

“The Harvest Is Plentiful...”– Matthew 9:35-10:15

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[What follows is the transcript of a sermon. It was originally intended to be heard, not read, so the tone is more conversational than academic. It has only been loosely edited, so forgive any grammatical, syntactical, or spelling errors. If you have questions please contact Southern Oaks Baptist Church through their official website, www.welovethegospel.com.]

Take your Bible and meet me in Matthew 9...

The text I would like to preach from this morning is one that relates to discipleship and disciple-making. One of the things Matthew’s Gospel makes clear is this: to be a disciple of Jesus is to be a disciple-maker. This is clearly where Matthew is heading because the last words of this book are the Great Commission—one of our 3GCs (core values)—the call on the life of every disciple of Jesus to make disciples who make disciples (Matt 28:16-20). That commission is the culmination of Matthew’s discipleship teaching. It is the family business that the Lord has called His children to take on.

But it doesn’t come out of nowhere. You might recall that it is anticipated in the initial call that Jesus issued to His first disciples—“Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men” (4:19). So following Christ is a call to “fish.” That is, He will send us out to the world to draw others to Christ with the Gospel message He provides and He’s going to equip us to make disciples, who make disciples, who make disciples, all over the world. That is what results from following Christ. That’s what He leads His disciples to do. And the Great Commission in Matthew 28 fleshes out more of what that involves—going, baptizing, and teaching.

Brothers and sisters, that is the mission that should invigorate your life with purpose. That is a life that glorifies God. Regardless of your vocation or school or where God has placed you, He is going to send you out to make disciples. That is what disciples do. By definition, disciples of Jesus make disciples. And who could imagine a more exciting thing to live for? But...if we’re honest, we are easily distracted. Sometimes what the world values is what we spend our time pursuing. But it doesn’t have to be this way. And the more value Jesus has to us, the less it will be.

Do we value Jesus enough to bring others to Him? That question is easy enough to answer. If we are trying to bring other people to Jesus, then perhaps we do. If we are not, could it reveal that we don’t. And if we don’t, it is almost certainly because we have forgotten how His love compelled Him to bring us to God. He had compassion on us. He saw us as lost and helpless, wandering aimlessly closer and closer to destruction. But He came to us. He made a way for us to be forgiven and made right with God through the cross and resurrection. He took our sin upon Himself and took its penalty to the grave. He valued us enough to save us by His sacrifice, not because we have anything valuable to offer Him (that’s important!) but rather because He created us and loves us. That’s grace. We are valuable to God not because He needs us, but because He made us. He loves His creation and moves to redeem His creation. And this free gift of salvation comes to us through faith—trusting in Jesus alone to save as we turn from our sin and self-sufficiency. Everyone who has experienced salvation from God contributed nothing to the equation except the sin that made it necessary. But God made a way, through Christ and His work, for us to be made right before Him and with Him forever. That’s the good news we call the Gospel.

The more you ponder this Gospel, the more you value the Jesus at the center. And the more you value Jesus, the more you will see the things that Jesus values and pursues and begin to value and pursue them for His glory. In fact, our calling in life is an extension of what Jesus values. He calls us to a life that seeks that which He values. And our text this morning is an illustration of this. It helps us to see that the mission of God’s people is the mission of God. We are invited to play a part in the mission of God Himself (i.e., the *mission Dei*). He invites us to join Him in pursuing what He values. That’s the foundation of missions. Our text helps us to see how

missions and outreach flow from the heart of God to the hearts of God's people. We are sent for the sake of pursuing that which God values.

So let me set the stage. Matthew has just relayed a series of stories that communicate the authority of Jesus. He first demonstrates Christ's authority through His *teaching* (particularly in the Sermon on the Mount). He then shows that Jesus has authority over the *physical* realm (through various healings), over the *natural* world (through the calming of the storm), over the *supernatural* (through his casting out of demons), and even over the *unnatural* (seen in his forgiving of sin and his power over death, which is quite unnatural from the Bible's point of view). And now, as we come to the end of chapter 9, Jesus is about to exert his authority over the twelve disciples by sending them out...

There is so much that we could see in this section, but what we will focus on today and next week is an interesting progression that relates to the sending activity of God. There are five steps to this progression (of which we will consider two this morning) and at least three major applications (two of which I'll bring out today). In order to see this, we must start by reading the text. Let's pick things up in Matthew 9:35...focus your minds. The most important things I will say today I'm about to say as I read God's Word...

