

# WHY SHORT-TERM MISSIONS?

BY JIM MERSEREAU

Over the last four decades the Lord has given me the privilege of traveling extensively around the world. During a twenty-one year career in the U.S. Navy, then as a pastor who took members of his church on short-term missions, and then as the Vice-President of an international humanitarian relief agency, I have had the opportunity to visit thirty-four countries, some of them numerous times. One lesson I've learned from my travels is that most of the rest of the world is nothing like North America.

In the United States today we enjoy the highest standard of living, the most creature comforts, the best medical care, and we are better fed, clothed and housed than any middle-class of people in the history of the world. Although there are a small handful of other countries that do have a standard of living somewhat comparable to ours, the fact is that most of the rest of the world is nothing like the USA – it is extremely poor by comparison.

Let me pause here to note that I do not believe we in North America should feel guilty, or apologize for the abundance we have. The good Lord, by His permissive will, has chosen to allow North Americans to enjoy this level of abundance. And, He has chosen to allow you and me to live in this country, at this time in history, instead of anywhere else at any other time. So I don't believe we need to feel guilty or apologize for what we have. I do however believe we must recognize that with the blessings comes responsibility. Why short-term missions? Here are three reasons:

## 1. *God has blessed us so we can in turn be a blessing to others*

In Luke 12:48 Jesus said, “*From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked.*” There's a universal truth in that passage. It leads to an understanding that as good stewards of what the Lord has entrusted us with, we are to use some of our abundance to help and encourage our brothers and sisters in other places around the world.

It's true that North Americans in general have a lot, and so it's also true that North American *Christians* have a lot compared to Christians in other places. We have more money at our disposal, more access to healthcare, more medicines, and more healthcare supplies than anyone else. We also have more healthcare professionals per capita than any other nation in the world. We have more food, clothes, construction materials, more Bibles and Christian literature, than any other group of Christians anywhere. No Christians have ever had so many material resources that could be brought to bear for the cause of Christ worldwide than North American Christians do today.

Short-term missions can serve as a conduit for us to share those resources. Short-term missions create channels for resources to flow; resources of money, medicines, construction materials, literature, and most importantly people, all flowing from North America to the rest of the world to assist our brothers and sisters in other places in their Kingdom-building work. We have been blessed so we can in turn be a blessing to others.

## **2. When we serve those less fortunate than ourselves we are actually serving Jesus.**

In Matthew 25:40 Jesus said, “*... I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.*” In this verse Jesus taught that when we serve those less fortunate than ourselves we are actually serving Him.

I once read a quote from Mother Theresa. She was speaking about her ministry to the poor and destitute in the slums of Calcutta and I will never forget the way she described them. She said, “The dying, the cripple, the mental, the unwanted, the unloved – they are Jesus in disguise.”<sup>1</sup>

As I read those words my mind flashed to images of the many people I’ve met on mission fields around the world; impoverished people, sick people, hurting people. Those images are simply representative of many millions upon millions of desperate, ill, and spiritually lost people in our world today. According to Jesus in Matthew chapter twenty-five, when we look at them we should see Him. “*Whatever you have done for the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.*” Short-term missions to impoverished regions around the world afford the unique opportunity to serve Jesus by serving others who are in much greater need than we are.

It should also be noted that this lesson does not just apply to short-term *international* missions. There are many places in North America that are impoverished and in desperate need of assistance also. Inner-city slums, coal-mining communities in Appalachia, Indian reservations in the American Southwest, Eskimo villages in Canada and Alaska, are all populated by people in great physical and spiritual need. While Christians in North America are uniquely equipped to be a blessing to impoverished people in other places around the world, it is also true there are numerous needs in communities right here in our own country. Churches and relief agencies should not lose sight of the opportunities to serve others in the Name of our Lord, right here at home.

## **3. Short-term missions strengthen the church.**

In Luke 6:38 Jesus instructed, “*Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.*”

Please don’t misunderstand that verse to necessarily be about money. Money may be part of what God wants us to give, and the blessing He bestows in return may also involve money, but more often the blessings given and received involve much more. Giving money to godly causes is certainly important, but it’s often not what God is really looking for from us. Simply giving money can be too easy and requires only superficial involvement on our part.

Usually the giving God wants from us involves our time, skills, and a willingness to take action on behalf of others. If God calls us to invest time and effort into a Kingdom-building activity, it will require a much deeper level of involvement than simply dropping a check in the offering plate. It will mean an investment of ourselves into the lives of others and that quickly becomes much more meaningful than money. In return God may choose to bless us in some new financial way, but more often God’s blessing will be spiritual, and this is where the strengthening of our churches comes in.

I’m reminded of an example from a mission trip to the Central Romanian

province of Transylvania. We were conducting free medical and dental clinics in a poor gypsy farming village named “Agribicu”. While the clinics were in progress one of our American pastors, along with three American church members and a Romanian translator, were prayer-walking along the dirt roads of the village.

At one point they came across a woman harvesting potatoes in a field. They attempted to engage her in conversation but she politely told them she had too much work to do and couldn’t stop for conversation. So the three team members offered to harvest the potatoes for her so she could spend some time speaking with the pastor.

Well, she got a big smile on her face and readily agreed. The three team members then stepped into the field and began harvesting the potatoes while the woman came out on the road to speak with the pastor. Through the translator the pastor told the woman about Jesus and then answered many spiritual questions for her. Over the course of the next thirty minutes the woman was led to faith in Jesus *and* ended up with three times as many potatoes harvested than if she had done the work herself!

The woman was saved, the potatoes were harvested, but those three church members actually received the bigger blessing. That night at the hotel, as they told the story around the dinner table, they were absolutely glowing! As a result of their willingness to bless others in the Name of Jesus, God in-turn blessed their souls in a way they will never forget.

The fact is that mission trips change lives. If you are willing to go out of your way to be a blessing to some of those identified by Jesus as, “*... the least of these brothers of mine ...*” you will be blessed in ways you never imagined, “*...pressed down, shaken together, and running over.*” Because that’s the way our Heavenly Father works.

When North American churches send members on short-term missions the people return as better church members. On the mission field they participate in the work of God in a whole new way; they experience God in ways they never have before; and when they come back they’re changed. They realize if they can minister in such a way over there, they can certainly do it here as well, and the North American church ends up stronger.

North American Christians occupy a unique position in the Kingdom of God in our day. Our Heavenly Father has entrusted us with a tremendous amount of His material resources, more than any other group of Christians anywhere in the world. But not only do we have abundant resources we can send over there, we live in a day when most of us can actually *go* to the mission field. At no previous time in history has it been so easy for the average Christian to actually go on a short-term mission. This is a special time in Christian history and North American Christians occupy a unique position in the Kingdom. Let’s embrace the opportunity and serve the less fortunate in the Name of Jesus.

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1. “Mother Theresa Quotes” [www.womenshistory.about.com](http://www.womenshistory.about.com)