

Pray for Laborers

Matthew 9:35-38

Kimberly and I often begin our day reading together from Spurgeon's devotional entitled *Morning and Evening*. We have found this devotional to be a wealth of spiritual encouragement. Yesterday's devotion was not an exception to this rule and as we read it, I was struck by how closely it fits with our "Pray the Miracle" sermon series.

Spurgeon reminded us of our absolute dependence upon the LORD to bring life into our souls. **We cannot create spiritual life in our soul** apart from a miracle of God. **We cannot will ourselves** to love God. **We cannot make ourselves** care about the lost. **We cannot energize ourselves to** become zealous for evangelism.

Spurgeon's devotion begins with a verse from Psalm 119:37, ". . . give me life in your ways." *Spurgeon comments, "The psalmist confesses that he is dull, heavy, all but dead. Perhaps, dear reader, you feel the same.*

We are so sluggish that the best motives cannot quicken us, apart from the Lord Himself.

What! Will not hell quicken me? *Shall I think of sinners perishing, and yet not be awakened?*

Will not heaven quicken me? *Can I think of the reward that awaits the righteous and yet be cold?*

Will not death quicken me? *Can I think of dying and standing before my God, and yet be slothful in my Master's service?*

Will not Christ's love constrain me? *Can I think of His dear wounds, can I sit at the foot of His cross, and not be stirred with fervency and zeal?*

It seems so! No mere consideration can quicken us to zeal, but God Himself must do it; hence the cry, "Give me life in your ways."

We open our Bible together this morning to Matthew 9:35-38.

Main Idea: The harvest of souls is the LORD's harvest, not ours. The harvest is so plentiful and the laborers are so few. Let us pray that the Lord of the harvest will send more workers into God's field to do God's work.

These several verses in Matthew 9 teach us so much truth about God's ministry in our world and about our part in it. But before we look at Matthew 9:35-38, let us consider the context of Jesus' statements.

In verse 34, the Pharisees condemn Jesus. They hate Jesus for disagreeing with them about God, about life, about religion, about worship. They say, "*He casts out demons by the prince of demons.*"

Satan so often uses the tool of condemnation to disrupt God's kingdom. He is called the "accuser of the brethren" for good reason. The Pharisee's condemnation is intended to place Jesus on the sidelines . . . to remove His influence over others. Notice how Jesus responds to them . . . or I might say does NOT respond. Jesus answers by ignoring His critics and just continuing on doing good. Matthew tells us that Jesus simply "went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom . . ."

Truth: Sometimes the best response to condemnation is to simply keep doing the work of the LORD. Our good deeds will often be a better answer to our critics than any verbal defense that we could make.

I do not overstate this idea by asserting that it is never right to defend oneself. IN Matthew 12:25-32, Jesus responds to a similar accusation by arguing that Satan is not so foolish to war against himself and that a kingdom divided against itself cannot stand. But the idea here in Matthew 9 is that SOMETIMES it is most influential for God's glory to respond to accusations by simply continuing in the good work of the LORD. We do not have any sense that the accusations caused Jesus to lose His peace . . . His joy . . . His gentleness.

If you are taking notes this morning, we learn about Jesus engagement with the broken world around Him.

The Ministry of Jesus in our World

The Compassion of Jesus upon our World

The Perspective of Jesus about our World

The Petition from Jesus for our World

The Ministry of Jesus in our World

“And 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. (Matthew 9:36)

This description is almost an exact duplicate of something Matthew wrote earlier about Jesus in Matthew 5:23.

“And he went throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction among the people.” (Matthew 4:23 [ESV](#))

Notice three components that are highlighted about Jesus’ ministry:

1. Jesus taught people the Word of God.

The people in Jesus’ day were being taught traditions of men when they went to the synagogue. They were given man-made ideas about what is important to God and what God desires from us. They were given great moralistic messages, but no fire from heaven . . . no prophetic word from the LORD. Contrary to the Pharisees Jesus took God’s Book to the people and fed them not the word of man, but the Word of God. **Jesus knows that faith comes from hearing and hearing comes from the preaching of the Word of Christ.**

2. Jesus proclaimed the Good News of the Kingdom.

I love that phrase “The Good News of the Kingdom”. Think of a Kingdom that is filled with joy and peace and righteousness and hope and beauty and blessing. Then think of this present age and the kingdom of darkness that is all around us . . . with wars and disease and anger and crime and abuse and poverty and ugliness. Would you not want to live in the beautiful Kingdom? Jesus proclaimed the Good News that this Kingdom is near . . . right at hand. What hope Jesus stirred in the hearts of all those crushed by this present kingdom!

