

TO SEND OUT WORKERS

Matthew 9:35–38

Key Verse: 9:38

“Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.”

Do you ever feel overwhelmed? Like you have so much to do, but so little time or resources to get anything done? And you know there're people just waiting to criticize you? Sometimes it can seem futile even to try to do anything. In today's passage Jesus is in a similar situation. But he's not overwhelmed. He doesn't feel helpless or give in to despair. He gets to work for the Lord of the harvest. He has a very special message and a very clear focus to his ministry. What's more, he's able to see beyond himself and respond from his heart to all the people around him. Finally, he tells his disciples how to see the world and gives them a very special prayer request. In his prayer request we can learn his vision for them and for us. Workers. It just so happens to be Labor Day weekend, when we celebrate all those who worked so hard to build this country with their blood, sweat and tears. We're also beginning a new school year, when we ready ourselves to minister to students. But why do we do it? What's the bigger picture? What kind of people does Jesus want us to be, and what does he want us to do? May God open our hearts and speak to us personally through his living words today.

In Matthew's Gospel Jesus begins his public ministry in Galilee in chapter 4, and large crowds begin following him. Chapters 5–7 are his famous Sermon on the Mount. In chapter 8, when he continues his ministry, large crowds follow him again. Then Jesus begins to face opposition from the Pharisees. The Pharisees are mentioned in chapter 9 three times. At the beginning of the chapter they thought Jesus was blaspheming for telling a man his sins were forgiven (9:3). Later they criticized Jesus for eating and drinking with tax collectors and sinners at Matthew's house (9:11). Finally, when he drove out a demon from a mute man, they said Jesus was working by the power of the prince of demons (9:34). Every move Jesus made, the Pharisees criticized. So they came to represent those who're always criticizing and finding fault with others.

Who were these Pharisees? 9:3 calls them “teachers of the law.” The Pharisees were religious laymen who grew up memorizing the Bible and then teaching others. They thought of themselves as pursuing purity in a corrupt world. They dominated the synagogues throughout the land. But as a group, over the years they had added many extra-Biblical traditions to their religious life. What was worse, they were hypocritical. They kept God's word only outwardly. Jesus said they were trying to impress people by their giving, prayer and fasting. And they were very judgmental. Matthew devotes an entire chapter recording how Jesus rebuked them (23:1–39). We first get a glimpse of the Pharisees when they go out to see John the Baptist in chapter 3. John also rebukes them. He says they were proud of their heritage as descendants of Abraham, but lacked any spiritual fruit. According to John, their main problem was they didn't

know how to repent. Here in chapter 9, although they seemed to know the Bible well, Jesus tells them to go and learn God's heart of mercy towards the sin-sick (9:13). He also says they're like old wineskins, stuck in the past, with many rigid, self-righteous legalisms (17). Underneath it all, the Pharisees were jealous of Jesus' booming popularity. Their jealousy made them spiritually blind. They couldn't even see the beautiful things God was doing through Jesus. Jesus steered his ministry away from them.

Let's read verse 35. This verse is basically a repeat of 4:23. It describes the main pattern of Jesus' ministry in Galilee. Despite the Pharisees' criticisms, Jesus went through all the towns and villages. At first, to us it may not seem like much—a few towns and villages in Galilee. But the first century Jewish historian Josephus wrote that in Galilee there were 204 towns, not counting villages, and they all had at least 15,000 people living in them. If we do the math, that's at least 3 million people. The Galilee of Jesus' day was much more populated than we might think, but there was no big city; people were dispersed all over the land. Going in person to all those scattered places, traveling on foot, was really a daunting task, and physically exhausting. But Jesus was ready to do it.

Why was he so determined to go and be among the people? At his birth the angel announced that he would be called "Immanuel"—God with us (1:23). His coming to this world fulfilled the prophecy that God would send a ruler who would be the shepherd of his people (2:6; Mic5:2,4). Jesus was keenly aware that God had sent him to go after the lost sheep of Israel (15:24), to be a spiritual doctor for the spiritually sick (9:12). So he refused to get entangled in debates and power struggles with the current religious leaders—he did what God wanted.

What was Jesus doing? It says he was "teaching in their synagogues." Synagogue in Greek means "gathering place." Synagogues were local Jewish community centers used for many activities: schools, places for communal meals, hostels, courts, places to collect charity, and political meetings. People also would gather to hear the Bible read and interpreted, and to pray. Unlike later synagogues, they were simple public buildings with benches along the walls. Every town would have a good number of them, and Jesus went to all of them diligently. What did he do there? It says he was "teaching." Jesus was working hard to help people understand the word of God. And his teaching had a focus. What was it? Matthew says he was "proclaiming the good news of the kingdom."

