# "...But the Laborers Are Few" – Matthew 9:35-10:15

Brandon Holiski Southern Oaks Baptist Church November 14, 2021

[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 a Bible and meet me in Matthew 9...

Glad you are here with us today. We are going to continue our look at this text at the pivot of Matthew 9 and 10. It's a text, as we saw last time, that has some features that are unique to this specific expedition that Jesus sent His disciples on, but also some principles that relate to missionary activity more generally that are relevant to our lives and the lives of all Christ followers in history. As with last Sunday, I would like for us to consider the progression that can be isolated in the text and then ask why it matters for our lives. In addition, I would like to ask some questions that arise from the text, but which are often not asked for one reason or another of congregations.

Before we can do any of this, however, we must do the most important thing, and that is getting the text of Scripture in our mind. I'll read the same scope of verses as last week, beginning in chapter 9, verse 35. Please follow along as I read. This is 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." When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. 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.' 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. 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; Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James the son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; Simon the Zealot, and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him. These twelve Jesus sent out, instructing them, 'Go nowhere among the Gentiles and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. And proclaim as you go, saying, "The kingdom of heaven is at hand." Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, cast out demons. You received without paying; give without pay." (Matthew 9:35-10:8)

Last week, I told you that this text unfolds as a five-step progression. We looked at the first two steps last Sunday, beginning with this one...

## The Condition of the Lost Moves Jesus to Compassion

We see this especially in verse 36, where we read...

When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. (Matthew 9:36)

Jesus has compassion on the crowds because He sees the condition of their heart. He sees people who do not know His Father. People dead in their sins and heading for destruction and Hell. They don't see the problem.

They mistake the noose for a scarf. They are oblivious to the danger. Like sheep without a shepherd, they are vulnerable and inevitably harassed.

But where does this compassion lead? It leads, as we saw last week, to a call to pray. In other words,

## The Compassion of Jesus Compels Disciples to Petition

Look at verses 37 and 38 once more...

"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)

Jesus wants His people gathered in from the harvest field that is the lost world, so He tells His followers to pray that God would raise up and send more workers to go to them, like He came to us. He wants them to "fish" for people, as He worded it when He called His first followers, and to dedicate their lives to making disciples, as He commissions at the end of the book. And that commission—that Great Commission as it's called—is actually directed at all His followers.

"Well, pastor, I'm just not an evangelist. I'm not much of a teacher. I'm introverted. I'm an INTP on the Myer's Briggs personality scale. I just don't have that gifting or personality type." I get what you're saying, but Jesus has not exempted you from that call. He didn't say, "Go therefore, all you extroverts, all of you with dynamic communications skills, and all those gifted as evangelists, and make disciples. The rest of you, just hang out. Sing some hymns and wait until I return." No, the Great Commission—a call to make disciples—was issued to all Christ followers. As Rebecca Manley Pippert writes,

"Jesus commands and calls every Christian—from every culture and every nation on earth, regardless of our gifts and personality types—to be his witnesses....Evangelism isn't an activity limited only to clergy, evangelists, and missionaries. Nor is it limited to those who have been Christians for a while. God has given all believers at all times the amazing privilege and continuing challenge of being sent to be his witnesses. And when we witness, we are joining Jesus' whole purpose in coming!"<sup>2</sup>

Your gifts and personality are uniquely suited—and designed—to allow you to connect with certain people that God will bring into your circle of influence. He knows what He is doing. He is sovereign over all of that. You have divine appointments that He has arranged for you to share with others what Jesus has done in your life through His cross and resurrection, and what He can do in theirs by His grace. This is the work of all God's people. No exceptions.

In fact, did you notice what happens immediately after Jesus tells His disciples to pray for more workers? He turns to twelve of the same folks He just told to pray, and He calls, equips, and sets them aside to be part of the answer to their own prayers. The disciples become the very workers they have prayed for. Isn't that funny? The Lord says, "Pray for more workers." His followers pray, "Lord, send more workers." God responds, "Great, I will. Go. I'm sending you." I love that. Look at 10:1—"[Jesus] 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."

## The Petition of Disciples Is Answered with Commission

Now, to be sure these twelve men<sup>3</sup> were commissioned for a special purpose, something that was unique to them. Matthew hints at this in verse 2, where for the first and only time in his book he calls these men "apostles." Apostle just means "one who is sent." But it becomes a technical term for several New Testament writers to refer to specific men who personally had encountered Christ and had been set aside by Christ to

basically lay the foundation for the Church and communicate authoritatively the Word of God without error. That calling is unique to them. We are not "apostles" in that technical sense. I don't believe in apostolic succession the way it is popularly conceived in the Catholic Church, for instance. God stills send people (the verb is *apostello*) and His people are still sent ones (*apostolos*). But "apostle" in this technical sense, which describes the Twelve here (spoiler alert: one of these guys doesn't quite cut it in the end) and men like Matthias and Paul (in Acts), is not something that we can relate to. It's a specific calling. None of us are called to be apostles in the same sense.

