

Praying for global impact

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[0:00] Good morning, everyone. If you'd like to keep your Bibles open there at Matthew 9, we'll be going through that text in just a moment. I moved from the country to Newtown, inner west, to start studies at Moore College at the beginning of 1996.

I remember one of my first impressions was how many people there were, in Sydney, that is. See, I grew up on a farm, 120 acres between five people, so my personal space consisted of about 25 acres.

But next door to us was a national park of about 80,000 acres, and I used to play in there as well.

But when I used to start to work in there, I could go for days without seeing a single soul.

In fact, there were certain areas of the park where I'd worked that if you did see a single soul, it was very odd, very suspicious. In fact, they were drug dealers or they were poachers or something like that.

It was really weird to see people in some areas of the park. It wasn't one of those national parks which was flooded with tourists all the time. And so in the middle of winter, you could be a whole week and not see a single soul.

[1:16] And so I've got 80,000 acres all to myself. And if I ever did find a single soul, I'd be more than happy to spend the day with them. And moving from that kind of environment to Sydney, I was immediately struck by the number of people and how close everyone was to you.

One of my first impressions, walking down King Street, Newtown, and pulling up at a set of lights, pushing the button. I believed you had to push it six times because apparently I'd changed the lights, but it turned out that that was actually just a myth.

That never works. It took me 10 years to work that one out. Standing there waiting to cross the road and all of a sudden this bloke comes straight up and right beside me.

Like we're touching. And I'm thinking, is there no more room here? I have never stood that close to someone without giving them a hug or having a conversation with them.

And so I did. I put out my hand and introduced myself to this guy, completely ignored me. He just looked at me and then looked away and then the light went green and poof, off he went across the road.

[2:27] It was a weird experience for me. Kind of like standing in a lift in those early days. We didn't have lifts in Narrabri. Or traffic lights. Standing in a lift.

It was completely odd for me to have all these people crushed in on me. And we're standing there in total silence just looking at the numbers. Waiting for our turn to come. So that we could exit.

No one saying anything to anyone. Kind of like an awkward prayer meeting where you're looking at the watch just hoping someone either prays something or this thing shuts down real soon. After 16 years of Sydney, it's changed me.

I don't care if someone stands beside me at the light so they don't say anything anymore. I'm really grateful when no one speaks to me in the lift now. There are few things I think more tiring than constant exposure to people.

It is even more tiring when you are constantly serving them or ministering to them. Mothers with little children have certainly got something to say about that.

[3:35] I think there's no one more tired than I know than mothers with little children. Living in Sydney means that we are surrounded. We are, in fact, we see hundreds of people every day if not thousands.

And we are certainly mindful of millions more. Especially a rush hour on a train. Constantly exposed to people. Natalie and I went to the zoo yesterday.

Took the girls to the zoo. We normally go on a Friday on my day off. But we went yesterday. The whole time there I'm thinking it's going to be busy. It's going to be busy. It's going to be busy. And it was busy. I mean, I knew it would be. But you couldn't even get in to see the big cats. I mean, what's the point of going to the zoo if you can't stand there and gawk across at an animal that could potentially eat you and would love to if it wasn't for the glass there? And you could sit there and poke at it and annoy it a little bit. I mean, what's the point of going to the zoo if you can't get to the big cats? Well, I suppose you could if you were patient enough with people to stand in line and wait your turn.

[4 : 44] I wasn't. I am weary of constant exposure to people. I'm looking forward to long service leave.

And more exposure to people in school holidays in Queensland. And so is our society, weary of the constant exposure to people.

It's evidenced in a number of ways, but especially in the withdrawal into the comfort and the privacy and the security of our domestic caves.

We treat our homes like fortresses that visitors may approach only with great care. The market for domestic security systems continues to grow.

Bars are appearing on windows. Suburban fences, which came down in the open and accommodating 50s and 60s, have gone back up in the last 30, 40 years. Entertainment and recreation facilities are being installed.

[5 : 49] We phone for pizza. We can shop from our computers. We minimise the need to go out as we retreat further and further away from people into our domestic caves. And the great irony, of course, is that loneliness is skyrocketing as we retreat more and more into our domestic caves.

