LABORERS INTO HIS HARVEST

Matthew 9:35–10:42

Key Verse: 9:38

“…therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.”

This summer we’ve been studying about various aspects of prayer. In today’s passage Jesus mentions yet another kind: it’s a prayer to send out laborers. Jesus’ disciples become apostles, sent by him to do the same things he did. The word “laborer” stands out. Doing what Jesus did doesn’t mean standing on a street corner with a megaphone at a safe distance and enjoying celebrity status. It means laboring among neglected and desperate people, and then, being persecuted. Jesus gives various instructions on how to do it. We want to really listen to him and learn from him how to be the kind of laborers he wants in our time. May God open our hearts and speak to us through his word today.

Look at 9:35. This gives a general summary of Jesus’ ministry. He was diligent. He didn’t expect people to come to him; he went to them, to where they were living their lives. It says he was “teaching.” He wasn’t teaching some new philosophy or advice on how to live a better life. Once he quoted from Deuteronomy: “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God” (4:4). His teaching ministry was like feeding people spiritual food. It says he was also “proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom.” “Gospel” means “good news.” We hear so many false promises every day. But what Jesus was proclaiming was genuine; it’s the good news that God is inviting all people to his kingdom, to have a close love relationship with him and to enjoy real peace and real hope. Finally it says he was “healing every disease and every affliction.” He cared about everything people were suffering and wanted them to be healthy and happy. In a way, his healing ministry was an illustration of the gospel of the kingdom.

Look at verse 36. This doesn’t just tell us what Jesus was doing; it reveals his motivation. He saw so many people every day with so many problems. He could have felt burdened, or frustrated, or overwhelmed. But it says when he saw them, he had compassion for them. The Greek word means to feel gut-wrenching pain. Jesus was laboring for people, teaching, proclaiming and healing, all out of such compassion. Compassion was his motive for ministry—not duty, not pressure, but compassion. It goes on to explain why he was so compassionate: “…because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.” The word “harassed” in Greek literally means “skinned.” It’s like the old English expression “fleeced,” meaning robbed or taken advantage of. “Helpless” literally is “thrown down.” “Harassed and helpless” is like our expression “used and abused.” Who was doing this to these people? Maybe it was the merchants. Maybe the politicians. Maybe the religious leaders. Maybe they were just doing it to each other. In any case, it says they were “like sheep without a shepherd.” Sheep can’t really survive on their own; they need a shepherd each day to guide them to water and green pastures, to protect and keep them safe. But these people had no true shepherds who cared for their needs—there were just many people out to use them for their own agendas. “Sheep without a shepherd” expresses their dangerous vulnerability. Jesus sensed how people felt really lost.

Look at verse 37. Jesus turns away from the people and speaks to his disciples here. He’s trying to help them see the situation the way he does. A plentiful harvest means so many people are actually open to the gospel of the kingdom. The problem is not their openness—the problem is a lack of laborers. There are just too few. Who are the laborers? They’re shepherds like Jesus. They’re diligent like Jesus, going to people where they’re at and patiently teaching them, proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing diseases like Jesus did. Ministry is never quick and easy or convenient; it involves labor. It’s probably why there are so few people doing it. People’s lives are already hard enough; they don’t want extra labor to do. But Jesus’ vision is to raise laborers for the spiritual harvest. This is what it means to be his disciple.

Read verse 38. When there are so few laborers and so much work to do, we may feel overwhelmed, or complain. But Jesus’ solution was to pray. He said, “pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest.” “The Lord of the harvest” is important. In farming there’s a lot of hard work to do. But no matter how hard people work, there still might not be a harvest. Why not? It might be bad weather, or an unforeseen insect infestation. So where does the harvest come from? Not from people; the harvest comes from God. God is the one who makes things grow. And he’s the one who prepares real laborers for the harvest. When we see great human need, it’s the time to pray earnestly that God would send laborers into his harvest. This must have been Jesus’ own prayer. He asks his disciples, and us, to join him in this prayer. Before sending out disciples, he mentions this prayer first. We should pray like this at the start of a new school year.

Look at 10:1. Jesus’ disciples had many weaknesses. They certainly were different from him. They had no power or ability within themselves to really do anything. But Jesus gave them authority to cast out unclean spirits and to heal every disease and every affliction. It was Jesus’ own authority. Like them, we all feel inadequate and unqualified. But if Jesus calls us and sends us, he gives us his authority to be laborers in his harvest.

Verses 2–4 lists the names of the twelve apostles. “Apostles” means “sent ones.” It means people sent with the authority of Christ. In a sense we are all Christ’s ambassadors, sent to help people be reconciled to God (2Co5). As we think about their names, we realize the apostles were diverse and ordinary people. Jesus still wants to use all kinds of people as laborers in his harvest.

