

Workers and harvesting

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Preacher: David Calderwood

[0 : 0 0] We're going to read from Matthew 9, verse 35, all the way through to Matthew 10, verse 16. And Jesus went throughout all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues 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. 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 Thaddeus. 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.

[1 : 2 0] 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.

Acquire no gold or silver or copper for your belts, no bag for your journey, or two tunics or sandals or a staff, for the laborer deserves his food. In whatever town or village you enter, find out who is worthy in it and stay there until you depart.

As you enter the house, greet it. And if the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it. But if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you. And if anyone will not receive you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet when you leave the house or town.

Truly I say to you, it will be more bearable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah than for that town. Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves. So be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. Well, it was a long time ago, a different life really, but I well remember harvest time on the farm growing up and then in a later life working for a seed breeding company, a wheat breeding company.

[2 : 3 6] Harvest always brought mixed emotions. On the one hand, it was incredibly exciting because harvest was the end for which you worked all year. That's what you did, that was what you had in mind when you were doing the plowing, when you were planting, when you were spraying, when you were watering, and when you were waiting nervously for the crop to come ready.

So harvest time was the culmination of a whole year's worth of work, or at least a good part of the year's worth of work. But it always brought that mixed emotion. It was a high energy time.

Harvest meant all that work had been worthwhile. But as I say, it was a mixed emotion because it was also a daunting time. Hot summer days, hard, heavy, dangerous work because it was all with machines.

Long hours, because there's lots to do, and it just never quite seemed as if there was enough helpers to actually do it. And sometimes harvest was just purely heartbreaking.

It might be one of those harvests this year. You finally get a good crop, there's a good price, and then the weather beats you. So that's harvesting, a real mix of emotions.

[3 : 5 2] Well, in verses 37 and 38 of the passage before this morning, Jesus changes his language to describe his mission, and he starts to use the language of harvesting. But before we get into the details, and both the exciting and the daunting aspects of this harvest of Jesus, I want to remind you again of the bigger context, which I think helps us understand these verses properly.

The bigger context is Jesus' authority and priority in his mission. Matthew himself reminds us again in chapter 9, verse 35. 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.

Now that's one of those word brackets that I've spoken about before. And it pushes us right back to chapter 4 in verses 14 to 17, where Jesus begins his ministry.

And from that very point, Jesus presents himself as Messiah. That is, the Old Testament promised king and savior. The one who would come to reestablish the kingdom or rule of God.

And Matthew in chapters 4 to 9 emphasizes Jesus' authority and priority in mission. And he does that by using these bookend verses, these bracket verses.

[5 : 19] So chapter 4, verse 23, you'll see, is almost an identical verse to chapter 9, verse 35. It talks about Jesus' mission as proclaiming, teaching, and healing.

He would proclaim the good news of Messiah's arrival. He would teach what the kingdom rule would look like. And in line with Isaiah's prediction, he would heal every disease and illness among the people.

And that, if you go back and read through Isaiah, was a very particular thing because that event, those happenings, Isaiah said, they would mark the arrival of Messiah and the age of salvation, the long-promised age of salvation.

So Jesus does that as a sense to tell us that that which Isaiah predicted has now come. But it also illustrates his authority and priority in undoing the effects of sin and restoring God's image bearers to the character of God and to relationship with God.

So chapter 9, verse 35, brings that first section of 49 to a close, but also then links into the next section, which we're going to look at over the next three weeks, which runs through to the end of chapter 10, a section in which Jesus details by another sermon.

[6 : 45] So we've had the Sermon on the Mount in the first section. Now we're going to get the Sermon on Mission in this section through to the end of verse 10. And again, Jesus is developing his authority and priority in mission in a different way, using different language, different pictures.

And he now describes, as I said before, his mission in terms of harvesting and shepherding in verse 36. Now, harvesting and shepherding, both metaphors, and they are metaphors, they're picture words, both are used in the Old Testament by the prophets.

And again, each of them describes the coming age of salvation and the mission of Messiah or Jesus. And Jesus used them as the basis, as I said, of another sermon, teaching how his mission of kingdom building would actually develop and happen, how it would work out in practice.

