

Sermons on Matthew

A Plentiful Harvest

Matthew 9:35-38

With Study Questions

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5/22/2005*

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Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, __teaching in their synagogues, preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every sickness and every disease __among the people. ⁻³⁶⁻ But when He saw the multitudes, He was moved with compassion for them, because they were __weary and scattered, __like sheep having no shepherd. ⁻³⁷⁻ Then He said to His disciples, __“ _The harvest truly *is* plentiful, but the laborers *are* few. ⁻³⁸⁻ __Therefore pray the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest” (Matthew 9:35-38).

Introduction

We are entering a transition point in Matthew from the many miracles performed by Jesus to the broadening of His ministry. In the chapters ahead He will enlist ministers to accommodate that growth. He will predict the type of response His ministers/apostles will experience. We will begin to see men conspire against Christ as the cross comes into focus.

Teaching and Preaching

Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, __teaching in their synagogues, preaching the gospel of the kingdom (Matthew 9:35a).

I recently received a flyer from a well-known mega-church growth program entitled¹, “**What do you do when preaching a sermon is not enough?**” Certainly there is more to being a pastor than preaching sermons – just as there is more to being a Christian than inviting people to church.

But implied in the above question (since it is clearly aimed as pastors) is the idea that preaching is potentially impotent in advancing Christ’s kingdom. That may be true. But if it is true, the problem is not found in the act of preaching any more than the problem of divorce is found in the

¹ Something to that effect.

institution of marriage. The problem isn't marriage; the problem is the people who are married. Similarly, the problem isn't preaching, the problem is what is being proclaimed in the preaching.

Teaching and preaching was the heart of Christ's ministry and should continue to be the heart of Christian ministry (2 Timothy 4:2). The Christian faith is planted in the hearts of men via the preaching of God's word (Romans 1:16; 10:17); and all other activities (in this case healing, but today things such as relief work or other philanthropic or altruistic behaviors) are designed to bring men's attention to that message. A missionary who only builds buildings and collects and spreads food is falling short of his calling. He must preach the gospel!

There is a subtle distinction between teaching *didasko* and preaching *ke_ryssō*. Teaching means to provide instruction; to make sure the facts are straight and understood. Preaching means to make a public announcement; to herald or declare. In medical research and development there is *instruction* aimed at finding a cure for cancer. If a cure were found there would be a mass *heralding* and proclamation of the good news of the cure; such should be the character of preaching. There is good news and everyone should hear it!

The Gospel of the Kingdom

The good news (gospel) which Jesus preached was the good news of the kingdom. The gospel of Matthew never strays too far from the kingdom message. Contrary to popular opinion this kingdom is not to be found in a future millennium. And although it may have an affect on politics, it is not itself a political kingdom. And while the kingdom produces virtue in its inhabitants, it is not a kingdom made up of the elite, the righteous or the strong.

Jesus Christ is the King of this kingdom and He makes it manifestly obvious that His true heaven-bound subjects are those who have come to recognize their fallen, weak and sinful estate (Matthew 9:13). It is made up of those whose eyes have been opened to their own corrupt natures – who recoil at the folly of standing before God confident in their own righteousness (Luke 18:14) but rather have faith in Jesus and in Him alone (Matthew 9:22).

This is good news indeed for it is through this King and His kingdom that men are reconciled to God.

Healing

We have spoke in detail regarding the healing ministry of Christ so I will not pursue that any further here. Suffice it to say Jesus was healing every disease and every sickness. It became quite public that Jesus had unlimited power over all things – illness, the elements, the demons and death itself.

Compassion

But when He saw the multitudes, He was moved with compassion (Matthew 9:36a)

One is generally shocked to find that many world religions do not view compassion as a virtuous article of faith. What Jesus experiences here is something He could only have experienced via an incarnation. God the Father and the Spirit have no bodies. Jesus prior to becoming a human man had no body. The word compassion *Splagchnizomai* very much carries with it a visceral response. In the Scriptures the heart often refers to something mental, e.g. **“As a man thinks in his heart” (Proverbs 23:7)**. This word does not describe that. It is a word describing entrails, passions, feelings.

Some are overly controlled by their passions and some keep them at such a safe distance that they have no place in their negotiations through life. In the same way we beseech God to cultivate our intellects into conformity with His mind, we ought to pray God craft our passions as well. This does not come overnight and it is usually something gained through much discomfort.

An attribute of our Savior was that He was moved with compassion. He was neither stoic nor emotionally indifferent. He has the deepest concern in every proper sense of the word. And we, my friends, should seek to imitate that. We should not be indifferent to the estate of our neighbors. If they are sick, tired or in need, we should have compassion and help. If they, as with those in this passage, are spiritually lost, we ought to have compassion and seek to bring them to Christ.

Sheep with no Shepherd

What was it that caused Jesus to have such compassion on the multitudes?

