

Chapter 34: Plentiful Harvest, Few Workers

Matthew 9:35–38

As we come to the second major section of the Gospel of Matthew, the focus changes, even while it remains the same. Still we read about our incomparable Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who came into this world to save desperate sinners like you and me. Still we read about his unparalleled compassion for the weak and wounded, sick and sore. Still we discover his relentless efforts to bring many sons to glory. Yet, now Jesus introduces a new part of his plan—a strategy that he has used to expand the gospel of his kingdom throughout the globe. Here, Jesus begins to send other people to minister on his behalf. Here, we see that *Jesus shepherds his sheep through undershepherds*.

Many Weary (Matt. 9:35–36)

Matthew 9:35 declares, “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.” This is nearly a verbatim repetition of Matthew 4:23: “And he went throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction among the people.”¹ By this repetition, Matthew is marking the end of the first major section of Jesus’ life, and the beginning of a second major section, which will be characterized by Jesus’ commissioning of his disciples to work alongside him to accomplish his work.² This may be underscored by the shift from Jesus’ moving throughout “all Galilee” (Matt. 4:23) to the way that Jesus’ *disciples* will go throughout “all the cities and villages” (v. 35). As a true human being, Jesus cannot bodily inhabit more than one space at a time, so he will need laborers who will divide up to carry on his mission throughout all these places. Note also the special attention that the “villages” get here. Jesus is not content to remain in cities, but he insists upon bringing his kingdom into the more rural areas as well.

Jesus’ ministry has three aspects: teaching, proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, and healing.³ Even so, by putting teaching at the front of this description (especially on the heels of an extended cycle of healing miracles in Matt. 8:1–9:34), Matthew is emphasizing the significance of teaching and preaching above healing in the ministry of Jesus.⁴ Particularly, Jesus was preaching “the gospel of the kingdom,” which John Calvin defines as God’s “[gathering] to himself a people sadly scattered, that he might reign in the midst of him; and, indeed, he erected his throne for the express purpose of

¹ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 382.

² Blomberg, *Matthew*, 165.

³ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 238.

⁴ Hagner, *Matthew 1 - 13*, 260.

bestowing on all his people perfect happiness.”⁵

Jesus’ desire for the joy of his people becomes apparent in his reaction to the sad state of the people upon his arrival: “When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd” (v. 36). Matthew does not tell us whether Jesus experienced this pang of compassion at a single instance of gazing out on the crowds, or whether this sense of compassion grew over the course of time as Jesus encountered more and more desperate souls. Regardless, the word Matthew uses for “compassion” is particularly strong: “The verb *σπλαγχνίζομαι* [*splanchnizomai*] means to have the viscera moved, lungs, heart, and liver, which are considered to be the seat of feelings, such as love, pity, etc. We may say, ‘his heart was stirred.’”⁶ So far, the crowds have simply been present to marvel at Jesus’ teachings and healings (Matt. 7:28–29; 9:33), but now Jesus sets his compassion upon them.⁷

Particularly, Jesus saw that his people were “harassed” (“literally ‘flay’ or ‘skin’, but comes to be used metaphorically of harassment of any kind, and then (in the passive) of the exhausted or troubled state produced by such harassment”) and “helpless” (“‘throw’...perhaps best to think of sheep lying passive on the ground, with no sense of what to do in their need: they lack the protective and guiding role of a shepherd”).⁸ Even worse, they were “like sheep without a shepherd.” This phrase “is rich in Biblical references. In addition to the passages based on Zech. 13:7, namely, Matt. 26:31 and Mark 14:27, see also Num. 27:17; I Kings 22:17; Ezek. 34; Zech. 10:2; 11:5; and John 10:12.”⁹ Biblically, a “shepherd” is often used to speak of various kinds of leaders who were charged with the care of God’s people—particularly the anointed officers who served as prophets, priests, and kings. As Jesus arrives on the scene, though, “the rightful leadership of Israel had abdicated its responsibility, as demonstrated by its inability or unwillingness to recognize God’s true spokesman.”¹⁰ This is a great danger, as Morris observes, for “Goats manage very well by themselves, but sheep do not. Sheep without a shepherd points to people who are in great danger and without the resources to escape from it.”¹¹ Jesus, however, has come to be the Good Shepherd of his people (Matt. 2:6, citing Mic. 5:1; see also Ezek 34:23; 37:24; John 10:11).¹²