*"And Jesus went throughout all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction. ³⁶ When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. ³⁷ Then he said to His disciples, 'The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; ³⁸ therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.' **10** And he called to him his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal every disease and every affliction. ² The names of the twelve apostles are these: first, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother; James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother; ³ Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James the son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; ⁴ Simon the Zealot, and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him. ⁵ These twelve Jesus sent out, instructing them, 'Go nowhere among the Gentiles and enter no town of the Samaritans, ⁶ but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. ⁷ And proclaim as you go, saying, "The kingdom of heaven is at hand." ⁸ Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, cast out demons. You received without paying; give without pay.'" (Matthew 9:35-10:8)*

This is God's Word...

These verses (and the ones that follow) are tricky and frequently misunderstood. We have to remember that these verses concern a particular group of men, Jesus' closest 12 disciples. Therefore, much of what he says to them here, and throughout chapter 10, applied uniquely to them. So there are a couple of mistakes I want us to avoid today.

First, it would be a mistake for us to ignore the context and try to apply everything in this passage directly to us in an exact, one-to-one, sort of way. For example, I've seen people argue that the verses that come immediately after what we just read are meant to forbid contemporary missionaries from taking supplies or raising any sort of funds for their journey. "You just have to trust the Lord," they argue. But that's ridiculous. What Jesus will say in verses 9 and following applied to that particular trip Jesus was sending those 12 disciples on. It doesn't apply in the same way to every trip that every missionary goes on. It didn't even apply to every trip Jesus sent the Twelve on. So folks that argue that these commands apply to every missionary God sends have overlooked the situational nature of this text. By trying to apply it universally to every situation, they are mishandling God's Word.¹ We want to try to avoid that along the way.

But second, we also don't want to make the mistake at the opposite end of the spectrum. We don't want to see the situational nature of this text and then conclude that everything about this text only applies to these twelve men and, therefore, there is nothing in it for us, so we can just move on quickly. No. That would be a mistake as

well. *“All Scripture is God-breathed and useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness, so that we may be thoroughly equipped for every good work”*, Paul wrote (2 Timothy 3:16-17). Therefore, we need to take time to see the principles in this text that do apply to us.

So if along the way we need to avoid these two extremes and the errors they embody, how then shall we proceed? Well, we must begin with noting how the text plays out and what it meant for the original audience and the twelve disciples in particular. And, as I stated earlier, there is a progression we can observe in the text. Let’s observe it first (or at least part of it), then we can ask the “so what?” question to see what we can learn about God and what relevance this story has for how we operate as Christians. To be sure, we can only scratch the surface of that matter. But hopefully it will generate some personal reflection.

With that in mind, here is the first stage in the progression...

The Condition of the Lost Moves Jesus to Compassion

Look at verses 35 and 36 once more...

“And Jesus went throughout all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction. ³⁶ When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.”
(Matthew 9:35-36)

The root of verb translated here as *“he had compassion”* actually comes from a word that means “intestines” or “bowels.” That’s appropriate. You know how strong emotions affect you physically? That’s what’s happening in Jesus. One commentator put it this way: “Jesus was physically moved by a stomach-wrenching empathy for the plight of his flock. He was literally sickened...”²

Why was Jesus moved to compassion? Verse 36 tells us it was because when he saw the crowds he saw that they were a people *“harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.”* Sheep don’t do well without a shepherd. They get lost. The quality of their life suffers. They don’t know where to turn for food. They are vulnerable to the elements and to predators. They wander directionless. In short, they’re vulnerable, helpless, and inevitably harassed. In fact, the English translations hide the extent of the metaphor a bit. The word usually translated “harassed,” originally meant “to flay” or “to skin.”³ That fits with sheep imagery. That’s how helpless and at risk they are. That’s what Jesus sees when he looks at the crowds. “It is to our own hurt when we do not serve the Lord (Jer 2:13; Hos 7:1, 13; 13:9), and it hurts him because it hurts us.”⁴

But here is the thing about shepherdless sheep: they don’t know that they are this vulnerable. And that is true of the crowds. They went along their business day in and day out, by all appearances living the “normal” life, not feeling helpless and harassed at most moments, not aware of how vulnerable they had become. When Jesus looks at the lost world that is what He sees. I think that is so important for us to pick up on. If we had more time we could observe how shepherding imagery is used in the Old and New Testament of God, the Messiah, and even the leaders God appoints for his people. Suffice it to say, it is very potent imagery.

But then Jesus shifts the metaphor from sheep to harvesting. Harvesting imagery is very often used in the context of God’s judgment throughout the Bible. So taken together, those images of shepherdless sheep and harvesting create a sense of urgency. Lost sheep can’t cut it on their own. They inevitably perish. They need a shepherd to lead them. And when Jesus sees the crowd He sees a people whose leaders (under-shepherds) have failed them and who therefore are left harassed and helpless. Jesus understood what this meant. He understood what the stakes were for the lost world. That is why he came to the world in the first place. So when He sees the crowd around him, He is moved to this great compassion because of their condition.

