



The Harvest Is Plentiful, the Laborers Few
(Matthew 9:35-38)

Introduction: Last week we were considering the ministry of our Lord Jesus Christ, especially the exercise of His authority over the powers of darkness, and the reaction of the covenant people of Israel to His ministry. Jesus had been traveling all over Galilee, preaching the Gospel of the kingdom, healing the sick, casting out demons and raising the dead. He had also been teaching the people many things, about the character of the true members of the kingdom, and how they should live. Now as Christ continued to minister, as He continued to shine the light of His truth and holiness, and especially as He continued to demonstrate His power and authority over the kingdom of the evil one, the people began to form opinions about Him. Some stood in awe, saying that they had never seen anything like this before. They were amazed at Him and continued to hang upon His words. Some of these were undoubtedly brought home into Christ's kingdom. But others were hardened. The light did not amaze them, it only convicted them. They didn't like it. The devil was undoubtedly inciting them to hate the light as well, since it threatened his power over them. Eventually, we will see, they will hate the light so much, that they will try to put it out. From this we saw that Christ's ministry has two effects: it either softens or hardens the hearts of men. And as I said last week, we need to make sure that our hearts are not becoming harder, but softer through the ministry of His Word. We are walking down a very dangerous road if our hearts are growing callous towards Him and His truth.

But now this morning, we see something different in our text. We don't see so much the reaction of the people towards Christ, but rather Christ's reaction towards the people. As Jesus was going about ministering to the people, He found that the needs among them were great, greater than He could meet alone. There needed to be more workers, more laborers to go into the harvest, to do the work of the kingdom. Therefore, He directs His disciples, who were already being trained for that purpose, to

Pray that the Lord of the harvest would send more workers into His harvest.

I. Now the first thing we see in our text is how the work of this harvest was being carried out by Christ: namely, through teaching and preaching, and through a ministry of mercy. I believe that this is important, for this is the same way that it must be carried out today.

A. First, it is clear that Christ's ministry was a ministry of the Word.

1. This was His basic tool. It was His chief instrument.
 - a. God's Word is the truth, and it is very powerful. It will not return without accomplishing that for which it is sent forth.
 - b. Paul tells us that the Gospel is the power of God unto salvation for everyone who believes (Rom. 1:16). This is why he was not ashamed to communicate it to as many as would listen to him.
 - c. This is also why Jesus Himself used the Word.
2. And we are told that there are two ways in which He used it: He both taught and preached it.
 - a. Perhaps you never thought about this, but there is a distinction between the two.
 - b. Teaching is simply the communication of knowledge. It means to explain something to someone, which he didn't already know. But teaching also implies that the teacher has the required knowledge and ability, and therefore is qualified to teach. He must know what he is to teach. But lastly, teaching also implies authority, for the one who is in the position of a teacher, stands in a superior position to the one he teaches. Jesus said, "It is enough for the disciple that he become as his teacher" (Matt. 10:25). The goal in Christian discipleship is that the one being disciplined acquire the knowledge and the character of the one who is disciplining him. The one who disciplines, therefore, must have the very best qualifications. And he must therefore be set apart for that work, and not presume to take it upon himself.
 - c. Preaching, on the other hand, is different. It's not simply the communication of information, although it is that. It is the authoritative proclamation of that truth on behalf of another, and the call for a response to that truth. In order to do this, one must be qualified and set apart as well.
 - d. Now Jesus obviously did both. He taught many things out of the vast storehouse of His knowledge and wisdom, as well as providing the most perfect of all examples for us to follow. But He also preached. He took that truth and proclaimed it with authority, directing His people to a particular course of action, or behavior. This is what He was set apart and sent into the world by the Father to

