You Are Strangers, And My Guests

*Instructor’s Bible Study Resource*

***Lesson Aim:*** To move toward a shared, Christ-centered and cruciform theology of evangelism for the local congregation.

***Learning Outcomes:*** Students will—

* See the centrality of worship and prayer for the work of evangelism,
* Cultivate a love for the local congregation as the place where Christ serves sinners,
* Learn to appreciate and promote *pastoral care* as a means of outreach,
* Bring together pastor and people, and people with one another in service of the gospel.

**Introduction**

Sean McGever begins his book *Evangelism: For the Care of Souls* with psalmody and prayer[[1]](#footnote-1), using Psalm 51:15 and Psalm 96 in selected verses. It is reproduced here using the NKJ:

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit.

**Amen.**

O Lord, open my lips,

**And my mouth shall show forth Your praise.**

Oh, sing to the LORD a new song!

**Sing to the LORD, all the earth.**

Sing to the LORD, bless His name;

**Proclaim the good news of His salvation from day to day.**

Declare His glory among the nations,

**His wonders among all peoples.**

Give to the LORD, O families of the peoples,

**Give to the LORD glory and strength.**

Say among the nations, "The LORD reigns;

**The world also is firmly established, It shall not be moved; He shall judge the peoples righteously."**

The prayers McGever suggests will also make a wonderful opening prayer for Bible class or an addition to the prayer of the church for a Sunday in which both pastoral and congregational attitude might be adjusted for outreach:

That we may always proclaim as of first importance that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures; That we may rejoice that Your Holy Spirit, who raised Jesus from the dead lives in us, and beckons us to proclaim your power and goodness to our families, neighbors, and all people—**Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.**

That whenever we speak, words may be given us that we will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel; That we will always be prepared to give an answer to anyone who asks us to give the reason for the hope that is in us with a spirit of gentleness and respect; That we will reject any merit of our works and embrace that we did not receive the Spirit by the works of the law but by believing the good news of Your Son—**Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer**.[[2]](#footnote-2)

God knows the use and repetition of simple words and phrases can have profound effect. He made them to have that kind of impact. A brief story, or a simple turn of phrase can immediately evoke a memory, provide an instant connection, or revive a long-forgotten thought. What do you instantly think when I tell you: *Almond Joy’s got nuts?* **A: Mounds don’t.**

Since words can be used to such effect, this little Bible study will be set against the backdrop of memorable images and stories that our Lord Jesus had given us. It will also provide a handful of short, pithy phrases to introduce to the congregation in the interest of promoting the **learning outcomes** listed above. This study can be condensed into one session or expanded for more.

Let’s look at some Scriptures, beginning with Psalm 122:1 and 1 Corinthians 15:3-4:

*I was glad when they said to me, "Let us go to the house of the LORD!"*

*“For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures.”*

Where do you find a source of words to give expression to your faith? **A: In the Divine Service, in the prayers and creeds of the church.** What might be some ways in which your personal faith is kept square with the faith once entrusted to the saints? See also 2 Timothy 1:13. **A: The *form of sound words* is given to us in worship and in the use of God’s Word in daily prayer**.

Phrase #1: \_**I’ll See You Sunday**\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

How does this phrase set up an *expectation* for us? To which of the Ten Commandments does this expectation correspond? See also Hebrews 10:25. **A: The expectation of believers to be in worship corresponds to the Third Commandment and the meaning that Luther uses to expound it in the Catechism.** How does the use of this phrase set up an *anticipation* for us, and how does that relate to the *joy* mentioned in Psalm 122:1? See also Matthew 18:20. **A: Psalm 122 and the Lord’s promise turn us toward God’s house and the Divine Service, which inspires joy in the hearts of believers.**

Concordia Publishing House has produced a devotional book of meditations on the gospels which included these thoughts on our Lord’s parables. It also captures the spiritual dangers involved and the challenges of the work.