The other problem linked with that is the emotional burnout from overexposure to people is the emotional exposure to people with issues.

That is particularly heightened for us in the media. Once upon a time, news of hostility on the other side of the world would take weeks, months even, sometimes even years before we would hear about it.

Now, a few shots are fired in some distant country and we know about it by the nightly news. And we're already tired from people. And as we see it again, these issues in the world, our compassion dries up in the face of human need.

Worse still is that we seem to be called on to be compassionate again and again and again and nothing ever seems to change.

[7 : 07] We see the ads on TV of starving children and so we get one, two, three World Vision kids and yet the ads keep playing.

There are always starving children and so we harden ourselves a little bit more to the needs of people. It's much easier to theologise about evil and suffering than to weep over it or to do something about it.

Now, desensitisation to human physical and psychological need flows over into their spiritual need. This month we're focusing on local and global impact and I want to ask the question, is local and global impact even a possibility?

Is it even a possibility? The need is enormous. Over 55 million people die every year.

55 million people. And the vast majority of them into a Christless eternity. So many are lost.

[8 : 22] So few are actually saved. And yet how many times has the gospel been preached? How many leaflets have we put in letter boxes?

How many children have sat through scripture classes? How many mission teams? How many doors are knocked? And we are told here in Matthew 9 that the harvest is plentiful.

Is it? Is it really? See, I think Jesus was in danger of overexposure to people too.

Look at there in verse 35. Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. Wouldn't it be great to have a couple of Jesus amongst us? According to one Jewish historian, there were 204 villages and towns in Galilee that Jesus went amongst.

[9 : 26] And each of these villages and towns had a population of at least 15,000 people. And so even if the actual figure was less than the estimated 3 million people, there was still a significant population called here in Matthew 9, the crowds.

And if Jesus was to speak in two of those villages and towns a day, it would take him four months to get through them all.

Apart from the sheer energy needed to keep up with that pace, there is an enormous emotional drain of serving so many people.

The crowds, the masses. And yet what is Jesus' response to the masses? Verse 36. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them because they were harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd.

See, people without Christ are like sheep without a shepherd. They will soon run out of pasture and they will die. Or they will get lost or they will get caught in a bush and they will die.

[10:41] In the meantime, they harassed, they are bullied, they are bruised, they are beaten, they are helpless, they are exploited, they are adrift. They are moving as a flock, as a big crowd, but knowing not why or where.

See, the unbelievers you know, your neighbours, your friends, your colleagues, may not on the surface appear to fit that description. But do not be misled by the shell of assurance, of self-assurance.

See, if you see them with the eyes of Christ, you will realise, you will recognise, you will see sheep without a shepherd. Behind the sinful behaviours lie frustration and exploitation and despair and hopelessness.

We are so often confused by the shell of self-assurance when we look at people. In the same way, you would be confused on a Friday afternoon, seeing a sheep standing in the water of a dam.

Late night, the sun's falling down and you think, there's a sheep after a whole long week of grazing. Is there taking in the water views, watching the sunset.

[12:01] When in actual fact, it's stuck in a dam. And if I don't go in and rescue it, it will die. It's not enjoying the water views.

It's not about when you see a sheep. But it's not about a thing. It's not about a thing. And Jesus' response is compassion because he sees the need. And the word means to be moved within one's stomach, to have a gut-wrenching feeling of pity towards someone.

it's to have your stomach turn and your emotions moved in the face of human need do you remember the last time you felt that?

do you remember the last time when you felt such strong pity? I suspect if I grab my baby Amelia now and took all her clothes off and in this cold building later on the floor there and you heard a scream I imagine you would feel the pity in that moment for her and repulse at me for doing it see I remember one such time I remember the baby of a couple that I married who had surgery on his heart which went really wrong it was serious surgery but it was supposed to be routine and I remember sitting in the room with the doctors and the parents and the grandparents when the specialist said we're sorry but your son has got a 50-50 chance of survival I felt like pulling a coin out of my pocket and flicking it I don't like 50-50 they said we're doing all that we can but we just don't know what the outcome will be and the tears just flowed parents, grandparents and even the doctors