Where did this come from? Actually, when John the Baptist began his ministry, he was preaching, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near" (3:2). And when Jesus began his ministry, he preached exactly the same thing: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near" (4:17). What does it mean? Basically it means that God himself is breaking into human experience and bringing real salvation through his Son. God is redeeming this world full of sin, death, curse and all its misery and ugliness and bringing it back to himself. God is inviting us all to come out from under Satan's oppression and injustice and come under his own gracious reign. The message of the good news of the kingdom is not for a special few people; it's for everybody and anybody, regardless of race, income or any other circumstance.

Why was it Jesus' main message? It's because the message of the kingdom gets at our core human need, what our souls are actually longing for. It tells us how to come back to God our Creator, to have our true "home," our true "paradise" in him. It's what human beings lost at the beginning, and what God promises us at the very end in Revelation. People in every generation try so hard to build a kingdom for themselves in this world. But it never works. Even the best earthly kingdoms never last. We all need the good news of the kingdom, not of man but of God himself. The good news of the kingdom is our only true and living hope. The hope of the kingdom is worth living for, and worth dying for. The good news of the kingdom is that it's a place where anyone can find their true worth, their true dignity, their true belonging.

While proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, it says he was also "healing every disease and sickness." The message of the kingdom was accompanied by God's power and authority to cure every human disease and sickness. It tells us that nobody is too sick or damaged for God to redeem and restore. It also tells us that Jesus used his God-given power and authority as king of the kingdom not to "dominate" or crush, but to tenderly heal (cf. 12:20). His beautiful healing ministry actually gives hope to all those who feel like damaged goods. His healing ministry really communicates the truth and reality of the kingdom. It draws all those who are weary and burdened to open their hearts and come to him (11:28). His message and his healing were like cold water on a parched desert ground. Jesus is the ultimate worker who proclaimed the good news of the kingdom and healed every disease and sickness. Many Christians emphasize duties or rules or morality. But as followers of Jesus, we need to be helping people personally believe the good news of the kingdom, and to experience deep spiritual healing through God's mercy to us in Jesus.

After his summary statement in verse 35, Matthew goes on. Let's read verse 36. The way Jesus saw the crowds is striking. Crowds of sick and broken and hungry people constantly coming wherever he went might seem too needy, too demanding, too burdensome. Some people might see them as a market, an opportunity to make a profit or gain a position. But Jesus saw them, it says, "with compassion." It's his same initial reaction Matthew repeats in 14:14, 15:32 and 20:34. It tells us something very important about Jesus. Jesus is not just some ultra-perfect, demanding person, far removed from our experiences. The Bible says he was made like us in every way so that he could empathize with all our weaknesses (Heb2:15; 4:15). This Greek word for "compassion" literally means to experience pain in one's internal bodily organs. It's kind of like today's phrase, "I feel your pain." It's not a calculated, intellectual response, but a gut reaction that comes from one's nature. Compassion for people was at the core of who Jesus is and what he was doing. And one of the main aspects of his discipleship training was to help his followers learn his compassion for people (14:14; 15:32). In fact, in his parable of the unmerciful servant Jesus actually used this same Greek word for compassion to teach his disciples how they should be (18:27).

Why did Jesus have compassion? Look at verse 36 again. It says, "...because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd." The Greek word for "harass" is literally to skin, flay or lacerate. Figuratively it means to vex, torment, "rip off" or take advantage of. It wasn't coming from just one or two places; everywhere they turned these people were facing demands—from the religious leaders, from the political leaders, from the local business leaders.

It got to the point it was hard to even live or breathe. The Greek word for “helpless” literally means to be thrown down. Figuratively it means to be so wounded, so weak, so tired we have no power to stand up on our own. Have you ever felt that way? The expression “like sheep without a shepherd” originally came from Moses. At the end of his life, he was asking God to raise up his successor because he really wanted to prevent his people from becoming like sheep without a shepherd (Nu27:17). This expression was repeated many other times in the Old Testament (1Ki22:17; 2Ch18:16; Isa56:10,11; Jer50:6; Eze34:3–6; Zec10:2; 11:16; 13:7,8).