Nevertheless, He commissions these twelve disciples to be apostles. He gives them "authority to drive out impure spirits and to heal every disease and sickness" (Matt. 10:1). In other words, the same authority that Jesus has been exercising in his preaching (cf. 7:28-29) and in His miracle working throughout the last several chapters, He delegates to these men so that they can do the same.

And then what does Jesus do? He sends them out. Look at verse 5 and following:

"These twelve Jesus sent out, instructing them, 'Go nowhere among the Gentiles and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. And proclaim as you go, saying, 'The kingdom of heaven is at hand.' Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, cast out demons. You received without paying; give without pay" (Matthew 10:5-8).

# The Commission of God Sends Disciples on Mission

"Mission" or "missions" are terms that get thrown around a lot in churches. They can be a bit tricky to define. I'll spare you all the debate. I like, however, Chris Wright's definition of "mission":

"...our committed participation as God's people, at God's invitation and command, in God's own mission within the history of God's world for the redemption of God's creation."

I like that this is a God-centered definition. And I think the elements of that definition are what we see here in this text—God's people, being invited by God in the flesh, to participate in God's own mission (*missio Dei*..."the Mission of God") to go after God's creation (in this case the shepherdless sheep) with redemptive intentions. And since it is God's mission, God initiates, empowers, directs, and blesses it (which the rest of chapter 10 bears out).<sup>5</sup>

The mission that Jesus sends them on involves specific activities. They were to announce to the people "the kingdom of heaven has come near" (10:7), which is the same "good news [literally, "gospel"] of the kingdom" that they had heard Jesus proclaim (9:35). And they were to carry out the same miracle-working ministry that Jesus had, which gave credence to their message.

But I think we can make one other point from this passage, a point that will play out in the rest of the chapter and the rest of the book. But I want to at least mention it here...

## The Mission by God's Power Is Brought to Fruition

Remember these twelve men have been following Jesus for some time. They didn't just show up at this point of the story. They've been around. It is important, then, for us to see that Jesus is calling them to do the same things He had been doing among them. He is calling them to proclaim the same message He had been proclaiming among them. And the same authority/power that He had exercised and modeled in preaching and miracle working, He now gives them. In other words, God gives them the example they needed, the message

they needed, the method they needed, the authority/power they needed, and everything else they needed to accomplish the task.

And because accomplishing the mission is done in the power of God, then there is nothing that can thwart its ultimate completion. It's going to get done. One way or another, it's going to get done because it is God that gets it done. It's His power, His authority, that is needed, not their skill, education, ingenuity, or resources. He will use them to accomplish His goals, but it will always be God's power that accomplishes them. Thus the ultimate outcome is sure. And God gets all the glory.

Our condition moved Jesus to compassion...Jesus' compassion leads us to pray/petition the Lord for more workers...Those petitions are answered by God commissioning workers...Those commissioned workers are sent on mission...And God's mission is brought to fruition because of His power.

#### So What?

Last time I asked questions about our praying and our giving to get us to reflect on the degree to which each evidence that we see the condition of the lost and the need for people to go to them with the message of Jesus. Today the main applicational question is related...

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

God wants us to pray for more workers. He wants us to give for His mission. But He also wants us to go. God is going to send us into the harvest field too. It's going to happen. If we are following Christ, that is where He's going to lead. He has commissioned us (collectively and individually) to make disciples among the nations, so our life is going to involve missions. It's that simple. It's not a question of *if* God wants to send us to make disciples...it's a question of *where* He wants to send us to make disciples?

And the answer to that—at least in part and for now—is right where He has placed you. What is your sphere? Your family. Your friend groups. Your neighbors. Your coworkers. Your classmates. God has placed you there as salt to awaken a thirst for Christ as you share the story of Jesus and live a life that reflects His own. Those people, for the most part, will never come into this place. An effective mission would not be one that centers on evangelistic appeals ringing forth from pulpits. God knew this. That's why He saves a people and then scatters them among those who are not inclined, at the moment, to be in a place like this. God has sent you to them. That's an effective strategy. And that's been the biblical strategy for the church from the word "go." So you and I need to start looking at those places where God has put us as mission fields.

