

THE CRITICAL HARVEST

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Matthew 9:35-38

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INTRO.

-- Scene from The Princess Diaries

-- For all those who have ever felt like Mia - invisible, sat upon - there's good news. There's someone who knows your name, someone who cares deeply about you and what you're going through. That someone is Jesus, and today we come to a passage in the Gospel of Matthew that tells us just how Jesus responds as He sees us here today.

Matthew 9:35-38

-- What Matthew gives us here is a summary of Jesus' public ministry. There were three main components of that ministry:

1. Teaching in the synagogues. The object of Jesus' teaching was to edify, to strengthen and build up people through the truth of God's Word.

2. Preaching to the crowds that gathered around Him in outdoor locations - on a hillside, beside a lake. The purpose of Jesus' preaching ministry was mostly to evangelize - to call people to repent and enter the Kingdom of God.

3. Healing the sick and afflicted everywhere He went. The purpose of Jesus' healing ministry was 2 fold: to confirm that He was the divine Son of God, and to convey His compassion for the suffering.

-- As he describes how Jesus carried out this public ministry, Matthew makes 4 key statements that I want us to focus on this morning:

v. 35, He went / v. 36, He saw / v. 36, He had / v. 37, He said

I. He Went (v. 35)

A. Jesus' Ministry

1. Jesus started His public ministry by going around to all of the cities and villages of Galilee in the northern part of Israel. One historical source indicates that there were about 200 such towns with a total population of about 3 million.

2. What Matthew tells us is that almost all of Jesus' ministry took place out in the community. Jesus took the initiative to go to the people. In Jesus' own words, He came "to seek and to save the lost." So, Jesus went everywhere the lost were - He conversed with them in their homes, danced with them at their weddings, worked with them on their fishing boats, cried with them at their funerals, and prayed with them in their synagogues.

B. How Different the Gospels Would Have Been

-- Think how different the stories in the Gospels would have been if Jesus had not gone throughout the villages seeking the lost. The woman in Samaria would have gone to the well, drawn some water and gone back to town unchanged. Zacchaeus would have continued to sit at the tax collector table, making lots of money but living a life of rejection and dying a lonely, bitter man. The demoniacs in Gadara would have spent the rest of their days living among the tombs like wild animals.

-- But Jesus went out to them and forever changed their lives. Thank God that He doesn't wait for us to come to Him but that He comes to us, He seeks and finds us, He searches for and reclaims every one of His lost sheep.

II. He Saw (v. 36)

-- And wherever Jesus went, He also saw.

v. 36, "When he saw the crowds"

A. A Difference Between Looking and Seeing

1. There's a difference between looking at people and actually seeing them. Jesus didn't just look at people - He saw them. He paid attention to them. He looked at their faces and saw into their hearts.
2. Matthew uses two words to describe what Jesus found in the people's hearts:
 - a. They were "harassed" (beaten down and worn out), and
 - b. They were "helpless" (a word that describes someone lying prostrate, like someone knocked out or unable to move).
3. Jesus saw them as sheep without a shepherd - they had no one to protect them or provide for them.

B. Divine Appointments

-- I believe that Jesus went out every day "seeing people" and looking for those divine appointments when God would arrange an encounter with someone that Jesus could minister to in some way - a woman at a well, a short man in a tree, a paralyzed man being lowered by friends through the roof, a sick woman standing silently in the crowd reaching out to secretly touch His garment.

-- But Jesus wasn't the only one with divine appointments with people in need. I believe that we all have them, probably almost every day. The big difference is that Jesus was looking for them and saw them when they happened, while we too often aren't looking for them and fail to pay attention to them.

III. He Had (v. 36)

-- v. 36, "he had compassion for them"

A. Possible to See and Not Respond

-- Of course, it's possible to see the hurts and needs of people and not respond to them.

Jesus not only saw the people and their needs, He also responded with compassion.