“The parables of Jesus have always aroused the imagination… Jesus takes the ordinary events of life and hallows them into a spiritual significance. How often have we seen a farmer plant crops and thought only of the backbreaking and tedious hours in the extremes of weather? But Jesus saw more. To the simple act of sowing seed, the Savior gives a heavenly interpretation.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

The Lord Jesus said, Mark 4:26-29:

*[Jesus] said, "The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground. 27 He sleeps and rises night and day, and the seed sprouts and grows; he knows not how. 28 The earth produces by itself, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. 29 But when the grain is ripe, at once he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come."*

How do these agricultural images illustrate our *shared work* of evangelism?[[4]](#footnote-4)

* Plowing. **A: A good farmer gives careful attention to the ground. This involves listening, see James 1:19. First, consider *the areas of life* that provide contact with your neighbor. Try to understand how that person connects with others (*Head, Heart, or Hands*[[5]](#footnote-5)). Note that in Scripture, Christ gives us cues as to how we may follow the Holy Spirit’s leading in the work of evangelism. Sean McGever writes:**

**[B]eing born again requires a catalyst outside of ourselves. If there ever were an activity that included you but you did not initiate, it was your birth… Any discussion of being born again which is a primary focal point of evangelism, must insist that the true catalyst for being a Christian is from above and not from me or from anyone else for that matter, not even the evangelist… The great tradition of the church, in its wisdom, has located the work of evangelism as a ministry of the Holy Spirit. The third article of the Nicene Creed teaches us that the Holy Spirit is the “Lord and Giver of life.” Salvation was accomplished by the work of Christ and is applied by the giver of life, the Holy Spirit…[[6]](#footnote-6)**

**If we can’t control the Spirit’s work of conversion, what then are we to do? Jesus gives us a clue in His words to Nicodemus: listen for the wind… The wise evangelist should be alert and jump into action when the wind of the Sprit picks up. The key skill is listening. We must listen to God as best we can. We must also listen to people.[[7]](#footnote-7)**

* Planting. **A: Note above all that planting expects *the Seed*. One would think that it should go without saying. But McGever identifies a “formula of consumerism and pragmatism” that is commonly used in outreach efforts: “Conversion testimonies follow a predictable format: first, I was facing something difficult in my life; second, I put my faith in Christ; finally, things are better now.”[[8]](#footnote-8) The Paradigm of Law and Gospel, and the Christian’s dual identity as saint and sinner are diametrically opposed to this approach, just like the picture suggests: *the Life is in the Seed*.**

**What is *the Seed*? Consider John 12:24 and Luke 8:11 below, and note how these verses demonstrate the relationship between *Christ* and *His Word.***

***Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit*.**

***Now the parable is this:* *The seed is the word of God*.**

**Christ is the Seed who dies for us, and the gospel brings Christ Himself into our midst for our life and for the life of the world.**

* Watering. **A: Scripture affirms God’s Word as taking up both roles in the farming metaphor: God’s Word is the Seed, and God’s Word is also the watering that gives the growth. See Isaiah 55:10-11.**
* Expectant Waiting. **A: Recall again Mark 4:26-29 above. Enter into the agricultural illustration, and note the part that *faith* plays in sowing the seed. Note also the prayerful and watchful anticipation of the farmer who waits on the coming harvest. He hopes for a livelihood and to feed himself and his family. In the work of evangelism, we are hoping and praying for a harvest of lost souls for the God’s glory and the salvation of many.**
* Harvesting. **A: The Lord uses the illustration of the Harvest in two ways in the Bible. In Matthew 13:24-30, He uses the Harvest as a picture of the end of the age: He put another parable before them, saying, "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field, 25 but while his men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat and went away. 26 So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared also. 27 And the servants of the master of the house came and said to him, 'Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have weeds?' 28 He said to them, 'An enemy has done this.' So the servants said to him, 'Then do you want us to go and gather them?' 29 But he said, 'No, lest in gathering the weeds you root up the wheat along with them. 30 Let both grow together until the harvest, and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.'"**

**When the disciples asked Jesus to explain this, He said, Mat 13:37-43: ‘The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man. 38 The field is the world, and the good seed is the sons of the kingdom. The weeds are the sons of the evil one, 39 and the enemy who sowed them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. 40 Just as the weeds are gathered and burned with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. 41 The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all law-breakers, 42 and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. 43 Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear. So Jesus uses this parable to teaches how the devil is at work in field to undermine the work of the Kingdom, and how the workers in the field are to be careful in their work not to overzealously tear out what seems like a weed. Note the urgency imposed upon us and the world because of the impending day of Judgment.**

**In John 4:35-38, Jesus also uses a Harvest as a picture of the ingathering of souls that begins as people turn from unbelief to faith: Do you not say, 'There are yet four months, then comes the harvest'? Look, I tell you, lift up your eyes, and see that the fields are white for harvest. 36 Already the one who reaps is receiving wages and gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. 37 For here the saying holds true, 'One sows and another reaps.' 38 I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor."**