Few Working (Matt. 9:37–38)

What is to be done to care for these helpless and harassed crowds? Jesus acknowledges the great need and the lack of resources: “Then he said to his disciples, ‘The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few’” (v. 37). At this point, we might still expect that Jesus himself would take up the exclusive responsibility for the work ahead. Instead, he makes two surprising statements. First of all, he points to the need for laborers beyond himself: “the laborers are few.” As Lenski observes, “Up to

⁵ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, 1:420.

⁶ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 382.

⁷ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 372.

⁸ Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 407.

⁹ Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 440.

¹⁰ Blomberg, *Matthew*, 166.

¹¹ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 239.

¹² Hagner, *Matthew 1 - 13*, 260.

this point Jesus alone was working at bringing in the harvest, training the Twelve at the same time, so that they were now ready to help him.”¹³

Second, he identifies a particular means of raising upon more workers; “therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest” (v. 38). Morris well articulates how strange this sounds to our ears:

In an age like ours we would expect a call to more vigorous and effective action ourselves (and situations continually arise when that is the right course to pursue). But Jesus points to prayer as the really effective thing. No matter how great our personal exertion, we will not be able to gather in the whole harvest. Therefore we are to pray to him who can *send out* the workers who are needed.¹⁴

By this, Jesus is not identifying some weakness or lack on his part, even though he is acknowledging that others beyond him will have a role in God’s plan of redemption. Rather, he is broaching the need for the work of the Holy Spirit to answer prayers and to train more laborers for working in the harvest. It is not more effective plans and programs that we need, but more fervent prayer for God’s Holy Spirit to raise up the needed laborers for the harvest. Thus, Calvin writes, “As no man will of himself become a sincere and faithful minister of the gospel, and as none discharge in a proper manner the office of teacher but those whom the Lord raises up and endows with the gifts of his Spirit, whenever we observe a scarcity of pastors, we must raise our eyes to him to afford the remedy.”¹⁵

To summarize, this second major section of the Gospel of Matthew opens by making three closely related points. First, there is a critical need for work. Second, there is a woeful lack of workers. Third, the means by which God raises up workers is through prayer. If we lose sight of the need, the ministry, or the method, then we will ultimately lose sight of the overall mission of redemption that Jesus came to accomplish in and for his people.

Discussion Questions

1. What did we see Jesus do in the first part of his public ministry (Matt. 4:17–9:34)? How did we see him teaching, preaching, and healing (Matt. 4:23)? What role did the disciples play in Jesus’ ministry during this time? What role did the crowds play in Jesus’ ministry during this time? Why did Jesus begin his public ministry by laboring on his own in this way? What do we learn from this about Jesus’ unique role in God’s plan of redemption?

2. How does v. 35 signal the start of a new section of this Gospel (cf. Matt. 4:23)? What is the same about Jesus’ ministry? How might the shift from “all Galilee” to “all the cities and villages” suggest a new approach to Jesus’ ministry? What does Jesus see when he looks upon the crowds? What does

¹³ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 385.

¹⁴ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 240.

¹⁵ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 1:421.

“harassed” mean? What does “helpless” mean? What significance is there to the phrase, “sheep without a shepherd”?

3. What is similar about the imagery of “sheep” and “shepherds,” and then “harvest” and “laborers”? What is different about the two images? To whom does Jesus confide his evaluation of the spiritual needs of the crowds (v. 37)? What does that suggest about the role that they will take in this work (see Matt. 10:1–4)? What unique work did the first apostles do? What part of their work carries over even to the modern church today?

4. In laboring to bring in the harvest, what role has God appointed pastors (teaching elders) to do? What role has God appointed ruling elders to do? What role has God appointed deacons to do? Why are all these officers necessary today? What roles has God reserved for his entire church? What specific task does Jesus call us to in seeking to raise up more laborers for the field? How might you incorporate this kingdom prayer in your prayer life?