

ON MISSION
John 17:13-21

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REFLECTION

We all love a good spy thriller, don't we?

Many of you remember the "Get Smart" series – the old sitcom with a contemporary remake starring Steve Carrell, released in 2008. It's a Cold War saga, a satiric sitcom, where secret agent Max works for CONTROL, a secret part of the United States CIA, where he tries to control the Russian KAOS.

If you don't remember "Get Smart," maybe you remember "Mission: Impossible." A small team of secret agents was used for covert operations against dictators and evil organizations. "Mission: Impossible" also with movie remakes – four feature films starring Tom Cruise.

Seems we all love a good thriller – secret agents and covert operations. Deep down, we all want to be a spy.

In these edge-of-your-seat thrillers, the assignment often comes in the form of a recording that self-destructs five minutes after it's played. And when the mission is described, the recording ends with, "Your mission, should you choose to accept it..." and then the assignment.

"Should you choose to accept..." Elite organizations have always appreciated the importance of voluntary choice when seeking individuals to take on challenging missions. For centuries, when military organizations have asked their members to take unusual risks – the tasks have all been voluntary. This is no accident. The military knows that people are always more committed to a path they have chosen themselves rather than to one assigned to them.

So, as in the television shows of old or the movies of today, we're all sent on a mission. But we have to choose to accept it. No, the Bible is not going to blow up in a few seconds after we learn our assignment. But to become a follower of Jesus gives us "mission: possible" – leading people to know Jesus as Lord.

So the question today is are you willing to accept your God-given mission, your assignment as a follower of Jesus? To know that you and I are here for one purpose, and one purpose only – to live our lives as faithful followers of Jesus and to bring others into His movement?

When we take God into our lives, when we catch His heart, when we follow His leading, His purposes become our purposes. When we surrender to His will, when His plans become bigger than our own plans, when the worship and adoration of God becomes our heart's desire, we get ready for a mission. When God chooses us to build up His kingdom, we go into the world as an agent of God – sometimes loudly, sometimes quietly, but always with purpose – to lead others to Jesus.

Your mission, should you choose to accept it, is to bring people into the hope, peace, joy, and assurance of God's salvation through a Son who loved them enough to die. He was faithful to His mission. May we be faithful to ours.

SERMON

["Jesus is Lord"]

Have you ever wanted to be on a subversive mission, where you, as a special agent, are involved – sometimes overtly, sometimes covertly – trying to overthrow the powers that be?

In reality, all Christians are on a subversive mission. We are members of the body of Christ, and we are His agents who fight, defeat, and overcome the powers of evil that seek to steal, kill, and destroy (John 10:10).

Paul, in the book of Philippians, reminds his readers that “Our commonwealth is in heaven” (3:20). Moffatt more vividly translates this as “We are a colony of heaven.” A colony is a beachhead, an outpost, and island of one culture in the middle of another. (Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon, *Resident Aliens*, preface)

I took a trip to a “spy shop” on the web to see what kind of paraphernalia I could find for a secret mission. I found a Coke can that's actually a digital recording device. You can video up to four hours. It looks like you're sipping on the soda – the can is actually marked Coca-Cola. All the while, you're taking pictures – secret pictures – of those around you. There was not a diet Coke option, so I'll forever be suspicious of those who drink “the real thing.”

I also found a Kleenex box with a camera. You go into someone's office, you see a box of Kleenex. You don't know – maybe the tissues are taping you, recording everything you do and everything you say.

You better beware of neckties with color cameras. Maybe every man in this room who is wearing a tie has a color camera, recording your every move. Yours for only \$399.95.

I found an umbrella that had, at its core, a sharp, 10-inch long, surgical stainless steel blade. See someone walking along with an umbrella, beware, lest they impale you.

Then there was the glove gun. One firm handshake and then farewell.

And, like Max in “Get Smart,” there was a shoe telephone, used by the Romanian Secret Service in the 1960s and 1970s, for sale on the internet.

And ladies, lest you be left out, there was a lipstick pistol – that’s a way to think about the kiss of death.

No, I’ve not been watching one too many spy flicks, and I’m not completely off my rocker. The reality is the depiction of scripture is this cosmic battle between good and evil, and those who follow Christ become His agents. Agents on a mission.

I. We are not of this world

Jesus, speaking to the Father in prayer, says in John 17:14, “I have given them Your word; and the world has hated them, because they are not of the world, even as I am not of the world.”

Christianity is more than a matter of a new understanding. Christianity is an invitation to be part of an alien people who make a difference because they see something that cannot otherwise be seen without Christ. (*Resident Aliens*, p. 23)

You understand that, ultimately, all human beings are on one side or the other. You’re either on God’s side or you’re on the evil side. There is no middle ground. Those of you, this morning, who think you walk in the middle, refusing to make a commitment to either following the Lordship of Christ Jesus or living for evil – well, actually, you’ve already made your choice. Either you’re with Him or you’re against Him. Satan likes nothing more than for you to stand in the middle ground and think you haven’t made your choice because, in convincing you to make no choice, he has chosen for you.

