



Matthew 9:35–38

35 Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. 36 When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. 37 Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. 38 Ask

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

Reflection

Matthew uses almost exactly the same words in Matthew 9:35 as he did in chapter 4:23. He opens and closes this section of his gospel with,

Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness.

In between, are Jesus' words and his works, his message and his mission; his preaching in Sermon on the Mount in Mat-

threw chapters five to seven, and his ministry of healing in Matthew chapters eight and nine. Jesus has come to bring healing to world by the power of his word. But he can't do it on his own; it is not God's good design for him to do it on his own. The time has come to involve others in his mission.

The picture Matthew present us with in our passage today is of Jesus perhaps pausing for a moment and looking up at the vast crowds who have been drawn to him. He may have been working his way tirelessly, sunrise to sunset, through a seemingly endless queue of people coming to him for healing. Or perhaps he's pausing briefly during one of his powerful sermons, letting a point he's made sink in, really hit home.

As he stands there he's overwhelmed with compassion for the huge crowds. Where are Israel's teachers? Who is looking after God's precious flock? Here they are harassed and helpless, coming to him in their droves. They're confused, directionless and in desperate physical and spiritual need. There are wolves running amongst them, they're in great danger; false teachers in their midst and pagan cultures all around them. Many are leaving the fold never to return. What are they to make of sin's effect over their lives? Who is there to make sense of all the pain and suffering and oppression that they are enduring – and to help them to continue trusting in God's plan? To explain to them that while their physical needs might seem pressing, they're nothing compared to their spiritu-

al needs. Who is there to care for them, both body and soul? Where are Israel's leaders? Huge crowds, endless crowds, all of God's precious children, harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.

In this moment, Jesus turns to his disciples and says these famous words:

“The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.”

It must have been a powerful moment. The first moment Jesus put voice to the fact that he could only heal so many, preach so much; that he needed help on his mission. The first commissioning of his fol-

lowers to continue in his footsteps. It's the beginning of the Great Commission. The unreached people of the world need more preachers and missionaries and ministers of the gospel, Jesus can only personally encounter a small number, so he's turning to his followers for help.

But do you notice that he firstly asks them to pray — not to 'do' — but to 'pray.' There is a bountiful harvest before them, ripe for the picking, people ready to respond to the good news of the gospel. Jesus needs our help in his mission, but it starts, as always, with prayer. Not in our strength, but in his. We can't do it on our own either, we need God to raise up help for us. God is the 'Lord of the Harvest,' it's his harvest, his great work, he will supply the workers, he will guarantee the fruit. Remind your-

self of this, pray to him for his help, pray that he would raise up workers to work alongside you. Pray that God would marshal his church so that together all Christians everywhere are united in the work of his kingdom, spreading the gospel in his world, through our words and our works just as Jesus modelled for us.

Think

Take a little longer than usual now to consider these two metaphors. Jesus, the Good Shepherd, laid day his life for his sheep. He died for them and sent his Spirit to raise up under-shepherds as 1 Peter 5 describes us, to follow in his footsteps. Those amongst us in positions of leadership and influence in the church, whether formally or informally, are to guard and pro-

protect God's precious flock. Feeding them, nourishing them, teaching them from his life giving word. When one of them strays from the flock and is in danger of being cut off forever, moving heaven and earth to bring them back into the fold. These aren't our sheep, they belong to God. Consider the inestimable privilege and the depths of the responsibility of shepherding God's flock until Jesus returns. Of guiding God's little ones through the dangerous of life to eternal security in his arms. Seeing them safely home. Could there be harder, or more rewarding, or more important work?

Perhaps only when we consider Jesus' second metaphor. There are seven and a half billion people living in our world today. Many of them have never once heard the words of life. But don't despair; pray. The

harvest is plentiful and when we ask the Lord of the harvest to raise up workers he will not disappoint. This great harvest will come in, this great harvest is coming in. So pray that it would come in all the more, pray that the Lord would raise up gospel workers for his kingdom. Are you praying for the spread of the gospel? Are you praying that God would raise up preachers and missionaries and evangelists and Scripture teachers and kindly neighbours over the fence only too happy to share the gospel, first with their lives and then over a cup of tea?

Pray

Let's stop and do so now. This talk today is shorter so that you can pray for longer. Start with these words, 'Lord, the harvest

is plentiful but the workers are few. Lord of the harvest, please send out workers into your harvest field ...' and I'll leave the rest to you.