Jesus invested His ministry in proclaiming the truth about that Kingdom. This means that **Jesus kept clean lines regarding what He spent time to teach and what He DID NOT spend time to teach.**

The Good News of the Kingdom centers on the King who rules in the Kingdom of God. Jesus taught that God the Father sent His only Son into the world to be His King-Messiah. This King is like no other King . . . He is all-powerful, infinite in

love, perfect in goodness and full of mercy. This King will suffer to bear the punishment of the sins of the people so that through His death everyone who believes would be declared righteous in the sight of God. God's King will overcome Satan and sin and death as He will rise from the dead and offer peace on earth and good will to man. Jesus proclaimed Himself to be the One sent from heaven to be King. This is the message that Jesus proclaimed.

How might we share in the blessings of this perfect Kingdom? *"From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.'"* (Matthew 4:17 [ESV](#)). Repent means to turn away from . . . Turn away from the kingdom of darkness and place your life under the Kingship of God's King! Believe in Jesus!

Truth: When Jesus preached the Kingdom, He did not merely gave out some good information about God's rule in this world, but that He called people to repent of sin and to believe in God's King-Messiah in order to receive eternal life.

3. Jesus authenticated His message with healing miracles.

Jesus miracles are "signs" that would prove His message is from the LORD. The LORD often authenticated His messenger's message with signs to reveal that He is the One behind the message and that the message should be believed. For instance, remember when the LORD sent Moses to both the Israelites and to Pharaoh with the message of redemption for the people to be set free from bondage. Moses was concerned.

"Then Moses answered, 'But behold, they will not believe me or listen to my voice, for they will say, 'The LORD did not appear to you.'" (Exodus 4:1 [ESV](#))

God's response reveals how the LORD gives confidence that a messenger with new revelation is truly sent from God.

"The LORD said to him, 'What is that in your hand?' He said, 'A staff.' And he said, 'Throw it on the ground.' So he threw it on the ground, and it became a serpent, and Moses ran from it. But the LORD said to Moses, 'Put out your hand and catch it by the tail'—so he put out his hand and caught it, and it became a staff in his hand— 'that they may believe that the LORD, the God of their fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has appeared to you.' Again, the LORD said to him, 'Put your hand inside your cloak.' And he put his hand inside his cloak, and when he took it out, behold, his hand was leprous like snow. Then God said,

“Put your hand back inside your cloak.” So he put his hand back inside his cloak, and when he took it out, behold, it was restored like the rest of his flesh. “If they will not believe you,” God said, “or listen to the first sign, they may believe the latter sign. If they will not believe even these two signs or listen to your voice, you shall take some water from the Nile and pour it on the dry ground, and the water that you shall take from the Nile will become blood on the dry ground.”” (Exodus 4:2-9 [ESV](#))

I belabor this a bit because so many good people are confused about Jesus’ ministry and mission. When you ask, “What did Jesus come to earth to do? What was His work?” Many say things like, “To heal the sick. To help the poor. To perform miracles.” And yes, Jesus did these things. But these were secondary to the securing of the Gospel through His death and the proclamation of the Gospel to the world.

In short, Jesus’ earthly ministry is two-fold:

1. To secure redemption for His people by giving His life as an atoning sacrifice on the cross.
2. To proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom.

When we ask the question, “What is the mission of Jesus’ church?” Jesus passes the second part of his ministry to us. We are given the responsibility to proclaim the message of the Good News. Jesus commissions us taking His message of the Gospel of the Kingdom and proclaiming it to our world.

“These twelve Jesus sent out, instructing them, “Go nowhere among the Gentiles and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. And proclaim as you go, saying, ‘The kingdom of heaven is at hand.’” (Matthew 10:5-7 [ESV](#))

Truth: The proclamation of the Gospel is central to every disciples’ ministry. We are given a message by the One who sends us into this world. Our faithfulness to Jesus’ ministry is rooted in our understanding Jesus’ Gospel and then proclaiming it.

