

The Harvest is Plentiful but the labours are few

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[0 : 00] Well, if you'd please turn with me to Matthew chapter 9. So Matthew chapter 9, beginning at verse 35.

Can I just say that if you're expecting that we would be back in Samuel, we will be at some point. But I wanted to carry on from where we left off last Sunday morning.

In light that the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ is the reason for the Great Commission. And the reason we can go out and proclaim the good news is because of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Well, I want to continue with that message. I want to continue with why that is so important. And so to do so, we'll pick up this same. Obviously, this is said before the cross in verse 35 through to 38. It's now here God's word. And when 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.

[1 : 37] 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.

Let's pray. Father God, we pray that you would enlighten our mind with a view of changing our heart, that we would understand that these words are words not only spoken and written, but they are spoken to us as your people, that these things have been written down for our instruction, and that, Father God, that we would pay attention to them, we pray.

We would ask, Father God, that we would understand what is being said here and that we would live in the light of it as your people. In Jesus' name, amen. So as I was saying last week, one of the most important things that we recognize about the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ is that because of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ, we now have a message to tell.

There are only so many things that you can say about Jesus prior to his resurrection, hence why so many times throughout the gospel accounts, after Jesus has healed someone, he tells them not to tell anyone.

And you have to make sense of that as a Christian, or else you'd be terribly confused about what to do with that type of message out in the world today. You must understand that when Jesus heals someone and then tells that person not to say anything, it is because they do not have the full message.

[3 : 23] And therefore, only to give a partial message is only to have a partial understanding of who Jesus Christ is. And therefore, if the only thing you understand about Jesus is that he can heal you, then you're giving a very limited message of Jesus Christ to the world, especially in light of his death and his resurrection, that he can take your sins away.

And he has taken your sins away. He has risen from the dead. Now, because of this, this now changes everything. This means that now we can understand fully, in light of what Matthew is saying here, why Jesus healed and why the commission to make disciples of all nations exists. So as you sit here this morning, notice what Matthew does, and then notice what Jesus is saying, and then notice what this means for the disciples, and notice what this means for you, who live after the time of the resurrection, and after the time also of the 12 disciples.

Matthew summarizes here in the first verse, or verse 35, the first verse that we read, the life and work of Jesus, that he went throughout the cities and villages, that he is proclaiming the gospel, healing diseases, as a way of summarizing what Jesus did all of the time.

Now, the question is, why did Jesus do those things? Why is it important for you to understand what Jesus is doing, and why the commission to the disciples is slightly different than what Jesus Christ

was doing?

[5 : 10] Jesus went around teaching, and we know from the Sermon on the Mount, a lot of his teaching was corrective. You have heard it said, but I say unto you. You have heard it said, but I say unto you.

In other words, he was addressing his own people of the day of how they were misunderstanding the word of God, and how he then had to reintroduce the truth in light of their misunderstanding. You have heard it said, but I say unto you. And then when Jesus spoke in parables, he is then drawing distinctions between Israel, the people who think that they are safe, and the rest of the Gentiles, who think, you know, the tax collectors and sinners, and you often see that Jesus speaks in parables, and these two go alongside each other.

And what Jesus is proclaiming is, of course, a reality that is true after the resurrection, especially when you read the book of Acts, and you see this dividing wall has been demolished between Jew and Gentile, bond and free, and all are one in Christ Jesus.

All of this only makes sense in light of the resurrection of Jesus. Now, when it says here that Matthew is summarizing, that Jesus is teaching, proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom of God, healing every disease and every affliction, he is essentially saying that this is what Jesus did all the time, but there has to be a distinction.

[6 : 46] They must mean different things. It cannot be a summary in the context that this is the same thing for all people, that same thing all the time, or else there'd be no need to say, you could just say one thing.

If it was to summarize just one thing that Jesus did, he would have just used one word. It's very similar when you have a dictionary and a thesaurus. You know, why can you have like three or four different words that will complement start, begin, commence?

