

## “It’s Harvest Time!” (Matthew 9:35–38)

Two churches have made national news in the last three weeks.<sup>1</sup> A church in Ohio is enmeshed in a battle with a strip joint. Every weekend church members visit the site, block traffic, take photos of the license plates of customers, and then post them on their “shaming” site. Apparently there’s a fair amount of condemnation and verbal insult offered in the process. Consequently, the owner of the strip club, along with a couple of his dancers, set up shop outside the church on a Sunday morning, wearing bikinis and eating hamburgers. The pastor says now the church is *really* solidified, and will see it through to the end.

A church in Georgia is at war with a high school because their mascot is a demon. The church has been collecting signatures of protest saying that a pitchfork-wielding mascot sends the wrong message to teens. Yet, the students and the administration maintain that the mascot doesn’t symbolize evil or Satanism. The principal says that the origin of the mascot is from a World War II fighter squadron out of their local military base. The school adopted the name in a show of patriotic honor to the squadron. The pastor says he’s ready to fight for what he believes in. The school says it’s ready to rumble, too.

What are your initial impressions of these churches? My personal opinion is that they are fighting the wrong battles. The desired actions hold little or no hope for any real or substantive change. Furthermore, these kinds of battles bring ridicule to the Christian faith and alienate the very people we should be trying to reach. Do you think those strippers want to go to that church, after their livelihood is threatened and they are called names? Not hardly. One of the strippers, a married mother of six, says she was tired of being called a “homewrecker and a whore.” She views the members of the church as hypocrites, and their offers of salvation are rejected. Do you think those high school teens are going to fill the youth ministry of the church at war with their mascot? One senior said she doesn’t get it at all—it seems like an attack on her school. It seems to me that these churches have lost an opportunity to influence their community.

Now what if these two churches applied the same amount of energy in showing care and concern for the strip club dancers and the local high school? What if they first elected to build rapport and even friendship with those that they disagreed with? Perhaps in the course of time, they wouldn’t need to shame folks or collect signatures on a petition. At the very least, there would be an open door for the gospel.

In Matthew 9:35–38,<sup>2</sup> Jesus teaches us how to positively impact our culture. His example and His words suggest: *A world in despair needs churches that care.* Verse 35 says, **“Jesus was going through<sup>3</sup> all the cities and villages teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every kind of disease and every kind of sickness.”** This is an important phrase. Notice, Jesus took the initiative. He didn’t expect people to come to Him; He went to them.<sup>4</sup> In years gone by, it was common for medical doctors to make “house calls.” Yet, today we wouldn’t think of calling our doctor and asking him to come and visit us at home. Likewise, in years gone by, it was common to invite people to church and see them respond to Christ. But today, many people won’t darken the door of a church so we must go to them. But hasn’t that always been the general rule? In Acts 20:20b, Paul testifies that the method of the early church was teaching in the market place and from house to house. The four gospels and Acts are replete with five different commissions that emphasize our need to go.<sup>5</sup>

If Emmanuel is to be a church that cares we must be willing to go into our community and pursue people. Are you willing to leave the seats and hit the streets? Will you go into your school, your neighborhood, or your work? Will you meet people where they’re at and share Christ? Before you answer these questions, ask yourself this question: What would happen if Jesus had waited for me to come to Him? Do you think you would have come? Of course not! You’re no different than any other person. Jesus had to go after you! Now the question is this: Will you go after others? *A world in despair needs churches that care.* What kind of care will we show others? What will we do to reach them with Christ’s love?

Jesus showed great care by utilizing a three-pronged ministry. (1) He taught in the synagogues because He cared for Israel (Zech 2:8). The synagogue was the place of worship for the Jewish people (Ps 74:8; Mark 1:21), so to reach the “the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matt 10:6; 15:24), Jesus pursued them in their places of worship.<sup>6</sup> (2) He also went into the market place and proclaimed the “gospel of the kingdom” (i.e., the good news that salvation comes through Jesus Christ)<sup>7</sup> because He cared for people. The difference between teaching and proclaiming is comparable to the modern distinction between teaching a Sunday School class and preaching the gospel in downtown Olympia. Jesus used both methods. (3) He healed people wherever He went. It’s interesting to note the two fold emphasis upon “every” (*pas*). Unlike contemporary “faith healers,” Jesus healed every kind of disease and sickness from every type of person.<sup>8</sup> He employed whatever means possible to minister to people. Following in Jesus’ sandals, the apostle Paul declared, “I have become all things to all men, so that I may by all means save some” (1 Cor 9:22b). Similarly, we must be equipped to go to any and every length to share Christ. *A world in despair needs churches that care.*

