

9:38 - Ask the Lord of the Harvest to Send Out Workers

Matthew 9:35-10:4 (NIV)

³⁵ Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. ³⁶ When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on 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 workers are few. ³⁸ Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field." ¹ Jesus called his twelve disciples to him and gave them authority to drive out impure spirits and to heal every disease and sickness. ² These are the names of the twelve apostles: first, Simon (who is called Peter) and his brother Andrew; James son of Zebedee, and his brother John; ³ Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; ⁴ Simon the Zealot and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him.

"See a need; fill a need." It's a catchy phrase. Words to live by, words that even our Lord put into practice. "Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd." (verses 35-36) Jesus saw a definite need.

It's sad because there shouldn't have been a need here. The Jews had synagogue rulers and expert teachers of the Law (Bible scholars of the Old Testament) and rabbis. They had shepherds, but these shepherds didn't do their jobs. It wasn't neglect or inadequacies that caused them to fail at what they were supposed to do. This was far worse. Their sheep, their people, were harassed and helpless. The English words used here don't get the full flavor of what was described. It wasn't just that they were bothered or annoyed or inconvenienced. No, Matthew, the author of this gospel, uses a word that means hurled about, tossed around like a rag doll. They were like sheep without a shepherd, people who needed guidance, needed protection, but were left unprotected against the evils of the world.

What had the synagogue rulers, the expert teachers of the Law, and the rabbis been doing to these people? In Matthew chapter 23 Jesus condemns these who should have been the people's shepherds. He calls them out saying, "They tie up heavy, cumbersome loads and put them on other people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them." (Matthew 23:4) These shepherds put law after law on top of the people. They made them do work after work teaching them that there was no other way to get right with God. But the people found that they couldn't do all the holy works that they were requiring. These were not laws from God's Word, but these were laws that they invented, that they forced the people to live by. And when the people admitted that they couldn't do all these extra laws, the synagogue rulers, the expert teachers of the law, and the rabbis shut the door to heaven in their faces saying that they are not good enough to be with God.

Has that been a part of your story, your history? Has a church leader ever shut the door of heaven in your face? Many of you know exactly what it's like to have expectation after expectation, to do list after to do list, law after law put upon you with no help on how you can actually do it all. So, you're left with two options: either you work yourself to complete exhaustion trying to accomplish it all or you lie about what you actually did. Regardless, you have to put a smile on your face and pretend that you have done everything that was asked, nay demanded of you. All the while you felt exhausted. You looked around and wondered how all these other people are doing it and with such ease. The unaccomplishable burden of perfection that church leaders have put upon you harassed you, made you helpless, just like the crowds Jesus saw.

"See a need; fill a need." It was not enough for Jesus to simply note that the crowds were bad off, like sheep without a shepherd. He had compassion on them. He cared about their plight, and that compassion moved him to action and offer a solution. He said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field." (verses 37-38) Jesus' solution for the people who are like sheep without a shepherd is to have his followers pray to him to provide these shepherds, those workers of the Lord's harvest field.

You and I, we see people who are harassed and helpless like these crowds were. We see people who have had a crushing weight of to-do lists and expectations and laws heaped upon them and then the door to heaven slammed in their faces when they could not do it all. We've seen this, but how many times have we then asked the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into his harvest field, to give these people a shepherd who cares about them enough to then lift the burden of perfection off their shoulders, who points people to Christ as the total and complete satisfaction of everything God requires of us?

Do I pray this? How often do I pray this? That number of prayers is shamefully low. And it's ridiculous that I don't pray this every day because Jesus himself promises to answer this prayer. His is inviting you and me, even commanding us, to pray to send workers out into his harvest field. He is telling us what to pray and yet I often don't pray this even with a promise of him answering it.

What's more is that he shows us in the very next verses the answer to that prayer: "Jesus called his twelve disciples to him and gave them authority to drive out impure spirits and to heal every disease and sickness." (verse 1) God has already shown me that he will answer this prayer and that he has answered this prayer. That's the history of our church. We are still a young church having celebrated this year our 25th anniversary. In those 25 years, the Lord of the harvest has sent to you four full-time pastors, pastors who tried to serve you as Christ served all of us, who had compassion on you because they themselves had experienced the compassion of Christ, who found you when you were harassed and helpless and pointed your eyes up to Christ, directed you to Jesus who takes that burden of perfection off of your shoulders and instead accomplished perfection for you.