We are not of this world.

John Chrysostom said (in the 4th Century) that Jesus is saying, “My followers have something else in view. They have nothing in common with earth. They have become citizens of heaven.”

The church knows Jesus and the world does not. The greatest event in the history of the world is not the discovery of a continent or the dropping of a bomb. The greatest event in human history is the death and resurrection of a man named Jesus.

The reality is the world’s values are not to be our values. The world’s goals are certainly not to be our goals. Jesus made it really clear that He was not of this world. He was other-worldly. He was from another kingdom, another power. God loves the world enough to send Jesus to die for the world, but He wants to redeem the world, not become part of the world’s brokenness.

Have you ever lived in a foreign country, or anywhere – maybe in the States – where you realize you have everything you need? You have shelter and food. You have warm clothes. You even have some entertainment venues. But, in reality, it doesn’t feel like home. It’s not your place. Whatever that feeling is that makes a place a home, that makes it where you belong, is lacking. You can read account after account of folks in foreign lands who say, “I just didn’t fit.” I found

one missionary who says, “I know what it’s like to live in a foreign country where I didn’t quite fit in, even though I learned the language.”

That is our relationship to the world. We don’t belong here. This isn’t really our place. We are only passing through.

Peter says, in his first epistle (1 Peter 2:11), “Beloved, I urge you as aliens and strangers to abstain from fleshly lusts which wage war against the soul. Keep your behavior excellent among the Gentiles....”

Or in Hebrews, in that great section on faith, “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1). It is that great Hall of Faith, mentioning Abel, Enoch, Noah, and Abraham and Sarah.

“All these died in faith, without receiving the promises, but having seen them and having welcomed them from a distance, and having confessed that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. For those who say such things make it clear that they are seeking a country of their own.... But as it is, they desire a better country [that is, a heavenly one]. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; for He has prepared a city for them” (Hebrews 11:13, 15-16).

The message throughout scripture is consistent: We are not of this world. We are only passing through. The kingdom of God is our eternal abode. We are agents on a mission for the eternal.

You may not need a Coca-Cola camera or a lethal lipstick, but you do need to be equipped and realize the enemy is around every single corner, looking to take down those who are making a difference for the kingdom of God.

The world hates us because we call men out of this world. We call them into a heavenly dwelling. We call men away from the wealth of this world, and we call them to the riches of God.

The world is about power; the kingdom is about peace and servanthood.

The world is about greed; the kingdom is about giving.

The world is about lust; the kingdom is about love.

The world presses injustice on the weak and the poor, the old and the unborn; the kingdom puts priority on the widow and the orphan, protecting the weak and defenseless.

We are not of this world. Our mission, should we choose to accept it, is nothing less than the Great Commission – to call men into a new kingdom, a kingdom with the plan to undo the evil one.

Remember the message of Jesus? His sermons are summarized so simply: “Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand,” saying, “That power of God, where He reigns and rules on earth as He does in heaven, has begun with my presence.”

Jesus’ message is the proclamation of the in-breaking kingdom of God, which brought an end to all other kingdoms. His teaching, miracles, healings indicate the nature and the

presence of the kingdom. The Sermon on the Mount begins as an announcement of something that God has done to change the history of the world. (*Resident Aliens*, p. 86)

It's here. The army is marching. Like a mustard seed, it grows. The world will hate us because it hated Him.

Look at John 15:18-19. "If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, because of this the world hates you."

Following Jesus is not for the faint of heart. It's for the devoted, the dedicated – those willing to risk life and limb, fame and fortune – all that they have – for the greater good of God.

The Kingdom of God is worldwide, crossing all cultural barriers.

Here's the reality. You, as a follower of Jesus, have more in common with a German, a Japanese or a Chinese believer than you do with an unbeliever in the United States. I understand the privilege of being a citizen of this, the greatest country that men have ever imagined. But I also know that the kingdoms, the empires of men rise and fall, and my commitment is, first and foremost, to the kingdom of God before it is a commitment to any country. The thing I share with a Chinese believer is that we have the common cause of Christ, which is stronger than any country's cause. We live in the greatest country on earth, but it is nothing compared to the kingdom of God – which is for all people of every nation who say "Jesus is Lord."

II. Jesus doesn't take us out of the world; He leaves us here to work and to redeem for His purposes.

Look at verses 15-17

I do not ask You to take them out of the world, but to keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth.

