

ST. MATTHEW'S CHURCH

NEW YORK CITY

PRAY FOR COMPASSIONATE WORKERS

Matthew 9:35-10:8-15

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost, June 15, 2008

All true churches are missionary churches. There are four reasons why all Christians should be involved in missions: (1.) the lost condition of the world, (2.) the Great Commission, (3.) the love of God working in us, and (4.) the many opportunities for advancing Christ's kingdom. And it is amazing that all four of things are in the Gospel reading for today.

The starting point is the terrible accusation the Pharisees made against Jesus: "But the Pharisees said, He casts out demons by the ruler of the demons." This is He gets His power for the devil. But notice how Jesus answers them. Three chapters later He gives a reasoned answer, explaining that if His power to cast out demons is from the devil, then Satan would be working against himself, like a kingdom divided into warring factions, and a divided kingdom cannot stand. In these verses He answers His critics simply by continuing to do good. Our Gospel text says, "Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness" (Matthew 9:35).

This is an important lesson for us. There are many lessons in these short verses, as we will see, but if we get nothing else from this passage, we should learn that our best and most effective response to those who hate, criticize, or slander us is merely to keep doing the right thing. We can always answer our enemies by doing good.

Three Things Jesus was Doing: Jesus was actively doing exactly what He had been doing all along. When you compare Matthew 4:23 with Matthew 9:35, it is a deliberate echo of the earlier verse, which is repeated almost word for word. Matthew 4:23 says, "Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people." And here in Matthew 9:35, we read again, "Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing

every disease and sickness.” So Jesus not only had work to do, He had done it, and He was continuing to do it.

- A. Jesus taught in their synagogues:** This is the point at which Jesus always began, and it is where we must start if we are to model our ministry after His. The people He saw were “harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd,” and the reason they were helpless is that they did not know the Bible. Jesus was the herald, the man or woman who brings a message from the king. Jesus was he one who brought a message from God. The duty of the herald is the proclamation of certainties, preaching must always be the proclamation of certainties. We live in an age when people have ceased to be sure of anything. Jesus came proclaiming the certainties by which men live, and each one of us must be able to say; “I know whom I have believed.” The people Jesus was speaking too should have known this; they had possessed the Old Testament for centuries, and their teachers should have taught, and they did not have the inclination to seek out Bible truths themselves. What they needed to know and what Jesus certainly taught them was who God is, what God has made us to be, how we have fallen short of God’s righteousness and corrupted his image within us, and how we need a Savior who can save us from sin and from ourselves.
- B. Jesus was the teacher of the “Good News”:** It is not enough to proclaim the Christian certainties and let it go at that, we must also be able to show the significance of these certainties for life and for living. Preaching is not the same thing as teaching. Teaching is instruction; it has to do with content, and it is primary. Preaching contains instruction, but it is more than instruction. It is also proclamation, an announcement of what the listeners must hear and to which they must respond. Preaching is the point at which teaching becomes personal. The word that is used for “preaching” in this passage is *kerusso*, which is what a king’s herald does. A herald speaks for the king, making his decrees known. In this case, the proclamation was about the kingdom of God and his anointed King, Jesus, who is the Christ. This decree was good news, and the good news was that the awaited King, who is also the Savior whom we need to save us from our sins, had now come. We teach Christianity, not by talking about it, but by living it. It is not so much our duty to discuss Christianity with others, but to show them what Christianity is all about by our lives.
- C. Jesus was a Healer:** The Gospel which Jesus brought did not stop at words, it was translated into deeds. If we read through the Gospels, we will see that Jesus spent far more time healing the sick, and feeding the

hungry, and comforting the sorrowing than He did merely talking about God. He turned the words of Christian truth into the deeds of Christian love. Jesus power to heal disease was one the evidence that He was the Messiah. As He told the disciples of John the Baptist later: “The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor” (Matthew 11:5). Also, it is we see that the healing of physical disease is linked to and illustrates the far more important healing that has to do with sin. What we need most is forgiveness of our sins and reconciliation with God, which is what Jesus accomplishes. We must remember, if we are truly Christian our belief will issue in Christian action.