At some point, they must have meant something slightly different, or else there would be no need for the word. Okay, at some point, they must have meant something slightly different, or there'd be no need to have a different word.

You would just use the same word. So, even though Matthew is summarizing what Jesus is doing here, the distinctions are important, really important.

And the reason they're important is because of the difference between what Jesus came to do, and what he then commands his disciples to do after he has gone.

[7 : 54] The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few, and nobody knows why. Nobody knows why.

Or do we? Is Matthew, through the words of Jesus here, actually telling us why the laborers are few? Through distinction. Through the difference between the work of Jesus and the work of the disciples.

Well, the harvest is plentiful means that the fields are white under harvest. There is plenty of people out there who are ready to be harvested for the kingdom of God.

And Matthew is, Jesus is speaking in exactly the same way he spoke to Peter, that you are no longer to be a fisherman, you are to be a fisher of men. So that fisher of men, it conveys the same kind of work of laborers in the harvest field and fisher of men.

It's the same type of work that you are to gather in to the kingdom of God that which God has already in its place. So let's notice the distinctions as we go through the few verses here.

[9 : 05] So Matthew summarizes, as we've seen, the life and work of Jesus, verse 35, teaching, proclaiming the gospel, and healing. Then in verse 36, Jesus has a response.

So now we get to see what Jesus sees. Verse 35 is what Matthew summarizes. Jesus isn't speaking. Matthew summarizing what Jesus has done. Then in verse 36, we get to see what Jesus sees as he looks out to the crowds.

He has compassion on them. But don't misunderstand this act of compassion as a compassion for people who are poorly, that they have diseases, they have this.

That may be part of it, but if it was, then Jesus would have addressed that specifically. Rather, what he says is that they are harassed and helpless.

And why are they that way? Because they are like sheep without a shepherd. The reason for the compassion that Jesus has towards these people is because they are lost.

[10 : 06] They are like sheep without a shepherd. They may have multiple other things going on in their lives, multiple other reasons for why they are harassed and helpless.

But the ultimate reason is because they are like sheep without a shepherd. And that's the reason Jesus has compassion on them. They're lost. They are lost sheep.

And so to be a sheep without a shepherd is the very definition of what it is to be lost. So think of how many people live in this world not following or under, consciously under, the lordship of Christ. That's the definition of what it is to be lost. You could say that they're lost in their sin. You could say that they're lost in their way. You could say that they're lost in multiple of other issues.

But ultimately, the reason why they're lost or rather the defining mark of their lostness, if I can put it that way, is that they are sheep without a shepherd.

[11 : 19] They have no direction or safety because that is exactly what a shepherd brings to sheep. And if you have no shepherd, then you have no direction because sheep get their direction from a shepherd.

That doesn't mean that sheep always follow the shepherd. We have plenty of examples, don't we, in Ezekiel 34, for instance, where the people of God are as corrupt as the shepherds were back in the day.

You know, as the saying goes, that sheep follow sheep even when they hear the shepherd's voice. Okay, and Jesus addressed that as well.

But the point is here is that the reason why they are harassed and helpless and therefore lost is ultimately because they are without a shepherd.

And that's the reason for the compassion. Jesus has compassion on the lost. Verse 37 then turns our attention to the life, turns our attention from the life and ministry of Jesus to the life and ministry of those who will now follow Jesus.

[12 : 35] Jesus turns to his disciples and says, the harvest is plentiful. The harvest is plentiful but the laborers are few. Therefore, this is your response verse 38 pray to the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into his harvest.

His harvest. Now the point here is small but significant. The fact that it is his harvest should draw our attention to at least a couple of things. Now we may not live, at least most of us may not be exposed to sort of the agricultural life of seed time and harvest.

but most of us should know that you cannot have a harvest unless you've already had a seed time. Most of you should understand that you cannot harvest anything unless someone at a previous time has actually sowed the seed so that you actually have something to harvest.

And therefore, when it says here that you are to pray to the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into his harvest, his harvest, the implication is is that God has already gone beforehand and accomplished the work of sowing.