Sometimes, I fear that those of us who want to follow Christ build up so many walls around the secret compound that we insulate ourselves from the very ones we're called to redeem in Christ. The most artificial life I have ever lived was when I was a seminary student, studying in Fort Worth for ministry. Quite literally, when you're living at seminary you can work on campus, go to school on campus, eat on campus, work out at the gym on campus, see the on-campus doctor. Eventually you realize that the walls of the "monastery" are rising to such a height that you have no idea about the lost and dying – the darkness – beyond Seminary Drive.

The same thing could happen to a Baptist church. It can happen to a downtown Baptist church. The worst thing we can do is plan so many activities and events that you can live your whole life down here at 12th and Tyler and never reach out to the world beyond. Oh, you need to be here – but you need to be bringing others here, too. Be purposeful, be passionate in your mission to win people to Jesus.

How many friends do you have who do not know Jesus as Lord? Are there relationships you are developing right now with the intent of bringing them to our side – to the other side – to the side of light and life and goodness and peace and joy and salvation?

What I want you to see is that we're not to be taken out of the world.

Paul says essentially the same thing in 1 Corinthians 5. Paul says,

“I wrote you in my letter not to associate with immoral people; I did not at all mean with the immoral people of this world, or with the covetous and swindlers, or with idolaters, for then you would have to go out of the world. But actually, I wrote to you not to associate with any so-called brother if he is an immoral person...” (5:9-11).

“Don't judge the world,” He says. In other words, if you want to stay away from the sinner, stay away from the sinner who is pretending to be a saint – don't stay away from the lost and dying world.

You can't fault a pig for wanting to roll in the mud. You can't fault sinners for not living like saints. You can't blame the world for not acting like the church. One of the biggest problems we have is we expect a lost and dying world to act like Sunday School members. We yell at them when they don't look like we're supposed to look or act like we're supposed to act.

Eugene Peterson tells an interesting story. **He and his family were walking in a mount meadow in Yellowstone Park. There was a little boy of four or five about 30 yards out in the meadow, picking wildflowers – exquisite alpine flowers. Now, you know it's against the rules to pick flowers in national parks. Pastor Eugene Peterson says, “My children new this; they had learned the Sierra Club motto: “take nothing but pictures, leave nothing but footprints.” Everybody knows that. He says, “My children knew that as well as they knew John 3:16 (one of my children thought it was from Scripture).”**

So here's this little kid out in the meadow, picking the wildflowers. Pastor Eugene Peterson could see the little boy, breaking the commandment of the national park, and he was outraged. It was sacrilege taking place on holy ground. So the pastor yelled at the kid – the kid he didn't even know, “Don't pick the flowers.” The little boy just stood, wide-eyed, innocent – and terrified. He dropped the flowers and ran, crying.

Peterson said, “You can imagine what happened next. My wife and my children, especially my children, were all over me. ‘Daddy, what you did was far worse than what he did! He was just picking a few flowers and you yelled, you scared him. You ruined him. He is probably going to have to go for counseling when he's forty years old.’ My children were right,” says the pastor. “You cannot yell people into holiness. You cannot terrify people into the sacred. My yelling was a far worse violation of the holy place than his picking a few flowers.” (Eugene Peterson, *Subversive Spirituality*, p. 165-66)

So it is with the church. We can't yell at the world and expect them to follow the rules they don't even know.

So here's your mission, should you choose to accept it. You are to reach out to a fallen, broken, evil world with the grace of God. You're to be an ambassador, an agent for the other side.

Peterson says, **“We come to a place where it is not enough to be saved – we want to share the salvation life. We take on responsibilities inherent in the saved life and find ourselves assigned to positions in our neighborhoods, in our communities, where the ways of God and men and women intersect. People show up at these crossroads lost, discouraged, fatigued, and confused. The task of Christians assigned duty at these intersections is to give direction to people on the way, encourage and exhort them, provide information about the weather and the road conditions and serve up refreshments. It is an incredibly busy place, traffic hurtling this way and that, and there are a lot of accidents, a lot of injuries, and therefore much caring to be done.**

“It goes without saying that Christians care. Baron von Hugel used to say, ‘Caring is the greatest thing. Christianity taught us to care.’ Christians care and if they don’t they don’t stay in business very long, or they don’t stay credible very long. This word care is at the heart of our community traditions.” (Eugene Peterson, *Subversive Spirituality*, p. 154)

The most credible form of witness from the church is the creation of a living, breathing, visible community that follows Christ.

Your assignment, should you choose to accept it, is to be the presence of Christ to a lost and dying world. For, after all, you committed yourself to follow Him.

The real church asserts that God, not nations, rules the world. The boundaries of God’s kingdom transcend those of Caesar, and our task is the formation of people who will join the movement of the Christ. (*Radical Aliens*, p. 47)

[Hud’s: “Jesus is Lord”]