Fortunately, there are many people in our church who are finding common ground with unbelievers. Two weeks ago, Virgil Halstead, our faithful church custodian, came in to see me. He informed me that he’s returning to his unique mission field. Virgil is an extraordinary pool player and he uses this ability to go into bars and share Christ. This past week, Len McIntosh, who is a final contestant with Biggest Loser, spoke to our local Kiwanis group about diet and nutrition. After he finished speaking, they even asked him to join their club. John Hoover, one of our longtime members, goes to a local sports bar and watches his favorite team, the Nebraska Cornhuskers, with other likeminded fanatics. His goal is to be able to share Christ with some of the folks there. We have ladies in our church who have health club memberships and seek to share Christ with those at the gym. Others have joined a bicycle or motorcycle club with the goal of sharing Christ. The goal is to use any interest or ability to build common ground with unbelievers. As we build a friendship with others, God will open doors for His gospel to advance.

In 9:36 Matthew writes, “**Seeing the people, He felt compassion for them, because they were distressed and dispirited like sheep without a shepherd.**” The disciples and Jesus both looked at the same sea of humanity but Jesus saw something that the disciples did not. He saw the hurts of people. He saw people harassed by pressures, tormented by their past, exhausted by their present, frightened by their future. Why didn’t the disciples see this? They saw with their natural eyes, not with their spiritual eyes.

Matthew states that Jesus “felt compassion” for people. The verb translated “felt compassion” (*splagchnizomai*)<sup>9</sup> is a graphic term.<sup>10</sup> No English term does justice to this verb. It could be translated: “His heart went out.”<sup>11</sup> Or as I prefer “His guts went out.” Jesus’ compassion was a “gut response!” The idea is that whenever Jesus saw lost people, He was stirred deep down inside.<sup>12</sup> He was “moved in his guts.”<sup>13</sup> It’s worth noting that the word “compassion” is always used of Jesus or by Jesus in His parables.<sup>14</sup> In the New Testament it is a word unique to Jesus. So in a biblical sense “compassion” must be a divine act. We must pray for the compassion of Jesus. Compassion is love in action.

Jesus felt such compassion for the people because “they were distressed and dispirited like sheep without a shepherd” (9:36b). The word “distressed” (*skullo*)<sup>15</sup> originally meant “to skin, flay” and eventually came to be used for serious trouble of any kind. The people were like sheep that had been ripped and skinned alive. The word “dispirited” (*pipto*)<sup>16</sup> means “to throw, hurl” and describes the people as “down” or “downcast.”<sup>17</sup> These sheep were cast down from a mortal wound. They were wounded and left for dead. These graphic terms picture the negative impact of the Pharisees, Sadducees, scribes, and elders. By adding many external conditions to God’s law, these leaders placed the Jews under a yoke of slavery (23:1–36, esp. 23:4).<sup>18</sup> As a result, they were “sheep without a shepherd.” Sheep are defenseless animals. Without a shepherd they are vulnerable to any attack. Even without predators they are in trouble if they have no shepherd, for they are not good at finding food. They need a shepherd to lead them in green pastures and beside still waters (Ps 23:2).<sup>19</sup> They need Christ.<sup>20</sup>

If we are to be a church that cares, we must see people with the eyes of Jesus and we must seek to act. This means being aware of their hurts and needs. There are a number of times when people are especially responsive to spiritually things. (1) When a person is recently divorced. (2) When a person loses a loved one. (3) When a person moves to a new town. (4) When a person is in the midst of a significant physical trial. During these traumatic times in peoples' lives they are most open to the gospel. We must be sensitive to the Spirit and look for every opportunity share Christ with those who need Him.

This past Thursday, I was sick so Brad Goodin was picking up Joshua from guitar lessons. On his way to Music 60000 Brad heard a terrible screech. He didn't know where it came from, and then all of a sudden, "BOOM!" A woman rear-ended him. There are a lot of thoughts that could have immediately went through Brad's mind, but the first thought that came to his mind was: "I wonder if God is going to use this accident as a witnessing opportunity." It was Brad's compassion and sensitivity to the Holy Spirit that allowed him to think like this in the midst of a crisis.

[The Bible is clear we must care for unbelievers and go to them. But to stop there is never enough. The thrust of this passage is found in 9:37–38.]