And here's the first of the big points in this new section. And it's a bit confronting, really, but we'll dig into it over the next three weeks. His disciples would share in the mission of Messiah.

His disciples would actually share in his mission of proclaiming, teaching, and we'll have a look in a minute of healing. And that, we'll come back to that healing a bit.

[8 : 13] So Isaiah 52 and Ezekiel 34 are the two chapters predominantly that lie behind these verses. And those two chapters picture the joy of God's salvation coming to God's people.

And it's a familiar verse that Paul also uses in Romans chapter 10, talking about the same sort of thing. And the verse says, How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him, or those who bring good news of happiness, who publish salvation, who say to Zion, Your God reigns.

The Old Testament prophets envisaged this time of salvation when people would, with Messiah, proclaim God as Savior and King. And Ezekiel 34 pictures the day when God will replace false shepherds who abused God's people.

And I think that's a reference here back to verse 34, the Jewish religious leaders. Ezekiel 34 contrasts the false shepherds that abuse and harass God's people and were self-interested, were caring for themselves rather than God's people, with the true shepherd, the Messiah, who would come to rescue his sheep and point them back to his grace and mercy.

And so, I want to stop here and press upon you the principle again that we'll dig into over the next three weeks. That is, Jesus invites his followers, his disciples, that is, you and me, if you're a Christian this morning, Jesus invites his followers, or his disciples, to share in the mission of Messiah.

[10 : 00] To share in that kingdom-building mission. It's quite an incredible thought, really, when you think about it. And that means both harvesting and shepherding or caring for God's people.

Not only does Jesus invite you, it's actually stronger than that in these verses. Jesus expects you, as a believer, to share in his rescue mission.

How will you do that? We'll see in more detail, but at this point, how do you do it? By imitating what Jesus does. Follow the leader. Proclaiming the good news.

Teaching what the kingdom of God looks like. And we'll see in a minute how the healing fits in. So, friends, it's an incredible privilege that's on show here.

That we should be brought in to that very, very fundamental, important mission of Messiah. An incredible privilege, but it's also a great responsibility.

[11:08] And so, like the harvest I remember as a young bloke, it's both exciting and daunting. So, the question I want to spend the rest of the morning on this morning is, what will motivate you and me, then, to throw ourselves into this hard work?

The hard work of harvesting and the hard work of shepherding. Well, I've got four points.

You'll see them on the outline if you've got it in front of you there. The first one is that seeing people with the compassion and love of Jesus. It's an attitude to start with. Now, given the events of chapters 8 and 9, which I've been looking at over the last four weeks, I think we could really easily understand Jesus feeling a real sense of frustration.

He hasn't been recognized like he should have been recognized. Or perhaps even resentment.

He's been used by the crowd as just a very nice Mr. Fix-It.

But people haven't really wanted to worship him as God. Or maybe even anger. He's been bad-mouthed by the Jewish religious leaders.

[12:30] They, of all people, should have recognized him and been his strongest supporters. It's not frustration, resentment, or anger that we see in Jesus when he looks at the crowds.

Verse 36. It's compassion. When he looked at the crowds, he had compassion for them. Why?

Because they were harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd.

Jesus looks at the crowd and he sees people individually and corporately as a group. People who are lost. And if you know anything in farming and sheep management, what you have with sheep herd is you've got a whole big number of sheep and they're all very, very happily going together as long as they're together.

But not one of them know where they're going. Not one of them actually know where they are.

They're just all going together and there's some security in that. And that's what Jesus sees. This massive crowd in front of them.

They're all sort of finding some security in being in that crowd together, but Jesus sees that none of them really know where they're going. None of them know who they are. They're just following each other blindly, hoping that the person of the sheep next to them knows where they're going.

[13:58] My friends, what a sad picture of despair and aimlessness in life. And Jesus looks at this crowd and he knows their need for rescue.

He knows they need to be delivered from their own foolish thinking. Determined thinking, no doubt.