There are a variety of gifts and a variety of ministries that each disciple may have in Jesus’ church. But central to every disciples’ ministry is the proclamation of our King’s message.

“Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.” (2 Corinthians 5:20 [ESV](#))

Application: Let us ask the LORD for a zeal to cherish the message Jesus gives to us and to announce it to the people in our lives.

The Ministry of Jesus in our World

The Compassion of Jesus upon our World

“When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.” (Matthew 9:36 [ESV](#))

The Pharisees were supposed to be the people who shepherded the Israelites toward worship of the LORD. But instead the Pharisees “harassed” the sheep with man-made traditions and with an emphasis on external forms to the exclusion of internal life. They were placing the heavy weight of legal burdens instead of relieving those burdens through Gospel ministry. People were being crushed by condemnation, by shame and by the guilt of their sins and the false shepherds were not lifting a finger to help them.

The Pharisees were supposed to lift up the people to the LORD through prayer and teaching of the Word. But the Pharisees abandoned the people’s spiritual lives and left them “helpless”. The Pharisees considered the common people below them and not worthy of their attention.

A sheep without a shepherd is a sheep that will soon perish. A sheep cannot lead itself to water or green pasture. A sheep cannot protect itself from apex predators. A sheep cannot bind up its own wounds. **A sheep without a shepherd will die in misery and hopelessness. That is us without Jesus.**

Jesus comes to offer Himself to be our Shepherd . . . our Leader, our Provider, our Protector.

This Shepherd loves His sheep and cares for them.

This Shepherd lays down His life for His sheep.

This Shepherd speaks to His sheep and knows each one by name.

“My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand. I and the Father are one.”” (John 10:27-30 [ESV](#))

Notice that Jesus “saw” the crowds. I love this description of our Good Shepherd! He sees us! Wherever you are right now, Jesus “sees” you. Your needs, your hurts, your troubles, your traumas, your sorrows, your failings . . . Jesus SEES you. You are not unnoticed. And what is His response to seeing you?

Answer: He has compassion on you. In spite of all our failings and our weaknesses and our troubles. He moves with kindness toward us. He offers to be your Shepherd. He wants to feed you, to bind up your wounds, to lead you beside quiet waters, to restore your soul to health and life.

Truth: Jesus ministry to us begins with His compassion for us.

When you think of Jesus, do you see His heart of compassion for you? Satan comes and whispers, *“Jesus does not care about you. Jesus only wants to take what is yours away from you. If you follow Him, He will lead you away from what is good and beautiful and pleasing and true.”*

“When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.” (Matthew 9:36 [ESV](#))

He sees you. Do you see Him?

Friends, when the LORD is our Shepherd, we never lack any good thing!

**“The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters.
He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name’s sake.
Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.” (Psalm 23:1-4 [ESV](#))**

Application: Receive Jesus as Your Shepherd. Turn away from any false shepherd. Repent of trying to be your own Shepherd. Give yourself to the Good Shepherd who alone can care for you and give you life.

In our church’s elder daily prayer email, Pastor Josh wrote this comment:

What do you see in crowds? Isn't it amazing what Jesus saw: after an exhausting cycle of sacrificial ministry; when faced with yet another throng of needy people,

*Jesus looked with compassion and saw opportunity—opportunity for gospel ministry and an eternal harvest that drove him to encourage others to pray desperately that God would send out laborers into that harvest to care for his people. **He sees us. He knows those who are harassed and helpless.** And when he looks, he cares. May we grow that kind of heart, and join in prayer for people fellow shepherds and laborers who share it. Josh Beakley*

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Jesus now turns to His disciples who have chosen Him as their Shepherd and King. They are no longer harassed and helpless. They are not fed and protected. They have been forgiven by God of all their sins. They have been granted eternal life. Now Jesus commissions these disciples to participate in His ministry in the world. Once fed by Jesus, they now participate in bringing Jesus' shepherding care to others.

"Then he said to **his disciples**, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few;" (Matthew 9:37 [ESV](#))

When Jesus looks upon the world as God's field to produce fruit for God's glory, what does Jesus see? What is Jesus' perspective?