The rest of chapter 10 contains his instructions, warnings and promises. Look at verses 6,7. He gives them a very specific mission to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. God wanted to give them a chance to hear the gospel first. Later, Jesus’ witnesses are sent everywhere, to the ends of the earth (Ac1:8). God still gives his servants a specific mission. Instead of trying to do everything, it’s better to discern what God is asking of us personally and focus on that.

Look at verse 7. Regardless of our specific mission, the message is always the same: “The kingdom of heaven is at hand.” What does this mean? It means God is inviting people back to himself. God is giving people the chance to come under his gracious rule. It may sound like a fantasy, but it’s very real. “At hand” means it’s nearby, within our reach. It’s kind of like a train that’s pulling into the station, about to open the doors. We can just stand on the platform and stare at it until the doors close and the train leaves, or, we can get on! This message is God’s good news; proclaiming it means giving people the chance to respond.

Look at the first part of verse 8: “Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, cast out demons.” These are all people who’ve been suffering under Satan’s rule. In Matthew’s Gospel, the physical sicknesses are also metaphors for spiritual illness. Just as Jesus did, we need to proclaim the good news of the kingdom, and, at the same time, heal the sick—especially the spiritually sick. Jesus doesn’t want us to just preach at people, ignoring their problems. We can’t heal anybody, but if we’re depending on Jesus, he can work through us.

It’s a lot of work for laborers. So in verses 8b–10 Jesus mentions the pay. He says, “You received without paying; give without pay.” They all received the blessings of being with Jesus, free of charge, so they should learn to give without getting paid. Salary at our jobs is important, but not in ministry. We’ve all heard to “give back” or “pay it forward.” When we’re only thinking, “What’s in it for me?” we’ll end up disappointed. But if we learn to give as we were given to, we’ll experience real joy. In verses 9,10 Jesus also instructs them to go out with no material resources to depend on. This part seems so hard. His point is in verse 10b: “…for the laborer deserves his food.” Basically he’s teaching them to depend on the people to whom they minister to provide them with food, and maybe a place to stay, and not much else. It’s a laser-focused mission, not encumbered with many things we think we need, but don’t.

Read verses 11–14. The key word here is “worthy.” Simply speaking it refers to a person who is open. Jesus wants us to look for that one “worthy,” “open” person. When people are not willing to receive us or listen to our words, we should just move on and keep on looking for someone who is. We should bless the worthy person with God’s peace. And we shouldn’t take rejection personally, but leave room for God’s wrath (15).

Read verse 16. Wolves like to eat sheep. It means the task of laborers is dangerous. Jesus advises us to be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. What’s a serpent’s wisdom? It lies patiently out of sight and waits to strike at just the right moment. A dove is a symbol of innocence and integrity. Jesus wants us to be shrewd but also not to lose our integrity by adopting the manipulative tactics of this world. In verses 17–20 he warns us about persecution. It will come first from the authorities. Jesus tells us not to be anxious about what to say, but just depend on what God gives us through the Holy Spirit at that moment. In verse 21 he warns that even beloved family members might turn on us, probably because they don’t want to repent. Read verse 22. Instead of feeling hurt or lonely or depressed, Jesus wants us to “endure to the end.” He also tells us again to move on (23). In verses 24,25 he tells us as his disciples to expect persecution, because he himself was persecuted, even though he only did good.

In verses 26–33 Jesus helps us to overcome our fear. The only way to overcome fear is to fear God, not people. Also, we may feel as insignificant as a sparrow, but God cares for us and knows all about us. As we reflect on this truth, we can overcome our fear of people. Especially we should never be afraid to acknowledge our faith in Jesus to anyone (32,33). In verses 34–39 Jesus warns us that when we go out as laborers into his harvest, there will be divisions. Why? It’s because Jesus calls us to a life of self-denial, taking our cross and following him, loving him more than anyone else in the world. This causes people to misunderstand and turn on us. Still, he wants us to be willing to lose our very lives for his sake. He’s calling us to be laborers with such a radical commitment to him. In verses 40–42 Jesus concludes by focusing on those who receive his laborers. In a sense, how people respond to us is how they respond to Jesus, and, to God himself. He says this to help us not to be discouraged. His words are also a promise to those who do whatever they can to help his laborers, even with a cup of cold water. God sees and rewards even the smallest things we do to try to help.

Read 9:38 again. May God help us to see people the way Jesus did, and believe in Lord of the harvest. May he help us to pray earnestly to send out laborers into his harvest field. May God he help us take Jesus’ words to heart and put them into practice.