**Knowing this builds our love and appreciation for our congregation.**

Phrase #2: \_**I Love My Church**\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

What does this phrase suggest about what our attitude should be regarding our church and its people? Compare Galatians 6:10. **A: It is only right that we should love and act charitably toward those of the household of faith.** Read also 2 Peter 2:4-6. What sins of ours does this expose to us? What comfort do you find there? **A: Answers will vary. Be sure to apply the comfort of the passage: through Christ you are acceptable, and will not be put to shame.**

React to the following quote from Dr. Martin Luther:

We have no other reason for living on earth than to be of help to others. If this were not the case, it would be best for God to kill us and let us die as soon as we are baptized and have begun to believe. But he permits us to live here in order that we may bring others to faith, just as he brought us.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Dr. Mark Wood envisions outreach as a process that involves four steps[[10]](#footnote-10):

* Build Awareness. **Does the Community know we are here? Do they know who we are? What do they know about us? Do the people in my life know about my faith and fellowship, and its importance for me?**
* Create Connections. **How can we find a way to establish continuing contact with the people we have met?**
* Nurture Relationships. **How can we demonstrate the Lord’s kindness to the connections that we have made?**
* Make Disciples. **This is direct involvement with Word and Sacrament Ministry: Bible study, Adult and Youth Information Classes, and the Divine Service**.

Dr. Wood writes:

“We need to take some risks, endure some hardships, and engage people in their brokenness. This means that we have to step outside of our comfort zones and speak of Jesus with lost people even if it costs us friendships, career opportunities, or our popularity. It means denying ourselves, taking up our crosses daily, and following Jesus.”[[11]](#footnote-11)

Considering what Luther says above, and the cross-bearing that it implies, how many of the activities that take place in our congregation are for our members? How many things are intended to purposefully reach out to the lost (unchurched or de-churched[[12]](#footnote-12)) in our community? Are there more or other things that we might do, that we would be willing and able to do? What cultural cues, both positive and negative, are provided by our community?

**Answers will vary. Try to promote an openness for discussion. In that spirit, most ideas are welcome—there will simply be ideas that we will not use because of practical concerns or because of confessional concerns.**

The Lord Jesus said in His *Parable of the Sower,* Luke 8:4-15:

"A sower went out to sow his seed. And as he sowed, some fell along the path and was trampled underfoot, and the birds of the air devoured it. 6 And some fell on the rock, and as it grew up, it withered away, because it had no moisture. 7 And some fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up with it and choked it. 8 And some fell into good soil and grew and yielded a hundredfold." As he said these things, he called out, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear."

How does this parable help us in our spiritual need and in the case of our witness? **A: Jesus makes us aware of the dangers to our own faith and our need of His grace and help; He also keeps us from stumbling when we see how the world takes Him and His Word.**

“The sower throws out a handful of seed. Because it does not fall on fertile ground to take root the plant dies before the grain ripens. There is no depth of soil on the hard roadside, the stony plot or the weed-infested corner. It is amazing on what a tiny bit of ground a weed will grow, but not the wheat. Without proper moisture and sunshine, the plant withers and dies. The toiling has been in vain, and the disappointment is keen.”[[13]](#footnote-13)

Who are we inclined to blame when we see how Christ and His word are rejected? **A: We might blame it on the weeds. Blame it on the rocks. Blame the birds. Blame it on all the people whose footfalls stamped the path down so hard no seed gets in. Finally, we might blame it on the Sower. If He can be found blameworthy somehow, the Seed is snatched away.**

Dr. Wood asks the question:

Why are non-churched people opposed to the church and deaf to the message we try to bring them? One reason is that more and more, the broken people our world rejoice in their brokenness. They are not open to hearing anything that is contrary to what they want to hear and do. They dismiss the Bible as out of date or otherwise irrelevant. They will respond to anyone who disagrees with them or their life choices with anger, hatred, and even violence. Why should you take risks to witness to such people? Why should you concern yourself with people who have no desire to hear what you have to say? There’s only one reason: love.[[14]](#footnote-14)

Consider these Scriptures:

*We love because he first loved us.* (1 John 4:19 ESV)

*Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself, and God our Father, who loved us and gave us eternal comfort and good hope through grace, 17 comfort your hearts and establish them in every good work and word.* (2 Thessalonians 2:16-17 ESV)

Use these Bible verses to construct a prayer for the outreach efforts of your congregation, your pastor, and for yourself.