- 1. The harvest is plentiful.**
- 2. The workers are few.**

Question: Why do you suppose Jesus said this to his disciples? Answer: Because this is not the perspective that disciples naturally have.

If I were to have asked you this morning, "Tell me what you think about the spiritual condition of our world." What would you say?

I often would answer by emphasizing the world's spiritual darkness, the world's hardness of heart, the world's love of sin, the world's rejection of God, the power of Satan to deceive. And yes, all these things are true. **BUT there is something else that is true in spite of all that. This is the thing that we need the eyes of Jesus to be able to see.**

Truth: God is still working miracles in our world to bring sinners to repentance and the lost into His kingdom.

"Look, I tell you, lift up your eyes, and see that the fields are white for harvest." (John 4:35 [ESV](#))

The harvest is plentiful not because people are naturally eager to HEAR the Gospel and respond to it. The harvest is plentiful because God is eager to save those who are His.

Yet Jesus tells His disciples that the workers are few! Now the Pharisees prove that the critics of the workers are not few. Instead of laboring in God's field, the Pharisees spent their time criticizing and plotting to take Jesus down.

The word picture Jesus gives makes every farmer want to weep. Think of this. The farmer looks over His field during the harvest season and sees the wheat bursting from the ground with a fullness that he has never witnessed before. The combine is broken and the wheat needs to be harvested by hand. Winter is approaching and he knows that he has a limited window to bring the crop in to the barns. Any crop left out in the field will be lost. He goes out to hire workers. He needs 100 men to help him. He only finds a dozen. He pleads and pleads. Does anyone know any place where he can hire more workers? Crickets.

Truth: The problem Jesus' church faces is never with not having enough opportunities to witness or make disciples. The problem the church faces is having laborers who are willing and committed to Jesus' ministry.

Notice that this problem is not that there are not enough people going to church or attending church. The problem is that there are not enough **workers** in God's field. This may be because the people who could do the work are distracted by other affairs in life. This may be because the people who could do the work are discouraged by the work. **But the perspective of Jesus about God's field and God's harvest is that the workers are few.** This is not the complaint of a pastor of a church. This is Jesus telling all his disciples about a problem that we can expect to confront as we are involved in His work.

Jesus uses the term "laborer" because his calling is not all fellowship and fun. The work of Jesus' ministry is hard. The labor is rewarding! But it IS work. And this

labor is often difficult, often draining, often discouraging. I think these are some of the reasons why the laborers are few.

Remember that the harvest is plentiful! God will use you in the work of the LORD.

Question: So what is the church to do when we face such a shortage of workers? We could complain about it. We could point our fingers at people who we think should be working. We could get discouraged by it. What is the church to do?

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“therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.”
(Matthew 9:38 [ESV](#))

Truth: God’s method always begins with prayer. Prayer does not make other actions unnecessary, but it does make other actions spiritually meaningful.

Imagine two separate scenarios for addressing the need of our church for more laborers to teach the Gospel to our children. In Scenario #1, the children’s ministry team spends hours strategizing over a recruiting plan. Then, after creating a plan, they execute it with phone calls, personal invitations and public announcements. At the end of the recruitment campaign, Bethany has 25 new teachers! In Scenario #2, the children’s ministry team asks the church to pray for more teachers who possess a zeal for the Gospel and for the souls of children. The elders pray over this need at their weekly Wednesday prayer meeting. The other teachers earnestly pray for more laborers. Our congregation prays on Sunday morning. At the end of the prayer effort, Bethany has 5 new teachers!

Which scenario was more successful? Here is what I know: **God is most glorified when we use the means that He ordains.**

Jesus is not saying that any worker will do. Jesus calls us to pray because He knows that God sends the RIGHT KIND of WORKERS into His field. God does not desire self-appointed workers or arm-twisted workers in His field. The LORD

desires who hear His voice and see that labor in His field is **a noble calling, not a cold obligation.**

Laborers who are filled with the joy of the LORD are the kind of laborers that Jesus' has in mind. These kind of workers will not quit the field when the sun is hot or when the baseball season starts. These kind of workers will not condemn other workers who they think are not doing the work the right way. These kind of workers will communicate the love of Jesus and the joy of God's kingdom work.

