

ON MISSION with JESUS
Making the Most of Every Opportunity
I Peter 2:9-12 and Jeremiah 29:10-14
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One of my goals for this series, “On Mission with Jesus,” is to debunk the common misconception that most of our lives is insignificant and only a small part is spiritual. That misconception has been around for a long time. 500 years ago, the priest and reformer Martin Luther spoke against this idea when he wrote

It is pure fiction that the Pope, bishops, priests, nuns, and monks are called spiritual while princes, lords, business owners and farmers are called material. This is deceitful and hypocritical. All Christians are spiritual and there is no difference among them except for the roles in which they serve. We are all consecrated priests as Saint Peter says, “You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood.” – Martin Luther, paraphrased

I came across Luther’s quote in a book I’m reading by Tim Keller called “Every Good Endeavor.” In the book, Keller does a great job connecting all forms of work we do at our jobs with God’s calling to serve Him and build his kingdom. I recommend the book to anyone who would like more food for thought around the spiritual significance of our work. The idea that the work of those employed by the Church is valued by God and everyone else’s work is mundane undermines the calling God has for every follower of his to partner with Him in doing his work in the world.

I want us to look more closely at the 1 Peter chapter 2 passage Martin Luther alluded to. I encourage you to find 1 Peter 2:9.

9 But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. 10 Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. – 1 Peter 2:9–10

In these verses, Peter clearly states the identity of the people of God: a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession. He says our calling is to declare the praises of God who called us from darkness to his wonderful life. In verses 11–12 he continues.

11 Dear friends, I urge you, as foreigners and exiles, to abstain from sinful desires, which wage war against your soul. 12 Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us. – I Peter 2:11–12

Peter challenges us to live in such a way that even people who disagree with us and accuse us of wrong doing will see our good deeds and our godly lives and will give glory to God. That's a calling every one of us can fulfill no matter where we work, live, or go to school. Pastor Tim Keller also highlights the Apostle Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 7:17. In this section of his letter, Paul challenges the 1st Century Corinthian church to live for Jesus whether they are married or single, free person or slave, practicing Jew or Gentile. In verse 17 he writes, "Each person should live as a believer in whatever situation the Lord has assigned to them, just as God has called them" (1 Corinthians 7:17). The words "assigned" and "called" Paul uses in verse 17 are typically associated with religious orders in which priests or religious leaders were placed, but Paul used them to refer to the life station each of us has. In other words, every follower of Jesus has an assignment and a specific calling in which they've been placed to glorify God.

Throughout this series I'm committed to providing examples for you of people within McBIC who have embraced their assignment and their calling in the everyday routines of life. I'd like you to watch this video of Betty Ebersole and Bob Joswick who are living out their calling by visiting and caring for the elderly.

Betty Ebersole and Bob Joswick

Thanks, Betty and Bob, for being willing to share what being on mission with Jesus looks like for you, and thanks for the wonderful ministry you have to older folks in our church family and in our community.

I want to turn our attention again to the Old Testament Book of Jeremiah. We've been focusing on chapters 28 and 29. God's people, the Israelites, due to their refusal to follow God and his ways, find themselves captive in the pagan city of Babylon. Their inclination is to close their eyes, grit their teeth and await God's quick deliverance, but God's word to them through his prophet Jeremiah was that they were going to be in Babylon for 70 years. While they're there, God instructs them to build houses, farm the land, have children, and then marry those children off. He tells them to pray for the city of Babylon and to seek its prosperity, because when it prospers, they, too, will prosper.

I've been using the people of God's situation as an analogy for us. As followers of Jesus, we find ourselves in a culture that is increasingly out of step and even hostile to Jesus and his ways. In the situation we find ourselves, we have three basic options.

- 1) We can adapt our lives and beliefs to the culture around and dismiss God's ways.
- 2) We can isolate ourselves from the people around us who don't believe and live the same as we do—just hanging on for Jesus to come back and take us to heaven.
- 3) We can engage with the culture, and in so doing bring glory to God by being salt and light to the people around us.

God's word to his people in Babylon and his word for his sons and daughters today is "Be true to your faith and who God has called you to be, as you interact with people who believe and live differently, and as you do bring glory to God through your lives." I encourage you to follow along as I read Jeremiah 29:10–14, where God explains what his response will be if his people follow his instructions.

10 This is what the LORD says: "When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my good promise to bring you back to this place. 11 For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you,

plans to give you hope and a future. 12 Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. 13 You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. 14 I will be found by you,” declares the LORD, “and will bring you back from captivity. I will gather you from all the nations and places where I have banished you,” declares the LORD, “and will bring you back to the place from which I carried you into exile.” – Jeremiah 29:10-14

Jeremiah 29:11 is a familiar verse to many of us. I frequently see it framed on walls in homes, and it's a “go-to” verse for me in wedding ceremonies. Who doesn't like the promise that God has plans to prosper us and not to harm us? Those words were spoken to the Jews living in Babylon by Jeremiah. God told them they would prosper and not be harmed, they would have hope and a future, He would hear and answer their prayers, and they would seek Him and find Him if they followed his instructions to fully engage in life in Babylon while they awaited their return to Jerusalem. Jeremiah closed that section with the promise that the Jewish people would be gathered from the nations where they were scattered and would be brought back to their homeland after their exile.