Jesus Moved with Compassion by the Need He Saw: When Jesus saw the crowd of ordinary men and women, He was moved with compassion. As Jesus moved throughout Galilee teaching and healing the people, He was moved by their pitiful condition. Verse 36 says that He had compassion for them, because they were like shepherd-less sheep, uncared for and completely helpless. “They were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd” (Matthew 9:36).

The image of shepherd-less sheep has strong Old Testament roots and is fully developed in the New Testament. Numbers 27:17 tell how Moses, who was once a shepherd himself, prayed for a successor (Joshua) so that the people would “not be like sheep without a shepherd.” In I Kings 22:17, Micaiah predicted the death of King Ahab at Ramoth Gilead, saying: “I saw all Israel scattered on the hills like sheep without a shepherd” (2 Chronicles 18:16). Ezekiel wrote an entire chapter against the false shepherds of Israel because they “only take care of themselves” (Ezekiel 34:2) and “so not take care of the flock” (verse 3), as a result of which the sheep “were scattered over the whole earth, and no one searched or looked for them” (Ezekiel 34:6).

Most extensive of all are the later chapters of Zechariah in which he denounced the wicked shepherds of Israel, and even predicted the killing of the good shepherd who would come (Zechariah 13:7). On the last night before His arrest, Jesus applied Zechariah’s prophecy to Himself, telling His distressed disciples; “This very night you will all fall away on account of Me, for it is written: ‘Strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered’” (Matthew 26:31; quoting Zechariah 13:7).

The interesting thing about these Old Testament passages is that in nearly every case the image is negative. The shepherds are false, selfish, or negligent, and the sheep are neglected. In the New Testament and the words of Jesus, however, we find the positive side of the image. In His parable of the lost sheep, Jesus compared the Father to a shepherd who searches until the lost sheep is found, even though ninety-nine are already safe (Mathew 18:10-14).

The best known of all are Jesus' words about Himself in John 10. Jesus reveals Himself as he shepherd whom the sheep will follow: "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand is not the shepherd who owns the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father, and I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd.

Jesus saw them as helpless sheep and a harvest to be gathered in.

Jesus Makes a Prayer Request: Jesus had been going about among the common people, preaching the gospel and healing their diseases. He was moved with compassion because they were like sheep without a shepherd, harassed and helpless. He was aware of the volume of work to be done, the great harvest to be reaped. But there was a problem: The harvest was indeed great, but there were few workers. Therefore, in the third great statement of these verses, Jesus tells His disciples what they are to do about it. They are to pray; "The harvest is plentiful," He said, "but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into His harvest field" (Matthew 9:37-38).

If we look closely at this verse, we will see that it is also important that workers are the right kind. We need workers who have been sent into the harvest fields by God. If God does not send them, they may respond to some missionary appeal and go out, but when the heat of the day comes and the work becomes difficult, they will abandon the harvest and go home just as the false shepherds abandon the flock when wolves or other dangers

threaten. Indeed, one way we can know the workers who are sent by God is that they do not abandon the harvest or shrink from battle when the fighting gets fierce. May God give us that kind of leader, especially in our day, when the battle lines are poorly drawn and people want peace more than truth and popularity more than the approval of Jesus Christ.

Jesus Takes Action: Matthew 10:1 says: “He called his twelve disciples to him and gave them authority to drive out evil spirits and to heal every disease and sickness.” They were very ordinary men. They had no wealth; they had no academic background; they had no social position. Jesus is looking, not so much for extraordinary men, as for ordinary men who can so ordinary things extraordinarily well.

The proclamation that “the kingdom of heaven has come near” is the gospel, the good news that God is in the world. No one volunteers for this work. Jesus had said that we “ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.” God has not only to call them through the Spirit but to equip them through faith and to confer on them through the Holy Spirit and given them authority that God himself exercised in Jesus the Christ.

That is why Matthew calls the twelve “apostles.” The apostle in the Hebrew community was a “messenger” who was considered a “proxy” for his teacher or master. The apostle was equipped to act on behalf of his teacher, not only making his work representative of but having same power as his teacher. Hence Jesus could instruct his disciples to carry on the same kind of ministry they had witnessed and heard from Jesus.

We all are now equipped by the Holy Spirit with the compassion to go about helping those who are harassed and helpless. Amen.