

Christians as Co-laborers

Good morning. If you have your Bible, would you turn with me to Matthew 9. It is on page 764 of the Bible in the chairs. As always, you can also follow along using our church app which has the sermon notes provided in there for you.

We are coming back to our series through the Gospel of Matthew after taking a four-week break to look at those smaller letters of the New Testament. We are picking up where we left off which is at the end of chapter 9. The last four verses. That's right. We went from a short book of 25 verses to now a short passage of 4 verses. But before we jump into the text, let me remind you of where we are in the Gospel of Matthew.

At the end of chapter 4, Jesus begins his ministry, and he starts by giving a massive sermon, the Sermon on the Mount. In this sermon, Jesus taught about a flourishing life and what must happen to enter the kingdom of heaven. That an internal righteousness is needed not just external obedience. He proceeded to teach with authority from chapters 5 through chapter 7. In chapter 8, Jesus came down from the mountain and began living out the message he preached. He not only taught with authority but showed how he has authority in all of life, over everything. He healed many, cast out demons, calmed storms, and raised the dead to life. Just before our passage, Jesus casts out demons from a possessed man and the Pharisees declared, "He casts out demons by the prince of demons."

As we have seen through these last few chapters, Jesus has been busy. He has done a lot of ministry. And it seems there is even more to be done. But it is in these verses that we see a shift, a transition. Matthew shows us how this ministry of Jesus now extends to the followers of Jesus. That being a disciple means engaging in the work Jesus himself does.

With that in mind, would you follow along as I read Matthew 9:35-38?

READ Matthew 9:35-38

Would you pray with me?...

INTRODUCTION

[ILLUSTRATION]

Hannah and I are in the season of parenting where everything takes a tremendously long time to accomplish in our house. With Evelyn being five and Noah being two, we are at the stage where they are no longer babies completely dependent for everything. But they also aren't old enough to really do too much by themselves. Or at least do it well. It's at the awkward stage of wanting to include them in things we are doing around the house but also knowing it will take even longer and probably won't be done quite the way we would like.

Over the Summer, there were times that we needed to get out there and pull the weeds from the flowerbeds. Hannah is usually the one to maintain the flowerbeds and usually tries to sneak out and do it while the kids are busy or gone. But at one point this Summer, she decided she would try and do it with the kids' help. To her surprise, once she explained to them what they were doing (pulling the weeds) and what they were looking for (anything green sticking up), those kids got right to work. Every time they spotted something green shooting up from the mulch, they would grab it or dig it out and bring it to the bag. Now, sometimes they didn't always get it right. Maybe they didn't get the weeds at the root, or they dug out more mulch and dirt than needed, but they watched Hannah do it, listened to her instructions, and they joined in the work. Sure, Hannah could have done it on her own, but there was plenty of work to go around and this was a learning experience for the kids. A way to engage them in the work she was doing.

And this is the kind of picture we get here in our passage. Jesus, looking around at all the people in all of these crowds, seeing the work there is to be done for the kingdom of God. Rather than do it all himself, he is looking for laborers who will do the work. He's inviting others to join him in the kingdom building work he has been doing. He's looking for those who will co-labor with him as he builds his kingdom.

The main idea for today's message is that **Christians are called to co-labor with Christ.**

What does it mean to co-labor with Christ? To join the work Jesus is doing? To co-labor with Christ, we look not only to Christ's example but also to what he commands. As we walk through this short text, we will see that we must 1) Engage People, 2) Have Compassion, and 3) Pray Earnestly.

ENGAGE PEOPLE

The first thing we see in our text is that Jesus met people where they were. He engaged people; therefore, we must also **Engage People.**

Look at verse 35:

Matthew 9:35

³⁵ 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 gives us this summary statement of Jesus' activity in verse 35. That he was traveling, teaching, preaching, and healing. Matthew used a similar sentence to this one in 4:23. What followed was Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, a long, extended portion of teaching. And then we saw the application of that teaching through his ministry to others in chapters 8 and 9.

