

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.”

10 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.

⁵ These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: “Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. ⁶ Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel. ⁷ As you go, proclaim this message: ‘The kingdom of heaven has come near.’ ⁸ Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you have received; freely give. (Matthew 9:35-10:8 NIV2011)

The Harvest is Plentiful! We Have Work to Do.

It’s a beautiful morning. The sun shines with hardly a cloud in the sky while birds cheerfully chirp in the breeze. Everyone wears their best smiling and waving to each other. There’s barely enough room to sit as they pack themselves into the pews. It’s the picture perfect cliché Sunday morning in the small town church that TV and movies show.

You think about our own small town and the clichés that are present with church. One I’ve heard said often enough in some shape or form: everyone might not go to church on Sunday morning, but just about everyone belongs to one. That’s simply not true. According to national averages, 60% of people in rural settings are unchurched—they do not claim to belong to a church. Over 60% do not attend a service on a weekly basis. A survey from 2010 shows that in Cherry County the story is much the same.¹ But you don’t need statistics and surveys to come to that conclusion. Look at our own church. We aren’t exactly struggling to keep social distancing protocols because we have too many people showing up on Sunday mornings. And, let’s not kid ourselves, this was before the pandemic.

So, what do we do? We could shake our head in unbelief while we wring our hands and bemoan the sorry state of society and our own church. We could point fingers and pass the

¹ While being a 10-year old survey, I would be surprised if those numbers have gone against the national trend.

blame. But that's not what God calls us to do. The harvest is plentiful and we have plenty of work to do. So where do we start?

Look again at what Jesus does in Matthew 9. As he expands his ministry he travels to different towns and villages teaching, preaching, and healing. But what does he see? Matthew writes, "**They were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.**" They look like someone had whipped and thrashed them. They look like they had been knocked down and were helpless. This had happened in the past and they were still dealing with the results.

We don't need to speculate too much of what caused the people to look like this. We see it today. Sin and temptations prick and won't leave alone. That feeling of powerlessness and lack of control is something all too familiar. You see how addiction and pet sins really wreck a person. Tension and problems at home with the family between mom, dad, and kids leave people exhausted. The burden of finances just won't go away irritating every month—why do things have to always seem to be so tight? Responsibilities of life and expectations of others agitate and annoy. The death of a friend, the pain you see someone fighting with sickness, the hidden struggles of depression and anxiety leave people visibly wore out.

To a certain extent we can see these things. But sometimes we simply can't because we've never been in that situation. You have no idea what to look for. Other times it's because we refuse to look outside of our own personal bubbles and problems.

But Jesus does. He who is true God knows all. He sees the secret inner thoughts and feelings. He sees them being harassed and helplessness. He sees and has compassion on them.

When we feel this compassion we say things like, "My heart goes out to you." Or, "It hurts your heart to see those things." But we aren't very good at suffering with someone. That's what having compassion is. Having compassion on your neighbor means loving them as you do yourself. Remember, your neighbor includes your friends and the person who is different from you! It means we fear and love God that we help and befriend them in every bodily need. It means we defend them, speak well of them, and take their words and actions in the kindest possible way.

And quite simply, we don't. Instead of taking them in the kindest possible way, we are quick to judge and speak. We jump to conclusions so instead of listening and learning, we can't believe they are struggling with that or act that way. And then we tell them what they need to do to fix their lives. Instead of speaking well, we use their situation and those juicy details as fodder for rumor and gossip. Instead of defending them, we join in or say nothing at all. Instead of help and befriend in every bodily need, we do it when it's convenient for us. Or, even worse, we do it out of fear of what others might say if we

don't. We do it because we know it's going to make us feel good about ourselves. Sometimes we just don't know what to do. We are afraid they will take advantage of your compassionate heart. They might reject you! And so, we do nothing.

Oh we try. But we come up short. And you always will. It's not an excuse. It's the reality as fallen sinful human beings. Having true compassion means being selfless. But we, by nature, are selfish to the core. God have mercy on me, a sinner.