You simply have to do the reaping. The work of actually saving these people, the work of actually these people being God's people, you just have to gather them in, has already been accomplished.

[14 : 09] Where? Well, the cross. Jesus is addressing what is true in the future as well as true in the present. God is the one who goes before and does this work making sure that the harvest is ready.

But the biggest distinction here that we must see in case we get muddled is the distinction between the kingdom activity of Jesus and then the work of laborers in the harvest field of the disciples.

This distinction must be understood. Jesus, verse 35, is commanding his disciples to pray for workers indicating that the work that he gives his disciples is different than the work that he has currently done.

In other words, nowhere in the summary does it say that Jesus is harvesting. And I think one of the reasons why it doesn't say that is because the ministry of Jesus is to do one thing in particular and that is to prove to those people living in the days of Jesus and to prove to us today that he is actually the Messiah.

In other words, if the Messiah turned up, if the anointed one of God turned up, the Savior turned up, how would you recognize him? What would he have to do that was different from what everyone else was doing?

[15 : 34] there would have to be defining marks so that you wouldn't be able to tell the difference between Jesus or anyone else. What is the difference between who Jesus is and who everyone else is?

So let's have a look at the kingdom activity. All the way through the gospel of Matthew and in fact any of the gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke or John, Matthew does exactly what the rest of the

gospels do.

That Jesus is going throughout the cities and villages, he is proclaiming the kingdom of God, he is teaching people or rather calling people to repent and believe in the gospel, calling them to be followers of him and when Jesus heals the people that he does, sometimes he says to them, don't tell anyone.

But what those people are actually experiencing when they get healed is what? What sense does it make to heal someone who is then going to die anyway?

Will you say, will it give them a better course of life in the meantime? The lame walk, the blind see, the deaf hear, suddenly they have a better quality of life, but okay, but they still have to die.

[16:57] So what do those acts mean in light of the resurrection? Well, the greater problem is, of course, death. The greater problem is however well you may be, you could have peak physical health the day before you die and then you die.

so what does it mean for Jesus to do these works? Well, it is to prove who he is.

It is not a model for ministry going forward. It's certainly not a model for the disciples to copy going forward. What people are experiencing when the deaf hear, the blind see, and the lame walk is what the kingdom of God will actually look like when it comes in its fullness.

Because when it comes, there will be no lame, there will be no blind, the deaf will hear, the blind will see, the lame will walk. In the kingdom of God, in the new heavens and the new earth, there will be no sickness, no illness, and there will be no death.

There will be none of those things. So what is happening is that as the Messiah comes, he is bringing with him what the kingdom life will actually look like.

[18:22] It will look like people who are complete, who are full, without affliction, without sorrow, without pain, without infirmities.

But it's only a taster of things to come, because you still have to get over the biggest thing, which is death itself. Now, if you think that that's an unfair statement, that no, it must be possible for the church today to be able to do the same type of things.

I'm not ruling out the fact that God could heal someone today, not even for a moment. God can do what he likes whenever he likes, properly understood. What I'm saying is that the ministry of the disciples is very different from the ministry of Jesus, and I'll show you.

When Jesus had to qualify who he was to John, this is what it says in Matthew 11. When Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and preach in their cities.

This is Matthew 11, verses one to five. Now, when John heard in prison about the deeds of Christ, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, listen, are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?

[19:47] In other words, what John is looking for is are you the Messiah, are you the Savior, are you the anointed one of God, or are we to keep looking? Now, whatever Jesus says after that point, it has to be the defining mark between the Messiah and not the Messiah.

whatever evidence Jesus gives John, it has to be evidence that can only point to the Messiah, or else you couldn't tell the difference between Jesus or anyone else.

So what does Jesus say? And Jesus answered them, go and tell John what you hear and see. The blind receive their sight, and the lame walk, the leprosy is cleansed, and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have the good news preached to them.