In 9:37, Jesus tells His disciples, **"The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few."** Jesus changes metaphors. Not only are unbelievers like sheep who are in trouble; they are also like wheat that can be harvested. The phrase "plentiful harvest" speaks of a bountiful spiritual crop (cf. John 4:35). Jesus makes it clear that there are many lost people who are in need of His salvation.<sup>21</sup> Some are tempted to question whether the harvest truly is plentiful. To many it seems spiritually dark and depressing. However, this means opportunity for us. In Washington State, the vast majority of people need to be reached. In 1990, 15% of our population claimed no religion. Now the figure is beyond 25%.<sup>22</sup> Now we can be discouraged or encouraged by this figure. I see this figure as a potential harvest field. Less people have the answer than at any time in our county's history. It's our time to capitalize for Christ!

You perhaps have heard of the old sales managers' device of holding up a large piece of paper with a small orange spot down in one corner. He says to his salesmen, "What do you see?" They all report that they see that orange spot, and he says, "That's your weakness as a salesman. You see the spot and don't see all of the open opportunity before you." We don't want to focus on our discouragements, because as one thinks in one's heart, so one is.

Jesus has promised us that there's a plentiful harvest. The fruit is ripe for the taking. The only problem is: "the workers are few" (9:37b). Work is hard and many people don't like to work. This leads to a shortage of workers. Yet, God is looking for some "workers" who want to reap His harvest. Notice Jesus doesn't call for pastors, missionaries, evangelists, leaders, or experts; he calls for "workers. The word for "workers" (*ergates*) can denote any workman, but it is used especially of agricultural laborers.<sup>23</sup>

You may have a vegetable garden. If so, you understand that a garden requires some work.<sup>24</sup> The first phase in this series is the preparation of the soil. Unless the ground is cleared and plowed, it will not be ready to receive the seed. After the soil is harrowed and furrowed, the second phase, sowing the seed, takes place. Cultivation, the third phase, is the lengthiest part of the agricultural process since it involves irrigation, fertilization, and weed control. Only when the crop is mature is it ready to undergo the brief fourth phase of reaping. Those tomato plants don't just spring up on their own accord, and the ripe tomatoes don't jump off the vine and roll to your back door. Harvesting a crop requires an effort. Agricultural work is much like spiritual work . . . it takes patience and perseverance. Sadly, the exercise of these qualities can be lacking in many believers. Yet, Jesus is calling you and me to the ultimate harvest—not plants, but men, women, boys, and girls who need Jesus. We can't let this fruit rot on our watch. We must pluck the fruit and bring in the harvest. Jesus declares that we must work while we still have time (John 9:4). Will you work for the harvest? It's the only pursuit worth devoting your life to.

In 9:38, Jesus closes our passage with these penetrating words, **“Therefore beseech the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into His harvest.”** “Therefore” (*oun*) links the exhortation of 9:38 back to 9:37. The conjunction serves to grab our attention. In light of such a great harvest and so few workers action is critical. The imperative “beseech”<sup>25</sup> (*deomai*) may be translated “plead” (Acts 8:24). There is a sense of urgency attached to this word. We are to “pray earnestly” (ESV) that the Lord of the harvest will send out workers into His harvest.” Although the harvest is already His, it must be gathered in. To this end, we need selfless and sacrificial workers (Matt 10:1–42). This is a clear command that is to be given even greater priority than praying specifically for lost people.<sup>26</sup> We must continually and specifically pray for God to raise up workers. *A world in despair needs churches that care.*

Jesus calls His Father “the Lord of the harvest” (cf. Luke 10:2) because the harvest is dependent upon Him, not us.<sup>27</sup> He’s the One who sovereignly tills the hearts of people (John 6:44). He’s the Lord; we’re not. We’re dependent upon Him to open doors (Col 4:3) and hearts (Acts 16:14). We’re not called to bring about the harvest. We’re not responsible for conversions or church growth. That’s God’s job! We’re called to pray. Why don’t we see or care? We don’t pray! This doesn’t mean that we should do nothing but pray but it does mean that we should do nothing without praying.

And how are we to pray? Jesus said we are to ask the Lord of the harvest to “send out” workers. The verb “send out” (*ekballo*) literally means “to throw out.”<sup>28</sup> The underlying Greek word conveys a very powerful image. The word is *ekballo*. The *ek* part means “out” and the *ballo* part means, “to throw” (like throwing a ball). We need to pray that God will throw some people out of the church. Why does Jesus insist that we pray for God to “send out workers?” Prayer is the only hope we have of world evangelization. We will not bring in the harvest any other way. A crop of wheat needs workers to bring the grain into the barn; without the laborers the crop cannot be reaped. This is also true spiritually. Although God can do whatever He chooses (Luke 19:40), He tends to choose men and women to perform His work. *A world in despair needs churches that care.*

I challenge you to pray for your fellow believers here at EBF. Pray that God will throw us out of the church and into His harvest field. Pray that people in our church would experience divine appointments at airports, shopping malls, coffee shops, etc. Pray that they would have spiritual eyes to see the hurts of the people that they run into. This is what makes the Christian life a daily adventure. When you’re on mission you never know what’s going to happen.

