



To the Ends of the Earth

Part 2 – You are Now Entering the Mission Field

Pastor Ted Cunningham

We're in a series on missions. We're talking global missions. Today we are talking about what it means to be a cross-cultural missionary. And what can we do in Branson, Missouri? How many of you had a sign leaving your church that said, "You are now entering the mission field"? What the idea there was we gather as a church family, but when we leave this building, when we step outside of our home and hit that front step, we are now able to share with people in our neighborhoods, in our nation, and to the ends of the earth. We want to get good at doing that.

I heard Rick Warren say something this week that struck a chord and I wanted to start today with it. "You were made by God and for God and until you understand that, life will never make sense." We talk about the purposes of the church, and as we talked about the Great Commission last week and as we'll talk about it this week, understand this is a purpose of the church but also a purpose of your life – taking the gospel to the ends of the earth and what is your part in that? What is my part in that? And until I get that, life is not going to make sense.

So, if you've wondered why relationships keep falling apart, why you struggle in finance and everything about your life seems to be chaos all the time, I'm just going to ask this question: are you living for God's purposes or yours? It's a question you must wrestle with.

I heard Coach Hugh Freeze say it this week: "If you think about your life like a football game and it has quarters, zero to 18 years old, that's your first quarter. Nineteen to thirty-six, that's the second quarter. Thirty-seven to 56, that's the third quarter. Fifty-seven to seventy-five, that's the fourth quarter." How many of you in here are grateful for overtime? There are a few of them. Some of you are in overtime. I'm in the third quarter, but I want to take the gospel to the ends of the earth until the final buzzer. Can I get an amen on that?

Matthew 28, it's where we started last week. "***Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations...***" We talked about what a disciple is. We focused a lot on all nations. "***...baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.***" And this is discipleship. "***...teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.***"

What we are talking about today is entering the mission field in our neighborhoods, in our nation, and around the world. We have to really wrestle with why this is awkward and uncomfortable for us. You and I tend to move away from those who are different from us, difficult, and hostile.

We push away from them. If they don't look like us, if they don't talk like us, if they don't eat like us or enjoy things like we enjoy, they don't vote like us, it's not someone we want to spend time with, so we push away.

I can tell you that with my time over the years on the mission field, I've had moments where I sit down and I'm with a missionary and they bring breakfast to us, and the eggs are a little bit runny. I'm groaning inside. The missionary prays, "Lord, thank you for the food brought before us." At that moment I'm like, *You know, if I can eat Doritos, I can probably eat this.* We don't know what's in Doritos and we eat those all the time.

But I get uncomfortable. I grew up using forks and knives and utensils, but I've been to places where they use their hands. It's in these moments where – and this is what we're going to wrestle with today – I can begin to think *My culture is better than yours.* I can begin to think *The way I was raised is better than the way you were raised.* So, we push away from people who are different.

And then they are really opinionated. Have you been around opinionated people lately? I have every Sunday, 8:30, 10:00, and 11:30. So, people aren't just different than me, they are difficult at times, they're challenging. They come at you and it's like, *Well it would just be easier to walk away from this person. I shouldn't have to deal with this.*

Today, we're not just talking about the gospel taking us to places that are different or difficult. What about the people that are accepting the call of God upon their life to go to places that are hostile toward the gospel, risking their lives to share the gospel?

I'm not talking about going to California. But we are going to wrestle with that a little bit today because this racial pride and cultural arrogance exists all over the world. And we want to talk about what happens when it comes against us. How do we deal with that? And what happens when it comes from us?

You see, the Great Commission that we talked about last week and starting with today, it actually sends us, follower of Jesus, to share the good news with those who are different, difficult, and hostile.

We don't have one here at our church, but we did growing up, the sign that said, "You are now entering the mission field." In other words, you are now stepping out into the world where you are going to experience people who are different, difficult, and hostile, and what is your approach?

If you have your Bibles, turn to Acts 1. We're going to look at the first 11 verses of Acts 1 today as we look at Jesus giving the disciples the Great Commission and then the outline, the strategy of where they're going, where they're going to start. Before they get to the ends of the earth, they are going to start, and they are going to work with some racial pride and cultural arrogance. They are going to have to deal with that coming against them and coming from them. As we dig into this, we're going to jump right into Verse 1.

Luke said, ***In my former book...*** Which is Luke's Gospel, ***Theophilus...*** It's interesting when you read Luke's gospel, he refers to Theophilus as most excellent Theophilus, but drops that title here. So, you knew Theophilus was someone of high rank but because a believer between Luke's Gospel and the Book of Acts.