But what does it mean to be like sheep without a shepherd? A shepherd’s main task is to be faithful to lead his sheep to green grass and fresh water, and to always protect and take care of them, no matter what. Sheep without such a shepherd quickly become weak, dehydrated, malnourished, and thus, they get sick. Without a shepherd, sheep also are vulnerable, abandoned and begin wandering astray and getting into trouble (cf. Eze34:3–6). It’s a powerful image. We might think of little children like sheep without a shepherd, but usually we think of adults as independent and self-sufficient, able to function well on their own. In light of Jesus’ view here, that’s only a superficial understanding of human beings. Without a personal relationship with God our Shepherd, all people are really like sheep without a shepherd. People’s souls are hungry, thirsty and dissatisfied. They’re suffering from fear. They don’t really know where their lives are going or what they should be doing. They easily get caught up in the wrong things and even become self-destructive.

The point here is how Jesus saw people. In our fallen nature it’s easy to see people with indifference, thinking, “I’m so glad that’s not my problem!” It’s easy to be critical and judgmental, especially when we see how people are doing wrong. But Jesus would say, “If only that person had had a good shepherd, he or she would not have gotten into so much trouble and needless suffering.” His visceral reaction to people of all kinds is not to avoid them: It’s compassion, to understand what they’re going through, to care, to be moved, to get involved. Without compassion we can go through all the motions but not really touch people where they’re hurting and bring healing. Jesus wants us to be workers who’ve internalized his compassion, who don’t fake it, but genuinely care and work from a heart of compassion.

So how can we have his compassion? Philippians 2:1 says, “Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion...” The only way to have his compassion is when we’re united with Christ in personal fellowship with him through the Holy Spirit. Without this union, our human compassion runs dry and we soon find out we don’t have anything to give anyone any more. We need this spiritual union with Christ most of all. But to have his compassion, we also need to learn to share in people’s real life agonies, to get close to them, and even to let our hearts be broken. To have compassion, we can’t protect ourselves from people’s pains—there’s no safe way to do it.

Jesus not only had compassion on people personally. Look at verse 37. He’s using imagery from people’s ordinary life experiences. In that agricultural society people knew firsthand the frustration of not having enough hands during a harvest to get all the produce in before it was too late. Again in this verse Jesus is not negative about people or about ministry to

them. He says, "The harvest is plentiful." He sees with the eyes of faith that many people are ready to receive the good news of the kingdom. To Jesus, the problem is not the people, but the lack of kingdom workers. So what is a "worker"? Jesus is talking about kingdom workers. Like farmers during a harvest, kingdom workers are those who sense God's time, put everything else aside and focus on kingdom work. Also like farm workers, kingdom workers get personally involved in the work. They roll up their sleeves and get their hands dirty, touching people's real problems and needs. But why are there so few kingdom workers? First of all, it's because it requires training, and people hate even to hear that word. It also involves personal sacrifice, which people also don't like. It involves hard work, whereas people would like to take it easy. And being a kingdom worker doesn't promise any earthly rewards. No wonder there are so few! The fact that there are so few kingdom workers speaks to human selfishness. There were thousands of Pharisees in Jesus' day, but so few kingdom workers.

What did Jesus do? Read verse 38. Jesus didn't just look at the situation or at his disciples; he looked up at God. He believed that God is the Lord of the harvest. God is the one working in this world to give life, to draw people to himself and to his kingdom. God is the one who can transform people from being like sheep without a shepherd into being real workers for his kingdom. Jesus is right in the middle of training his disciples, and he's about to send them out for fieldwork training. But before doing so, he says we all should pray, asking God that *he* would send out workers into his harvest field. What a beautiful prayer! What a hopeful prayer! This prayer shows that raising and sending out workers is God's work, not human work. It shows his humble reliance on God. It shows his faith in God, even in overwhelming circumstances and need, that God can certainly do it. Jesus was not at all discouraged by the lack of kingdom workers or by all the criticisms he was facing. With faith and hope in God he prayed and pressed forward and never gave up the vision of the harvest for God's kingdom.

Let's review in this passage what Jesus the kingdom worker did. He overcame all kinds of criticism. He worked hard and diligently went to people where they were. He shared the good news of the kingdom with the hopeless. He healed every disease and sickness among the sick and wounded. He saw all kinds of people with compassion, as harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. He helped his disciples see people positively as a plentiful spiritual harvest. He also asked them to join him in praying to God to send out kingdom workers.

This Labor Day let's pray Jesus' prayer topic: "Lord, send out workers into your harvest field, workers who are really like Jesus!" And at the beginning of this new school year, above all else, may God inspire us with his compassion for American young people. May God mold us into kingdom workers like our Lord Jesus. And may God raise up a new generation of Christ-like workers for his kingdom.