They need rescued from their lifestyle that they may think is quite successful.

They need rescue. They need redirection, new direction and purpose in life. So friends, the first point of challenge for you this morning is, is that how you see people?

Every day we rub shoulders with lots of different people, don't we? Neighbors, wider family, workmates, sportsmates that we play sport with, just down the shops as we go around our daily business.

Neighbors, I mean there's a whole list of people that just on a daily basis we rub shoulders with.

How do you see them? Do you look past the veneer?

[15:21] Are you moved by their lostness? Now I'm talking about people who might present really, really nicely. Most of our friends and families and workmates do.

But are you moved by their lostness because you see past what you're seeing and you see them chasing security and meaning and purpose in endless entertainment, in fads of fashion, in the latest gadgets, in the latest relationship and so on the list could go.

Do you delight to tell them of the rescue and the new life that you've experienced in Jesus? Or are you simply happy to engage with them at face value?

as one nice person to another nice person? And if we do that, you know what it means?

It means that we privately enjoy and delight in the benefits of our salvation in Jesus and don't really care too much about those we mix with.

[16:44] That's a harsh way of putting it but I guess when you take all the frills away, that's what it boils down to. Second point then is the second motivation is to see my part in meeting this need.

How does Jesus intend us to share or get involved in his mission of harvesting or saving people from their lostness? Well, it's very interesting verse, verse 38.

Praying, by praying. Now, I don't know about you but that seemed to me to be a strange strategy. See, I'm an activist. I look and think there's so much to do, so few people to do it.

Let's get cracking, let's get mobile. What does Jesus say? He said, yeah, there is a lot to do, very few people to do it, so let's pray.

Let's pray. Pray urgently that the Lord of the harvest will send out laborers into his harvest. Now, we might have expected directions to employ expert evangelists with specialized theological training because this work of harvesting is a specialized gig.

[18:01] Or we might have expected directions to plan all sorts of evangelistic events, all sorts of church-sponsored events, formal events, appeals to raise funds for these sort of things. Now, no doubt these things have their place, but the first and most urgent part of mission is always going to be prayer.

Why? Because harvesting is a spiritual work and it requires spiritual weapons. See, salvation or bringing somebody into the kingdom from darkness into light, it requires a complete reformatting of a person from the inside out.

Total change. And of course, once we see that, then we know that we can't do it. I can't change a single attitude in somebody else. Only the Lord of the harvest can do that.

So we pray. But as well as praying, we get on with the ordinary business of gossiping the gospel.

Harvesting's a two-sided coin. We pray and we get on with the job of telling people the gospel.

That's what Jesus did. That's our job. That's our brief. And then as we move into chapter 10, we see that in this early stage of Jesus' mission, it's the band of 12 whom he commissions for a short-term mission into surrounding Jews' villages and homes in Galilee.

[19:42] But as we look across the whole spectrum of Mark's record of the life of Jesus, by the time we get to the end, we see that things have changed. And after the resurrection, it's clear that the principle is that all Christ's people are to be involved in proclaiming the good news of the gospel.

So therefore, my friends, what it means is this, again, come back to that principle. Being a disciple is what qualifies and mandates you to be involved in mission.

Simply by being a Christian, you're expected and invited to be involved in the mission of Messiah.

And that's a really important thing to grasp because, you see, confidence for success in this mission of harvesting is not in the ability or the qualifications necessarily, educational or otherwise, of the laborers.

Confidence for success lies with the Lord of the harvest. harvest. What a ragtag bunch Jesus commissions here for the work of harvest.

Most were fishermen. We know from other parts of the scriptures that they were uneducated, some of them uncouth, and all of them are not ordinary.

[21:23] Then in the middle of the list, you've got Matthew. He comes along unable to shake his reputation as a despicable man in a past life, a tax collector.

And blow me down, you've got Judas, a disciple at this point, who later was seen to lose his way in a really, really awful way. Yet he's included.

I tell you, it's a ragtag bunch. And they're the ones commissioned as the forerunners and therefore the model for all of us here this morning to proclaim the gospel, to teach.