- do.
- e. This is still the way that the work of His kingdom advances today. The ministry of the church is primarily a ministry of the Word. It is not carried on in this way by all who are in the church, but through the ministers and elders He raises up to teach and preach His Word. They are to teach, “This is what the Lord says,” and they are to preach, “Therefore, you must do it.” This is the way He calls His people out of the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of light, and how He disciplines them and trains them to do the work He has called them to.
 - f. There are similar things which He calls all of people to do, such as admonishing, exhorting and encouraging one another. But the public ministry of His Word is committed to those men who are qualified, called and set apart for this work. His work cannot advance without these workers.
- B. But we also see in our text that Jesus’ ministry was not only a ministry of the Word, it was also a ministry of mercy.
1. Besides teaching and preaching, Jesus also healed those who were sick, and those who were demon-possessed.
 - a. Now this, as I’ve said before, was to authenticate who He was: that He was a messenger from God. The miracles were meant to alert the people to the fact that God was present and speaking.
 - b. But these healings were also acts of compassion. Once, Jesus withdrew in a boat to a lonely place, after He heard about the death of John the Baptist. But the multitude heard about it, and followed Him. And when Jesus came ashore and saw them, He didn’t become angry, but felt compassion for them, and healed their sick (Matt. 14:14). And Jesus often did this, because His heart was full of compassion. We see this again in our text this morning.
 - c. If I may, I would like to read a quote from Jonathan Edwards which will help us better to understand the compassion of Christ towards His sheep, and what it is that the Lord calls us all to be as we grow more into His likeness. In his very insightful book, *The Religious Affections*, he writes, “He whom God sent into the world to be the light of the world, and head of the whole church, and the perfect example of true religion and virtue, for the imitation of all, the Shepherd whom the whole flock should follow wherever he goes, even the *Lord Jesus Christ*, was a person who was remarkably of a tender and affectionate heart; and his virtue was expressed very much in the exercise of holy affections. He was the greatest instance of ardency, vigor and strength of love, to both God and man, that ever was. It was these affections which got the victory, in that mighty struggle and conflict of his affections, in his agonies, when *he prayed more earnestly, and offered strong crying and tears*, and wrestled in tears and in blood. Such was the power of the exercises of his holy love, that they were stronger than death, and in that great struggle, overcame those strong exercises of the natural affections of fear and grief, when he was sore amazed, and his soul was exceeding sorrowful, even unto death. And he also appeared to be full of affection in the course of his life. We read of his great zeal, fulfilling that in the 69th Psalm, “The zeal of thine house hath eaten me up,” John 2:17. We read of his grief for the sins of men, Mark 3:5, “He looked round about on them with anger, being grieved for the hardness of their hearts;” and his breaking forth in tears and exclamations, from the consideration of the sin and misery of ungodly men and on the sight of the city of Jerusalem, which was full of such inhabitants, Luke 19:41, 42, “And, when he was come near, he beheld the city, and wept over it, saying, if thou hadst known, even thou, at least in this thy day, the things which belong unto thy peace! But now they are hid from thine eyes.” With Luke 13:34, “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, which killest the prophets, and stonest them that are sent unto thee; how often would I have gathered thy children together, as a hen doth gather her brood under her wings, and ye would not!” We read of Christ’s earnest desire, Luke 22:15, “With desire have I desired to eat this passover with you before I suffer.” We often read of the affection of pity or compassion in Christ, Mat. 15:32, and 18:34; Luke 7:13, and of his *being moved with compassion*, Mat. 9:36, and 14:14; and Mark 6:34. And how tender did his heart appear to be, on occasion of Mary’s and Martha’s mourning for their brother, and coming to him with their complaints and tears! Their tears soon drew tears from his eyes [as] he was affected with their grief, and wept with them; though he knew their sorrow should so soon be turned into joy, by their brother’s being raised from the dead; see John 11. And how ineffably affectionate was that last and dying discourse, which Jesus had with his eleven disciples the evening before he was crucified; when he told them he was going away, and foretold them the great difficulties and sufferings they should meet with in the world, when he was gone; and comforted and counseled them as his dear little children; and bequeathed to them his Holy Spirit, and therein his peace, and his

comfort and joy, as it were in his last will and testament, in the 13th, 14th, 15th, and 16th chapters of John; and concluded the whole with that affectionate intercessory prayer for them, and his whole church, in chap. 17. Of all the discourses ever penned, or uttered by the mouth of any man, this seems to be the most affectionate and affecting” (Religious Affections).

- d. When Peter later describes the ministry of Christ to the Gentile Cornelius and his friends, he says, “*You know of Jesus of Nazareth, how God anointed Him with the Holy Spirit and with power, and how He went about doing good, and healing all who were oppressed by the devil; for God was with Him*” (Acts 10:38). His ministry was not only a ministry of teaching and preaching, it was also a ministry of mercy, of doing good, of healing, of compassion. It was a ministry of living what it was that He taught.
- e. This is the second element that must be present in the heart of the worker in God’s kingdom: he must have a heart of compassion. He must feel for those who are truly in need, spiritually and physically. Needless to say, the Lord would have His ministers to exercise this compassion. But He would also have all of His people do so, since all of us are called to become like Jesus, and to show this same love and compassion towards one another and all men.
- f. May our gracious Lord be pleased to fill each of our hearts with this love.
- g. And so first, we see the ministry of our Lord through the Word and through the exercise of compassion, and through this we see also what the character must be of those workers who are called to labor in His fields.

II. But let us look secondly, now, at the compassion of Christ as it is stirred up by the needs He sees among the people, and how it moves Him to direct His disciples to pray that the Lord might raise up more such workers.