Do you have that intentionality? Do you see your day through those lenses? You should. And as you do, it will likely call for some changes in your life and routines. The possibilities are endless. Let me give you an example or two. What if you and your family were intentional about frequenting the same restaurants or places of business for the purpose of building relationships with those people which you prayerfully hope will lead to evangelistic opportunities. Yes, maybe that means you will not get to try every restaurant in town, for example, and may even grow tired of the menu. But I think as your life expires, and you are on your deathbed, you would not have traded the conversations about Jesus with that waitress or that woman who paints your toenails for the chance to have sampled more of the eats around town or to have found a better stylist.

Start making choices for missional reasons. Think about how you can do that. That doesn't mean that you're throwing Jesus into every conversation. You are just building relationships, caring for people, tipping well, making it known that you are a Christian, and looking and praying for chances to connect the dots between life and the Gospel of Jesus Christ for people over the course of these natural rhythms of life. That's an idea. Give it some thought. And be creative. Jesus gave us a mandate to make disciples, not a detailed methodology of how

that can play out. The diversity of encounters in the New Testament reflects this. Indeed, the New Testament shows us how any part of life can occasion a missional opportunity, if you are ready and watching.

Parents are you raising your children to have this mentality? Are you bringing up boys and girls to have missional eyes? Do you realize that "God gives children to believers for the furtherance of his mission"?<sup>6</sup>

In other words, it's not just about going on a trip or relocating your life to be a vocational missionary in some foreign country. If God wants you to go to some foreign country to do this, I'm convinced he will make it known to you if you seek Him. It's not like He wants it to be a secret. But wherever He places you, even if that is exactly where you are (in your school, in your home, in your workplace, among your friends and colleagues), I can say with confidence that He wants you to seek first the kingdom there. Wherever He places you, make disciples there. Live like Jesus there. Teach people about Jesus there. Explain to people what Jesus has done for them on the cross there.

Tell them how their sins separate them from God, but they can have their sins removed—fully forgiven—if they would turn from their sins and selves and turn to Jesus to save them. Tell them that Jesus is God's way of salvation and if they trust in Jesus and His work alone, they will be saved, as a free and unearned gift of God's grace. Tell them what Christ has done for you. Tell them the grace He has shown a sinner like you. How He has changed your life and future. Tell them about the salvation that God offers, which can only be found through faith in Christ. You can do that anywhere. Wherever God has placed you, you can do that. You don't have to wonder if God is calling you to do that. He is! So go to them and proclaim "the good news of the kingdom."

But let me ask you this—Have you ever even asked the question, "Is God calling me to pack up my bags and relocate to another country to make disciples there?" "WHOAAA, Pastor, chill out man. Let's not get too carried away here." It's weird, isn't it, that we acknowledge intellectually that God has chosen to send Christians to unreached people around the world, but then we're surprised when He actually calls someone we know, or worse us (oh my!), to do just that. You know what? There is a very real possibility that He might one day be sending some of you to some place you've never even heard of to make much of Him and bring in some of the harvest. Where do you think those missionaries we give to support come from? They come from churches like this.

David Platt, in one of his books, asks a series of thought provoking questions:

"God has given us access in North America to education, training, and skill development in so many different fields—medicine, business, sports, education, engineering—and all are useful in countries around the world. What would happen if disciples of Jesus stopped assuming that the default for where we might live and work is in North America? What if we began to look intentionally for jobs among the nations? What if students in the church began studying specifically for the purpose of getting jobs overseas among unreached peoples? Or what if those same students simply started studying overseas for the explicit purpose of making disciples in unreached areas? Similarly, what if business leaders began strategically looking for avenues to expand their influence among unreached nations? Ultimately, what if followers of Christ started leaving work in places where the most number of Christians live and started looking for work in places where the least number of Christians live?"<sup>7</sup>

I sense the tension in the room. But the reality is that "countries closed to gospel work are open to developments in education, business, sports, and medicine." Your skills and education may seem needed here, but it would be indispensable and irreplaceable there.<sup>8</sup> Now that sort of talk is not going to get you elected in this country. But it just might help you not waste your life.

Of course, I know that some of you started tuning me out when I started to ask, "Is God calling you to pack up your bags and blah, blahh, blahh, blahhh..." You're thinking—"God would never call me to do something like that." But let me ask you this...