And blessed is the one who is not offended by me. You see? Jesus knew that John would know what the defining marks of the Messiah was.

And it was that he could do things that nobody else could do, because if everyone else could do it, how could you tell the difference between Jesus or anyone else?

[21:02] How could you ask the question, is it you or shall we keep looking? you've got to have evidence that sets Jesus apart. And so what sets Jesus apart is that the blind see, the deaf hear, the lame walk.

Jesus' kingdom ministry defines his Messiahship, defines that he is the Savior of all. John understood that, and so too are we to understand the same thing.

God's God's ministry. God's ministry. God's ministry. God's ministry. God's ministry is to be laborers in the harvest field.

That's your ministry. That is what God has given to us. So the harvest. The harvest is plentiful, the laborers are few, and we're not quite sure why.

We would hazard a guess that God's people are just not getting it, or they're lazy, or they can't be bothered to spread the gospel, share the gospel.

[22 : 16] That could be true, but because we're not told that truth, we don't know. It would be much easier if Jesus says, oh, and the reason why there are so many few laborers is because of A, B, C, and D.

But he doesn't do that. So what is the reason why there are so few laborers? Well, I think there is a clue in the text, and I think we are helped by what Jesus actually says.

Jesus has compassion on those who are lost, those who are lost like sheep without a shepherd, and the harvest is plentiful, and the laborers are few. Those who are lost, helpless, and harassed, recognize, or Jesus recognizes that what they actually need in order to not be that way is a shepherd.

The shepherd is, of course, none other than the Lord Jesus Christ himself, and the way that they are brought into the Lordship of Christ, brought under his shepherd, is for the harvest to be harvested, so that these souls are brought into the kingdom of God, so that they can actually be taken care of and know that the one who takes care of them is the Lord God himself.

Now, Jesus might be thinking here, though I can't for a moment guess what Jesus is really thinking, is that his thoughts might go to Ezekiel 34, where you have the shepherds who are sort of who are corrupted by their need for great gain, and want gain, and not really doing what they ought to be doing.

[23 : 54] Then you've got perhaps the people who are as corrupted because they're doing exactly the same thing, and the question is, who's copying who? Are the leaders copying the congregation, or are the congregation copying the leaders?

And it all comes down to the character of will. Now, I don't know if that's what the situation is here, or is it rather that the reason why there are so few laborers is because the harvest is so great? In other words, many hands make light work. If you have a few dishes, then you think, well, I can wash that up by myself.

But if you have just had a meal where 17 people have been around your house, 17 people is a lot of people, 10, let's say, if you've got a house where you can fit 17 in, but imagine you had that many around, in fact, some of you did over Christmas, more than that.

And then it comes to washing up time. The plates are many. What would be really helpful would be what? More hands.

[25 : 03] So is Jesus saying that the reason why there are so few laborers is because the harvest is so great? Do you get the point?

Could Jesus be saying that? That the harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few? Now, I don't want to push the illustration too far because I don't think Jesus is doing that with it, but everyone knows when it comes to harvest time, you've got a very small window to harvest your crop, to get it at its best.

It's only a matter of days in some cases between it being not ready to ready to being too late. And in that context, if you've got massive fields, you need lots of hands to get the harvest in before the weather turns or before the moisture then gets back into the plant, the seed, right?

There's multiple things against you. So now, if you just draw that together, now the harvest is plentiful and you've got a short amount of time to get it in.

I don't think Jesus is saying that, but the point is the hyperbole, the urgency behind the need for many laborers. either way, whether it's because there's not enough laborers because nobody wants to do the work, or there's not enough laborers because the harvest is so great, whatever the case may be, the response still needs to be the same.

[26 : 32] And that is that we are to pray to the Lord of the harvest, the Lord of his harvest, to send out workers into his harvest. that's our response, that we need to pray that Jesus is saying not go and get to work, but actually go and pray.

The first thing that Jesus says to his service is you need to pray about this. You need more workers because you are not going to be able to do it all on your own. You cannot do it all on your own, and therefore you need to get to prayer, that the Lord of the harvest would send more workers out into his harvest field.