I remember going with them and standing beside their baby's bed I remember the tiny lifeless body filled with cables and tubes so that mum and dad could only just touch the toes I remember the parents they weren't even able to hold their child I remember the desperate situation I remember the knot in my stomach I have to ask myself do I feel that pity for my unbelieving neighbours and friends and strangers and I think that my friends is our first need is it not from this text our need is to feel compassion because of their need if we misdiagnose the condition we won't be pleading for the right solution our need is to have the compassion of Jesus compassion is a work of grace in our hearts it's not the product of works it is the product of prayer earnest prayer at the throne room of God fill me with compassion give me love have you become desensitised to the crowd of shepherdless sheep around five years ago in this country 64% of the population had a nominal adherence to Christianity less than 25% of those people actually went to church regularly that is less than 16% of the population went to church regularly and even if we assume that the 16% who attended church regularly we were committed to Christ that means there's a full which I think is a fairly wild assumption there is a full 84% of our fellow citizens who make no pretense of knowing Christ at 149.32 seconds on Wednesday afternoon this week the population of our country was 22,893,569 84% of that is about 19 million people 19 million sheep without a shepherd that's the need these people no matter how good they are or how bad are not saved 19 million sheep without

a shepherd 19 million who cannot know the ultimate meaning of life they cannot have a purified clean conscious before God and without Christ they have no eternal hope there is the need and our need is to feel compassion because of their need and as we begin mission month we need to be praying for compassion more than anything else when confronted with the crowds

[17 : 34] Jesus doesn't just see hopelessness and need though he sees potential see it there in verse 37 then he said to his disciples the harvest is plentiful but the workers are few you see Jesus saw an amazing potential the harvest is plentiful the metaphor changes here unbelievers are not just sheep who are in trouble they are also wheat that can be harvested you see we need to see with the eyes of Christ to not only see the lostness of people but also to see with his eyes to see the expectancy and the hopefulness of the harvest do you look at your neighbours and your colleagues and your friends and your classmates with the real sense that here is a potential follower of the Lord Jesus it has probably been so long since the Lord has used most of us to lead a person from unbelief to faith in Christ that we actually wonder whether there is any potential left we still know that there is a terrible lostness in the world and we still feel some compassion when we let ourselves think about it but potential we wonder could there ever be a harvest time in my life after so many years of fruitlessness well the answer is resoundingly yes when Jesus said in Luke 18 that it is hard for rich people to enter the kingdom the disciples responded well who then can be saved it seemed at that moment for the disciples that Jesus was taking away all potential for harvest for them but actually what he was doing was laying a new basis for the potential he answers them what is impossible with men is possible with God you see notice here in Matthew 9 whose harvest it is it is his harvest he is the lord of the harvest the king of the harvest the boss of the harvest and it is his harvest field it is his paddock and it is his crop it's not ours and if we are going to have a harvest time at St Paul's it will not be because there are so many competent communicators it won't be because we do knock ten times more than we do now it won't be because we have organised ourselves well the harvest we want is impossible for us to do new birth birth is a miracle you see my friends in case you are confused or a bit cynical our goal is not a big church our goal is not impressive statistical charts our goal is to see

God do the impossible through failures like me and you that is the way it has happened in history and that is how it will happen again in God's time he will perform the miracle of harvest and it will be marvellous in our eyes what then should we do should we begin with training sessions to multiply the number of evangelists should we develop a major recruitment strategy should we build a few strategically placed bible colleges or should we begin by establishing two or three international foundations to help pay for everything that we want to do at some point we may need to do all those things but get this point they are secondary steps considerable effort needs to be poured into the primary step action is demanded and Jesus calls for it in verse 38 asks the lord of the harvest therefore to send out workers into his harvest field in sync with his compassion for the lost Jesus calls us here to beg God to plead with God to send out workers into the harvest field you see I still remember the gut wrenching pity and sorrow that I felt for that baby's dad and mum as we stood around that hospital bed I used to go to the hospital and sit with them and pray with them most days and cry with them for most days I remember pleading with God like I have never pled with God I remember on one occasion being barely able to hold it in as I walked through the hospital foyer out to the car park and I remember opening my car door and hopping in my car and I could not hold it in any longer I remember grabbing hold of the steering wheel and sobbing and pleading with