And there's something really lovely about that, isn't there? Because as Jesus invites us and expects us to be involved in his mission, so he's also telling us that the outcome doesn't rest on us alone.

We're given the job of gossiping the gospel. He's the Lord of the harvest. He'll do what only he can do if we'll do what he asks us to do. Our confidence for mission is not our abilities.

[22:38] It's not our eloquence. It's not even the depth of our understanding of scriptures as a whole. It's in the Lord of the harvest supernaturally using the words that we speak as we're rubbing shoulders with people in a myriad of opportunities every single day.

So my friends, second challenge this morning. Are you praying this dangerous prayer?

Have you been praying this dangerous prayer? And it is a dangerous prayer. Are you praying that the Lord might cause you to overflow with compassion such that you're compelled when you bump shoulders with myriad people every day that you're compelled as you see their lostness to speak

the words of life?

Amen. Amen. Are you praying that the Lord of the harvest might change those that you see regularly in all sorts of circumstances?

Are you praying that the Lord of the harvest might go before you so that the words you speak might be made effective in their lives? The Lord of the harvest might actually change their hearts and renew their minds.

[24 : 16] And I think we've got to ask this as a church. Is this what we're known for as a church family? Is this a priority?

Is this an urgency for us? Or have we just settled into a nice comfortable club? If we're not praying, if you're not praying individually and if we're not praying as a church family together, if we're not doing that, if we're not taking the opportunities in everyday life, and my friend, I'm telling you, there's opportunities every time you engage with a person.

We're not talking formal evangelistic opportunities, as sometimes I think we set it up so we can actually say, well, this isn't the right time. So we sort of set it up in a way that we can excuse ourselves.

No, this is just gossiping the gospel. This is just overflowing. As we engage in any sort of conversation, the lostness and the hopelessness comes out really quickly.

People pin their hopes in this and frame their lives by that. It's a wonderful opportunity, many, many times, just for those few words. words of life.

[25 : 40] So if we're not praying, it seems to me there's only limited options. Perhaps we're not praying those prayers because we're actually caught up in the lifestyle that I'm talking about here, and therefore, in a sense, drawn to that lifestyle ourselves, rather than seeing it as a statement of lostness.

or if it's not that, then if we're not praying, that's perhaps we think that their lostness might be addressed in some other way apart from salvation in Jesus.

Jesus. There aren't too many more options I could come up with. Third point of confidence and motivation for us is having confidence then in the tools that Christ provides.

Jesus sends out this ragtag bunch of disciples on a mission which, humanly speaking, is impossible. But the key here is that he sends them out with his full authority.

And that means they've got all the tools they need to do the job he asked them to do. What are those tools? Well, they have the simple message, verse 7.

[27 : 00] The kingdom of heaven is at hand. Now, we can fill that out a little bit more, but there's essentially the message, the simple message that Jesus had come to save his people from their sin and establish the long awaited rule of God.

He'd come to rescue people from lostness and give them meaning and purpose in life. And they delegated authority of Jesus to add weight to their words.

Now, this is where I'm going to touch down again on this notion of healing. Can we expect this healing, ordinarily, to be part of our gospel ministry and gospel mission?

Well, if you look at verse 1 and verse 8, we pick up the notion of those two verses. And clearly, Jesus gives them the ability to heal, including raising the dead.

This is extreme power he's given these guys. What are we to make of it? well, at this point, their ability to heal in the extremity is tied with their authority.

[28 : 12] It was given them as a point of authority, a confirmation that they were ambassadors of Jesus, ambassadors of Messiah, engaged in exactly the same work as Messiah was engaged in.

Now, that this power was a special feature for a special time, limited, and not an enduring principle, becomes clear by the end of Matthew's record.

By the end of Matthew's record, we move to what's called the Great Commission in Matthew chapter 28. And when Jesus gives that Great Commission, we find that the delegated authority of Jesus, now resides in his word, in his written word.

And there's no longer a mention of healing at that point. And so, from there, we can say the delegated authority and power of Jesus to believers today, where Jesus says, lo, I'll be with you always, is in his written word, what we call the Bible.