-- The word "had compassion" literally means to be touched in the bowels. In our culture, we associate emotions, especially like compassion, with the heart, but to the Jews the seat of deepest emotions was the bowels. Actually, we do associate courage with the bowels, when we say that someone "has guts." But the Jews also associated the bowels, the guts, with the tender emotions of love and compassion. So, if you want to be romantic in an OT biblical manner, you can turn to your spouse or to your fiancée; and say, "I love you with all my bowels." Or for Mother's Day next Sunday you can make a card and instead of drawing a heart on it, you can draw a picture of the intestines.

B. Jesus Consistently Responded with Compassion

1. So, what Matthew is saying to us is that Jesus responded to the needs of people with the deepest of compassion. And that's something that Jesus does consistently throughout His ministry.

-- In chapter 14 Jesus sails across Galilee to be alone, but the crowds find out where Jesus is headed and actually beat Him there.

Matthew 14:14 When he went ashore he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion on them and healed their sick.

-- Again, in chapter 15 Jesus goes up onto a mountain to be alone, but once more the crowds follow Him, and again Jesus responds to them the same way.

Matthew 15:32a Then Jesus called his disciples to him and said, "I have compassion on the crowd

2. Statue of Christ in Oklahoma City

-- In April of 1995 Timothy McVeigh bombed the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City killing 168 people. That site has been made into a memorial with 168 empty chairs located where each person sat when they died. Across the street the St. Joseph's Catholic Church has erected another memorial, a statue of Christ in a robe with His back to the street and the place where the Federal Building had once stood. Surrounding the statue are 168 markers for each person who died in the awful bombing. Jesus' head is bowed in sorrow and grief and He is covering His face with His hand as He weeps in response to that horrific event. Even as we may ask "Why God?" we also know that Jesus did not exempt Himself from suffering and that He is touched with our weakness and weeps with us in our grief.

IV. He Said (v. 37)

-- v. 37

A. A New Image

-- Jesus uses a new image here - instead of comparing the people to sheep, He compares them to a harvest. Picturing people as a harvest field emphasizes two important truths:

1. The Potential

-- The harvest image emphasizes the potential for people to be reached with the Gospel and brought into the Kingdom of God.

2. The Urgency

-- The harvest imagery also emphasizes the urgency of the mission. If the harvest is not reaped, it will be lost.

The Bible often uses the harvest as an image for judgment of those outside of the Kingdom of God

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Joel 3:13-14 Put in the sickle, for the harvest is ripe. Go in, tread, for the winepress is full. The vats overflow, for their evil is great. **¹⁴**Multitudes, multitudes, in the valley of decision! For the day of the Lord is near in the valley of decision. **¹⁵**The sun

B. How Jesus Plans to Reach the Harvest

-- This verse also gives us 2 insights into how Jesus plans to reach the harvest of lost people.

1. Through Us

-- Jesus has chosen us as the instruments through whom He will reach the harvest of lost people. We are the servants that Jesus sends out into the harvest field.

2. Through Prayer

-- Jesus has also chosen to make prayer an essential means of reaching the harvest. You see, the needs of the harvest field are always greater than the visible resources of the church. There is always more work to be done than there are workers to do it.

a. The Typical Reactions

-- Typically, the church reacts to this problem in two ways:

- (1) We decide that there's nothing we can do - the job is too overwhelming, or
- (2) We try to squeeze more work out of those servants who are already

overworked.

b. Jesus' Option: Pray (v. 38)

-- But Jesus offers us a third option.

v. 38

-- Jesus tells us to pray for more workers because it's God's harvest field, and He cares for it even more than we do. We are to pray because God is the Lord of the harvest, and He has the resources to reach the harvest. We are to pray because God is the one who moves the hearts of those not yet working in the field and sends them out.

But there's a caveat here: watch out because you can't pray for workers without soon becoming one yourself. In fact, in the very next chapter the very ones whom Jesus tells to pray are the very first ones that He sends out.