I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach... His earthly ministry. 2 ...until the day he was taken up to heaven (after the resurrection), after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. 3 After his suffering, he presented himself to them and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God.

4 On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: "Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. 5 For John baptized with water, but in a few days, you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit." Last week, we talked about and used the illustration of the flag being presented to a family at a funeral. It just feels like the president is in the room when it is said, "On behalf of the President of the United States and a grateful nation..." We were reminded that when we take the gospel to all the nations of the earth, it's in the authority of the name of Jesus and there is power in that name. We just sang about it. Today we're seeing we don't just go with the authority of the name of Jesus; we go in the power of the Holy Spirit.

6 Then they gathered around him and asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" The conversation around the kingdom... I always enjoy it when I read it in scripture because you can look at the disciples... because we've read it and studied it and studied it. "Disciples, quit asking Jesus about the kingdom. You know it's coming." "Is it right now?" I can tell you one thing out of this global pandemic, one good thing that this has done for me. It has caused me to long for the return of Jesus Christ. I long for it.

I don't judge the disciples anymore for questioning the kingdom. But we do need to remember this, and this is what Jesus is bringing to them. Let's no one speculate on the time of the Lord's return. Let's long for it, but stop listening to TV preachers who set dates. Turn them off, throw away their book. You're like, *I can't believe you said that. There's one in here right now.*

Well, I ain't reading his stuff. I'm not going to speculate on the timing of the Lord's return. But let's carry the gospel throughout the world until the Lord returns. Some of you are in the fourth quarter. Some of you are in overtime. And the buzzer could be at any moment. Carry the gospel until you hear that final buzzer, wherever that takes you. Whatever the call of God is on your life, carry the gospel into the ends of the earth until either the Lord returns or calls you home.

7 He said to them: "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. 8 But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem..." "You're going to start there where Jesus was crucified." I want you to get into the minds of the apostles for just a second. *Okay we're starting where you were crucified. Will we meet the same fate there? Will we even make it to the ends of the earth?*

And then Jesus is very careful to link Judea and Samaria, and this is where we are going to dig in just a little bit today to look at racial pride and cultural arrogance. ***“...and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”***

9 After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight.

10 They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. Now this is important. We have Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and Galilee. We have to bring Galilee. Sometimes we stop when we talk about the plan for the Great Commission at Verse 8 in Acts 1, but we need to keep going and understand why Galilee is so important in this conversation.

11 “Men of Galilee,” they said, “why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.”

And all God’s people said... Amen. The Lord is going to return. And until that day, we’re taking the gospel to the ends of the earth. It’s important you see that this Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria... It’s the outline for the entire book of Acts. But I want you to see something. Jerusalem and Judea, that’s Acts 1-6, and Judea, Samaria, that’s 6 – 9, so roughly a few verses, the majority of the book of Acts, is to the ends of the earth.

I want to show you a map to show you what’s going on just so you see racial pride. I was trying to think of an illustration to explain because these are men from Galilee that are getting this and they are told to start in Jerusalem and Judea. Those in Jerusalem, “We are pure. We’re not tainted by outside influences. We are the seeds of pure Judaism.” They were told to mock the accents of those from Galilee. It’s like when you visit somewhere in the country... I go to Minnesota or Michigan and they make fun of my accent, which is strange to me because I don’t even have one. Their accents would have even been mocked in Judea. And they would have dealt with racial pride and cultural arrogance. “You’re not from us. You’re not pure.” The hostility they would have dealt with there. So, it would have been coming against them. But just a little bit north, they would have to deal with their own.

I like how my professor, Ron Allen, puts this and I just want to break it down. *“When you talk to Judea and Samaria, the relationship of Jerusalem to Judea was that of an urban center to a province. Or we would see it today as a city to a state. However, Jesus was careful to link Judea and Samaria, it’s cousin to the north. The two regions endured a bitter rivalry, dating to the early 8th Century BC when the Assyrians colonized Samaria with non-Jews who enter married with Israelites and thereby corrupted the race. Judea, which means Jewish, considered itself the home of pure Judaism and viewed Samaria with contempt.”*

And that’s why when we read in John 4 about Jesus talking to the woman at the well, what does she say to him? “Why are you talking to me? I am a Samaritan woman.” She doesn’t stop at Samaritan. She says Samaritan woman. She throws another barrier in there. You not only just have the issue of cultures, but you also have the issue of gender. And we are reminded in these stories that the gospel breaks down all of these barriers. The gospel breaks down all of these walls.