It is that word which is powerful to save as the Holy Spirit takes that word and applies it to the hearts of those we speak to. And finally, the final tool, the weapon for the disciples, was the tool of radically changed lives.

[29 : 43] Now, this is my attempt to deal with verses 8 and 9, or 8b, 9 and 10. This strange travel log direction, not to take any extra stuff with you.

So, folk have labored over these verses for years looking for some sort of deep, significant meeting. I think the point might be rather simple. I think it might come from the passages in Isaiah I've just referred to earlier on, Isaiah 52 particularly.

That is, it's aligned with what Isaiah predicted as a mark of the edge of God's outpouring of grace and salvation. And back then, in Isaiah's day, he said that the mark of that would be that you receive God's salvation as a free gift and you hand it on as a free gift.

That's the essence of how God deals with people, in grace. And so I think this here is just a confirmation again, or a direction again, that the approach of the disciples on mission was to reflect the grace of the gospel as they had experienced it.

the changing power of Jesus is free, and Jesus wanted to be clear that it was the gospel message which motivated these guys to be on mission, and not the idea of personal benefit or gain.

[31 : 08] In the day, there were a lot of traveling rabbis, and they were like sort of theological buskers. They would go around the neighborhood, and quite literally, they would present themselves in splendor to attract the crowd, and then they literally would sell their wisdom.

Jesus doesn't want his disciples to be even close to that. So, friends, the question again now is then, are you confident in the tools provided?

See, this is how it works. we might understand the invitation and expectation to be involved in the mission of Jesus, and then we start to say, well, heck, I can't do that.

Well, you can do it if you get confidence in the tools that Jesus provided you with. Words of grace, words of salvation for the worst of sinners.

the words are here. We just have to share them. We don't have to make them up. We just share them. The awesome power of the Holy Spirit behind those words, making them real in the hearts of the people to whom we speak.

[32 : 35] We don't even have to make the words impact. We just have to state them clearly, and the Holy Spirit will look after that aspect of things. things. And all that reinforced with the compelling evidence and witness and testimony of changed lives.

And believe you me, my friends, that is a compelling witness. People in our society today are actually asking the question, does it work? That's what they want to know in anything of life.

Does it work? The radically changed life is a compelling addition to the words we speak, and a necessary addition to the words we speak, or a compliment, rather than an addition to the words we speak.

I think, again, perhaps the real problem that keeps many of us from throwing ourselves into harvest is that we have lost confidence in the tools provided. These tools don't look or sound impressive. especially given the enormity of the task. But that pushes me to my last point of motivation, and that is understanding the success of harvest is guaranteed.

[33 : 59] So in the last few verses, Jesus doesn't hide the fact that just as opposition to him was becoming more frequent and more vicious, so his harvesters would experience the similar sort of things.

And so I think Jesus here gives a perspective to get his mission workers through these tough times. Verses 11 through to 15 has this strange thing about going into somebody's house, and then if they don't respond, then just walk away.

then I think what's happening here is a picture of what they were familiar with in the day, symbolically. So Jesus is saying, okay, if you take the words of the gospel to a particular house, a particular village, a particular person, and they aren't interested in Jesus ultimately, then you should leave and symbolically shake the dust of that home or city off your feet.

Now, again, there was a common religious practice among the Pharisees and Orthodox Jews. When they returned to Israel, they quite literally would shake the dust from their feet and their clothes.

And it was a symbol of leaving behind everything that was defiled and unclean and Gentile, everything that was opposed to God, in other words. I think what Matthew's saying here, what Jesus is saying here through Matthew is that he's taking that same symbol and applying it a slightly different way.

[35 : 39] If you go into a house or speak to a person or a village and they refuse Jesus, the words of Jesus, then symbolically leave, symbolically shaking off the dust of that village from you.

In other words, Jesus is saying, warn them that rejecting the words of Jesus, rejecting the ambassador of Jesus, is the same as rejecting Jesus himself.

