



Hearts for the Harvest
Matthew 9:35-38

Continuing in our walkthrough of Matthew's gospel, we come to the end of chapter 9. Picking up in verse 35 this morning....

Matthew 9:35-38

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."

This end to chapter 9 is also a transition point for the gospel as a whole. Verse 35 is nearly identical to what Matthew wrote in chapter 4, verse 23. Jesus was traveling, teaching, and preaching the gospel of the kingdom in synagogues, and he was healing every disease and every affliction.

This is what is called an "*inclusio*" in biblical studies. It is when an author gives similar or identical verses that serve as markers of a major section. Think of them as parentheses or bookends to group scenes of Jesus' life together.

And in this case here in Matthew's gospel, from chapter 4 through 9, the focus has been on the teaching and healing in Jesus' earthly ministry. As the story unfolds from here on out, emphasis will be given to the rising opposition to Jesus' teaching and ministry.

But this morning as we look at the final verses of chapter 9, we get a glimpse at the heart of Jesus towards people, and we are challenged as his disciples, as those who claim to follow Jesus, to develop a heart like Jesus' towards people, which should then in turn shape the way we serve Jesus and people.

So, let's look again at verse 36...

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.

So, here's Jesus, he sees the vast number of people in need, and his heart is moved with compassion for them. Notice, it does not say that Jesus was angered at the sight

of the people. Jesus was not annoyed by everyone and their needs. Jesus wasn't disgusted by the sight of those sinners in his midst.

He was compassionate, because as he looked at the masses, made up of countless individuals with varying stories, backgrounds, struggles, and experiences, he saw that they were, ultimately, harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.

Consider, that analogy, "sheep without a shepherd." My guess is most of us are not farmers, most of us don't have sheep, I know some do, but most don't, but it's not hard to understand this analogy.

Sheep without a shepherd wander aimlessly. They get lost. They have no direction. They have no one to feed them. They have no one to protect them from the dangers that surround them. They are, as Matthew describes, "harassed and helpless." But this analogy isn't one that Matthew thought of himself. This is an analogy that is given by God in the Old Testament, which is really important to understanding these words in the New Testament.

Through the prophet Ezekiel, for example, God looked out at his people and, of course, knew the ways that the religious leaders were treating them, so he calls them out...

Ezekiel 34:1-6

1 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. **5** So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd, and they became food for all the wild beasts. My sheep were scattered; **6** they wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill. My sheep were scattered over all the face of the earth, with none to search or seek for them.

So again, those who were meant to serve and protect the people of Israel were using the people of Israel to serve themselves. Rather than protecting them, they ended up abusing them. Those who were meant to be the shepherds of God's people ended up being the predators of God's people.

So, the sheep were without a shepherd. And this rang true all the way to the life of Jesus. And we see Jesus, during his early life and ministry, call out the religious leaders over and over again. And Jesus, in Matthew 9, sets his earthly eyes on the crowds, and he is moved with compassion. He sees the sheep with no shepherd. Sheep wandering aimlessly. Sheep exposed to predators. Sheep without anyone to bring nourishment and care.

But ultimately, this is why Jesus came. He came to be the shepherd that his people so desperately needed.

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.

So God says, the earthly shepherds have failed, so I will shepherd my people myself. And Jesus comes to be that shepherd. He comes to be the shepherd that you and I desperately need.

We’ll talk more about that in a minute, but first, I want to consider the heart of Jesus here. Christ’s heart is a compassionate heart. Not reluctant. Not annoyed. Not apathetic. But loving, gracious, patient, and sympathetic.

Now, as followers of Jesus, as ones being conformed to the image of Christ, growing in Christlikeness, this means our trajectory for growth is growing in our compassion for others, especially those who do not yet know Christ.

This challenges many other ways we view people, doesn’t it? If we consider the thoughts and emotions that arise in our hearts as we see people, whether individuals or groups of people, compassion isn’t always what we experience.

For example, if this passage was written to describe us so often when we see the crowds or the individual, rather than, “he/she had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd,” it might say...

...“he/she had a **fear** of them because they were dangerous and malicious, like threats to be avoided.”

So often, we just view people primarily as threats, and so the primary way we engage is through avoidance. We want to preserve our safety so we don’t interact, we don’t

engage. We're afraid of their views, we're afraid of their motivations, we're afraid of their potential actions, so we avoid.