Certainly, the four pastors here have not been cookie cutter cut-outs of each other. Each has come with his own strengths and weaknesses, just like the Twelve that Jesus sent out. Those Twelve came from all over, not like it was in the Old Testament where you had to be of the family line of Levi to be a priest. You had a few fishermen. You had some brothers: Peter, Andrew, James, and John. You had some hotheads like Peter, James, and John. James and John were known as the "Sons of Thunder." They once asked Jesus if they could call fire down on a city that didn't receive them kindly. You had at least one political activist among the Twelve in Simon the Zealot, a radical. You had some who already had experience of sharing Jesus with others like Andrew who brought Peter to meet Jesus and Philip who went and told Bartholomew – also known as Nathanael – that he had found the Messiah. You had some who were ostracized by society like Matthew the tax collector. You even had one who would eventually betray Jesus: Judas Iscariot. This is certainly a motley crew, but the Lord of the harvest raised them up to be his workers and he sent them out into this plentiful and ripe harvest field for those people who were harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd.

Jesus invites and commands us to ask him to send workers out into his harvest field. He has already proven that he will graciously answer that request and wants to. So, how are we going to take him up on this?

I have a challenge for you, a challenge I have been doing since I started preparing this sermon two weeks ago. I want you to set an alarm for 9:38. It doesn't matter if it's AM or PM. Set an alarm to go off every day at 9:38. I use my alarm on my phone since it's pretty much always with me. When it goes off at 9:38, do what Jesus says in Matthew 9:38, "Ask the Lord of the harvest...to send out workers into his harvest field."

You can simply pray Matthew 9:38, or you can get more specific with it day by day. You can pray as Paul asked the Thessalonian Christians to pray: "Brothers and sisters, pray for us that the message of the Lord may spread rapidly and be honored, just as it was with you." (2 Thessalonians 3:1) You can pray that God will fill the vacant associate pastor position at Prince of Peace in Salt Lake City or for every church that is currently without a shepherd, a pastor. Our pastor candidates coming out of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary have been low over the past couple of years. Pray that God would move more young men with the desire to serve as pastors for our national church body to fill those vacant churches. Pray that God will raise up more missionaries both here in the US and all over the world. Pray that God grant success to Pastor Heiderich's outreach efforts in Lehi, that the mission work there would blossom and flourish as he finds people who feel harassed and helpless. Go to the WELS missions website to read what our missionaries are doing and pray specifically for these people and their shepherds. Then let's just see how God answers these prayers that we offer up at 9:38.

As we wait for those answers, take a step back and ask if God is calling you to be one of these workers, a part of his motley crew of followers and preachers. Can you enroll in seminary to become a pastor? Are you wanting to work with the Truth in Love Ministry to go on their summer mission trips to Provo and Lehi and other places here in Utah? Do you want to see where in the world you could be of service by looking into the Kingdom Workers' program? Is there something you can do here at Light of the Valley working with our Evangelism committee, with Harry Short, our Evangelism Chairman, with our pastor to work the harvest field of this community? Maybe you are well suited to be the prayer warrior, to do what our first hymn proclaimed, "If you cannot be a watchman, Standing high on Zion's wall, Pointing out the path to heaven, Off'ring life and preach to all, With your prayers and with your off'rings You can do what God demands; You can be like faithful Aaron, Holding up the prophet's hands." (CW 573:3) God is calling us to action, to ask for more workers for his harvest field, and he has proven that he will answer us.

So, set your alarm for 9:38. When it goes off, ask the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into his harvest field. He will answer it, just as he did when he sent out the Twelve. God will provide workers - shepherds - for the harassed and helpless people of our world because he has compassion on us, to give us the comforting message that he has fulfilled perfection for us. Amen.