God to save pleading with him to save life and I remember by the time that I got home pleading with God all the way home in such a way that my shirt was wet with tears the word here is to plead it's to beg that the Lord of the harvest will cast out workers begging God to throw workers out into the paddock literally the begging is linked with compassion it comes out of compassion it is the action that follows the feeling of compassion isn't it strange though for a thing to plead for God to raise up workers it is strange that the farm hands should be told to beg the owner of the farm to send out more workers into the harvest surely

Jesus doesn't mean to imply that God doesn't know that there's a shortage of harvesters or surely he doesn't mean that God doesn't care whether the harvest comes in why then are the farm hands told to beg the farmer for more help I think something very important is happening here there is one possible answer and it may be the only answer certainly the only one that I could come up with God has willed that his miraculous work of harvesting be preceded by this kind of prayer before he does

a great work he moves his people to pray greatly for that work I wish I could say that I've always been faithful to this call to prayer to my great shame I have not but I'm convinced that the really great issues before us will be settled on our knees that doesn't mean we don't do anything except prayer it does mean it does mean that we should do nothing without prayer it is true that [25 : 41] God often uses means it is also true that we often focus on the means and forget the really significant work must be God's work otherwise it will all come to naught Jesus' compassion issues in prayer and in a call for us to pray and it may be that if we fail to pray it is because our compassion is defective or it may mean that we are compassionate but we are naive and we have misdiagnosed the real problem that is we don't clearly understand the utter plight of the lost and if this is the case if we don't truly understand the utter plight of the lost we will throw all of our efforts or the vast majority of our efforts into the secondary solutions even the best secondary solutions that we can find and we will spend our time arguing over the best secondary solutions that we can find while not pleading for the primary solution pleading for

God to do his work and so my friends we begin mission month 2012 and the global task is huge the needs seem endless the local task is huge too forget about the global task the local task is huge I want to talk about harvest time here at St Paul's because if we are not engaged in harvest time here at St Paul's I want to be frank with you we will never be truly engaged with harvest time in Africa we will never be truly engaged with harvest time in Africa in fact I said to you a number of months ago one of the signs of a declining church is that we actually put our efforts into harvest times in Africa and everywhere else rather than our local local harvest we have a mission objective of 500 in attendance by the end of 2012 and our mission objective is not to steal sheep from someone else's paddock but for lost sheep to find their shepherd our objective is for people to be rescued by the Lord

Jesus so let me be absolutely frank with you if by the end of 2014 we have 600 people in services every Sunday but our records show that we've only baptized people in the last three years about 20 people in the last three years I would sit back and say we have not succeeded I will not call it a success even though it will look like it let's pray about harvest time at St Paul's I don't know what God will do amongst us I don't know if 2012 or 13 or 14 is the season of harvest amongst us it may not be I know as your pastor that I'm not broken enough yet and I'm not yielding enough yet and I'm not compassionate enough yet and I'm not praying enough yet maybe we have to wait until 2025 but maybe not firstly we must pray for our own hearts I read an interesting article this week that said

atheists give to need because of compassion and Christians are motivated by doctrine or reputational concerns atheists give because they're moved in the gut with people's needs we do it out of duty and our praying can be the same turn up to prayer meetings run through the prayer sheet for this next month we pray for global mission because we ought to rather than pleading with God because of the vast needs rather than because of compassion and so pray my friends that our hearts my heart senses the need feels the compassion sees the potential and stays fervent in pleading with God to throw out worker after worker after worker into the harvest field secondly pray for persons you know outside of Christ that they might come to their shepherd there is a power at our disposal in prayer that we have only begun to tap and I'm praying that all the members of our church apply themselves to prayer this month to pray to plead earnestly as if your nearest and dearest were desperately ill amen