The response to this message is simple: Please fill out the “Seven for Heaven/Seven for Earth” card. Write down the names of seven unbelievers (“pre-Christians”) that you want God to reach. Make sure they are in our county. We’d like to see God reap their souls and plug them into our church or another Bible-believing church. Additionally, write down the names of seven believers that you want to see thrust into the harvest. Pray that God will use these people this very week to fulfill their calling as workers in God’s harvest. May we believe God for an unprecedented harvest. May He accomplish great kingdom exploits in and through us. *In a world that is in despair, may we be a church that cares.*

### **Scripture References**

Matthew 9:35–38

John 4:35–42; 9:1–4

Mark 10:45; Luke 19:10

Matthew 10:1–42

Matthew 14:14–16

1 Corinthians 3:6–9

1 Corinthians 9:19–23

### **Study Questions**

1. How did Jesus use ministry as a tool to reach others (Matthew 9:35)? Why was the three pronged approach that Jesus so effective? How can I use ministry to touch the lives of those around me? What are some practical ways that I can strive to preach, teach, and heal?
2. How did Jesus respond when He looked at people (Matthew 9:36)? Do I see people through Jesus' eyes? Am I moved with compassion that motivates action? How would I describe my burden for unbelievers? See Paul's burden for Israel in Romans 9:2. Often lost people seem to be fairly "together." How can I make an opening for the gospel with those who don't seem to sense their need for it?
3. How would I translate and flesh out the phrase "they were distressed and dispirited like sheep without a shepherd" (Matthew 9:36)? How can I become more sensitive to the needs of others? What can I do to cultivate greater sensitivity and compassion? How can I show compassion to needy people without creating an unhealthy situation where they become dependent on me? What guidelines apply here?
4. Do I see the harvest as plentiful (Matthew 9:37)? Why or why not? How can I develop greater spiritual optimism? Who is within my harvest field? How will I seek to reach these people? Who can I help me strategically reach out to them? What means/methods might be the most effective?
5. Am I currently praying for other believers (Matthew 9:38)? If so, who am I praying for? What are my specific requests for these individuals? Will I begin to pray for these disciples to be thrust into the harvest? How can I creatively support and encourage these harvesters?

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> James Emery White, “Strippers Going To War,” in *Church & Culture Blog* Vol. 6, No. 15; 8/15/2010.

<sup>2</sup> This account is without parallel in Mark and Luke. However, the summary of Jesus’ ministry is repeated verbatim in Matt 4:23. Hence, 9:35 and 4:23 form an *inclusio*, creating a “bookends” effect that sets off the material in the chapters between them. In chapters 5–7 Jesus is the authoritative Messiah in word in the Sermon on the Mount, and in chapters 8–9 he is the Messiah at work in the miracle stories. See Michael J. Wilkins, *Matthew*. NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 374; John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 406.

<sup>3</sup> The verb that is translated “going through” (*periegen*) points to a continuing process (Matt 9:35). It is a rare word only found five other times in the NT: Matt 4:23; 23:15; Mark 6:6; Acts 13:11; 1 Cor 9:5. BDAG s.v. *periago* 2 defines it as “to travel about in various directions, go around, go about.”

<sup>4</sup> Jesus’ gives His earthly purpose in Luke 19:10: “For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost” (ESV). He shares a parallel purpose in Mark 10:45: “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.”

<sup>5</sup> Matt 28:18–20; Mark 16:14–18; Luke 24:44–49; John 20:19–23; Acts 1:6–11.

<sup>6</sup> Israel was chosen by God from among all the peoples of the earth to be His covenant people (Deut 7:6–7). God then promised that a Messiah would come out of Bethlehem (Micah 5:2; Matt 2:5–6). In the NT, Matthew records that this Jewish Messiah (Matt 1:1–17) was named “Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins” (Matt 1:21).

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Matt 4:23; 24:14; Luke 16:16.

