

Focus Text

“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. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.”

(Matthew 9:35–38, ESV)

1. Minister Like the Master

“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.” **(Matthew 9:35, ESV)**

Matthew pauses from the excitement of the miraculous works that Jesus has been doing to remind the audience of the “point!” Jesus has come, saying, “Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand!” Now they have experienced everything that entails, from simple healings to the calming of nature, the forgiveness of sin, all the way to the resurrection. If there is any statement that Jesus is God and the savior of His people, the people in Capernaum should know it without question. The King and Kingdom are a wonderful place where life is found. As Christians have clung to the gift of eternal life and resurrection for centuries, this portrait in Matthew 8-9 gives us hope beyond hope that no matter what troubles we face on this mortal coil, His eternal Kingdom awaits, and it will be a place that our hearts long to see. It is awesome in every sense of the word.

“The circle comes to a close. With but small variations¹ the evangelist repeats 4:23*. The readers look back on chaps. 5–9. They now know what the “gospel of the kingdom” is (chaps. 5–7) and how Israel’s Messiah heals all diseases (chaps. 8–9). His activity encompasses all of the villages and cities of the region (cf. 9:26*, 31*); it is not something that takes place hidden in a corner of Israel”¹

¹ 1 After 9:33–34* ὁ Ἰησοῦς is necessary. On τὰς πόλεις πάσας καὶ τὰς κώμας cf. Mark 6:56*. Mark 6:56* has already been used in 9:20*. In 14:34–36* Matthew omits v. 56a* and uses it here in anticipation.

* 23 Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.

Matthew 4:23 (NRSV)

* 26 And the report of this spread throughout that district.

Matthew 9:26 (NRSV)

* 31 But they went away and spread the news about him throughout that district.

Matthew 9:31 (NRSV)

Luz, Ulrich. 2001. *Matthew: A Commentary*. Edited by Helmut Koester. *Hermeneia—a Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible*. Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg.

2. Cultivate Christlike Compassion

“When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.” **(Matthew 9:36, ESV)**

When Jesus looks at the crowds who are coming to Him, desperate to see the kingdom of God, He shows compassion —a mixture of empathy, pity, and love. It's a sadness that Jesus feels because these are God's people, and yet they've not been shown God's graciousness, but instead a system that has held them in bondage. Jesus then references the prophets who said on several occasions that the people of God were like sheep lost without a shepherd. Sheep are pack animals, and without someone to guide them, they are hopelessly lost. It's clear from their admiration and wonder that they haven't been preparing for the Messiah and possibly have lost all hope that the savior would come. Now Jesus is here, as we see another vital trait of God, compassion. God desires that His creation stop rebelling and turn back toward Him. God's heart for lost people is deep and compassionate. As Christ Followers, one of our values is “sharing,” not because we want to make everyone uncomfortable, but because we share the gospel of Jesus, which reflects God's compassion for the world. As we see people who are far from Jesus, He desires that they know Him and is compassionate toward them. Even though it's one of our least practiced values, it's so crucial because it communicates God's compassion.

“And he said, “I saw all Israel scattered on the mountains, as sheep that have no shepherd. And the Lord said, ‘These have no master; let each return to his home in peace.’ ”” **(1 Kings 22:17, ESV)**

“So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd, and they became food for all the wild beasts. My sheep were scattered;” **(Ezekiel 34:5, ESV)**

3. Seize the Sacred Season

“Then he said to his disciples, ‘The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few;’” **(Matthew 9:37, ESV)**

The disciples are being prepared to go out and proclaim to Israel that the time for repentance is at hand, and to be ready for the judgment of God. The image of the harvest in the Old Testament was often used as a sign of God’s judgment. To be clear, the harvest represents God’s judgment of sin over the earth. The disciples are given another title and mission: “the laborers,” the people who will pull those out of the judgment and collect them for Jesus. Jesus is noting that at the moment, not many are fellow laborers, and that more will be needed.

These two themes are in tension: God’s judgment and compassion. A Holy God who hates sin but loves His creation and desires to save them from their sins. These are the two prongs of Jesus’ mission: “Repent” (turn from Sin). “The Kingdom is at Hand” (Enter into His Kingdom!) Recently, a friend asked, “What is a watered-down gospel?” My personal response would be a gospel that offers either judgment with no salvation or, more commonly, salvation with no repentance or transformation. With the parable here of the shepherd and the harvest, we see both parts of Jesus’ message coming to life. As we grow in the “Share” pillar of our faith, we must balance both parts. Jesus does indeed love all people, but hates the sinfulness that corrupts humanity. Repentance and Salvation go together like peanut butter and jelly!

“The disciples’ task will be to heal Israel’s affliction. In the Old Testament and Judaism, the image of harvest is definitely associated with judgment.¹¹ In the sayings source a strongly eschatological tone probably resonated. The gathering of Israel for the kingdom of God by means of the disciples’ proclamation is an eschatological event.”²

² 11 Uro (Sheep, 201) provides Old Testament and Jewish material. In a marginal note in his Matthäusevangelium, Schnackenburg interprets it, however, in terms of an understanding of mission that was developing in the primitive church. Relevant here would be not only John 4:36–38* but also the Pauline usage of κερπτοί. However, the use of the image elsewhere in Matthew contradicts this view. Important for the decision on this question is whether Matthew expected an imminent parousia (a view that I would affirm).

“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.” **(Joel 3:13, ESV)**

“For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: The daughter of Babylon is like a threshing floor at the time when it is trodden; yet a little while and the time of her harvest will come.”” **(Jeremiah 51:33, ESV)**

Application

4. Plead for Passionate Prayer

“therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.” **(Matthew 9:38, ESV)**

The disciples are called not just to go into the world and seek out lost people, but to begin with prayer that God would send people. God is responsible for the sending, saving, and growth of His Kingdom, and Jesus is reminding the disciples, BEFORE they are sent out, that this mission is God's and is done for Him and by Him.

Next week, Matthew is going to dive into the sending of the disciples out into the fields for the harvest. This week, will you join us in prayer that the Lord will send whoever He wills into the world to seek and save the lost, to build His Kingdom, and to be the Lord over His Church? Our Mission: “To Be & Make Committed Followers of Jesus Christ.” The preparation this week is for Good Shepherd to submit to Jesus, because this is His mission in the world. Amen.