But the men of Galilee would have dealt with it here and then they would have had to deal with it from within going to Samaria. And the gospel requires that we deal with racial pride and cultural arrogance when it comes against us and from us. I pray by the power of the Holy Spirit that you and I will deal with this today. Some of you are very comfortable in Branson and there are those in here right now that just moved here, and you are not yet comfortable in this town.

I heard from a precious couple that came to me. They felt called by God to move to Branson. I just want to share this. Culturally, they don't feel accepted in Branson, they don't feel comfortable here. And some of you right now are frustrated going, "Well they should". That's the point. They don't. I think we've got to really wrestle with this a little bit as a church because when she shared... Last week, I was talking to her, and I asked for permission to share this. I'm not going to tell you who it is. They've been at our church for just a few months.

She said, "I want to be able to pledge allegiance and I want to be able to sing the National Anthem, but I'm just not there. I don't feel it. There are so many uncomfortable things that hit me. But I want to." I said, "If you don't feel comfortable in town, I hope you feel very comfortable at Woodland Hills Family Church." Let me say that one more time. I hope you feel warmly welcome at Woodland Hills Family Church."

By the way, this is everywhere. I went to Africa, and I didn't realize this cultural arrogance between Kenya and Tanzania. We had a missionary from Kenya in the first service who was raised on the field. She text me after the service. She goes, "I just want you to know, Kenya is better than Tanzania." I'm like, "See! That's the whole point." But that's what we deal with. There is some struggle there. I experience it all over the nation. I went to France. I would walk into restaurants and be met with a "We don't want you here." We've experienced this. Oh, I pray because of the Gospel of Jesus that would never be true of this church because the gospel tears down every one of those barriers. But what it means is we have to talk about it. We have to address it.

It's come against me. I did an event years ago in Las Vegas. You want to talk about feeling uncomfortable someplace, I feel uncomfortable in Vegas. Primarily because I don't gamble and I'm sober... most of the time. I'm sober all the time for all of you. I had to do that independent Baptists... I'm going to have to say this. I've been there twice to speak. You have to go with your spouse. I got up to get us coffee one morning and walked down... It's like the Casino never shut down. I'm going to get coffee and I'm like, *This is the mission field right here*. I remember after I was done speaking... so, it comes against us all the time. When I was done, the guy got up and goes, "Oh, wasn't that guy from the Ozarks precious?" That was condescending, right? Am I hearing condescension in his voice? You know I always want the last word. I said, "At least I'm the only sober one in here." I felt that. It was like, "Isn't that neat that we can get something from a hillbilly in the Ozarks?"

So, we experience it, but it also comes from us. Do you know that? It doesn't just come against us, it comes from us. We deal with it in this nation. There are places you don't want to visit. I joke about California, but I love going to California. We need to get good at knowing we should be pressing in and moving toward places that are different from us, difficult, and even hostile toward the message we bring.

What can we do when we move to a community with racial pride and cultural arrogance while at the same time confronting our own? How can we deal with that? I think the first one Dick Foth taught us years ago, answering this question. We need to walk in with a **“there you are,” not a “here I am”** mentality. Do you know why most missionaries can’t stand short term mission trips? I’m just going to say it because I always get messages from them afterward saying thank you. It’s because Americans tend to show up on the foreign fields with a “We’re here. Your problems are solved. We have water, truck load of it.” And they are like, “Well, we have a well with a filter, but we appreciate the bottles of water. We’ll sell them in the market place.”

We show up with this “we’re here.” We show up with a here I am. But we want to get good at entering the mission field so let’s walk into a room, as Proverbs 15: 30 tells, with bright eyes. Bright eyes gladden the heart. Bright eyes are like, “Man, it’s so good to see you. What can you teach me? What story can you share with me? What can you teach me, not just about your culture but about your family, about the history of your nation?”

That’s why, a lot of times, with short term mission trips, we need to view them more like vision trips than we do a “here I am. We’re here for you.” We continue to support, and we continue to send, but this is one reason why this church is passionate about putting resources in the hands of missionaries who have given their life to a nation. They go, they show up, they spend years learning a language, and as they are learning a language, they’re learning a culture, they are learning the people. Many have gone and said we are giving our whole life to this nation instead of us spending all that money on just a one-week or two-week trip, which is good, and we are going to have those, but when we start to talk about short term trips, make sure you know it’s going to be “there you are.”

Ask great questions and listen. You have a neighbor right now that comes from another culture, just stop pushing who you are and what you are. Learn. Get to know them. Ask question. Don’t interrupt them when it reminds you of a story about you. Stay with the there you are and ask great questions.