To have THESE KIND OF LABORERS requires prayer. And while we pray, we must remember that Jesus is the LORD of the Harvest. He is not detached from this work, but central to it.

Evangelism is the work of the LORD from beginning to the end:

1. The LORD created the world and everything in it.
2. The LORD created every person in His image with the capacity to know Him.
3. The LORD sent His Son to die as a man for mankind on a cross. The LORD provided the way for the image of God to be restored and our relationship with God to be reconciled.
4. The LORD opens blind eyes to see His glory in the face of Jesus. The LORD speaks and dead souls come to life.
5. The LORD sends out laborers to speak the Gospel.
6. The LORD opens doors, gives clear words and grants boldness to feeble instruments.
7. The LORD uses the feeble instruments to perform His miracle of spiritual life in the soul of every person who believes in His Son.
8. The LORD will make all things new . . . and the Gospel will have the impact on the world that the LORD sovereignly purposed it to have!

Evangelism is the work of the LORD from beginning to the end. THEREFORE, should we not begin every evangelistic work with prayer? We have NO ACCESS in ourselves to create the miracle of spiritual life in dead souls through our own efforts. Our only access to such power is the LORD. So let us pray.

Let me ask you, "Do you think that the lack of workers is a problem for the LORD?" Answer: No.

My grandchildren and I were watching a children's video about Corrie ten Boom. You may remember that Corrie and her family hid Jews in their home in Holland during the time of the Holocaust. They were caught and they all were sent to a concentration camp. Corrie's family members perished while in Nazi confinement. In the video, there was a statement that Corrie made that grabbed my heart:

"There is no panic in heaven! God has no problems, only plans." Corrie ten Boom

That statement is true in EVERY circumstance. You might be facing a health crisis or a broken relationship or a financial need or an emotional distress or a spiritual battle. God. Has. No. Problems. Only plans. So we pray to the One who has the Plan.

Truth: When we pray the LORD hears and then acts upon our prayers. Our praying results in the LORD sending out laborers.

The word "sent out" is very forceful. It is the same word used for the expulsion of a demon from a possessed man. It takes supernatural power to drive out a demon and it requires this same power to drive a self-willed disciple into the LORD's work.

When we have need for workers in God's field, we ask the Lord of the Harvest to send out workers!

Application: Will you commit to asking the LORD to send more workers whose hearts are filled with God's Spirit? Will you pray for your own life to be a worker in God's field? Will you pray for others to become workers in God's field?

As I look over this congregation, I think of the potential we have in our own assembly to reap God's harvest if we would be spiritually roused to the LORD's work in our community. I see young men and women full of talents and energy. I see older men and women full of experience and wisdom. I see children full of faith and hope. We the LORD would do if we all caught fire for His glory. I see employers who would bless their workers. I see nurses and doctors who would bring light to the suffering. I see teachers who would point children to the Savior.

And as I think of this I ask, “Will we see the power of Christ bring miracles through our church?” I urge you all to pray for such an outcome!!

Jesus gives us this command, “Pray earnestly!” Pray with heart! Pray with urgency! Pray with faith! Pray in the Spirit!

Conclusion:

At this point, we might think that the only necessary thing related to evangelism is prayer. Is there anything more to consider? Yes. After calling the disciples to pray for laborers, Jesus immediately sent them out as workers. So the matter is not ONLY an issue of prayer. But for this series, it is our emphasis.

Will you make the work of witness a matter of prayer over the next seven days?

Pray for open doors. Clear words to communicate the Gospel truly. Boldness to overcome fears and Satan’s opposition. And workers.

Main Idea: The harvest of souls is the LORD’s harvest, not ours. The harvest is so plentiful and the laborers are so few. Let us pray that the Lord of the harvest will send more workers into God’s field to do God’s work.

Father in Heaven, please send more laborers into Your harvest. Awaken your followers who are sitting on the sideline to see Your heart for your local church. Awaken all of us to see Your mission to bring the Gospel to every person. Please grant us more Spirit-filled, Christ-impassioned evangelists from our own church to proclaim the love of Jesus in their neighborhoods, families, workplaces, and social groups. We KNOW that you perform miracles when your Gospel is clearly and boldly proclaimed. We pray the miracle of revived laborers for your glory. Amen