It's easy to adopt this posture towards others, especially in a culture that is so influenced by politics and media that thrive off fear-mongering. It's easy to adopt the posture of them vs. us, him vs. me. The church vs. the world. It's confrontational more than it is compassionate.

...“he/she had **disgust** for them because they were sinful and depraved, like diseases without a cure.”

So often we look at others, especially those who celebrate what the Bible calls sin, show no remorse for their actions, and just be disgusted. And so, like with fear, we just avoid them. But more than just hoping for their defeat, we avoid and hope for their judgment. It's condemning more than it is compassionate.

...“he/she had **apathy** towards them because they were irrelevant and insignificant, like objects with no usefulness.”

So often, we view and measure others simply by the ways they improve our lives. If they can help us in some way, then we give them the time of day. If not, then we aren't interested. Again, instead of seeing them as people made in the image of God, we view them as tools made for the benefit of ourselves. And tools can only be used or discarded. But that is a posture that is more controlling than it is compassionate.

...“he/she showed **reckless acceptance** of them because they were perfect and proud, like sinless sheep with no need of a shepherd.”

This is the extreme opposite of fear or disgust. It's the extreme opposite of avoidance. It's an acceptance that sees people with no spiritual need whatsoever. They are who they are. They are who they were created to be. The only need they have is to be celebrated and embraced. They don't need a shepherd, because they are their own shepherd. That is a posture that is more cowardly than compassionate.

But none of those postures and views of people line up with the way Jesus views people. Jesus saw the crowd, recognized they needed a shepherd, and it moved him with compassion. And the challenge for us is to grow into this posture as well.

I love to travel and I love being at airports. As frustrating as travel delays or the security line can be, I love the airport, because I love to watch people. We've been on vacation visiting family, so I flew just this last week and when you're at the airport you see all kinds of people. You see the exhausted parents trying to keep their little ones entertained while they wait for their next flight. You see the man or woman presumably on a business trip because they're dressed nice and you overhear them on the phone

talking about sales this quarter. You see the couples clearly in vacation mode with their Hawaiian shirts and straw hats. And so many others. And as you watch people, it's a great reminder to consider, every single one of them has an entire life outside your own. Backgrounds, dreams, hopes, tragedies, hobbies, likes and dislikes, family, friends. They are just normal people, like you and me, but as Christians, we are challenged here to view them not just as travelers, but as souls. People who need a shepherd. And that's how we should view our neighbors, family members, those who march in a parade, those who picket against our cause, those whom we have nothing in common with...they are souls in need of Christ.

Rather than seeing others merely as political threats, rather than seeing others as merely useful or useless objects, rather than seeing others as merely disgusting sinners, we need to ask the Lord to give us eyes and hearts that see others as people in need of a shepherd. In other words, Jesus views them with a spiritual lens. And we should, too.

If we view the world as enemies, we will engage them as enemies. If we view others as objects, we will treat them as objects. But if we view them as people, as souls in need of a shepherd, we will do what we can to point them to the shepherd.

So we should ask, what emotions do people elicit in your heart? Is compassion for your neighbor, colleague, peer, family member, or complete stranger something you experience?

Why or why not? Could it be that you are failing to think of them in spiritual terms? We need the Spirit to mold our hearts to be compassionate towards those in need of the gospel.

And this is exactly what Jesus is trying to teach his disciples in this passage. Notice what he says in the next verse...

Matthew 9:37

37 Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few

Jesus here shifts the analogy from sheep and a shepherd to a harvest and laborers. The point is the same in both. There is great need for gathering. The shepherd gathers his sheep. The laborers gather the harvest.

In the immediate context, Jesus and his disciples have gone through numerous cities and towns, and Jesus turns to his disciples and says, I came to not only bring the kingdom of God, but to proclaim the kingdom of God, and if the world will hear of this good news of the kingdom, I have determined that it will take more than just me proclaiming it. I've determined that I will use laborers to help in the gathering of the harvest.

But first, you need to see how great the harvest is! And by seeing how great the harvest is, having your heart be moved with compassion towards them.

And so, we need to see the immensity of the harvest.

Right now, there are just over 8 billion people in the world, and it is projected to be nearly 9 billion in just 10 years.¹

Our world is made up of not just geo-political nation-states such as the United States, Canada, and Mexico, but by “people groups.” These are ethnolinguistic groupings of people, and each geopolitical nation-state can have thousands of people groups.

