



Jonesboro Heights Baptist Church
Sanford, North Carolina

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Workers for God's Harvest
Matthew 9:35-38

Compassion can be a powerful thing, can't it?

When I was probably about ten or twelve years old, I was with my father one day at the local general store. As we were leaving, we saw smoke rising a couple of miles away. It was the kind of smoke plume that strikes terror in your heart, because you just know it's a house fire.

Now through the years, my father had been a volunteer firefighter. He was a charter member of the volunteer rescue squad in our town, and he had run a wrecker service for many years. Back in those days, he was the guy in our rural community that people often called on when there was some kind of emergency.

So Daddy did what he usually did when he saw an emergency need—we rushed toward the smoke. And surely enough, it was a friend's house. It was doubly tragic, though, because ten or fifteen years earlier, this same family had lost a house on this same spot in a fire.

There's a lot I still remember about that day—my friend Nicky sobbing as he watched his house burn, his father Bobby just shaking his head, the box of bullets for Bobby's pistol exploding when the fire got to them. But the thing that stands out in my mind the most about that event is that by nightfall that evening, my father had gone around to our neighbors with an old cigar box and collected several hundred dollars to give to this family to help them in their time of crisis. Out of compassion for a neighbor and his family, Daddy laid aside his work in his auto repair shop that afternoon and responded quickly to their need in a tangible way.

Nearly 2,000 years ago, as Jesus was going about through the towns and villages of Galilee teaching and preaching and healing, he stood one day and looked out over the crowds who had gathered. He saw more than crowds, though. He saw a ready harvest of people who were in need, and it moved him to the very core of his being.

This is a powerful picture of Jesus. In fact, to me it's one of the most deeply moving pictures of Jesus in the Gospels—one that ought to stir us to action.

Moved with compassion, Jesus urged his disciples to pray for more workers for God's harvest. This picture of Jesus should reach out and grab us! It should burn into the very depths of our beings the truth that *we must see people through Jesus' eyes, and pray earnestly for more workers for God's harvest.* "Worker's for God's Harvest"—that's what this text is about! That day, more workers were needed for God's harvest. And they're still needed today!

This morning I want us to focus on what God is calling you and me to do in the mission he's given to us as his church to reach out with the gospel to those who are lost without Christ—in God's harvest here in our community, throughout our state and our nation, and around the world.

There are three questions that we need to ask as we look at this text this morning.

First, *are we looking at people through Jesus' eyes* (9:35-36)?

How do we look at people? How do we see the person who lives next door to us? What about the one next to us at work or at school? What about those we run into in the stores or the restaurants or businesses we frequent? How do we view people we meet on the street? What about the street people—the homeless, the drunks, the drug addicts, or those who are on the street because of some kind of mental illness? What about people from around the world—the strangers and aliens among us and those we see on the news?

This text tells us how Jesus saw people. As he was teaching in their synagogues and preaching the good news of the kingdom of God, people were coming to him to listen. Many of them were sick. They had a variety of diseases and disorders. And he was healing them!

Matthew tells us how Jesus saw the people as he looked out over the crowds.

He saw them as men and women who needed to hear the good news of God's kingdom. They needed to know that God's reign had come near in Jesus. They needed to know that what they were experiencing was not all that there was. They needed to turn from the way they were heading to God and his ways, submitting to his rule. They needed to hear the good news that because God reigns, they could be set free from their sin and suffering.

That's why Jesus was "healing every disease and sickness" (9:35).¹ As he saw the crowds, he saw them as individuals with special needs. He knew that this one had this disease, and that one had that sickness. He saw them as people who needed to be loved and helped and healed and restored—and most of all, forgiven and set free.

And when he looked out at the crowds, Matthew says that "he had compassion on them" (9:36). The Greek word Matthew uses here is a very powerful one. It means to be moved very deeply with compassion or pity. When Jesus saw them, he was moved to the very depth of his being.

And here's why. It wasn't that Jesus saw something in them that moved him to some kind of affection for them. It wasn't that they somehow earned his favor. No, it was a compassion that grew out of who he is. You see, Jesus had come to shepherd his people. Time and time again, in passages like Psalm 23 and Ezekiel 34, the Old Testament pictures God as a shepherd. And in Ezekiel 34, during the exile in Babylon, God says that he himself will shepherd his people, and that he will set his servant David over his people as a shepherd to tend them. This was, of course, a promise of the Messiah. And Jesus is that promised Messiah!

So as he looked out over the multitudes, his shepherd's heart was moved, "because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd" (9:36). What those who were supposed to be their shepherds (the Jewish leaders) offered bound them rather than set them free. It ignored those who didn't follow every detail of their traditions about the law and how it should be observed. Rules were more important than a relationship with God. And those who couldn't keep all the rituals and rules were left to wander like sheep without a shepherd.

Are we looking at people through Jesus' eyes? Do we see them the way he does—as people who need good news, as people with special needs, as those who are harassed and made helpless by religion without relationship, by the world and materialism, all things that promise meaning but don't deliver? Are we moved to the very depths of our being, realizing that people are *lost* without Jesus Christ?