Think about it, there is nothing remarkable about the twelve men in our text. You may think, "What are you talking about? Those are the Twelve Disciples. Those guys turned the world upside down. Those guys are among the most famous Christians to ever walk the planet." That's true. That's what they became. But that's not who they are in Matthew 10. In Mathew 10 they're a bunch of nobodies. They're fishermen, and zealots, and tax-collectors like Matthew that everybody hates. They're greedy and power-hungry and egotistical. Some of them, like Peter, had a foot-shaped mouth. They all struggled with doubt at certain points. They'll deny Christ for a season. Abandon Him at His crucifixion. They didn't go to the best schools and graduate at the top of their class. They're not the cream of the crop by any worldly or religious measure. And yet that's who God chose to send to change the world.

Why? Maybe it was to teach us that accomplishing his plan has nothing to do with our own power and ingenuity and creativity and popularity and charisma. But it has everything to do with his power that is at work in his people. You know why they got the job done? Because God got the job done through them. Remember the last point we saw in the progression today? The mission *by God's power* is brought to fruition.

We must not forget that whatever God is calling us to do has nothing to do with our own inadequacies, and everything to do with his complete and total adequacy. He doesn't just call us to fish for men, he says to us "follow me and I will *make* you fishers of men." He doesn't just command us to work out our salvation with fear and trembling, He reminds us in the next verse that it is God who works in us to will and to act in order to fulfill His good purposes. He doesn't send us to save people (we can't save people), He sends us to proclaim the Gospel because the Gospel is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes. And He doesn't just commission us to make disciples of all nations, He promises to always be with us even to the end of the age and He fulfilled that promise by sending his Holy Spirit to indwell us. That's who we need. We need the Spirit. And if we are Christians, we have the Spirit of the living God within us. In other words, we have more than enough to do whatever it is that God may call us to do, wherever it is He calls us to do it.

He is the Lord of the Harvest. Notice the text calls it "his harvest." Sometimes we forget that the success of the mission depends on God's power, not ours. The Corinthians forgot that. They started making much of their leaders and thinking that the fruit of their ministry was owing to them, and this lead to quarreling among their people about who was the better leader. Paul had to remind them that any fruit in ministry comes only from God. Listen to what he wrote to them:

"You are still worldly. For since there is jealousy and quarrelling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere humans? For when one says, "I follow Paul," and another, "I follow Apollos," are you not mere human beings? What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe—as the Lord has assigned to each his task. I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. The one who plants and the one who waters have one purpose, and they will each be rewarded according to their own labor. For we are co-workers in God's service; you are God's field, God's building." (1 Corinthians 3:3-8)

You see, we are thinking worldly when we think God needs our power and abilities and creativity and methods and advice. So, if you're sensing your own inadequacy, I'd say that's a pretty good place to start. If you're thinking, I could never do that on my own, I'd say that's a great disposition to have! It will remind you that whatever God calls us to, we need him to equip us for. It will remind you to rely on God. In fact, as we'll see, the next thing Jesus is going to say to these twelve men in Matthew 10 is designed to show them that they need to depend on Him. And if God so chooses to bring any fruit from our ministry, we must remember that He alone deserves all the glory. All of it. Amen?

All of that to say: at least ask the question. "God where would you have me go to make much of you in this world and draw other people to you with the Gospel?" If that's somewhere across the globe, praise the Lord! If that's right where you are now, praise the Lord! The harvest is plentiful and the workers are few in most places.

So if you have eyes to see and ears to hear, pray for workers. And get to work. "Freely you have received; freely give."

May we be a church that always prioritizes "sending capacity" to "seating capacity." May we be a church that values ministries with centrifugal force, not just centripetal force. As Jared C. Wilson explains,

"An excellently run attractional church has centripetal force, ever drawing people to the center. A gospel-centered missional church has centrifugal force, where people brought into orbit around the gospel are sent out into the world on mission in response to the explosively glorious power of grace." <sup>10</sup>

The church is to be a sending agent...God's primary sending agent in fact.<sup>11</sup>

Last week we talked about unreached people groups. I told you that there are somewhere in the neighborhood of six thousand unreached people groups in the world. That's a lot. And less than 5% of vocational missionaries head to these places. These places, by most definitions, have an Evangelical Christian population of less than 2%, which means that most people in these groups, unless something changes, will live the entirety of their lives without ever hearing the true Gospel.

But there is encouraging news. According to the previous SBC president, J. D. Greear,

"[W]hen Paul died, there were 12 UPGs [unreached people groups] for every one church; now there are 6413 churches for every one UPG. There are 60 U.S. churches alone for everyone UPG. That means if just one out of every 60 U.S. churches took responsibility to bring the gospel to a UPG, every tribe and tongue would receive a witness to Christ's name in our generation (and that's not even to factor in the impressive work being done among the UPGs by believers in other nations). God has placed the completion of this assignment in our grasp." 12

Of course, there are other factors in play than our willingness and activity. But if God wants it, this is within reach. But He's going to accomplish it through churches that get serious about making disciples and get serious about sending their people...to their community and beyond. Will that be us? Will that be our legacy?