So, out of all that, what's the perspective we should hang on to as harvesters? Well, I think what Jesus is saying here is, we must be content to do what Jesus has asked us to do and let God do what only he can do.

We, practically that means we plead with people as much as possible. We plead with them to hear the offer of salvation in Jesus. We even go as far as to warn them if they're totally disinterested and dismissing the offer of salvation in Jesus.

But then, having done all that, which is all we're asked to do, then we leave it to Jesus. We walk away in a sense and we leave it to Jesus. We leave it to the Lord of the harvest to do what only he can do and that is either apply our words savingly into their lives or leave those people in their unbelief.

[37 : 09] And that's, again, a wonderful relief for us. It's not our responsibility to get conversions. It's our responsibility to speak the word.

And when we've done that as best we can, then we should be relaxed and, in sense, walk away from the situation and let God do with that word what only he can do with it.

And verse 16, I'm just going to touch down on because it belongs to next week's section, but it sort of links. Jesus anticipates it's going to be even worse than just mild rejection.

So at times it's going to feel like you're going in the midst of a pack of wolves trying to convince them to be vegetarians. And it's not going to end well. There's going to be serious physical danger ahead.

What perspective can take us into that sort of scenario? Well, again, the Lord of the harvest will guarantee the harvest is brought in.

[38 : 26] Not even that sort of opposition will stop Jesus harvesting those he intends to harvest into his kingdom. And going back to chapter 9, verse 37, it's going to be a plentiful harvest, a huge harvest.

So friends, in the light of those four motivations, and I hope you find them motivating, I'll just finish on this. We all need to respond in prayer. I think we need to direct, at least, and I'm speaking about myself here, but I think it probably applies to lots more than me.

We need to direct our prayer in two ways. I think we need to be praying in repentance and asking forgiveness for our self-interested indulgence in the gospel.

We need to be doing that individually and also together as a church family. And what do I mean by self-interested indulgence? Well, I think this is again for me, but if it applies to you, then make sure you wear the cap of it.

I think we can easily delight in the joy of new life in Christ. We can delight in the security that gives us, the hope of heaven for the future.

[39 : 44] we can delight in it at every point that we've been rescued into new relationship with the Lord, new hope of heaven. We can do all that and not be engaged in the task of trying to make sure that others around us find that similar delight.

And that's what I mean by indulgence. I think we do need to pray in repentance and ask forgiveness for that. I certainly do. And then we need to pray also at the same time that the Lord of the harvest will make us overflow with compassion.

Compassion for people that we see in such lostness. Remember, we're rubbing shoulders every day in our family, in our street, with our neighbours, workmates. We're rubbing shoulders with people who present really, really nicely.

They've got their life in order, it appears. They've got all the things that they like. They're set up for the future, for their retirement. They've got nice wives and husbands and nice children and nice houses and nice yards.

And it's so deceptive. we need to be praying that the Lord would help us see past all that, see through all that, and see people who are lost, even in their niceness.

[41 : 10] And that we might be so overflowing with compassion for them that we'll take the risk and we'll open our mouths and we'll say to them, well, you know, you can have all that stuff that can be taken away in a minute.

It's not real good to build a life on that. I want to tell you that there's a better way. Speak of the Lord Jesus.

So pray with me now. Lord, we have been indulgent, self-indulgent in enjoying you.

Lord, it's right and proper that we should enjoy you, that we should delight in you, should see your beauty. And we know the sweetness of new life and relationship with you.

We know the freedom from guilt that comes in knowing that our sins have been forgiven. But Lord, our indulgence is that we've just been happy to have that for ourselves and we've not had that urgency, that compassion that would force us to speak to those around us.

[42 : 32] So help us, Lord, to see people around us as you see them. And respond, Lord, with the same overwhelming compassion that you do. I pray, Lord, that you might help us to trust in the tools you've given us.

Help us to trust in your spoken word. Help us to trust in your spirit applying that word. Help us, Lord, just to be content to have a model of a changed life that goes with us as we speak to people.

Help us, we pray, Lord, in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Thank you.