

Compassion, Prayer, Mission

Matthew 9:35–38

Last week Steve dealt with our first core value, God’s Word, from Psalm 19. This week we are oriented to our second and third core values: Prayer and Mission. We are in **Matthew 9** today, beginning in **v. 35**. Matthew 9 is a busy, action-packed chapter that opens with God the Son forgiving sin — an act which he, alone, can do. Immediately there’s a challenge by the religious leaders. To authenticate his deity, to show them clearly that he is God, he supernaturally intervenes and heals the man. Then we go to the calling of Matthew, the tax collector, who immediately follows Jesus. We see Jesus **proclaiming** the hope of the Gospel to “sinners” and **gathering** with “sinners” — that sounds about right, since that’s the only thing available — there is none righteous; no, not one. The religious leaders challenge and attack again. A young girl is resurrected. On the way to bring the girl from death to life, a woman who has been bleeding for 12 years interrupts his trip. In faith, she reaches out to the Lord for healing. He heals her. Two blind men are healed. A demon-possessed man is set free. The religious leaders challenge again. I don’t know the period of those events, but just reading through the chapter to that point almost leaves me out of breath, ready to sit down and rest for a bit. But immediately, we see Jesus continues going around doing his father’s work.

Matthew 9:35–39 — 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. ³⁶ When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. 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.”

PRAY — Lord, what we have not, give us; what we know not, teach us; what we are not, make us.

“If sinners be damned, at least let them leap to hell over our dead bodies. And if they perish, let them perish with our arms wrapped about their knees, imploring them to stay. If hell must be filled, let it be filled in the teeth of our exertions, and let not one go unwarned and unprayed for.” (C H Spurgeon)

The famous Spurgeon quote is jarring. It causes us to sit up, pay attention, and focus on what he is saying, which is very helpful for the preaching this morning as we address prayer and mission.

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“If sinners be damned,” he begins. A terrifying outcome no one wants to see. But God has appointed a life-saving remedy and way of escape: The proclamation of the Good News that in Christ sins are forgiven, and death is defeated. **And the means of prayer.** “Let not one go unwarned, unprayed for,” says Spurgeon. With that provocative start, let’s carefully turn our attention to the passage.

v. 35 — 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.

Why is he doing this? It’s the Father’s work and assignment — John 5:19. He is making the Father’s grace and love clear and plain — John 1:16–18. He is working diligently, tirelessly, because he knows the night is coming when no man can work — John 9:4. So it’s a very busy season of ministry with multitudes coming to be healed... But Jesus isn’t just cranking out miracles, losing the plot, as it were. The Son of Man has come to seek and save the lost. The miraculous signs simply pointed to his divine authority. And in the middle of preaching and healing every disease and every sickness, he sees the crowd. He really **sees** them. He’s not just counting to see how long the line is. He **sees** them. He reads them, if you will — their hunger, their brokenness, **their lostness**. And in really seeing them, he is stirred to compassion for them. As we consider Prayer and Mission that the Lord both commands and facilitates, let’s see and feel that, at the front end, he sees and feels the condition of those who are lost, and that stirring of the heart and emotion fuels prayer and mission.

I. Compassion, v. 36

Compassion is part of the character of Savior. It is part and parcel of love, and God is love. (1 John 4:8) The Greek word for compassion is interesting to our modern western ears because it has an anatomical foundation. It describes the bowels, which were thought to be where love and pity were rooted. It’s a feeling word based on observing the plight of another. So the greatest man that ever lived — the ultimate man’s man, who is the perfect embodiment of masculinity — is moved to feeling deeply the brokenness of the people. Again, this compassion is rooted in love.

The parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10 describes what love for neighbor looks like. This same pattern of seeing, feeling compassion, and then moving to action (which we will see in our passage a moment) is how Jesus defines obedience to love our neighbor the second greatest commandment. Luke 10:33 says, “... a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he [the Jew stripped and beaten by robbers] was, and when he saw him, he had compassion. ³⁴ **He went to him and bound up his wounds.** So the root of love produces the fruit of really seeing, of compassion, and action to minister

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to the need. We can't say we love God if we are not obeying him. And we can't say we love others if we are not seeing, and feeling, and addressing their needs. Love produces very practical unified fruit as we see described in the high passage in 1 Corinthians 13. By unified, I mean it does something to our whole person, leaving nothing unchanged. We see people differently. We perceive their needs. We feel compassion.

As Jesus sees the crowd, what is it that stir him? It's lostness. He felt compassion for them because they were harassed and helpless.