And then lean in when it’s awkward and uncomfortable. We have a saying in the Cunningham home. “Awkward is Awesome.” We got that from Mark Batterson. There are times we are going to feel uncomfortable. “This is so awkward, but, Lord, we’re going to lean in.”

I read a great article this week by Keelan Cook and it’s simply titled, *Why Understanding Culture Helps us Fulfill the Great Commission*. And this is for Branson, this is for Africa, this is for all the nations of the earth, wherever the Lord sends us to proclaim the gospel.

“Like any message, gospel proclamation requires a language of transmission —a verbal language, yes, but also written language, body language and societal language. Culture is the language of life, whether you are a missionary in Africa or a regular church member in Raleigh. All of us navigate culture in our daily lives. But do we do it well?”

“Christians, we have a responsibility to understand culture and how it works, so we can contextualize the gospel. Contextualization is fancy-speak for the process of adapting a message to a particular culture (or context) so people in that culture can understand it. Now, this is an important task for a church that has

been told to make disciples of all nations, all ethne, all cultures. Understanding culture is important because sharing the gospel with people is important.”

“I want you to know that as you enter the mission field, walking out these doors and walking out of the door of your home each morning. Our neighbors are increasingly different than us and it is our gospel responsibility to understand them so we can clearly communicate the good news of Christ to them. Culture runs deep in us. Our culture subtly influences our foundational beliefs about life and family, faith and society. Often, we are unaware of how much this affects the way we communicate with others. Local churches in North America should take seriously unprecedented opportunity to do cross-cultural ministry in our communities as well as around the world.”

It's something we need to deal with and get better at in our community of Southwest Missouri and Northwest Arkansas. Taking the gospel to the ends of the earth. “There you are” not “here I am.” Ask great questions. Lean in when it's awkward and comfortable.

And then serve them in your home. Pat Kershaw has served for years with International Students Inc. When international students come to the United States for college, missionaries on these college campuses go to the airport, pick up these international students, help them move into the dorm, and usually, a day or two later, there is a barbeque. And all they do is serve. Max Lucado calls this the Ministry of hospitality. And all of us can do it. If we have the “there you are” not “here I am” mindset.

Listen to what Max Lucado says. *“Consider the genius of God's plan. The first generation of Christians was a tender box of contrasting cultures and backgrounds. At least 15 different nationalities heard Peter's sermon on the day of Pentecost. Jews stood next to gentiles. Can people of such varied backgrounds and cultures get along with each other today?”*

We wonder the same thing. He says yes. It's called hospitality. If you have a dinner table, if you have a coffee maker, you can invite someone over and get to know them.

Max Lucado says, *“The early church did this without the aid of sanctuaries, church buildings, clergy, or seminaries. They did so through the clearest of messages, the cross, and the simplest of tools, the home. Not everyone can serve in a foreign land or lead a relief effort, but who can't be hospitable? Hospitality opens the door to uncommon community. It's no accident that hospitality and hospital come from the same Latin word. They both mean healing.”*

We can serve anyone by opening up our home to them, those who are different, those who are difficult. And I want to encourage you that instead of pushing away from people, I want you to lean into them. Let's encourage one another to lean in for the sake of taking the good news.

There is a precious member of our church who fled her country to come to this country. I love this couple. They came up to me after the last service last week. She was worked up. I'd say she was fired up. She said, “Ted, I appreciate what you said, but I am scarred and I'm fearful for our nation.” She was passionate. She goes, “I fled my nation to come to the United States. I fled socialism. And when I see it happening here...” These were some of the best moments I've had in a long time as a pastor.

She said, “When it hits this country, where are we going to go?” And her husband, who was standing next to her just looked at her and slowly pointed upward. He wasn’t talking about Canada. He was talking about the return of Christ. He said, “Honey...” It was great because I just got to participate in the conversation that I didn’t have to say anything. The husband and the wife said, “We know of the return of Christ. We know what we’re supposed to do.” This couple, I would say, is in their fourth quarter. They have a couple minutes of the fourth quarter left. Then they are going to be in overtime.

