SEND OUT WORKERS

Matthew 9:18–38

Key Verses: 9:37–38

“Then he said to his disciples, ‘The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.’”

In our world cybersecurity has become a critical issue. On Friday there was a worldwide ransomware attack that affected more than 100,000 organizations in 150 countries. In Great Britain, hospitals and emergency rooms had to turn people away because patient records had been compromised. Cybersecurity is such a new phenomenon in our age of the internet that most universities don’t even have a major in it. There are so few people trained in cybersecurity. Similarly, in today’s passage Jesus sees a crisis in doing the work of the kingdom of God: he says there’s an overwhelming need, but so few workers. As Jesus himself is constantly confronted by people’s needs, he calls his disciples to join him as workers and to pray for more workers. What Jesus said 2,000 years ago is just as true today as it was then. "The harvest is plentiful, but workers are few." Jesus uses imagery from agriculture, which was the everyday experience of people of his time. Everybody knew that at harvest time, people had to stop whatever they were doing and go out into the fields to harvest what had been planted. During harvest, nobody would go on vacation, decide to read a new book, experiment with a new recipe or sit around arguing about ideas—it was time for every available pair of hands to work in the harvest field—even the elderly and children joined in. In a sense, ever since Jesus launched his ministry, it's been harvest time for the kingdom of God. The good news of God’s kingdom still gets at the root of everyone’s human problems and needs and gives us real answers and real direction.

But what is a kingdom harvest worker? Just as in farming, people need to know what they're doing. Harvesting can be done only when the crop is ripe. Too early or too late, and the crop will be ruined. Some plants are ready and some are not, so it takes a discerning eye. The best example of a kingdom harvest worker is our Lord Jesus himself. In today’s passage we can learn from him what it means to be an effective kingdom harvest worker. May God open our eyes and hearts to see the great need for kingdom harvest workers. And may God open our hearts to truly learn of Jesus how to live as effective workers in the harvest field of his kingdom.

**First**, kingdom workers respond to people who have humble faith (18–22). In verse 18 Matthew begins with the phrase, “While he was saying this…” Jesus had just been teaching about old and new wineskins. And right at that moment, a synagogue leader came and knelt before him. New wineskins come in unexpected packages! Most synagogue leaders were self-righteous old wineskins. But this one was not. He came to Jesus humbly for his help. What did he say? Look at verse 18b. This story is in all three Synoptic Gospels, but Matthew’s version is the shortest, so he tells us that the girl had already died. Matthew emphasizes the man’s faith. Even though his daughter was dead, he believed that if Jesus put his hand on her, she would live. He was such a loving father. He refused to give up on his daughter. He’d do anything to help her live. But more than that, he really had faith in Jesus. He even believed Jesus could raise her from death. As we’ve seen in Matthew’s Gospel, even Jesus’ own disciples had “little faith” (6:30; 8:26). But this man had great faith. Earlier Jesus was moved by the centurion’s great faith (8:10). He saw the faith of the friends who brought the paralyzed man to him (9:2). Now he encounters a man of faith again. How does he respond? Read verse 19. Jesus always goes wherever there is real faith. He still does. His disciples are mentioned here because Jesus wants them to be learning from him. A disciple isn’t just a disciplined person, or a faithful follower, but a true learner. Jesus was always taking his disciples with him so that they might *learn* from him how to be effective kingdom workers.