Now we come to this verse at the end of the chapter, and Matthew again uses it to set up a new section. He's using it as a signal to let you know that he's moving into another section of his Gospel account where Jesus will have another extended portion of teaching before we see the application of that teaching lived out.

Jesus is continuing to do the work of the ministry. The ministry we have already witnessed him do since chapter 4. He is going from town to town and engaging those in need: the sick, the afflicted, the downcast, the demon-possessed, the marginalized, the outcast, the poor, the defenseless.

Jesus does not avoid people or ignore people, he goes to them and puts himself where they are. He goes to their cities and villages. He teaches in their synagogues. As Jesus travels to all of these different places throughout the region, what does he find but more crowds of people? Masses gathering because they have a need they want Jesus to meet. He spends time with the crowds of people, healing them of their diseases. The needs seem to be endless.

Sometimes we can be so focused on ourselves that we miss the needs of others. There are needs all around us if we just stop to look. Once we do, we realize how many needs there really are.

[ILLUSTRATION]

It's like when you go to buy a new car. You've been driving the same streets in the same city for years and you've never even noticed the other cars around you. It seems like you've never seen the car you are going to buy on the road before. But then when you start looking into buying a new car, all you can see on the street now are those cars. It's like everyone owns that car now. Everywhere you turn, there is another one. It sticks out to you now because you have spent so much time learning about them, studying them,

reading reviews on them, and looking at picture of them. You have taken the time to become more aware of them, and now that's all you can see.

If we take the time to actually **see** people, engaging with them, hearing their story, building deep relationships, then we will become more aware of the needs around us. It can be easy for us to look past people rather than look at people. What I mean is, it can be easy to know people are around, maybe even have a passing conversation with them, but it is another thing entirely to enter their life. To enter their mess. To hear about their struggles and their needs. To engage with them.

It can also be easy for us to “do the work of ministry” and yet miss the ministry altogether. Jesus’ ministry was people. Seeing and teaching and caring and healing people. Many of us may be afraid to engage with people because we are afraid of what we are getting into. Of what that is going to mean for us and our lives. What burdens or needs are going to come up? With so much going on in our own personal lives, we can’t imagine taking on more from others. But we see Jesus stepping in. Meeting people where they are. Engaging with them in their brokenness and sickness.

How are you engaging with others? Are you looking past people or at people? What do your conversations on Sunday morning look like? Are you willing to go deeper than the weather, sports, or how busy we all are? What it would it look like for you to step in and engage with those in our church?

How are you seeking ways to engage with people in other areas of our lives? To meet people where they are? Are you taking advantage of the opportunities God places in your life with those who are around you, whether it be your co-workers, your friends, your family members? Are we looking for ways to be involved in our community, to surround ourselves with people who need Jesus?

In order to co-labor with Christ, we must be like Christ and engage people around us.

HAVE COMPASSION

Jesus goes further than just engaging with people. He also has compassion for them. As a co-laborer, we too must **Have Compassion** for others.

In verse 36, Matthew gives us a window into the heart of Christ. It says:

Matthew 9:36

³⁶ When he saw the crowds, **he had compassion for them**, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.

We already saw how he cared for people's physical needs. He healed them of their diseases and afflictions. He engaged with people in the messiness of their life. But he also had compassion for their emotional needs. It says they were "harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd." The image here is of a torn up, abused, hurt sheep. Something that happens to sheep when there is no shepherd to protect and care for them. Sheep are not able to care or protect themselves. They need the leadership, guidance, protection, and care of a shepherd. And this reality is what moves Jesus to compassion for them.

This phrase alludes to places in the Old Testament, like Ezekiel, where God judges the teachers of the land for not caring for his people. He says in Ezekiel 34:

Ezekiel 34:1-4

The word of the Lord came to me: ² "Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel; prophesy, and say to them, even to the shepherds, Thus says the Lord God: Ah, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? ³ You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat ones, but you do not feed the sheep. ⁴ The weak you have not

strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the injured you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought, and with force and harshness you have ruled them.

