

“Following Jesus into Missions”
Matthew 9:35-10:4
February 4, 2018

INTRODUCTION:

This is an appropriate passage for us to look at one week before our annual missions conference. While we are more familiar with the Great Commission with which Matthew concludes his Gospel, this passage is of similar importance in addressing the church’s missionary identity. If verse 35 sounds familiar to you, it’s because it is the second time Matthew has written virtually the same thing. **“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.”** That same verse appeared back in chapter 4 as an introduction to the ministry of Jesus. Chapters 5-7 give an example of Jesus’ teaching and preaching, while chapters 8-9 provide a sampling of his healing ministry. Why does he now repeat that verse?

Matthew’s point in repeating that verse is that Jesus’ work is going to continue, but it is now going to be done also by his apostles. Jesus has come to restore what has been broken by the fall, a goal he pursues through teaching, preaching and healing. It becomes clear with this passage that Jesus intends the Church to continue this massive undertaking of restoration. We are continuing it even today, and that is the heart of missions. Jesus is the great Missionary, and we are called to follow him into this work.

I. Missionary Motive

Our motive for missions flows from the heart of Jesus. **“When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd”** (9:36). Jesus had compassion, a word that means literally to feel something in your gut. Jesus sees the crowds as those who are suffering for lack of a shepherd. They are like a flock of sheep who are open to any predator that might come along. The word “harassed” means literally “flayed.” Their skin has been ripped away, exposing raw flesh. And now they are helpless, a word that means literally to be thrown down. In a word, Matthew is saying that Jesus viewed these crowds as if they were sheep after the lion has attacked, lying helpless and bleeding on the ground.

This suggests the need to increase our vocabulary in the way we speak of those who are not believers in Christ. Some of the common language used to describe the difference between those who believe in Jesus and those who do not is to speak of sinners or saints, saved or unsaved, Christians or non-Christians, and churching or unchurching. There is nothing wrong with any of

those words, and each one has a place in communicating some truth about the gospel. Perhaps another set of terms suggested by this verse could be considered. It would be right to speak of the vulnerable or the invulnerable. Those without Jesus are like sheep without a shepherd, vulnerable to attack from predators. Those who know Jesus are completely safe in every way.

Such a perspective ought to give us compassion just as it did Jesus. People apart from Christ are vulnerable to attack from the main three enemies the Bible says we have: the world, the flesh (our sinful nature) and the devil. None of us are strong enough to defend ourselves against these powerful forces. There is a fable told about a scorpion and a frog. When the scorpion asks the frog to let it ride across the river on the frog's back, the frog asks, "How do I know you won't sting me?" The scorpion replies, "Because if I do, I will die too." Satisfied, the frog agrees to ferry the scorpion across. In the middle of the river, the scorpion stings the frog. As the poison is taking effect, the frog asks just before dying, "Why?" The scorpion replies, "It's just my nature." We are not unlike that scorpion, with a sinful nature that leads us to act in ways that are self-destructive.

Think about a person you would consider to be as far from Christ as possible. I'm thinking of someone I've invited to church, even though he's shown zero interest in spiritual things. He declined my invitation. Can you see that person you're thinking of as one who is, spiritually speaking, lying bleeding on the ground after having been victimized by a powerful predator? That doesn't mean that this person has no guilt. But it does mean that this guilt and their sinful nature are a type of monster within that no one but Jesus can tame. And, I might add, the only difference between you and that person is that by Jesus' mercy you have come under the protection of your good Shepherd, Jesus. Believing this fills our hearts with the compassion of Jesus.

II. Missionary Prayer

Jesus' compassion for these harassed and helpless sheep leads him to action, though it's not the action we might expect. He turns to his disciples and, changing the metaphor from shepherding to farming says, **"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."** As Jesus sees things, the problem is not lack of opportunity to rescue these suffering sheep. The harvest is in fact plentiful. The problem is the lack of workers.

I like this word "worker" because it's such a humble word. What the kingdom of God needs in order to bring in the abundant harvest is just common laborers. We often think that what the church really needs in order to move forward is more talented leadership. I read something the other day that stuck with me. Someone said, "Hell is full of the talented, heaven of the

energetic.” I realize this is something of an exaggeration and that there are many very talented people in God’s kingdom. I praise God for the Tim Kellers and John Pipers of the Church, extraordinarily talented men. But in general, we are simply humble laborers, assigned a certain place in God’s harvest field.

I think sometimes we neglect the work of outreach because we are looking beyond the field God has assigned to us and therefore see it as a job way too big for us. In a sermon the apostle Paul preached in Athens, he said that God **“made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, that they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel their way toward him and find him”** (Acts 17:26-27). God has orchestrated where you live, and where your neighbors live, and his purpose is that people should seek God. You are a worker in God’s harvest field, and God himself has assigned you the specific place in that field where you are to work. What’s more, God has also done the majority of the work, just as the majority of work with any crop is what happens prior to harvest time.

But there are a good many workers who are not working, and Jesus has a solution for that. We are to **“pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.”** He doesn’t say, “the harvest is abundant and workers are few, so go.” No, he says, “Pray to the Lord of the harvest.” The source of mission from our perspective is prayer. We can see that too in the fact that missions in the book of Acts stems from the church praying. I want to thank the many in our church who labor in this ministry of prayer. And I want to ask all of you to pray earnestly as Jesus has directed us here. Pray that Jesus would make you a faithful worker in the part of the field he has assigned to you. You might start in that by simply learning the names of your neighbors and praying for them.