- A. We read, “And Jesus was going about all the cities and the villages . . . And seeing the multitudes, He felt compassion for them, because they were distressed and downcast like sheep without a shepherd” (vv. 35-36).
 1. Jesus, at this time, was traveling primarily throughout the region of Galilee, but certainly the situation must have been the same throughout all Israel.
 - a. The people were distressed, that is, they were troubled, harassed. And they were downcast.
 - b. They were like sheep without a shepherd. They had no guidance. There was no one to teach them, no one to lead them into the right ways of the Lord.
 2. Now it wasn’t that the people had no shepherds at all. They had many spiritual guides, but they were bad ones. They were the scribes, the Pharisees and the Sadducees.
 - a. The problem was they didn’t care for the people. They cared only for themselves. Their hearts were wicked. What teaching and guidance they did give the people was faulty.
 - b. Jesus was not happy with these men at all. They appeared to be holy outwardly, but inwardly they were “full of hypocrisy and lawlessness” (Matt. 23:27-28). They were not only shutting themselves out of the kingdom, but also those who were seeking to enter it (v. 13). The things they were teaching the people were making them more fit for hell than for heaven (v. 15).
 - c. With leaders like this, no wonder they were distressed and downcast. They didn’t have anyone who would lead them in the right way, who would care for their souls, who would teach them God’s truth.
 3. But now Jesus comes, and sees their condition, and has compassion on them.
 - a. Let’s not forget that these are His sheep. Even though most of these will later reject Him, these are His covenant people, and He is their Lord. Remember what John said of Christ, “He came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him” (John 1:11).
 - b. And being the faithful shepherd that He is, being so filled with compassion that He was even willing to take upon Himself their nature that He might save those who were truly His, He takes notice of their need.
- B. But He also takes notice of something else: that as great as their needs are -- even at that time --, He would not be able to meet them all. And so He says to His disciples, “The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Therefore beseech the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into His harvest” (vv. 37-38).
 1. Here again is Christ’s compassion exercised towards His people. Realizing that He and His disciples would not be able to meet the demands of what they were then confronted with, Christ directs them to pray that His Father would raise up more workers.

- a. When Christ said that the harvest was plentiful, He was either referring to the fact that a time of reaping had now come, in which He was going to winnow out the tares from the wheat, or He was referring only to the elect, the true wheat, who, even though they were relatively small in number, would still add up to a plentiful harvest.
 - b. But either way, a great work was there to be done, and the laborers were few. Really, the only laborers were Jesus and His disciples. Next time, we will see Him commission the twelve and send them out into His fields. It was possible that there might have been a few others, such as some faithful among the disciples of John or among the Old Covenant believers that had not yet heard of Jesus (Luke 9:49). But certainly, even these would have been relatively few.
 - c. And so how was this work going to be done? Where were they going to get the extra help they needed? Where were the men going to come from who were called to this ministry, who were gifted to do this work, and who had the personal qualifications to shepherd God's sheep? They could only come from one place, and that is from the Lord of the harvest, from God. And so Jesus says, "Pray to Him;" "Beseech Him;" "Implore Him;" "Beg Him, that He might raise up more workers to meet this need." "The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Therefore beseech the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into His harvest."
2. Now the question facing us this morning from this passage is, Does this need still exist? And should we therefore pray this same prayer?
- a. I think the answer is obvious, isn't it? When you look around at the shepherds who are currently shepherding the Lord's flock, you do find a few faithful men who are actually doing the work, who are not afraid to declare the whole counsel of God, who are being faithful to their charge, who are preaching and teaching all the things which are profitable to the souls of Christ's sheep and are showing them compassion. But you also find many who, if they know the truth, are afraid to speak it because they fear man, many who simply don't have the truth and are preaching lies, and many more who don't care for the sheep at all, but are simply seeking to benefit themselves through their ministries. Yes, the situation still exists today.
 - b. But has Christ's heart changed? Is He no longer concerned for His sheep? No. His heart hasn't changed. He still has compassion for His sheep. He still wants them to be gathered. He still wants them to be faithfully shepherded and guided. He still wants them to hear His truth and wants His truth to be applied to them. And so He tells us that we must pray, pray that the Lord would raise up workers to send into His harvest. The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few.
 - c. And so, let us pray. Let us commit ourselves to pray for the glory of Christ and His church. Let us beseech the Lord of the harvest to raise up laborers, to raise up faithful men, men who know His Word, men who have the necessary gifts, men of compassion, who are energized and filled with the Spirit, who love the Lord and His people, who are not afraid to put their hands to the plow and to do the work, and who are not afraid to speak His truth. This is one of the most powerful ways that the Lord advances His kingdom: through the ministry of faithful ministers and elders. And this, if we really commit ourselves to prayer for this need, is one of the ways in which we can really help to advance God's kingdom. Perhaps, if we faithfully pray, the Lord will raise up men like this from our midst. The need is so great here and throughout God's kingdom. Pray that He would be pleased to do so.
 - d. Pray also that the Lord would use you to do this same work on a more personal level. Even though the Lord has not called all of His people to labor at the public level, He has given to each of us the responsibility to reach the lost on a private level. Pray that the Lord would be pleased to use each of us to bring His elect into His glorious kingdom from our families and our neighborhoods and places of employment. Pray that the Lord would fill all of our hearts with compassion, so that we would strongly desire to do this.
 - e. And now that we might have the strength to do what our Lord calls us to this morning, let us also prepare to receive this spiritual meal that He has provided. Let us quiet our hearts and minds before Him, and ready ourselves to come to His table now, that we might receive not only the physical elements, but also the spiritual grace, the help of God's Spirit, which He offers to us. Amen.