This is what Jesus sees happening to these people in Israel. These people needed shepherd leaders. The Pharisees had missed the mark. They were great at promoting religiosity, of keeping the law externally and ensuring Jewish traditions were passed down. But what they missed in all of that was actually caring for people. Caring for their spiritual well-being. Caring for their soul. Instead, they are more concerned with themselves and their authority. They are making sure they are treated with honor and dignity. They are focused on the external keeping of the law. But God also promises to be the shepherd of his people. Look at verses 11-16 of Ezekiel 34:

Ezekiel 34:11-16

¹¹ “For thus says the Lord God: Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out. ¹² As a shepherd seeks out his flock when he is among his sheep that have been scattered, so will I seek out my sheep, and I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. ¹³ And I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land. And I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the ravines, and in all the inhabited places of the country. ¹⁴ I will feed them with good pasture, and on the mountain heights of Israel shall be their grazing land. There they shall lie down in good grazing land, and on rich pasture they shall feed on the mountains of Israel. ¹⁵ I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down, declares the Lord God. ¹⁶ I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, and the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them in justice.

This does not come as a surprise to us because we are so familiar with Psalm 23:

Psalm 23

¹ The Lord is my **shepherd**; I shall not want.
² He makes me lie down in green pastures.
He leads me beside still waters.
³ He restores my soul.
He leads me in paths of righteousness
for his name's sake.
⁴ 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.
⁵ You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.
⁶ Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord
forever.

This is why Jesus says in John's Gospel:

John 10:11

¹¹ I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

This compassion of Christ is mentioned several other times throughout the Gospel of Matthew. One commentator mentioned that this verb is always used of Jesus or by Jesus in the parables. It has a unique connection to him and gives definition to his divine acts. As we see Jesus at work, he is doing so through his compassion for the broken, lost, and hurting sheep.

And it is this compassion that ultimately led Jesus to the cross. Being the good shepherd, he lays down his life for them. This compassion of Christ is not just

human pity. It's not that he just felt sorry for them, their needs, or their situation. Jesus sees beneath the surface. He sees into their hearts and their spiritual need. Yes, they had physical ailments and diseases, but even more than that, these people needed someone to care for their soul. They needed a shepherd who could heal not only their physical needs but their spiritual need.

Maybe you are here this morning because you are hurting. Maybe you are dealing with a life-threatening disease, a chronic illness. Or maybe you are hurting emotionally. Feeling neglected. Abused. Rejected. And you are looking for something to bring you comfort. Someone to see you and care for you. I'm here to tell you that Jesus sees you. Jesus cares for you like a shepherd cares for his sheep. While he is able to heal physical diseases if that's his will, and he's able to bring emotional comfort, Jesus wants more for you. He wants to care for your soul.

We can receive all the healing and emotional comfort in the world, and it would not change our eternal destiny. It would not change our deepest need or satisfy our deepest longing. The greatest need we all have, is for our sin and separation from God to be forgiven and reconciled. Our sin separates us from our Creator. It separates us from eternal life. But Jesus, being the Good Shepherd, laid down his life for us. He died on the cross, bearing our sin upon himself, paying the penalty we deserved to pay. Three days later, he rose again, declaring victory over sin and death. He offers forgiveness of sins and eternal life for those who repent of their sins and trust in his finished work for salvation. Will you trust this Good Shepherd today to restore your soul, and lead you in paths of righteousness for his name's sake?

Jesus ministered to both: people's physical needs and spiritual needs. Do you see both the physical and spiritual needs of people in your life? Are you quick to see one and overlook the other? Are you willing to help meet people's physical needs as you can? Are you willing to be inconvenienced for the sake of helping others? Are you willing to engage in deep and meaningful conversations to hear their spiritual needs? Or are we quick to be like the Pharisees and care more about the

external law keeping of others? May we be willing to not only engage people but have compassion for them. A compassion that only comes from Christ.

PRAY EARNESTLY

As Jesus engages with the people and has compassion for them, this leads him to tell his disciples to **Pray Earnestly.**

Look at verses 37-38 again:

Matthew 9:37-38

³⁷ Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; ³⁸ therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest."