But I want you to notice what Jesus’ compassion leads to... Look at verse 37 and 38:

“Then he said to his disciples, ‘The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.’” (Matthew 9:37-38)

In these verses we are to notice, second...

The Compassion of Jesus Compels Disciples to Petition

Jesus sees the condition of the lost. He feels compassion. So he tells his disciples to pray. And what are they to pray? That God would send workers into the harvest. That God would send people to those shepherdless sheep before they perish.

Do you think God answers that sort of prayer? Yeah! How do we know? Because Jesus has said that when we see him, we see the Father. So when we see this compassion swelling up in Jesus, we know that the Father, the Lord of the Harvest, has the same compassion for the lost. He wants people to be gathered from the harvest field. We can bank on that. So He will answer that prayer. In fact, you and I are here because the Lord answered this prayer! Jesus called His disciples to pray for workers. The disciples prayed. The workers came. And over the course of many years the Gospel came to Tyler. If you are a Christian, it came to you. And why? Because God answers this prayer! Look around you. The Christians in this place are proof positive that the Lord of the Harvest answers this prayer.

The condition of the lost moves Jesus to compassion...the compassion of Jesus compels the disciples to petition, to pray.

So What?

Do you think that what we are seeing in Jesus here reflects the mindset that He would have us adopt? Absolutely. Do you think that the call to pray for workers to be sent into the harvest of the lost world is any less urgent for His followers today? Clearly not. So let me ask two questions by way of application that could sting at first, but may, by God’s grace, get us focused on the concerns of this text anew. First...

Does your praying evidence that you see the condition of the lost and the need for more workers?

In a recent book on prayer called, *Just Ask*, the author asks, “If God answered, in one fell swoop, every prayer you prayed last week, how many new people would be in the kingdom?”⁵ Would legions be converted or would you just be more comfortable?

Do we pray to the Lord of the Harvest, asking him to send more workers into his harvest field? Do we pray “‘Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.’ Cause your name to be praised and your Kingdom to spread among all the peoples of the earth.”⁶ Do we pray for churches to be multiplied and disciples to be made among Ghanaian immigrants, and the Somalis of North Africa, and the Saudi Arabs, and the Iranian Turks, and the Brahman of India, and the Lohar of South Asia, and the six thousand other people groups who like them are “unreached” with the Gospel? We ought to pray for them. And we ought to pray that God would raise up missionaries who would go to them, because they’re not going to come to us. Just like we were not going to go to Christ, he had to come to us. If we can see the crowds like Jesus sees the crowds and feel the compassion Jesus feels for them, we will pray accordingly.⁷

If you’re like me when this truth first dawned on me, you’re thinking, “Where do I even start?” Well the place to start is always with Jesus. Start with the Gospel. We won’t see that compassion in us, until we can see it in Jesus. So we need to meditate and be impacted by texts like Matthew 9 that teach us about what Jesus feels for the lost world. We need to remember that we once were lost and that’s how Jesus felt about us. We once were helpless and harassed and Jesus loved us enough to come and die in our place on the cross to pay the price for

our sins and rose from the dead to ensure we could have right standing with God and a relationship with him forever. That's how much we were loved. That's how much grace he has shown us. That's how much mercy God has had on us, that He would send his Son Jesus to suffer, die, and resurrect for our salvation. That's the Gospel. And if we can really be impacted by the sheer grace of it all, then it is going to affect how we look at the people around us and in this world. So we start with Jesus. We preach the Gospel to ourselves so that our vision for people is conformed to His.

But here is another resource that has helped me gain perspective. It's called Operation World. Operation World has a website (operationworld.org) and they produce a book that features different countries and people groups each day of the year. It provides information about what the Lord is doing among these various people groups, how we can be praying for our brothers and sisters in these various places, and some very helpful and up to day perspective on the condition of the harvest. It's a wonderful resource that I would encourage you to check out. We draw from it in the prayer guide we distribute on Wednesday nights every week.

Today's prayer focus is Saint Helena. They are not considered unreached, but less than 9% would consider themselves evangelicals, most of which are Baptist. According to the site, the majority of those who identify as Christians are part of the Anglican Church, which there is "spiritually dormant." I read that most of those who call themselves Christian in Saint Helena are nominal at best, and the decline in church attendance is making this more and more clear. While they've had a strong Christian heritage, what they are in need of is revival and spiritual momentum. I couldn't help thinking of my country when reading about theirs. Christians around the world are praying for Saint Helena today. We should too. We need to pray that God would send workers into the harvest. That would be a wonderful application of this text...