Missiologists over the decades have tried to identify those people groups, and as difficult as that is, it is estimated that there are over 17,000 people groups in the world. And in order to gauge the need for the gospel amongst those 17,000 people groups, a statistic has been used to identify people groups based on lostness, ultimately how much or how little access to the gospel that group of people might have based on the number of Christians identified, churches established, and gospel workers present among them.

The terms “unreached” and “reached” have been employed, though probably not the most helpful terms, in my opinion, nonetheless used to identify people groups around the world with less than 2% evangelical Christian. This way the global Church can identify those corners of the harvest that are in the most desperate need for laborers. Those who are willing to cross cultural lines in order to do as Jesus did and has called us to do, to proclaim the gospel of the kingdom.

It is estimated that of the 17,000 people groups, over 7,000 people groups are considered “unreached” by missiologists today.² Nearly half! And of the so-called “reached” people groups, there is still an immense need for workers.

And that is not to dismiss the incredible need here in our country and our city for laborers in the harvest, to tell others of the gospel, that Christ’s sheep might be brought into the fold.

And so we look around with Christlike eyes and hearts, see the crowds and the need for the gospel, and that ought to move us to action.

Notice Jesus’ instructions here...

Matthew 9:37-38

¹ <https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/>.

² <https://joshuaproject.net/>.

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.”

Again, the harvest is plentiful, there are few workers, “therefore” pray.

Now, when we get to the end of Matthew’s gospel we will hear what is called the “Great Commission.” It is Jesus’ commission of the Church to go and make disciples of all nations, of all people groups. There is an active step towards those who need to hear the gospel in this mission, but first, notice Jesus says we pray.

That’s because, first and foremost, the harvest is his. He is the “Lord of the harvest.” It all belongs to him, the laborers serve him, and the great harvest is and will be to his glory and not the laborers’. And since the harvest is his, we go to him first. And we pray.

And notice, Jesus’ instruction here on praying is not about praying for the harvest itself, for the sheep to hear the voice of the shepherd and turn to him, though that is certainly a proper prayer to pray. Rather, Jesus instructs his disciples to pray that the Lord would send more laborers into the harvest.

One of the beautiful results of praying, and not just praying for personal stuff, but praying for others and praying prayers of adoration and praise, is that prayer shapes our hearts. If I pray for the good of my enemy, my heart grows softer towards them. If I’m rehearsing how good and faithful the Lord is, my heart grows in peace. And if I’m praying, Lord, the harvest is plentiful, would you send more laborers to the harvest, my heart grows in compassion for others and it moves me to be involved in God’s mission.

And we so desperately need hearts shaped by the Lord of the harvest for work in the harvest.

In fact, the Greek word behind “send out” there in verse 38 is a word that is used many times in the New Testament, and more often than not, it is used in a way that describes a not-so gentle sending. It can mean to “expel,” “drive out,” and “thrust out.”

In other words, it isn’t always used in a way that we might “send” our little ones to school on the bus in the morning, but also to describe someone thrusting out an intruder in their home.

For example, it’s the same word used to describe in other places in the New Testament for casting out demons from those who are possessed. It is used when Jesus drives out money changers from the temple (Matt. 21:12). It is used to describe the casting of Stephen from the city to be stoned (Acts 7:58). It is used to describe the religious leaders driving Paul and Barnabas out of Antioch in Pisidia (Acts 13:50).

It is possible, then, that this is not a gentle calling in view here when he wants the disciples to pray that the Lord would send out laborers into the harvest. **I think the point in that is to recognize that we are praying that God would stir the hearts of his people (you and me), that we might be shaken and cast out of our complacency, thrust out of our apathy, and brought out of our idolatry of the comfortable that we might be laborers in the harvest (both here and abroad)**

Because we need that. We need hearts shaped for the harvest. We need hearts that align with Jesus, who is moved with compassion as he witnesses the crowds, and thus moves toward them with the good news of the gospel of the kingdom. So, we pray, and our hearts are shaped, and our eyes are opened, and our feet are moved to go.

And the Lord is still actively sending laborers into the harvest. We are privileged as a church to partner with those who have sensed the Lord sending them into the harvest, backed by a church willing to send them and partner with them as well.

We had the joy of having one of our global missionary partners with us a few weeks ago - Guido and Evelin Groeneveld, sensed the Lord sending them to northeastern Spain to reach an area largely devoid of the gospel. By his grace, the Lord has also sent out some from our church as well, people that have sat next to you and worshipped alongside you and me and moved with compassion called to go to the nations with the gospel.