There are a few shocking things in these verses. The first is how Jesus responds to seeing the crowds, seeing their needs, and having compassion for them. It doesn't say, "And Jesus did it all himself." But rather that he turns to his disciples and invites them into the work he has been doing. He is looking for his disciples to co-labor with him.

For many of us, that's exactly what we want to do, right? We want to jump in there and start doing stuff. We want to do the work of ministry. Just point us in the right direction and we will go teach and preach and engage with others. We want to do, do, do.

But the second shocking thing is what he tells the disciples to do. As he sees the need around him, he does not ignore it or even tell the disciple to get in there and start doing the work. No. His first response to the need is prayer. He tells them to pray earnestly.

[ILLUSTRATION]

It reminds me of the classic movie, Karate Kid. Not the newer one with Jackie Chan. It's fine. But I'm talking about the 1984 version with Danielson and Mr. Miyagi. Daniel is ready to learn Karate from Mr. Miyagi. He's ready to get in there and start beating up these bullies who have hurt him. He's ready to learn how to chop and kick and block. But then Mr. Miyagi surprises him by asking him to wash and wax his cars. Which to Daniel seems absolutely bizarre. A pure waste of time. What good is washing and waxing cars going to do. But this continues, right? He comes back ready to learn the next day and now it's sanding the wooden floors. Again, another day he is told to paint the fence and then paint the house. Not what Daniel expected to be Mr. Miyagi's approach to Karate training.

But as we find out later (spoiler alert), all of these were giving Daniel the building blocks of Karate. That this was actually the most effective way to learn Karate.

Jesus seeing the work that needs to be done, and recognizing the laborers that are needed, does not turn to his disciples and tell them to get in the game. But instead, he tells them to pray. Pray for God to provide laborers. That the first action must start with a complete and total dependence upon God and his provision. Jesus emphasizes the priority of prayer because of the power of prayer.

This is something we see all throughout the Gospels. Jesus fasted 40 days and 40 nights in the wilderness. He taught on prayer in the Sermon on the Mount. He withdraws from the crowds to spend time in prayer. Jesus will pray earnestly to the Lord in the Garden of Gethsemane before his death. Jesus understood the importance of prayer. And he modeled what a life with God should look like. Desperately depending upon God for everything.

How important is prayer in your life? If I'm being completely honest, I'm preaching to myself more than anyone, in all of this sermon but especially in prayer. Prayer has always been my weakest spiritual discipline. I'm still growing in my prayer life, asking God to help me to desire time in prayer more. To help me

desperately seek him and depend on him. Because the danger we can all fall into is doing ministry for God without God. We can rush into just doing stuff. Helping people. Serving at church. Doing spiritual things. And yet, in doing stuff for God we can completely miss God.

What does your prayer life look like? What is your first response to situations and needs that arise in your life? Are you quick to jump into doing things or trying to meet people's needs? Or do you stop to pray and seek the Lord? Do we truly believe that we can do nothing apart from him? That he is Lord over all? May we all heed this passage of Scripture, as Jesus' first response to seeing the work needing to be done is prayer.

Jesus' words should give us great comfort. He said that the harvest is plentiful. This is good news. This should be encouraging. It means that there are many who **will** receive the message of the gospel and be brought into the kingdom of God. He's not sending out laborers in vain. The hope of evangelism is not in how clever we can be or in how effective we are in using different methods. The hope of evangelism is that God has called many to receive the good news, and they **will** be brought into his kingdom.

Jesus tells these disciples to pray to "the Lord of the harvest". While the harvest is plentiful and the laborers are few, Jesus says that God is the Lord over the harvest. He is in control. These people are his. He has called them. And because he is Lord of the harvest, they must pray to him to provide the laborers. He doesn't tell them to launch a program to seek out volunteers. He doesn't guilt trip them into stepping up and serving. He tells them to pray to the one who can provide what is needed.

And what is needed? Laborers. Those who will do the work of harvesting. Don't get me wrong. Prayer is the first and most important step. It's what Jesus tells his disciples to do. But it will not end with prayer. As they pray to God, those the Lord raises up will work. They will labor with Christ. They will labor for the gospel. They

will labor to bring in those whom the Lord has called. They will join in the work of the ministry.