Look at verse 20. Desperate people were constantly coming to Jesus. But this woman had an especially difficult problem. She’d been subject to bleeding for twelve years. In that society, for a woman it was totally devastating. No job, no marriage, no children, no social life, no future. Mark tells us she’d suffered a great deal under the care of many doctors and had spent all she had, but instead of getting better she grew worse (Mk5:26). Perhaps her parents had given her lots of money to fix the problem, but money and doctors didn’t work. Anyone with such a persistent, chronic illness for 12 years would just give up. But this woman didn’t. Such a long-standing bleeding illness would make her physically very weak, too weak to struggle to get through a crowd. But she did. It says she “came up behind him.” Why behind? It was because she was so ashamed of her problem. She didn’t want anybody to notice her; they might even chase her away. She probably didn’t want to bother Jesus, either. She probably didn’t think she was worthy to take up his time. It also says that from behind, she “touched the edge of his cloak” (cf. 14:36). Why? Read verse 21. This was her faith. She probably kept saying it to herself, over and over. It helped her fight against negative thoughts. She kept reminding herself that Jesus’ power is so great, it’s flowing even from his clothing, so she just needs to touch the edge of his cloak. What happened? Read verse 22. Jesus first “saw her.” Jesus noticed her when others ignored her. He told her, “Take heart.” He understood how discouraged she’d been because of all her suffering. He even called her “Daughter.” People avoided her. But Jesus embraced her as if she were his own daughter. And he said, “Your faith has healed you.” He didn’t say, “I healed you” but “*Your faith* has healed you.” It wasn’t the touch itself, but her faith that brought healing. Jesus respected *her* as a woman of faith. In saying these things he’s making a personal relationship with her. It wasn’t just about a physical healing, or a mechanical faith, but about having a personal relationship. Through these first two persons we learn that Jesus is compassionate even when he’s very busy. He doesn’t judge people based on social status. He understands those who have a broken heart, and he comforts them. Moreover, he responds to humble faith. Kingdom workers need to learn how to be like this.

**Second**, kingdom workers make an environment of faith (23–26). When he finally arrived at the synagogue leader’s house, he found a noisy crowd and professional mourners stirring up people’s emotions with their music, and he told them to go away. Jesus said the girl was not dead but asleep (23–24a). Then their crying suddenly turned to mocking laughing (24b). These people were there not really to help the family at their moment of crisis, but to enjoy indulging in sorrow. They were insincere and unbelieving. So Jesus cast them all out of the house. He wasn’t deceived by their false displays of emotion. He didn’t work until all those people were gone (25–26). It’s another important lesson. Jesus works only in an environment of faith. When people are only emotional or have a mocking spirit, Jesus cannot work. Kingdom workers need courage to make an environment of faith. We need to seriously pray for this.

**Third**, kingdom workers plant personal faith (27–30a). As soon as he left there, two blind men started following Jesus, calling out, “Have mercy on us, Son of David!” (27) Jesus didn’t help them right away; he just kept on going and went indoors (28a). Then the two blind men came to him. When they did, Jesus asked them an important question: “Do you believe that I am able to do this?” (28) It seems a rather funny question. Why else would they be following and calling out after him for mercy if they didn’t believe he could heal them? But as blind men they probably had been living as beggars. Jesus didn’t want them to be demanding this out of habit. He wanted them to have a faith that’s genuine and personal. He helped them confess their faith. He touched their eyes, the place where they were sick. And he said, “According to your faith let it be done to you,” and their sight was restored (29–30a). With these men, too, faith was the key. There’s no question that Jesus is able. He can raise the dead, cure incurable diseases, heal the most fatalistic life problems. The question is, do we truly believe him? Kingdom workers help people to have genuine faith in Jesus.

**Fourth**, kingdom workers experience both praise and slander (30b–34). Jesus warned the blind men not to tell about the healing (30b). It was because too much excitement would hinder his ministry. Then, while they were going out of the house, a demon-possessed man who could not talk was brought to Jesus. Compassionate Jesus was ready to help him, too, and drove the demon out. But the emphasis here is not on faith or on the way Jesus healed him, but on people’s responses. Many were amazed and said, “Nothing like this has ever been seen in Israel” (33b). But the Pharisees said, “It is by the prince of demons that he drives out demons” (34). In the future the Pharisees would use these same words to smear Jesus’ beautiful healing ministry again (12:24). We would think that somebody who went around with compassion, doing good for suffering people, would only be praised and admired. But Jesus was slandered and attacked by so-called religious leaders. We should remember that when we go out with the gospel and serve spiritually sick people, we too should expect to experience both praise and severe attack. We shouldn’t be surprised or moved.

