who does the work of convicting and converting. the converting work.

But of all these promises John 14:12 is staggering! You see, Jesus doesn't simply say you will do the works that I once did, he says, "You will do *greater* works." And except for the fact that it's Jesus himself who gives us this promise we just never would believe it! What does this mean? And how does it teach and encourage us in evangelism?

Jesus gives this promise to all believers.

"Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing. And they will do even greater things than these because I am going to the Father." This is a promise for all believers. No believer is left out. And, more importantly, no believer is given a pass—no believer is given the freedom to *not* participate.

This promise is not given to the super spiritual, to those who have a steel-like unbeatable faith. Nor is it only given to those who are missionaries, elders, pastors, teachers, and so on. It's not even a promise given to those uniquely gifted by the Holy Spirit to engage in greater works. It's for all believers, believers like you and me. But there is a catch. It's an incredible promise, but it is irrelevant if you are not trusting in the Lord Jesus Christ. It has no value if you have not put your faith in Jesus Christ for forgiveness.

Isn't it astonishing? Whatever text we read, there is always a pathway to the cross--always a way to get to the gospel. Jesus says it right in this verse, "Very truly, I tell you, *whoever believes in me*. That's the limitation of the promise. It begs the question, "Are you a believer in Jesus Christ?"

One of the most familiar verses in all of Scripture is 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 everlasting life." It's an astonishing verse. There is a great danger. All humans face the danger of eternal ruin, and of enduring the conscious justice of a holy God. There is great danger.

But there is the greatest of all possible gifts given out of the loving heart of God the Father, who sends His Son, Jesus, into the world and He gives him ultimately and finally on the cross. Here Jesus becomes our legal and moral guilt. He absorbs in himself the wrath of a Holy God. That wrath is spent on him, exhausted on him. It is finished—on him. We then get the greatest of all certainties—eternal life. And this promise in John 14 is for those of us who believe. We are rescued from perishing, and now possess life with God, now and for all eternity.

Are you a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ? Have you come to him and asked him for mercy? He most certainly will give it to you instantaneously. It is mercy that will completely eradicate your legal guilt before God, and He will give it to you, wiping your slate clean. It is forgiveness that will last forever. And Jesus says to us who believe "you will do greater works than even Jesus works." It's a promise for Christians only.

Jesus promises that believers can do greater works.

To understand this, we need to consider what Jesus does *not* mean and what Jesus *does* mean.

What Jesus does not mean.

He does not mean miracles. Let's read the verse again. "Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these because I am going to the Father."

Don't misunderstand me. I believe with every fiber of my being that God continues healing miracles in our day. In at least two places in the New Testament, the necessity of praying for the sick and even asking God to heal is urged on us. And God, in his wisdom sometimes grants supernatural healing. But in no place in the New Testament are we promised that all believers will do greater miracles than the miracles of Jesus.

Think for a moment about what Jesus actually did. He cast out demons. He turned water into wine. He walked on water. He fed 5000 people with a little boy's sack lunch. And on several occasions, Jesus actually raised people from the dead. When you put those kinds of miracles in view, church history does not indicate that any believer, much less all believers, is able to do these types of miracles.

John Piper puts it this way, "If you think Jesus means "more miraculous," you will be hard put to walk on water, feed 5000 with five loaves and two fish, or raise the dead. I don't know of any Christian who has ever lived—inside or outside the New Testament—who has ever done all three of these miracles, let alone something *more* miraculous. Let alone *every* Christian having done these miracles or something more miraculous."

If we sum up the life of Jesus in terms of his miracles, we see that his whole life was a blaze of miracles. Look at John 21:5, "Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written." Now, that is an incredible statement. It's saying that Jesus' life was a blaze of miracles, one miracle falling on the heels of another. John may be speaking hyperbolically, but he is saying all the books in the world are not sufficient to testify to the miracle-working power of Jesus.

Read the book of Acts carefully and see that the Apostles performed a lot of miracles. But none of these miracles add up anywhere close to being a *blaze* of miracles. Instead, what we see in the book of Acts is a blaze of conversions through the power of the Holy Spirit, working in the lives of the Apostles and working in the life through the lives of the early Christians.

What Jesus *does* mean.

What does Jesus mean? Well, the answer has to be evangelism. I take Jesus to mean the great work that he was doing is to seek and save the lost. To fulfill the great commission to witness and evangelize.

Luke 10 gives us an interesting story. Jesus gathers together a large group of committed followers. Luke tells us there were 72, and Jesus sends them on a missionary adventure. He tells these disciples that he gives them the power to do miracles. And he tells them to preach the gospel of the Kingdom of God. And they go out and they serve the Lord, and they are met with great success. They are thrilled and filled with joy. When they rush back to Jesus, they say to Jesus, "Hey, Jesus. Even the demons submit to us by your name." And you would think that Jesus would rejoice also. Instead, he immediately issues an instruction.

It's found in Luke 10: 20. "However, do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven." That's critical that we understand this. Yes, you're able to perform miracles. Yes, the demons submit to you. But even that's not reason enough to rejoice. What you should rejoice in is that when someone is saved and comes to faith in Jesus, his name is written in heaven. Rejoice in that!