But you will not have co-laborers, missionaries, for God proclaiming the gospel, without a passion for God and dependence on God. John Piper has famously said in his book, *Let the Nations Be Glad*, “Missions exists because worship doesn’t.” That worship for God is what fuels missions and is the goal of missions. But he also says:

John Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad*

“Where passion for God is weak, zeal for missions will be weak...Missions is not first and ultimate; God is.”

Where does passion for the Lord come from? It comes from spending time with him in his Word and *in prayer*. When we enjoy being in his presence. When we seek his face. David prays in Psalm 63:

Psalm 63:1-4

¹ O God, you are my God; earnestly I seek you;
my soul thirsts for you;
my flesh faints for you,
as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.
² So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary,
beholding your power and glory.
³ Because your steadfast love is better than life,
my lips will praise you.
⁴ So I will bless you as long as I live;
in your name I will lift up my hands.

As David encounters God through prayer and meditating on his Word, he beholds his power and glory. He is overwhelmed by the steadfast love of the Lord, and this leads to praise and worship. This leads to a passion for the Lord. This worship leads to missions as we see David declare in other Psalms for the Lord to be praise

by all nations and all peoples. For others to come and behold the glory and greatness of God. Because worship fuels missions and is the goal of missions.

As we pray earnestly to the Lord, he changes our heart and our desires and our passion to align with his glory. As these disciples are called to pray for God to raise up those who will go into the mission field, God will encourage and equip them to be the answer to that prayer as we will see in the next chapter next week.

Let me ask you. Do you have a desire to see the nations worship God? Do you want others to behold the glory and wonder of the God we serve? Are you praying for God to raise up missionaries and faithful disciples to share the good news of Christ? Are you praying with open hands to how God wants to use you in that mission?

Let me commend to you a few resources that can help you pray for the Lord to send out laborers. One would be an app from the Joshua Project called **Unreached of the Day**. This app will give you an unreached people group of the day. A whole people group who has never heard the name of Jesus. It gives you information about them and how you can pray for them. You can use this app as a tool to pray what Jesus commanded these disciples to pray: that the Lord would send out laborers into his harvest. Into those people groups.

Another resource would be a prayer reminder app such as **Prayminder or Echo**. These apps allow you to log prayer requests and set reminders to pray. We all carry our phones with us everywhere. Why not use it to help us establish healthy prayer habits?

Finally, we have a group in our church that meets here every Sunday between services to pray together. They gather to pray for needs in our church, the ministry, us pastors, and more. You want to grow in your prayer life? Start praying with others. This is an easy opportunity for you to do just that.

As we seek to co-labor with Christ, let us not miss the value and importance Jesus places on prayer. Let us all seek the Lord, praying earnestly for God to raise up laborers for the harvest.

CONCLUSION

The great thing about including our kids in the weeding of the flowerbeds was seeing them be excited to work with Mommy. They were so proud of the fact that they got to do real work and to really help with something. Were they perfect at it? Of course not. But we want them to grow in their work ethic and skills, and we want them to feel valued as part of the family. We want to engage them in the tasks that need to be done to feel a sense of ownership and responsibility, knowing that the ultimate responsibility for the tasks falls on us.

What an exciting and humbling thing that Jesus invites us to co-labor with him. As we do so, we look to follow Christ's example, and we listen to his commands. Do we always get it perfect? Of course not. But Christ welcomes us into the work of the kingdom. He's looking for laborers who will do the work, knowing that the ultimate result of the harvest is up to God. As we are called to co-labor with Christ, let us seek to engage the people around us, have compassion for the lost, and pray earnestly to the Lord to send laborers.

Would you pray with me?...

As the band comes, we are going to sing one final song before we go called The Sending. It's a prayer that God would fill our hearts with his compassion and send us out into the world to be used by him. Jesus is looking for laborers to go into the harvest, will we respond with Here I Am, Send me? As we sing this song, let's use it as a prayer, asking God to use us however he sees fit. To send us wherever he would have us go. May we all be doers of the word and not hearers only.