**Fifth**, kingdom workers are diligently with people (35). Read verse 35. The Pharisees’ attacks didn’t intimidate Jesus in the least. He kept on going around visiting sick and needy people, sharing the hope of God's kingdom and teaching the word of God. Some people only watched and criticized, but Jesus went out everywhere and worked diligently. Sadly, in church history leaders would lose this focus and get entangled in other things, and the church would begin to die spiritually. Kingdom workers need to keep on imitating Jesus. We need to keep being with sick and needy people, doing the work God calls us to do, the work of planting the hope of God’s kingdom, teaching the Bible and practicing the healing compassion of Jesus. May God help us not to get swayed or sidetracked, but diligently be with needy people.

**Sixth**, kingdom workers have a compassionate, shepherd’s heart (36). Read verse 36. This is a very important verse in Matthew’s Gospel. Later it’s repeated two more times (14:14; 15:32). Jesus’ compassionate heart for people was what made him the most effective kingdom worker. There are many ways we can see people. We can be indifferent. We can see people as annoying. We can be judgmental or critical. But Jesus saw all kinds of people with compassion. In Greek, the word literally means, “being moved in one’s bowels,” in other words, experiencing an agonizing pain. Amazingly, Jesus could feel all the pain people feel when they’re suffering. Verse 36 explains why he had such heart-breaking compassion. He saw that people were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. The expression “harassed and helpless” literally means “robbed” and “knocked down in despair.” It might have happened through other people, or through life’s hardships, or illnesses, or tragedies. But to Jesus, the real problem was that people had no true shepherds. The religious leaders were supposed to be their shepherds. But in fact, they only used them for their own glory and honor. They didn’t really care for people. It's actually a major theme of the Old Testament. God often rebuked Israel’s leaders for not being shepherds of his people, and promised to one day send a true shepherd for them (Isa40:11; Jer 23:4–6; Eze34:1–16,23; Mic5:2). Jesus knew God the Father’s shepherd’s heart for his people. So he went after the lost and healed the sick and injured. He served broken, damaged people with God’s compassion. It wasn’t a business at all. Jesus wants his disciples to learn not clever skills or techniques of manipulation, but his great compassion. There are two main things disciples of Jesus need to learn: the first is faith, and the second is compassion. Without compassion, it’s not possible to be a kingdom worker. People have many problems, but their fundamental problem is that they have no true shepherd to care for them. Without a good shepherd, so many people today are going astray, getting wounded and finally end up tragically. May God forgive our negligence. May he heal our calloused, hardened hearts. May he change our way of looking at people and grow in us a true shepherd’s heart like Jesus had.

**Seventh**, kingdom workers pray to send out more workers (37–38). Let’s read verses 37–38. We learn several things from Jesus’ words here. First of all, we learn that the harvest is plentiful. Jesus wasn’t negative about ministry. He saw that people were like a ripened harvest field. Sometimes it seems people aren’t interested in spiritual things. But Jesus clearly said the problem is not people’s receptivity; it’s a lack of workers. There’s always a lack of workers who actually understand people’s agonies and are compassionate. There’s always a lack of workers who are trained and ready to go out to work. Jesus didn’t just complain about the lack of workers; he gave a positive direction to pray to God, the Lord of the harvest, to send out workers.

Read verses 37–38 again. Jesus wasn’t trying to raise mere experts in the Bible; his goal was to raise practical workers who could go out among people and be good shepherds for them. First, we all need to be true learners of Jesus. Then, we need to go out and practice what we learn. Here, the expression “send out” can also be translated “cast out,” as in verse 25. We Christians would much rather stick together in comfortable places and care for ourselves. So sometimes we need a strong push. What if doctors all stayed in research facilities discussing the intricacies of medical theory and never saw actual patients? Likewise, Jesus wants us not only to study the Bible but also to go out and do the hard labor of shepherding people who’ve been damaged by sin.

Today we learned from Jesus, the best kingdom worker. May God help us to really learn from him. Like him, may we respond to those who have humble faith. Like him, may we make an environment of faith in our ministry. Like him, may we help people to have personal faith. Like him, may we expect both praise and slander. Like him, may we be with people diligently. Like him, may we learn to see people as sheep without a shepherd. And like him, may we keep on asking God to send out more workers into the harvest field for his kingdom.