We sang it with the choir this morning:

¹ Scripture quotations are from the *New International Version*.

Every day they pass me by. I can see it in their eye;
empty people filled with care, headed who knows where.
On they go through private pain, living fear to fear.
Laughter hides the silent cries only Jesus hears.

We are called to take His light to a world where wrong seems right;
What could be too great a cost for sharing life with one who's lost?
Through His love our hearts can feel all the grief they bear.
They must hear the words of life only we can share.

People need the Lord. People need the Lord.
At the end of broken dreams, He's the open door.
People need the Lord. People need the Lord.
When will we realize that we must give our lives?
For people need the Lord. People need the Lord!²

Are we looking at people through Jesus' eyes?

Now here's the second question. *Are we praying for the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into his harvest (9:37-39)?*

As Jesus looked out at these harassed and helpless multitudes, he saw how great the harvest of the kingdom was. Often Jesus used the harvest image to talk about his return and the Judgment, but here he was talking about those who needed to be brought into the kingdom. "The harvest is plentiful," he told his disciples, "but the workers are few" (9:37). And he knew there must be workers for his harvest! There were many who would gladly hear his gospel, especially the poor, the oppressed, and the outcast. He realized that the harvest was *God's harvest*, so he urged his disciples to pray for workers, since God must send them out.

Friends, the harvest is still plentiful today, if we look at people through Jesus' eyes. In this shift that's taking place in our culture from a modern perspective to a postmodern one, many people are more open to the spiritual side of things. They're open to hearing different understandings of reality. And while they may hear the gospel as one voice among many, at least many of them are willing to hear it!

So there's a tremendous need for workers for the kingdom harvest today! We need people who are willing to go to foreign lands to live out and share the gospel among those who have never heard, both short-term and long-term. We need people who are willing to go to other parts of our state and nation to do this among people who may have heard about Jesus only in passing. We need those who would reach out to the nations of the world who have come to our nation, the international communities right here in our country.

And don't miss this—we need disciples who are willing to reach out to people *right here* in Sanford, *right here in Jonesboro!* There are many who were born here and are living right here around us who have never really heard the gospel. Oh, they may have heard it in passing, but they've never really seen the difference it can make in someone's life or in a community. And the nations have come to Jonesboro, too!

² Greg Nelson and Phil McHugh, "People Need the Lord"; lyrics © Shepherd's Fold Music; River Oaks Music Company.

We need to send and support and pray for missionaries, yes! But as disciples of Jesus and as a congregation, we need to *be missionaries right here!*

Are we praying for God to send out workers into his harvest? It's *his* harvest; *he* must call, *he* must send. But he calls us to *pray* for workers! Are *you* praying for workers?

Well if you are, then listen very carefully. Here's the third question. *Are you willing to work in God's harvest* (10:1-5)?

You see, this is what Paul Harvey would call "The Rest of the Story."

Those same disciples that Jesus urged to pray for workers, he turned around and sent out in 10:1-5.

He called his twelve disciples to him and gave them authority
to drive out evil spirits and to heal every disease and sickness . . .
These twelve Jesus sent out . . .

If you pray, he just might send you, or your son or daughter . . .

We might be like William Carey, who worked so hard to get British Baptists to send missionaries, then was the first one they sent. Or like a young pastor I heard about years ago who preached a mission message and his wife responded at the invitation! Or like the shoe salesman I heard about who, despite his limited education, felt God's call to start a boys' Sunday School class. He was told that he'd have to go out and get the boys, and he did—by beating the first one in a game of marbles! That boy and his friends came. Later through his influence, they became Christians. And of those thirteen boys, eleven ended up going into the ministry.

And so I ask you: are you willing to work in God's harvest? There are several ways God might call you to do that.

Obviously, every believer should be *a witness* as we live out the gospel and tell others about Jesus.

Every believer should pray for workers for the harvest, and support those workers in prayer.

Every believer should support God's mission financially through systematic, sacrificial giving to the church and through special mission offerings.

And every believer should ask what God would have him or her to do in the outreach and ministry of the local church, or in vocational ministry, or in missions—short-term or career, local or national or international.

And as a church, we should be asking how God wants to work through us, and be willing to work in his harvest in whatever role he wants to use us!

Nearly twenty years ago now, Jo Ann and I went through a spiritual struggle about this. We went to the point of talking to what was then the Foreign Mission Board of the SBC. Through that struggle and a series of events, we came to understand that our role was to do our part by helping call out and support those God calls to go. It was not an easy decision. But God calls us to work in his harvest in different ways and roles. The question is whether we're willing to work in whatever role God calls us to in his harvest.

Moved with compassion, Jesus urged his disciples to pray for more workers for God's harvest.

Are you looking at people through Jesus' eyes?

Are you praying for workers?

Will you be a worker, here or wherever God may send you?

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

†*MEG*