

OPPORTUNE OBLIGATIONS

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Opportunities arise every day; and many are lost every day. So much of life's success relies on opportunities that arise and how we respond to them.

Therefore be very careful how you live—not as unwise but as wise, taking advantage of every opportunity, because the days are evil. (Ephesians 5:15-16)

These verses lead to Paul's urgent message to be continuously being filled with the Holy Spirit, the Source of such everyday wisdom. But my focus today is on his preamble.

"The days are evil." From the time of Christ's first advent until His return, this is the Biblical character of the season: evil. No one imagines that only evil exists or that it always prevails (except some Hollywood screenwriters), but it means that there is an undercurrent of anti-God sentiment that results in selfish, unholy behavior—apart from the restraining influence of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

One day, the Restrainer—the Holy Spirit in the Church—will be taken away (the Church will be caught up to be with the Lord), and then, literally, all Hell will break loose.

So, because these days are evil, Christians should not live as fools, but as wise, "taking advantage of every opportunity" to glorify Christ and make His name known, and thus add to the positive influence of the Gospel in the world.

How do you get the "advantage" over an opportunity? You don't let it slip by. When you spot an "open door" you step through it in faith and see what God will do.

Receiving Creates Responsibility

"Pay It Forward" is a great movie, that everyone should see. It's the story of a young boy who takes his teacher's challenge to invent a project to have a positive influence on others. He figures if he does something good for someone and that person does something good for another person, and so on, that he can generate a stream of multiplying goodness.

Every Christian has received undeserved gifts from God—salvation, healing, deliverance, prosperity, joy, and peace (to name a few), plus supernatural gifts of the Spirit—because God is extravagantly generous. Receiving a gift creates a responsibility, an obligation: to give back, to pay it forward.

Fishers of Men

“One day as Jesus was walking along the shore of the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew throwing a net into the water, for they fished for a living. Jesus called out to them, “Come, follow me, and I will show you how to fish for people!” And they left their nets at once and followed him.” (Mark 1:16-18)

These disciples knew how to catch fish; now, Jesus would teach them to apply those skills, and new skills, to catching people for God. It is fair to ask: if you, as a Christian, are not fishing for people, are you truly following Jesus?

You have skills and gifts that can be applied to the process, and the Holy Spirit will give you everything else that you will need. You have only to follow Jesus, and He will teach you.

Last week, I shared some gripping statistics with you. Of the nearly 7 billion people on the planet today, 3.2 billion have likely never heard the name of Jesus Christ, nor ever met one of His followers. Yet, Jesus said, *“This Gospel of the Kingdom will be preached throughout the whole inhabited earth as a testimony to all the nations, and then the end will come”* (Matthew 24:14).

Can this task reasonably be done, or does it mean that Jesus return is an incredibly long time away? Roughly 2,000 years have passed since the death and resurrection of Jesus. Evil days continue and fill the world with violence and heartache. Is it an impossible task? I believe it is more possible than most people realize.

For instance, here’s a simple chart that maps the hypothetical results of embracing a simple, reasonable plan of personal evangelism: One person wins two people to faith in Jesus and disciples them for one year so they can do the same.

At the end of one year, there will be three evangelistic disciples. As they each continue this practice, at the end of the second year there will be nine evangelistic disciples. At the end of the third year, there will be 27, and so on. Where it begins to get interesting, if everyone sticks with it, is at the end of the seventh year, when the disciples number in the thousands. In just twelve years, there will be more than half a million disciples.

But—get this!—in just three more years (a total of only fifteen years), even if the world’s population explodes, the potential is for more than 14 million disciples. That’s all the nations of the world! Just fifteen years. Sure there may be lean years and some attrition or fruitlessness, but can you see the immense potential? Not generations from now, but just fifteen years!

1 yr	1 win 2	Total of 3
2 yrs	3 win 6	Total of 9
3 yrs	9 win 18	Total of 27
4 yrs	27 win 54	Total of 81
5 yrs	81 win 162	Total of 243
6 yrs	243 win 486	Total of 729
7 yrs	729 win 1,458	Total of 2,187
8 yrs	2,187 win 4,374	Total of 6,561
9 yrs	6,561 win 13,122	Total of 19,683
10 yrs	19,683 win 39,366	Total of 59,049
11 yrs	59,049 win 118,098	Total of 177,147
12 yrs	177,147 win 354,294	Total of 531,441
13 yrs	531,441 win 1,062,882	Total of 1,594,323
14 yrs	1,594,323 win 3,188,646	Total of 4,782,969
15 yrs	4,782,969 win 9,565,938	Total of 14,348,907

As a result of the amazing potential of such a simple and doable plan, I believe you and I (and every born-again Christian) have an obligation to share the Good News with others. In fact, I believe we are obligated in three ways, as a result of our unique relationship with God.

Obligation to the Father

We are obligated to the Father because of His searching love. He has been called the “Hound of Heaven,” because His love is relentless. He reaches and reaches, until He connects. Jesus told a story to illustrate this very point in Luke 15:3-7.

So Jesus told them this story: “If a man has a hundred sheep and one of them gets lost, what will he do? Won’t he leave the ninety-nine others in the wilderness and go to search for the one that is lost until he finds it? And when he has found it, he will joyfully carry it home on his shoulders. When he arrives, he will call together his friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Rejoice with me because I have found my lost sheep.’ In the same way, there is more joy in heaven over one lost sinner who repents and returns to God than over ninety-nine others who are righteous and haven’t strayed away!

He searches until He finds, because He loves people and wants no one to perish, but everyone to be saved. We are to be an extension of that searching compulsion of love.

Obligation to the Son

Second, we are obligated to the Son of God, because of His saving love. Jesus rescues us. By His sacrificial death and His powerful resurrection, He releases us from sin

and sets us free. He makes us a new creation. Here's one way Paul described it in Ephesians 2:8-10.

God saved you by his grace when you believed. And you can't take credit for this; it is a gift from God. Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it. For we are God's masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things he planned for us long ago.

This new creation has a purpose—a purpose beyond personal safety and blessing: “so we can do the good things he planned for us long ago.”

He had in mind to partner with us in this grand rescue mission. We are to be the heralds of His saving love. We are to announce the Kingdom of the Redeemed, wherever He takes us. As we saw last week, if we don't tell them about Him, how will they put their trust in Him and be saved?

Obligation to the Holy Spirit

Third, we have an obligation to the Holy Spirit, because of His sending love. We have received the Holy Spirit with a heavenly intention, as Jesus expressed in Acts 1:8.

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. And you will be my witnesses, telling people about me everywhere—in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

The Spirit's fruit and gifts are given to equip us for this mission. They are to be used and shared, not simply displayed for our own admiration.

People need to hear, and they need to witness the grace of God through the lives of people—you and me—like themselves. Holy Spirit, flow through me!

What Now?

Have you recognized your obligation to the love of our searching, saving, sending God? Are you looking for opportunities to fulfill your obligation? If you will give yourself to this purpose, you will find opportunities most every day. Maybe not to win a convert every day, but at least to lovingly nudge someone in that direction. Perhaps to plow the soil, perhaps to plant the seed, perhaps to tend the young stalk, perhaps to prune the branches, or thin the new fruit, perhaps to harvest the ripe fruit.

Whatever the opportunity, will you begin to take advantage of it? Will you commit to keep your eyes open, and pray for divine alertness? Will you study God's Word to prepare your thoughts, and pray for gentle boldness? If so, you will be wise, and God will certainly use you.