Phrase #3: \_**My Pastor Will Love You**\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

How is this phrase different from “you’re going to love my pastor?” How does this different expectation help both pastor and people to adjust their expectations? **A: This focus does not make the pastor a celebrity or hero, but a servant who will care for those to whom he is called to minister. This helps the pastor to avoid the burden of *genius[[15]](#footnote-15)*, and helps the people to avoid placing confidence in any man which is only due to God’s Word.**

Sean McGever writes about the temptations that we face in the work of outreach:

“The primary temptation is to think that [we] are the author of the good news. The secondary temptation is to think that acceptance or denial of the good news by the recipients is due to [our] delivery.[[16]](#footnote-16)”

Compare what St. Paul writes, 1 Corinthians 3:5-9:

What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each. 6 I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. 7 So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. 8 He who plants and he who waters are one, and each will receive his wages according to his labor. 9 For we are God's fellow workers. You are God's field, God's building.

How is this perspective both *the cross* to our pride, and at the same time a load that is lifted from us? **A: Our pride is put to the cross when we are denied the conceit that we can argue anyone into the Kingdom by our winsomeness or persuasiveness. Our hearts are set at ease when we are not burdened with winning people over, but instead we are simply called to be faithful as God’s witnesses.**

Phrase #4: \_**Let’s Go See Him! *(Or: Let’s call him; I’ll Go Get Him; etc.)****\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_*

*While the earth remains*—the Lord said after the flood, Genesis 8:22—*seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease*. So, after the flood, we got back to gardening. And people have been doing it ever since.

In that way, we are provided for in the body. We learn our dependance on God, as He provides for us through the sun and the rain. There’s heavenly meaning there for our eyes and ears and hearts as well, if only we can take it in.

God knows that with all the work that goes into farming—breaking the earth up, fertilizing it, keeping the field against the critters that dig up and nibble; waiting on sun and rain, and with the passage of precious time, *the seed* is key to all of it.

So as we consider the opportunities before us as a congregation, we do so with a view to these things: building awareness; creating a connection; nurturing relationships; all with a view to making disciples, in the manner that Christ gave to us, and with His promise in view:

And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19 Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

(Matthew 28:18-20 ESV)

With these things in mind, let’s consider what things we might and could do together.

*At this point, you may wish to introduce a discussion of the community project list that has been provided. You might like to read through it in advance for possibilities that may be higher priorities for your congregation and community.*

**Conclusion**

 At the end, Sean McGever’s devotional approach still captures the imagination:

Almighty God our Savior, you desire that none should perish, and you have taught us through your Son that there is great joy in heaven over every sinner who repents. Grant that our hearts may ache for a lost and broken world. May your Holy Spirit work through our words, deeds, and prayers, that the lost may be found and the dead be made alive, so that all your redeemed may rejoice eternally around your throne, through Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**.[[17]](#footnote-17)

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1. McGever, p. xxi-xxii. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. McGever, p. xxii- xxiii. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Meditations on the Gospels, p. 102-103. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Cf. Wood, *Connected to Christ,* p. 48. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For a treatment of this, see Wood, *Connected to Christ,* p. 56-58, 66-68. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. McGever, p.44-45. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid., p. 46-47. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid., McGever, p. 52, 51. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. LW 30:11. This citation provided by Prof. Erling Teigen and quoted by Pastor David Thompson in an unpublished paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Cf.: Wood, *Meaningful Outreach*, p. 47ff. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Wood, *Connected to Christ*, p. 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. This can be a helpful distinction: the unchurched are those who have no connection to a Christian congregation. The de-churched are those who formerly had a connection but have lost or had it severed in one way or another. These together are nonchurched people, whom we are seeking to reach (rather than that we should compete with other churches for souls who are already “churchy.”) [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Meditations on the Gospels, p. 102-103. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Wood, Connected to Christ, p. 41. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Myron Bradley Penner in his book *The End of Apologetics: Christian Witness in a Postmodern Context* highlights Kierkegaard’s distinction between a “genius” and an “apostle.” One focus is on native gifts and learning that sets up the expectation of winning argument. The latter focuses of the Lord’s Call. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. McGever, p. 82. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. McGever, p. xxiv. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)