...because they were __weary and scattered, __like sheep having no shepherd (Matthew 9:36b).

They were weary *skyllomai*; this could be understood as harassed or flayed or skinned. And they were scattered *rhiptomai*; meaning to be hurled with force or thrown about. As Jesus healed and taught, multitudes (there were probably about three million people living in Galilee at the time – most of them had probably heard of Jesus) followed Him. One gets the idea that He turned and looked and saw an ocean of physically and spiritually destitute souls.

The phrase **“sheep having no shepherd”** seems to indicate that His greater concern was the spiritual destitution. But there was no shortage of shepherds in Israel. The problem was these shepherds were more lost than the sheep (Matthew 15:14). Of these shepherds Jesus taught,

–_For they bind heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay *them* on men’s shoulders; but they *themselves* will not move them with one of their fingers. ⁻⁵⁻ But all their works they do to __be seen by men. They make their phylacteries broad and enlarge the borders of their garments. ⁻⁶⁻ _They love the __best places at feasts, the best seats in the synagogues, ⁻⁷⁻ greetings in the marketplaces, and to be called by men, ‘_Rabbi, Rabbi’ (Matthew 23:4-7).

The genuine Christian faith is quite the opposite.

Come to __Me, all *you* who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. ⁻²⁹⁻ Take My yoke upon you __and learn from Me, for I am __gentle and _lowly in heart, __and you will find rest for your souls. ⁻³⁰⁻ __For My yoke *is* easy and My burden is light_” (Matthew 11:28-30).

Jesus did not shrink back from calling His followers to walk in a committed righteousness. Yet at its heart, the Christian faith is one of

peace and liberty. Those who are yoked (attached) to false teachers will find themselves laboring in spiritual destitution; those yoked to Christ will find that He Himself bears the burden which grants us peace with God.

Who Are Our Shepherds?

Shepherding is critical. Who or what in a given culture establishes its moral and spiritual settings? Who are today's shepherds? We have de facto shepherds who have arrived at that office by default. Rock stars and professional athletes will often set the bar these days by virtue of their popularity. Although they might resist being called role models, it is simply unavoidable.

But there are other, numerous, self-proclaimed shepherds leading our culture into the wastelands of spiritual impoverishment. If it weren't so tragic it would be humorous that sit-com stars whose shows endorse adultery, pornography, homosexuality and fornication stand before the camera instructing the audience on how they ought to raise their children.

The shepherds are movie directors enlightening us to the virtues of euthanasia, gun control, abortion and trust in self over all things. The shepherds are publishers – yes even Christian publishers – who decide what books are worthy fodder to nourish the souls of men.

So who is to shepherd? Jesus has given that responsibility to His church. We will soon read of Jesus picking His apostles. Of course those apostles would die. But we also read of the church, built on the foundation/instruction of the apostles (Ephesians 2:20); churches which consist of deacons, elders, pastors – given the responsibility of preaching and teaching (1 Timothy 5:17). They will soon be called shepherds.

The elders who are among you I exhort, I who am a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that will be revealed: ² Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; ³ nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock; ⁴ and when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that does not fade away (1 Peter 5:1-4).

Over and above authors of books, publishers, para-church ministries and celebrities, the church is to take responsibility for shepherding Christ's people. The church is the physical manifestation of Christ's kingdom (Matthew 13:47; Isaiah 9:7).

Pray the Lord

“The harvest truly is plentiful, but the laborers are few. — Therefore pray the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest” (Matthew 9:37-38).

How significant that the Lord of glory would now ask His, until now mere, onlookers to pray! The harvest is plentiful and it is time for the faithful to begin to take part. Jesus seemed concerned that the harvest was outgrowing the leadership base. The laborers in context (as we shall see in chapter 10) will be His apostles. But we learn something in principle here: we must pray that God raise up shepherds.

We must pray that God grant us godly men who will holdfast to the apostles teaching and not be tossed and turned by the winds of contemporary influence (Ephesians 4:14). Today these offices are held by elders and deacons. It is easy for them to grow weary. We are to pray for their strength and faithfulness and we are to pray God provide those necessary for the job.

Before Jesus picked His apostles He prayed all night (Luke 6:12). Loving and being compassionate toward our neighbors is the responsibility of us all. Praying for them and inviting them to church is a supreme act of love. But as God increases the harvest, let us not forsake praying for the laborers to whom has been committed the oracles of God (Romans 3:2).

Questions for Study

1. What activity should be at the heart of Christian ministry (pages 2, 3)?
2. What is the difference between teaching and preaching (pages 2, 4)?

3. What is the nature of the kingdom of God? What is the nature of its inhabitants (pages 3, 4)?
4. How did Jesus respond to the multitude (pages 4, 5)?
5. What caused Jesus to have this response (pages 5, 6)?
6. Who are the shepherds in our current culture (pages 6, 7)?
7. What is necessary for the proper growth of Christ's kingdom (page 7)?