Grace Roaders Ethan and Liz Helm, along with their kids and with another Grace Roder, Corinne Porter, serve in Phnom Penh, Cambodia today.

Grace Roder, Noelle Ferris serves along with her husband in Costa Rica.

Newer Grace Roaders David and Carmen Gunderson are in Athens, Greece right now on a scouting trip to see how they might serve the Lord among the immense refugee population there.

I know several here who have a deep heart for personal evangelism and regularly share Christ with others. I know several here have a deep heart for global missions and regularly serve on short trips or are generous with your resources for those who go.

We partner with many others connected with Grace Road laboring in the harvest in some way, both here and abroad, because at some point the Lord of the harvest gripped their hearts for his harvest.

And it should be our prayer that our hearts only grow for the harvest. So we commit to pray. Commit to pray for those who don't know Christ in your life and around the world. Pray for the lost right here in Rochester as well as those who belong to people groups in parts of the world you may never go to.

Commit to pray for our missionaries on the field. Commit to pray for more missionaries to be sent out of Grace Road.

I want to challenge you to pray, Lord, could you be calling *me* to go in some way? Lord, how do you want to use *me* in the harvest?

And perhaps, the Lord will shape or reshape your heart for his harvest.

GOSPEL

Now, while we are, by God's design, integral parts of the global harvest, it is necessary to remember that we are not the shepherd...Jesus is the good shepherd. So our task is simply to point people to the good shepherd.

Fulfilling what was foretold by the prophets in Ezekiel, Jesus picked up on this imagery about himself in John 10...

John 10:7-16

7 So Jesus again said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. **8** All who came before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. **9** I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture. **10** The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly. **11** I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. **12** He who is a hired hand and not a shepherd, who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. **13** He flees because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. **14** I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, **15** just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep. **16** And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.

So Jesus has more than compassion for the lost sheep with no shepherd. Jesus isn't forced to watch with a heavy heart as people wander with no hope or possibility of saving. Jesus becomes the shepherd that we desperately needed. Unlike the thief who comes to steal, kill, and destroy, Jesus, the good shepherd has come to bring life. Unlike the mere hired hand, unwilling to sacrifice of himself to protect the flock from danger, Jesus as the good shepherd gives his life that his flock might be spared from death.

There are many ways we try to shepherd ourselves, and there many other shepherds we are tempted to look to, but only Jesus can bring the life that we truly need.

Jesus is the only shepherd who could rescue you and me from being harassed and helpless, and he's done that by offering his own life on the cross and raising to new life that we, his flock, might share in that life. And the shepherd calls to his sheep to come. Notice that in verse 16 there again, "I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must

bring them also and they will listen to my voice.” So if you’ve never trusted in Christ alone for salvation, hear his call this morning. If this morning, you identify with the lost and wandering sheep imagery that Scripture presents, know that Jesus bids the wandering and lost sheep to come and find life in him.

For Christians this morning, let’s have compassion on those without Christ, because at one time we were the lost sheep. We were wandering aimlessly, without a shepherd, in harm’s way. We were unable to shepherd ourselves so we needed someone else to have compassion on us and point us to Jesus. We were the harvest needing to be gathered.

And let’s commit to pray for more laborers. Let’s ask the Lord to grow our hearts for the lost in our community and around the world. Imagine what that would be like if we as a church were committed to pray like that. Imagine the way the Lord might use Grace Road in his harvest.

So, let’s pray in a time of silent prayer and confession...

CONFESSION

PRAYER

ASSURANCE OF PARDON

John 10:27-28

27 My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. **28** I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand.

VERSES

Matthew 9:35-38

Matthew 9:36

Ezekiel 34:1-6

Ezekiel 34:11-16

Matthew 9:37

Matthew 9:37-38
John 10:7-16
John 10:27-28

SERMON DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What emotions do people elicit in your heart? Are there certain groups of people that elicit different emotions than others? Why?
2. How often do you consider the spiritual state of others, whether someone you know or a complete stranger?
3. What does it mean that Jesus is the “Lord of the harvest?”
4. How familiar are you with the state of global missions today?
5. Spend time praying together for 1) your heart to be shaped for the harvest, 2) current missionaries from Grace Road, and 3) more missional involvement by those in our church both here and abroad.