- **Harassed**; they are troubled, bothered. There is no peace. They do not have what they need and what they hunger for.
- They are **helpless**; scattered and wandering about. They don't know what to do to find peace, so they stumble around dejected and hopeless.

These are descriptions of separation from Christ. It brings to mind the language of Ephesians 2: without hope; separated from Christ, having no hope, and without God in the world. Their spiritual reality was producing real life consequences of brokenness, grasping first at this, then that. They are looking for, but don't know where to find peace, meaning, safety, deliverance, and their religious leaders are too busy plotting to kill Jesus rather than pointing them to Jesus, who alone is the source of these things. So, as J C Ryle puts it, they are ignorant, hopeless, helpless, dying, and unfit to die.

Unfit to die. This is the most alarming thing, because it is appointed to all of us once to die. It would be bad enough to meet our certain death in an unfit state. But what determines the condition of being either unfit or fit to die? The rest of **Hebrews 9:27** — **It is appointed for man to die once and after that the judgment**. It is the judgment that exposes our fitness or unfitness. They are unfit because when they meet the Judge on that great day, as things stand at the moment when Jesus sees them, they will answer for their sin, on the Great Day. They have not yet come to an awareness of their need of a Savior, so they certainly haven't fled to Christ, or believed on him as their substitute sin-bearer. Is it any wonder that God, who is love, who came to take away the sin of the world, who came to seek and save the lost, is moved deeply with compassion at the lostness of those around him, and their looming destruction if they remain in that state?

Luke 19:41 describes the Lord similarly moved He looks over Jerusalem late in his earthly ministry, weeping for their lostness and hardness of heart. Do you have the eyes of your Lord? Do they see

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that apart from Christ every soul ever born remains a child of wrath, without hope, on the broad road to destruction? Do you see this? Half a lifetime ago when I was in my late 20's, I was increasingly burdened through my own time in God's word and prayer, not for the lost — but burdened by the fact that I did not have compassion for the lost. I knew I should. I understood their destination apart from Christ, but I did not feel compassion for them. That, of course, just about zeroed out any telling of Good News, any robust praying... And I knew I was in a ugly, unloving place. But the Spirit produced a grief over my hardness, and I began to pray earnestly about my own condition. I admitted my lovelessness and lack of concern for the perishing and told God I must have help to change. And the most basic thing I could think of to ask for was simply God's love and God's heart. I knew from of passages likes our today that God's heart moved him to intercept a lost, dying world present Christ, the Savior as hope, forgiveness, and life. I knew I needed to feel that, so I simply began asking God to lay his heart over my heart. He heart, rich in love and mercy, over my heart, impoverished and needy. Over the weeks that followed, I noticed that I began to see people— to see and feel their spiritual needs and long for them to know and experience the hope found in the Savior. That God has laid his heart over mine has made all the difference. Yet I need ever increasing measures of this.

If you do not see people and perceive that they are troubled, and bothered, not at peace— that they are wandering about, looking for love, if you will, in all the wrong places. Drinking from idolatrous, sinful, broken cisterns that cannot satisfy the soul... If you do not feel compassion for them as they drink, and search, and sex, and spend their way along the broad road to destruction, will you pray that God will lay his heart over yours? I urge you to end a passionless life while people on your watch rush on the broad road. Ask him to give you his eyes to see what he sees, his love to love those you do not, his fearlessness in speaking grace-filled truth and praying tear-saturated prayers. We will not move forward in prayer or mission in any substantial way until we arrive at this point. We could end here, but there are two important points yet.

II. Pray Earnestly

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."

Prayer is the second means God uses in this passage bring souls into the Kingdom. The first was the proclamation of the Gospel as Jesus was doing in v. 35. But now the singular imperative, the only

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command in this short paragraph: PRAY. Prayer moves the hand of Father to intervene in lostness, to open blind eyes, and unstop deaf ears. We are commanded to pray.

The Harvest is the ingathering of people into the Kingdom. It is the deliverance of human souls from a sinner's hell. This harvest of souls is the fruit of Gospel proclamation and of prayer. These are means God has appointed to conviction of sin, and stir up faith and repentance.