Now think of the generations of harvest since the days of Jesus. Are the disciples alone able to harvest it? Are the disciples able to harvest the harvest today?

No, because they're dead. They're gone. So now we need more workers. And in the next ten years we're going to need more. And the ten years after that, and the hundred years after that, and the thousand years after that, there's going to be this constant need for more laborers.

So what do we do if we're not around to do the work? Well, we do the work beforehand in that we pray to the Lord of the harvest to make sure that he sends more laborers into the harvest field.

[27 : 57] this same kind of principle applies in the church, I think, in a slightly different area. There is such a thing called the 80-20 distinction for a reason.

The idea that 80% of the people, 20% of the people do 80% of the work within a church. That's true in quite a lot of areas.

it's also true that those who pray for more are often the same people who are doing the work in the first place. Not always true, but most of the time that's true.

Look in any church and any ministries within that church, who are the people most likely to ask for help? It's the ones who are already doing the work.

Who are the ones who are least likely to ask for help? It's those who aren't actually doing any of the work because they don't see the need. They're not in the field. They don't see, we're never going to get through this by 10 o'clock tonight.

[29 : 05] And I've had that feeling when I've gone out on the farm with Susan's dad and it's time to get the bales in and you think, we're going to be here all night. And you start baling it like, you know, when I would finish and I'd perhaps finish a bit early, and we would like start at four and then we perhaps, you know, go till six, have something to eat and then you're going till like half ten at night just to get the bales in.

Why? Because the weather tomorrow, you just, I'm never going to get through this. And the same thing happens within church ministries. That they hit a peak and then they die off rapidly, rapidly, because there's not enough laborers.

It gets wasted. And it's always the case that those who are doing the work are those who are going to be praying for more helpers. And those who are not involved in the work don't see the need to pray for it because they don't see the need.

Now, there are some who do but just cannot physically do the work anymore. They're not in the right place. But generally speaking, it is the case that those who will pray for more workers in the harvest field are those who are already doing the work of evangelism.

And those who don't pray for more workers in that harvest field are normally those who are not doing the work of evangelism. That's just an observational reality. But here's the exhortation then as we close.

[30 : 36] The harvest is plentiful and the laborers are few. And therefore two things are required of us all. Number one, we are all to pray to the Lord of the harvest for workers in his harvest field.

That's the first thing that we're to do. The second thing that we are to do, I think by implication, is that we are to be a worker within that harvest field. That we too are not only to pray for more workers, but we ourselves are to be a worker because many hands make light work.

harvest is plentiful and it is too much for one person. It is too much for twelve disciples. It is too much for only a few in the church to be involved, whether that is locally or globally.

It is too much work for only a few people to be involved. And the other issue here, which I'll just touch on as we close, is that in John 4, the disciples miss the harvest entirely.

And Jesus has to say to them, look up the fields of white unto harvest. You're not even seeing it, which adds a further complication. That what do you do when you first have to convince people that there is a harvest of people out there to be harvested for God?

[32 : 02] So the work is hard, the labors are few, and the first thing that we are to do is to pray. And therefore the only challenge to you this morning, or rather, command from the word of God, is to not only for you to be involved in the work of evangelism, but is to pray for more workers to join you.

Amen. in Christ, a lord, my gospel, He is my light, my strength, my soul.

This cornerstone, this solid crowd. Firm to the pierce that's drowned and sore. What heights of love, what depths of peace.

Where fears are still, when strivings cease. My comforter, my all in all. Here in the heart of Christ I stand.

In Christ alone, who to confess. Full as a garden helpless babe. This gift of love and righteousness.

[33 : 50] Scorned by the ones he came to save. Till on my cross, as Jesus died. The wrath of God was satisfied.

All every sin on him was laid. Here in the death of Christ I live. In Christ you are kept both now and forevermore.

So may the Lord bless you and keep you as you go. In Jesus' name, amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Thank you.