Another resource is found on joshuaproject.net. They have similar prayer focus each day for an unreached people group. Today's focus is the Kerinci (care-EEN-chee) of Bahrain. There are about 329,000 Kerinci in the world and about 27,000 in Bahrain. Only around one percent are practicing Christians, surrounded by a predominantly Muslim population. Only portions of the Bible have been translated into the Kerinci language and there is no audio Bible for those who are illiterate. Our brothers and sisters in Bahrain need our prayers. And they need God to raise missionaries because the harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. We should pray for Kerinci people.

In fact, here's another idea. I wonder if there are any of you who would adopt an unreached people group around the world, learn about them, and dedicate the rest of your life to praying for that people group and monitoring their needs and what God does among them. That may take some digging and concerted effort in prayer, but what might happen if you did so? We don't have to wonder. God will reach some from every tribe, tongue, people... Imagine that you dedicated your life to praying for one unreached people group and then one day, in glory, you get to meet people who God saved in response to those prayers. Actual people. Face to face. That's coming. Can you imagine! Maybe some of your Sunday school classes should consider making that a part of your ministry. Pick a people group. Pray for them throughout the life of your class. And in the next life, meet them. Think about it, your class could be the only people in world who dedicated such persistence in prayer for that people group. When you meet them in glory, it will be in response to those prayers. I challenge you. Do some research. Take up the charge as a class. Keep it fresh. See what God does.

Here's a second question...

Does your giving evidence that you see the condition of the lost and the need for more workers?

There's a troubling statistic in a book called *Follow Me*, by David Platt. Did you know that:

"Christians in North America give an average of 2.5 percent of their income to a local church (which I think is probably a generous estimate, but we'll go with it). These local churches then give an average of about 2 percent of those funds to the spread of the gospel overseas. In other words, for every one

hundred dollars that a professing Christian makes in North America, he or she gives five cents through the local church to the rest of the world.”⁸

Do those figures suggest to you that Christians in North America, by and large, really see the crowd like Jesus sees the crowd and feel his compassion for the lost world? Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert write that, “The Bible’s teachings should cut to the heart of North American Christians. By any measure we are the richest people ever to walk on planet Earth.”⁹ We live in a place where our stimulus checks are more than many people around the world have as annual salaries. But those aren’t our resources. Those are the Lord’s. Have we forgotten that? We must have, if those figures are true. What does the way we spend our money reveal about us? Does it give evidence that we see what Jesus sees and feel what Jesus feels? If we can see the plentiful harvest and the need for more workers, what effect will that have on our use of resources. I suspect, for most of us, it will mean we will live simpler than we do and give more sacrificially than we have.

I’m grateful for our church in this respect though. We do give a lot to mission causes. Between the Cooperative Program, the Smith Baptist Association, the Local One, Anchor of Hope, the Mission Offerings, this church gives away well over one hundred thousand to mission related endeavors, not including the many thousands we spend for our own mission efforts. This is good. We don’t need to boast about it, that’s not what it’s about. But it shows that the church as a whole has seen the value in getting financial resources in the hands of those who need it most to further the work of God’s mission. But we could do better. Indeed, in the coming year I would like for us to take a closer look at that through the missions committee to make sure that the money we give is going to that which is most urgent.

The point though is that these stewardship matters are not just individual, they are also corporate. We have to constantly revisit these things as a church to make sure we don’t drift from mission. But so do each of us as individuals. Does our personal stewardship evidence that we see the condition of the lost and the need for more workers? The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few...

There’s more to this progression though that we will consider next time...

Let’s pray...

¹ Another example of this would concern the issue of whether or not God gives the same authority to perform miracles to his followers today.

² S. K. Weber, *Matthew*, HNTC (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers), 130.

³ BDAG (2000), 933.

⁴ Keener, C. S. (1997). *Vol. 1: Matthew*. The IVP New Testament Commentary Series (Mt 9:36). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press. (as cited by Logos Bible Software).

⁵ J. D. Greear, *Just Ask: The Joy of Confident, Bold, Patient, Relentless, Shameless, Dependent, Grateful, Powerful, Expectant Prayer* (The Good Book Company, 2021), 102.

⁶ David Platt, *Follow Me: A Call to Die. A Call to Live* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2013), 195.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Also quoted by Platt (Ibid.). Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert, *When Helping Hurts: How to Alleviate Poverty without Hurting the Poor...and Yourself* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2012), 41.