The words of Mordecai to Esther seem fitting,

"For if you keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance will rise...from another place, but you and your father's house will perish. And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?" (Esther 4:14)

I'll be your Mordecai. Every pastor should be a Mordecai. Brothers and sisters, this is the task. Will you faithfully live your life for the glory of God and the good of the nations by sharing the good news about Jesus indiscriminately whenever God gives you opportunity, wherever God has placed you, and wherever God chooses to send you? If you will not, then God's going to still accomplish His mission. But you will perish. You will miss out on a life well spent and no one wants to waste their life. But who knows whether you have come to this moment and place for such a time as this? It's time to get laser focused. It's time to make disciples. It's time to give it your all. As Jim Elliot, who lost his life on the mission field, was right: "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose."

Let's pray...

- <sup>5</sup> For these twelve men, in this instance, they are sent on a very specific mission. They are only to go to Israelites. That may strike us as odd. Why only Israel? Well, the text doesn't say. But I think there are at least two reasons—one theological and one practical (isn't it nice that those two go together?). The theological reason has to do with the covenant that God had made with Abraham and his descendants, the people of Israel. So for the sake of his covenant and his great love for his people, Israel, God sends out these apostles to the Jews first (this "to the Jew first" theme is picked up elsewhere in the New Testament, e.g. Romans). But there is also a practical reason for going to the Israelites first. We learn in the New Testament (especially in Luke) that many of the godly people of Israel were waiting for the Messiah to come. If you have ever heard of Simeon and Anna, those are good examples. So yes, the church will spread to the Gentiles and yes it will include representatives from every people group in time, but what better place to start than with the people who knew and embraced the Old Testament and, in many cases, were actually waiting for the Messiah to come? So Jesus sends them first to their own people. J. Ligon Duncan makes a similar point in a sermon called "Go and Preach," which can be found here: http://www.fpcjackson.org/resources/sermons/matthew/matthew vol 3-4/21bMatt.htm.
  - <sup>6</sup> J. D. Greear, Gaining by Losing: Why the Future Belongs to Churches that Send (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), 206.
  - <sup>7</sup> David Platt, Follow Me: A Call to Die. A Call to Live (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2013), 196-197.
  - <sup>8</sup> Greear, Gaining by Losing, 202-203, 208.
  - <sup>9</sup> J. R. Briggs and Bob Hyatt, *Ministry Mantras* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2016), 135.
- <sup>10</sup> Jared C. Wilson, *The Gospel Driven Church: Uniting Church-Growth Dreams with the Metrics of Grace* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2019), 162.
- And the church is to be an evangelistic agent. Now I want to be careful here, because I think sometime Christians mistake evangelism for inviting people to church. That's not evangelism. Evangelism is about sharing the evangel...the Gospel...the news about what Jesus did to save sinners like us... That said, the church is important for our evangelism. We should use the church. Mark Dever, in a book called *The Gospel and Personal Evangelism*, explains, "By 'use the church,' I mean invite the person to whom you're witnessing to the church at which you're a member or to some other gospel-preaching church. But by saying 'use the church,' I also mean so much more than that. Realize that how the Christian life is lived out in the Christian community is a central part of our evangelism....our lives are to give our words credibility. Not that any of us can live perfectly, but we can live lives that commend the gospel. Remember Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount: 'Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven' (Matt. 5:16; cf. 1 Pet. 2:12).Remember Jesus' statement in John13:34-35: 'A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.'....Evangelism should include our way of living and our way of living together in the new society that is the local church." (Mark Dever, *The Gospel and Personal Evangelism* [Wheaton: Crossway, 2007], 66-67).

<sup>12</sup> Greear, Gaining by Losing, 203-204.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Rebecca Manley Pippert, *Stay Salt: The World Has Changed, Our Message Must Not* (The Good Book Company, 2020), 172.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Ibid., 172-174.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> The number 12 is significant as you might imagine. Just as God chose 12 brothers to lay the foundation for his people in the Old Testament, now he appoints 12 men through whom he will lay the foundation of his people, the Church. Spoiler alert: I know Judas throws a wrench in all this later, but there's an Acts 1 for that. The point we need to see here is immediately after he tells them to pray for workers, he commissions the 12 to be workers.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2006), 22-23.