I grew up with all this great ministry that you can do in a community, all you can do to stretch yourself and reach people who are different than you, don’t talk like you, don’t vote like you, don’t look like you. We can do all this great ministry with people, but if we don’t, as evangelists in our church would say, draw the net... Does anybody know what I’m talking about? Drawing the net means we don’t end right here, we end with actually sharing the gospel. Give them the good news. Tell them Jesus died for you. Jesus died for you. He rose again. And we read in 1 Corinthians 15, because he rose again, your sins can be forgiven. Your life can have meaning. Preaching is not useless. You have purpose in your life. Had he not been risen, if Christ did not rise from the dead, you’d be lost in your sins. You would not be saved. This is the good news. We need to be declaring to our neighbors after we minister with “there you are.” Don’t come in with “here I am,” no, here Jesus is. Don’t have “here I am;” it’s there you are, and let me tell you about the man who changed my life.

I know this is awkward and I know what research tell us. A lot of you will never share your faith. We get research at like 80% to 90% of born-again believers in the church today do not share the gospel with friends, family. I would say over the last 18 months, with the level of hostility in our country toward one another, it’s probably not making gospel transmission any easier for you.

I found this a few years ago and I asked our dear friend, Alex Himaya, if I could share this. He has a perfect illustration for the awkwardness, the hostility you may feel. How do you share the gospel when it’s awkward? I want you to check this out. [video plays] Alex Himaya dances to an MC Hammer song.

Alex Himaya: No standing ovation for that. I didn’t see it, but I know it’s not worthy of a standing ovation. Let me just say to you first of all, I’m flat out of shape. Secondly, I want to say to you that a lot of times, talking to people about Jesus is every bit as uncomfortable as ripping your pants off and dancing to MC Hammer song. In the first service, I almost grabbed the gold pants too. I thank God for his grace that did not happen. Next week, we’re going to dig deeper into this series about how to be vulnerable and how to share your story so that you can discover somebody else’s story. The point today – and I hope this is very, very, very memorable for you today – is that if your pastor can do what he just did, you can share Jesus with somebody this week. I love you. We’ll see you next Sunday.

Ted Cunningham: No, don’t applaud for that. That changed my relationship with Alex Himaya. I haven’t made eye contact with him since he did that. There are just some things you just can’t unsee. Do you know what I’m talking about? Somebody asked me in the last service, “Why didn’t you just have the boldness to do that in front of us?” I was like, “You saw why.” I’m a worse dancer than he is. And I want to pastor you for a few more years. You would stop looking at me if I danced like MC Hammer.”

But I thought what an illustration for us that that's what it feels like. But can I remind you where we started. You're going in the authority of the name of Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit. So, before you share or before you draw that net, pray. Before that neighbor comes over to your home, pray for the boldness, for the passages to share. If you've memorized verses of scripture, ask those to be recalled to you at just the right moment. You're going in the authority of the name of Jesus, which we have sung about, and the power of the Holy Spirit, which we have learned about today. Cross-cultural ministry.

Romans 10 reads, **13 for, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." 14 How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? 15 And how can anyone preach unless they are sent? As it is written: "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!"**

We're going to worship together to end our service, but I just want to say to Bob and Dee, what a joy it's been for our church. We've been supporting Bob and Dee and partnering with them for 20 years. They were the first missionaries that we supported to take the gospel to Tanzania, and being able to visit with you on the field and to see... I consider Bob like Indiana Jones. I can't explain it, but he is. If you know what I'm talking about with Indiana Jones... The way he works his way, not just through a country, but the ways those two work their way through a culture, the way they honor people. Yes, they know the language, they know the accent. It was really something for me to watch while I was with you. Bob, US citizen, talking to me and engaging with me, and Dee engaging with me. But when they got around the people that they've been ministering to, they didn't become someone new, but I just saw this transformation of God using someone to take the gospel to the ends of the earth. It is something to watch when you are engaging with the cross-cultural missionary. I hope it inspires each one of us to engage more in our neighborhoods and in our community.

How does that work? Some of you right now are going to go lunch and the server may have tattoos that make you feel uncomfortable. They have more piercing than you would care to see. You're going to engage with people who make you feel awkward and uncomfortable. If I can encourage you in that moment to think through not politics, not pandemics, but to think through the gospel and how can you be used in that moment to say "there you are" not "here I am." "There you are, how can I minister to you?" I have to tell you I'm looking forward to the return of Christ and I am looking forward to the worship service that we are going to have with every nation, tribe, and tongue.

Last week, we were at the Garth Brooks concert in Kansas City. It broke records. Like 74,000 people showed up. Adam Donyes said to me, "This is amazing but it's nothing like what heaven will be. When we gather around the One we've been proclaiming today, Jesus, and we worship. Every tribe, every nation, every tongue. Today, I'm going to invite you to stand and we're going to close, worshipping together, singing together.