God was intent on seeing his people be a blessing to the people around them and to the city in which they lived, even though the Babylonians were pagan people with no fear of God. He promised to bless them if they embraced their time in Babylon as his assignment for them and his calling to them. I'm convinced God is no less intent on seeing each of us embrace where we live and work and the people we interact with as his assignment for us and that He longs to see each of us embrace his call to be salt and light in our world. I've asked Pastor Jen Souter to share this morning about a unique opportunity she has embraced that has been a blessing to her and to people in our community.

Jen Souter

Jen, thanks for being willing to share with us this morning, and thanks for the intentional way in which you serve children both at McBIC and in our community.

I appreciate the Apostle Paul's use of the word assigned in 1 Corinthians 7:17. It moves the things that we're involved in from being simply something we choose to do or that we've landed in by chance to something God has designed for us and called us to. Just think for a moment how that perspective can change your view of your life:

- From "This is my job where I go every day to work and make money" to "God has given me this job, where I can use my abilities and experience to build his kingdom."
- From "This is the school I have to go to because my parents chose to live in this community" to "Every day when I go to school, I have the opportunity to brighten my classmates and teachers' lives with Jesus' light."
- From "Geez, my neighbors are so annoying. I wish I could just avoid them" to "Jesus, as I pray for my neighbors, show me how I can bless them in your name."

I chose the title of today's sermon, "Making the Most of Every Opportunity," from the Apostle Paul's statement in Ephesians 5:15–16, where he writes, "Be very careful then how you live—not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil." Paul calls us to be careful, attentive, intentional, and focused, because opportunities are all around us.

COVID was a difficult time for many of us, but it was also a season of great opportunity, and our church was able to take advantage of opportunities we were presented by our school district to bless children and families in our community. I don't know if you're aware of this or not, but our local schools are a primary source of providing food to many families in our community. New Hope Ministry and other food pantries use our schools as distribution points for families in need. When it became clear that schools wouldn't be meeting in person at the end of the 2019–2020 school year, our local district scrambled to figure out how they could still distribute food to students and families in need. This was especially important during COVID, because the need for food was anticipated to be even higher than normal. As part of the food collection plan, McBIC was asked to help coordinate food collection among area churches. Approximately 15 churches participated, and we assigned churches certain weeks on a rotating

basis over the course of 10 weeks from late March through mid-June. Over the course of those two and a half months, churches and residents across our community donated over 20,000 pounds of food that was collected here at McBIC and given to the school district for distribution.

During the summer of 2020, four months or so after pandemic began, our superintendent called me to ask if I thought local churches might be willing to provide their facilities for students to meet in when they weren't in classes due to the hybrid schedule of two days of in-person learning and two days of remote instruction. Places were needed because many parents of the students worked. I told our superintendent that I thought churches would be open to helping and that I was confident we'd be willing to provide the space to the district free of charge. He said if the space was free, the district could keep the cost to parents to a minimum. I reached out to churches, and 10 local churches agreed to provide space. As it turned out, the number of students only required West Shore Free and McBIC to be available as sites, but the district administrators were impressed that 10 churches had responded so quickly. During the 2020–2021 school year, McBIC and West Shore Free hosted students in classrooms five days a week.

Followers of Jesus and churches often get a bad rap—and too often we deserve it—but it's gratifying to me that during a time of crisis sparked by a global pandemic, followers of Jesus in this church and in churches across our community were able to rally together to bless students and families by providing them with space to meet and with food. As I've focused on our "On Mission with Jesus" theme, I've been sharing numerous examples from my life and the lives of others that are connected with our local schools. I'm convinced our local schools provide an awesome opportunity for us to impact a wide swath of children and families in our community, but the school is just one place where we can embrace Jesus' mission. Our neighborhoods, workplaces, and community recreational spots also provide wonderful contexts for us to make the most of every opportunity in sharing Jesus' love.

This focus on God's calling for every one of his children to partner with Him in doing his work lies at the heart of McBIC's mission to experience Jesus and share his love with others. I've asked Pastor Susan to share her sense of how significant this subject of being on mission with Jesus is for McBIC.

Pastor Susan

My hope today is that the Holy Spirit has touched your heart and that Jesus has sparked your mind with ideas of what it looks like for you to make the most of every opportunity in seeing the places where you're positioned and the people you're in relationship with as Jesus' assignment for you. This week and next, I'm inviting our church family to respond in one of two ways to the messages I've been preaching.

- Prayer partners, staff and church board members are available around the worship center to pray with anyone who would like to embrace the call to live on mission with Jesus in their workplaces, school, or neighborhood.
- As we sing, if God is stirring a desire in you to live on mission with Him, I invite you to step out in the aisle and walk toward the front. At the conclusion of our singing, I want to pray a prayer of commissioning over each of us.

"Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." AMEN!