

Seeing People as Sheep Without a Shepherd

Matthew 9:35–38

MAIN IDEA: Evangelism begins not with strategy or pressure, but with seeing people through the compassionate heart of Christ—people who are spiritually lost, helpless, and in need of a shepherd—and responding with prayerful dependence and obedient action.

BACKGROUND / CONTEXT: By the time we reach Matthew 9, Jesus has been teaching, healing, forgiving sins, calling sinners, and confronting hardened religious leaders. The crowds are growing, but so is the resistance. And it would be easy at this point for Jesus to withdraw, to focus only on training the Twelve, or to protect Himself from the overwhelming needs pressing in on Him. But Matthew 9:35–38 shows us that Jesus does the opposite. This passage is not primarily about technique; it is about vision—how Jesus sees people. Before He ever sends His disciples out in Matthew 10, He reshapes how they look at the world in Matthew 9. He teaches them to see people not as *interruptions, threats, or problems*, but as *sheep without a shepherd*. This text shows us the heart that fuels the mission. If Matthew 28 tells us what we are sent to do, Matthew 9 shows us how we must see people if we are to do it faithfully.

1. The Ministry That Reveals the Shepherd's Heart (v. 35)

A. The Scope of Jesus Ministry

- “Jesus went throughout all the towns and villages.” I.e. Jesus does not limit His ministry to convenient places or receptive audiences. He went to large towns and small villages. Prominent places and forgotten places.
- Jesus goes to where people are rather than waiting for them to come to Him.
- This reveals the shepherd’s heart—persistent, patient, and pursuing.

B. The Shape of Jesus Ministry

- Jesus teaches in their synagogues: He instructs minds with truth and He corrects false views of God.
- Jesus proclaims the gospel of the kingdom: He announces God’s reign and He calls people to repentance in faith.
- Jesus heals every disease and sickness: He shows mercy to real suffering and He demonstrates the restoring power of the kingdom.
- Word and deed are never separated in Jesus’ ministry.

C. Application: *We can follow the Shepherd’s Pattern.* Faithful evangelism flows from faithful presence. Disciple-making involves truth, compassion, and persistence. We reflect Christ’s heart when we: 1) *Are present with people*, 2) *Speak truth patiently*, and 3) *Care about real needs*.

2. The Compassion That Moves the Mission (v. 36a)

A. Jesus’ Emotional Response to the Crowds

- “When he saw the crowds, he felt compassion for them.” He shows gut-level mercy—not shallow sympathy. He is not irritated, overwhelmed, or detached. Jesus is moved *toward people in their need*.

B. Contrast with Common Human Responses

- We often respond to crowds and sinners with frustration, fear, or indifference.
- **Application:** *Let Christ’s Compassion Shape Our Vision.* Evangelism begins with how we see people. Saying you don’t have the gift of mercy is not an excuse. Jesus responds with mercy, and we should too. Cold hearts produce silent Christians. We must ask God to give us Christ’s heart before we ask for Christ’s boldness.

3. The Condition That Demands a Shepherd (v. 36b)

A. The Spiritual Diagnosis Jesus Makes

- “Distressed and dejected”—harassed, worn down, spiritually exhausted
- “Like sheep without a shepherd”—Old Testament imagery of leaderless, vulnerable people; this is an implicit indictment of failed spiritual leadership.

B. What This Means

- Sheep without a shepherd are vulnerable to danger, easily scattered, and unable to protect themselves.
- Spiritually, people without Christ lack direction, protection, and hope.
- External success or religiosity does not change spiritual lostness.

4. The Reality That Urgently Calls for Workers (v. 37)

A. Jesus’ Assessment of the Mission Field: “The harvest is abundant.” Jesus affirms readiness and opportunity. God is already at work before the disciples are sent.

B. Common Misconceptions Corrected: The problem is not a hostile culture, hardened hearts, or difficult times. The problem is a labor shortage. The mission stalls not because people are unreachable, but because too few are willing.

5. The Prayer That Precedes the Sending (v. 38)

A. The Pattern of the Kingdom: Jesus commands prayer before action. God is the Lord of the harvest. He alone sends workers into the field. Prayer expresses dependence, not passivity.

B. The Irony of the Command: Those told to pray are the very ones soon sent (Matthew 10). Prayer prepares hearts for obedience. God often answers the prayer by sending the one who prayed. They become part of the mission.

C. Application: *Pray for workers, willing hearts, and faithful obedience.* Prayer aligns our heart with God’s mission and moves us toward participation.

WHAT IS TRUE (SUMMARY):

Jesus sees people with compassion, not contempt, because He knows they are spiritually helpless without a shepherd. Although the need is great and the harvest is ready, the shortage is not of opportunity but of workers. And God, in His wisdom, advances His mission not through human strength or strategy alone, but through praying, obedient disciples who are willing to be sent.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR US:

Evangelism begins with how we see people. If we see them as enemies, we will avoid them. If we see them as projects, we will use them. But if we see them as sheep without a shepherd, we will love them. Jesus does not call us to save anyone. He calls us to see, to pray, and to go. Because the Lord Himself is our Shepherd, we go not in our own strength but under His care.

WHAT TO DO:

- ✓ Ask God daily to give you eyes to see people as Jesus sees them.
- ✓ Slow down long enough to notice people instead of rushing past them.
- ✓ Learn the names and stories of people around you.
- ✓ Turn ordinary conversations into caring conversations.
- ✓ Pray regularly for specific unbelievers God has placed in your life.
- ✓ Speak the gospel naturally, not forcefully.
- ✓ Remember that compassion fuels courage.