When God saves a sinner and wipes the slate clean, we are forgiven and become sons and daughters of grace. We can rejoice that our name is written in heaven. That is the greatest of all possible miracles! Therefore, witnessing to people is the great work that we are called to do to advance the Gospel. And we can do it to a greater measure than even Jesus. Tim Keller, who writes with incredible accuracy on this verse, puts it this way. "Our 'greater work' is not about us doing flashier miracles, but multiplying His message. In his earthly ministry, Jesus could only be in one place at a time. Now, through his disciples, millions of mouths can be speaking his words all over the world at the same time."

Consider the historical testimony of the book of Acts.

Can we prove this from the Bible--that evangelism is in view? Let's consider the historical record of the Acts of the Apostles. What we read in Acts is not a blaze of miracles, but a blaze of conversions, which is the fruit of evangelism.

At the very beginning of the Book of Acts, the believers are told to wait for the arrival and empowerment of the Holy Spirit, before engaging in evangelism. "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you. And you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria. And to the ends of the Earth" (Acts 1:8).

In other words, *wait*. When the Holy Spirit comes, He will supply all that you need to be courageous and compassionate witnesses. He will empower you to do greater works than even

Jesus' works. When we read through Acts, we see the fruit of evangelism over and over again. The book of Acts testifies to the Lord saving and adding to the number of those who are saved.

Consider the historical testimony of the book of Acts:

- So those who received the word were baptized, and there were added that day about 3000 souls. (2:41)
- But many of those who had heard the word believed and the number of the men came to about 5000. (4:4)
- And more than ever, believers were added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women. (5:14)
- And the Word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly. (6:7)
- So the Church throughout all Judea and Galilee in Samaria had peace and was being built up and walking in the fear of the Lord and in comfort of the Spirit it multiplied. (9:31)
- And the hand of the Lord was with them. And a great number who believed turned to the Lord. And a great many people were added to the Lord. (11:21, 24)
- But the Word of the Lord increased and multiplied. (12:24)
- And when the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the Word of the Lord. And as many as were appointed to eternal life believed, and the Word of the Lord was spreading throughout the whole region. (13:48)
- So the Word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily. (19:20)

Do you see? The focus of acts isn't on miracles. It's on the message of the Gospel. And the church is growing and growing and growing.

It's simply amazing. Jesus never left the boundaries of Palestine. Not one trip. But the early church took the gospel to Jerusalem, then to Judea, and Samaria. And did they go to the ends of the Earth? You bet they did. They took the gospel to all of Asia Minor. And then they crossed the sea to Europe. And by the time we get to the 17th chapter of Acts, just a little over halfway, the Gospel has so prevailed, they have so faithfully preached, that we are told they literally "turned the world upside down." Through their evangelistic efforts, these New Testament believers won greater numbers of people than even Jesus did in the limitations of his earthly ministry. Today, we carry on Jesus' work of spreading the Gospel through the power of the Holy Spirit. That's the promise that Jesus has given to us.

Jesus returned to the Father to secure the success of His promise.

But how can we know that Jesus will keep such a staggering promise? It's a tall order.

Read the verse one more time. "Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will even do greater things than these because I am going to the Father." Think about that. *I'm going back to the Father.*

“I will ascend back into heaven.” Pay attention though, it is not a direct route. Jesus did not step out of the upper room and ascend back into heaven. No. His ascension is by way of the cross. When Jesus steps out of the upper room, he is betrayed by Judas, arrested, falsely accused, and treated with great humiliation. And then he goes to the cross.

There he takes our place. He gets the penalty. We get the pardon and paradise. When Jesus is buried, everyone believes he is defeated. But three days later he is raised triumphant. Acts One tells us that he presented himself alive with many convincing proofs over 40 days. Finally, He climbs a mountain with some of his disciples and from there Jesus ascends back into heaven, where he is seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty. And what does He do when there? He sends the Holy Spirit—the spirit of truth and power. Through his Holy Spirit, Jesus empowers His Church, people like you and me, to take the Gospel. And since that day, the day of his ascension, greater and greater works have been done for the glory of Jesus.

In World War Two, a church in Berlin was bombed and reduced to rubble. When the rubble was cleared, workers discovered a statue of Christ. But the hands were missing. A sculptor said that he would fix it for free, but the church leaders decided to leave the statue as it was—as a visual reminder that we are the hands of Christ. The hands of Jesus were used to wash the dirty feet of the disciples as an example to serve one another. And true, we are the hands of Christ, but we are also the voice of Christ. We live and speak the Gospel. And we do this together with thousands of voices all over the world. Tim Keller is right, we are speaking the gospel and greater works than Jesus’ works are being done for the glory of Jesus Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Pray. Obey. Depend.

1. *Pray* for opportunities to preach the gospel. Pray that the Holy Spirit sovereignly and providentially arranges moments to share. Pray against being afraid, as Paul did in Ephesians 6. six. And pray for compassion as you witness.
2. *Obey*. Remember, no one gets a free pass to not participate. Jesus calls us to be a witnessing people.
3. *Depend* on the Holy Spirit to incline your heart and empower you to live and speak the gospel for the world's watching eyes.

These are the essentials. We want to be biblical, praying, worshiping, and missional people. And we want to be a people engaged in evangelism for the glory of Jesus Christ. We can embrace this promise for our assurance and encouragement.

*Heavenly Father, We are so grateful for what Scripture calls, “so great a salvation.” And because your eternal and Holy Son is in Heaven at the right hand of God the Father, interceding for us and giving us His Holy Spirit, make us a witnessing Church, May we be eager, fearless, courageous, and compassionate, to lead many to Jesus Christ who is our great Savior. Amen.*

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Edited by CKG