III. Missionary Workers

The first four verses of chapter 10 develop this theme of workers in the harvest field as Jesus organizes his disciples as the first of a wave of workers to come. I notice two things about these workers. First, these workers are gifted and scattered. As we saw in the previous verse, Jesus sends out and scatters workers. But we see here that he doesn’t send them out empty-handed, but gives them gifts. He **“gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal every disease and every affliction”** (10:1). That is the precise language used in 9:35 of the work Jesus was doing. Just as Jesus healed every disease and every affliction, now his disciples are given authority to do the same. Clearly, these are miraculous gifts. How should we think about this? Should we expect God still to give such miraculous gifts? I find it helpful to note that at the end of Matthew’s Gospel, when he gives the Great Commission, he says nothing about miraculous gifts. There, Jesus says that

he, Jesus, has all authority, and in that authority commands us to disciple, baptize and teach. Paul told the church at Corinth that there were gifts of healing, but not all possessed them. And even the great apostle himself speaks of a time in his life when he sought healing but didn't receive it (2 Cor. 12).

I like the way Frederick Bruner expresses the way Jesus has gifted the church for the work of missions.

According to the Great Commission at the end of Matthew, the teaching Word gets unrivaled presidency in the church, and the sacraments (which are acted or physical Word) get vice-presidency. But there can be no extended exposure to this Gospel's Word without discovering that it is a Word of unusual concern for people's *bodies*. Jesus did not give the lepers tracts or the blind sermons: he gave them cleansing and sight."

You may not have miraculous gifts of healing or casting out demons (I think very few do), but the Bible says you do have gifts entrusted to you by Jesus for the purpose of missions and outreach. They may be gifts related to the preaching and teaching ministry of the church, or gifts related to the deed ministry of the church. Our need is to recognize the gifts Jesus has given to us and to put those to use in this great work of partnering with Jesus for the renewal of the earth. It may be a simple gift of making meals for others at needy times in their life. It may be the gift of administration or of encouraging others. Jesus has given these gifts in accordance with his sovereign wisdom.

Workers are not only sent out with the gifts bestowed by Jesus, but also gathered as a diverse group. Note that Jesus called twelve disciples. The number twelve is without question an allusion to the twelve tribes of Israel. Jesus is both completing God's design for Israel and establishing a new Israel in the Church. The names of these twelve are mentioned, and several things stand out to me, all of which speak of the nature of the church.

The first thing I notice is that little is known about most of them, nothing in some cases. Similarly, the church is made up of nobodies who end up changing the world. We are like Gideon's unremarkable army who ended up routing the mighty Midianite army.

The second thing I notice is that even the ones of whom we do know something, the record is not always the most impressive. Peter had some great moments, but he also had some rather remarkable shortcomings. He was first in both faith and failure. He was both the rock and the denier of Jesus. In a sense, that is the case with us all. We are to be known both for our faith and our failure. It's not that we have to try to be noted for our failures—that just happens. We're just honest about them. But we can also be first in faith, resting on the great grace of Jesus. The last man in the list is one we know some things about too. Judas was the one who betrayed Jesus, the one whose

faith was false. Such is the church. Even our best are deeply flawed and our worst are living a complete lie. It has been that way from the beginning and so it will be until Jesus returns.

A third thing I notice is the diversity of this group. Simon the Zealot would have been the left-wing radical among them. But also present was the right wing conservative Matthew, the tax-collector. If we as a church can't rise above politically divisive Facebook conversations, then we are in trouble. If Democrats and Republicans can't get along in the church, we have a problem. Having political diversity in our church is a good thing, as long as we hold fast to our unity in Christ.

When Wendy and I lived in Philadelphia, I was on staff at a church with some significant diversity, both political and economic. One of our friends at that church owned his own advertising company, and he told us of a time when he and his wife were entertaining a client and his wife one evening. After dining at a nice French restaurant, they were walking down the sidewalk when my friend's client saw a homeless man with his head inside a large trashcan and his feet waving in the air. The client remarked on how disgusting he found that. As they approached the homeless man, he popped his head out of the trash can, saw my friend and his wife and greeted them both. "Oh, hello Steven; hello Elizabeth." After they walked a few more steps, the client asked, "You know that guy?" "Yeah, his name is Albert, and he goes to my church." The church worked with quite a number of the homeless in an attempt to help get them off the street, with some cases being more successful than others. But the remarkable thing to me was the great diversity seen in the church. That is the work of Jesus, seen right here at the beginning with these twelve. I see some of that great diversity here too. It is from Jesus, designed to showcase his beauty in the unity he brings. You see, it's a false choice to be told that you either work inside the church in boring church programs or you get out and do the real front-line work of the church in missions. To work to strengthen the church is to work in missions.

CONCLUSION:

It is remarkable to me that Jesus uses people like you and me to accomplish such an important task as the one he has called us to. He is restoring what is broken through the ministry of his church. We are the outpost of the coming kingdom of Christ. Would you apply this by asking yourself which of these three areas stand most in need of work in your life? Perhaps you need to ask Jesus to give you his heart of compassion for those apart from him. Or maybe you need to pray that he would send forth laborers into his harvest field, starting with you. Or perhaps you need to upgrade the value you assign to the church.