I don't begin to fully understand why God has ordained prayer as a means of accomplishing what he has ordained from eternity, but our joy and our usefulness in his Kingdom now, and our eternal joy increases by magnitudes when we come to grips with this: As God has ordained the elect before the foundations of the world, God has ordained that our praying be instrumental in moving His Holy Spirit to create life in dead hearts, and cause people to be born from above. **We are to pray.**

I am amazed that godly servants through the centuries often confess their struggle to be faithful and fervent in prayer. I am not surprised at my own struggle, and I am ashamed that there are too many times when it is duty more than delight. We act as though it is one step short of a punishment — perhaps passive aggressive way God breaks us down into compliance like a drill sergeant requiring a platoon to jog a mile while carrying a telephone pole on their collective shoulders. That will show them who's boss. And maybe God says "prayer will force them to remember that I'm in charge and they need to get with my program." Prayer may be a drudge, but like jogging while carrying a telephone will make you stronger, the dirty job of prayer will humble and sanctify you. Well, those outcomes may be produced, but what if God doesn't intend prayer as duty, but as delight? I submit delight is God's intention, and prayer is a means of grace for us.

One of the indicators of spiritual passion is our prayer life. I think in some ways it indicates both our temperature and our location — by location I mean our nearness to God in a sense of communion. When our hearts are warm toward Christ, when we thirst for him, when we practice the reality that the nearness of God is my good, our prayer life flourishes. But in other times and seasons our prayer life moves more to the duty side of the equation, then duty decays further into drudgery, and drudgery declines in distastefulness for prayer altogether. We can feel almost hypocritical in prayer at that point. My heart is not warm to Christ. I want it to be — I want my affections stirred toward the one who loves me, but they are not, so I'm not going to join the saints in the prayer meeting. My praying may be little more than a blessing over the meal and request for safety for my kids.

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Hear me, if any thought like that has ever entered your heart. Prayer is a means that God uses to stir your heart. Prayer is divine reversal of human of dullness. Scripture saturated prayer, communion with God, seeking first the Kingdom of God in prayer — God uses these graces to warm the cooling embers of your heart. When we are in a spiritually dry season we may feel least like praying. When we are in a spiritually dry season, we most need to pray. When it is hard to pray at home, our old nature as well as the enemy of our souls combine to convince us to absent ourselves from the prayer meeting. “You’re a hypocrite if you go. You have nothing to contribute; just stay home and rest. That will be better for you than anything.

But prayer both at home and prayer together as the family of God are means that God has appointed for the warming of your soul, and the mighty moving of the Spirit to bring those you love from death to life. Pray earnestly. Pray together. Pray through distraction. Pray through weariness. Pray through coldness. Pray through brokenness. God has commanded it both for his glory and our good. Pray!

Throughout the Scripture we are told how to pray... how to conform our disoriented wills and thoughts to the eternal Kingdom of God. In this short paragraph, we are given a specific direction that leads points to our third core value. We are to pray for laborers or workers to go into his harvest.

III. Laborers

Briefly now, we are to pray for those who aggressively live their lives on mission so that those wandering in darkness, harassed, helpless, and hopeless will be introduced to the Savior. Oh, how I pray God raises up a church full of workers in the field! It has been my prayer since before the church ever met for worship that we would send more missionaries from this square mile than any other square mile on the face of the earth. Frankly that seems like a ridiculous irrational prayer when you look at our numbers. There’s only 50 or so of us. But God took 12 broken vessels called disciples and turned the world upside down with them. I pray the global mission field is populated by Redeemer’s Grace Church family members for generations after I have returned to dust and that the world is turned upside through our children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren. I pray that because I am commanded to pray it. I and urge you to join in praying it, too.

Beloved, we have a theology that embraces prayer and puts it front and center on the Lord’s Day. We have a theology of mission that reminds us to seek first the Kingdom of and proclaim the glories our

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God and King to the end of the earth so that the nations may be saved and rejoice! But intellectual agreement will doctrinally sound theology does not necessarily produce fruit. I want us to move deeper into obedience in the areas of prayer and mission in 2022 and begin to develop not only a theology of prayer and mission, but a culture of prayer and mission. I want us to have eyes that see and weep over the lostness of those around us, and those in the distant coastlands who serve false gods that cannot save. To do that, will you join me today in stepping forward in obedience in prayer. Let not the corporate prayer meeting want for voices to be raised to our saving God! Let not the mission field want for missionaries when God has given us breath in our lungs to serve him, and children like arrows in our hands to make know the excellencies of him who has called us out of darkness into his marvelous light. Let not the breakroom in your workplace, or the rowing machine at the gym, or dinner table with your family have a single soul languishing in hopelessness and sin and not have compassionate run down your cheeks while you plead with God for mercy and grace on their behalf. With great confidence in our God, and hearts warmed by obedience and prayer, let's move to establish a culture of prayer and mission that so shapes our children and grandchildren that anywhere they may attend that does not have the whole church crying in prayer will seem strange to them. It's time, as we enter our fifth year, to move forward in these areas. God help us. God lay your heart over ours. For your eternal praise and glory.

PRAY

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