And he does. That's why we have Jesus. And when his heart goes out to the crowd, he gives what they need with healing and teaching. He knows what it's like to be harassed and helpless; he's been there too. He knows how it is to wrestle with feelings of inadequacy. He knows because he not only suffers to pay the price for your sins, he suffers with you. He does not excuse when you fall into sin, but he does take it in the kindest possible way being patient with you. And then he takes away the stain of sin on your good works so that he is pleased with our attempts. He defends you before God reminding the Father that he did suffer for you so that, for Jesus' sake, the Father cannot punish you as your sins deserve. He speaks well of you presenting you as his radiant bride, proud of you who have been washed of sin with the water and the Word. He continues to guard, protect and provide for your bodily needs. He sends his angels to guard you and every step that you go. He watches over you as Lord of the church ruling over all things and working them for your good.

Jesus sees his people like sheep without a shepherd, so he comes to fulfill that role for them. For the burdened and helpless, he says to you, "Come to me all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28). For the weak and lonely, "I am with you always to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20). For those struggling with responsibilities and feelings of not being able to do enough, he says, I've been right there (Isaiah 49). For those who feel like they wandering hopeless and helpless Jesus says, "I am the way, the truth and the life" (John 14:6). He is the Good Shepherd who leads his people with his voice. He's the Good Shepherd who does lay down his life for the sheep only to pick it back up again to give them life in His name.

And because he cares for you, he gives us work to do with this new life. He tell 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**" (Matthew 9:37-38). Jesus sees the lost suffering sheep and knows they need to hear the shepherd's voice. The harvest of souls is ready to be brought into the store bins of heaven. The kingdom of God has come near. The end of days is upon us. There's still more work to do! And so Jesus tells his disciples to ask the Lord to send out workers who will go with the shepherd's voice on their lips to bring peace to these troubled souls.

And then, what does he do? He calls his disciples to him and sends them out. Jesus is saying to them, “You are the answer to your own prayers! Go out and do the work I’m giving you to do.” He calls 12 to go out publicly with his power and his message to do the same work that he was doing. Freely Jesus gave them this gift, freely they are to share it.

What are we supposed to do as we look at the harvest fields of this world? Or our own community? Jesus says to you and me, “Ask the Lord of the harvest to send out workers.” Pray and pray again that God provide servants who are willing to go out into areas that we cannot go. Pray that he provide his church with servants who will go out publicly as pastors and teachers. But while you are praying, don’t sit there waiting for someone else to walk through those doors to carry out this work. Jesus calls us together not only for our own personal edification. He gathers us to send us out in our community to the straying, the lost, to the harassed and helpless.

You are the answer to those prayers. You are the answer to my prayers. The ministry of the church isn’t only about the guy who stands in the pulpit. God’s people work together—called workers and lay members—to share the good news that God’s kingdom draws near! Jesus, the King of kings and Lord of lords, wants more to be brought into his kingdom. So he sends you out with his message and with the promise that his Word will not return to him empty. He promises the Spirit will work in us and through us to carry out this task. He promises that your work will not be in vain. Freely you have received, freely give, Jesus says. You received his compassionate love and forgiveness as a gift. It was paid on the cross with his blood. He sealed it to you at your baptism. It’s given to you freely as you come to church and hear His Word. So, freely share this gift of grace. We don’t have to wait for God’s kingdom some time later down the road. It rules in your hearts through the preaching of the Word. It rules in our lives: he is our Lord above all things in heaven, on earth, and under the earth. It gives us a peace that surpasses understanding while we deal with the hardships and struggles of life because we have a Savior who suffered with us and has no plans to abandon us on the way.

But how will anyone know if we do not share it? How will they hear if no one speaks it? The lost do not realize they are lost until someone, out of compassion, shows them the way. Ask the Lord of the harvest to continue to send out workers and faithful shepherds who preach with the voice of the Good Shepherd Jesus. Ask the Lord of the harvest to continue to work in our hearts to show compassion to our neighbor in whatever vocation you have in life right now. The harvest is still plentiful and the workers are still few. That means there’s plenty of good work for us to do. Amen.