<sup>8</sup> Green writes, “Jesus regularly helped blind people to see (e.g., Mt 9:27–31; Mk 8:22–26), the deaf to hear (e.g., Mt 11:5; Mk 7:32–37) and the lame to walk (e.g., Jn 5:1–15). He cleansed lepers (e.g., Lk 5:12–16; 17:11–19), cured fevers (e.g., Mk 1:29–31; Jn 4:43–53), stopped a hemorrhage (Mk 5:24–34), restored a withered hand (Mk 3:1–6), replaced a cut-off ear (Lk 22:51) and healed a wide variety of unspecified illnesses. He healed with a word (e.g., Mt 8:16), without praying to God or invoking his name (except in one instance when he specifically declares that it is for the crowd’s benefit—Jn 11:41–42) and sometimes at a long distance from the one who was sick (e.g., Mt 8:5–13). On two occasions he used indirect means and two stages in the healing (Mk 8:22–26; Jn 9:1–7), but normally the cures were instantaneous and unmediated.” J.B. Green, *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, electronic ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1997, c1992), 300. The word “healing” (*therapeuo*) means “to render service” (Acts 17:25; cf. Mark 10:45). In the NT, the particular service is mostly the service of healing the sick. See BDAG s.v. *therapeuo* 1.

<sup>9</sup> Gk. *esplagchnisthe*, Matt 14:14; 15:32; 20:34; Mark 1:41; 6:34; 8:2; Luke 7:13.

<sup>10</sup> Elsewhere *splagchnizomai* describes Jesus’ motivation to heal and feed the crowd (14:14; 15:32) and heal the blind (20:34; cf. 18:27). Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 407 observes, “Apart from 18:27 in a parable (where compassion leads to forgiveness of debt), in Matthew compassion always addresses the physical needs of people, and so it will be in the ministry to which the disciples are called.”

<sup>11</sup> Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary. Vol. 1: The Christbook Matthew 1-12*, revised & expanded (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, [1987] 2004), 447; R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*. New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 373.

<sup>12</sup> Matt 14:14; 15:32; 20:34; Mark 1:41; 6:34; 8:2; Luke 7:13.

<sup>13</sup> Michael Green, *The Message of Matthew: The Kingdom of Heaven* (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1988), 134.

<sup>14</sup> The only other examples that do not directly refer to Jesus are found in Matt 18:27; Mark 9:22; Luke 10:33; 15:20.

<sup>15</sup> BDAG s.v. *skullo* 1 defines as: “weary, harass.” Cf. Mark 5:35; Luke 7:6; 8:49.

<sup>16</sup> The root word (*pipto*) can be found in Matt 15:30; 27:5; Luke 4:35; 17:2; Acts 22:23; 27:19, 29.

<sup>17</sup> BDAG s.v. *pipto* 2: “they were distressed and dejected, like sheep without a shepherd.”

<sup>18</sup> Jeremiah describes a similar picture in Jeremiah 50:6–7: “My people have become lost sheep; their shepherds have led them astray. They have made them turn aside on the mountains; they have gone along from mountain to hill and have forgotten their resting place. All who came upon them have devoured them; and their adversaries have said, ‘We are not guilty, inasmuch as they have sinned against the Lord who is the habitation of righteousness, even the Lord, the hope of their fathers.’” The religious leaders had been instrumental in turning the people away from God.

<sup>19</sup> Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*. Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 239.

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<sup>20</sup> The phrase “sheep without a shepherd” was used of God’s people in the OT (Num 27:17; 1 Kgs 22:17; 2 Chron 18:16; Ezek 34:5; Zech 10:2). Matthew seems to be making an allusion to Ezekiel 34. In this passage, Ezekiel makes it clear that the Messiah will shepherd the people Himself (34:11–16) by feeding them (34:2–3; Matt 14:19–20), healing them (34:4) and bringing the lost sheep back (34:4–6; Matt 18:12–14). Jesus, the “good shepherd” reinforces these truths in John 10:11–18 (Cf. Matt 10:16; John 21:16–17; Rom 8:36; Heb 13:20; 1 Pet 2:25).

<sup>21</sup> Elsewhere, Jesus uses the term “harvest” as a symbol of the final judgment (Matt 13:30, 39; cf. Isa 17:11; Joel 3:13). Some commentators have suggested that this is the meaning here, however, this does not fit the context. The adjective “plentiful” makes it clear that Jesus is speaking of a bumper crop. Donald A. Carson, “Matthew.” *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*. Edited by Frank E. Gaebelin and J. D. Douglas (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), Electronic ed.

<sup>22</sup> These stats come from the American Religious Identification Survey 2008. The research of ARIS comes from The Graduate Center of the City University of New York. See [www.usatoday.com/news/religion/2009-03-09-ARIS-faith-survey\\_N.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/news/religion/2009-03-09-ARIS-faith-survey_N.htm). Accessed 16, August 2010.

<sup>23</sup> Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 239.

<sup>24</sup> Most people associate evangelism with an event, but from a Scriptural perspective, it is more of a process. In fact, the Bible uses agricultural imagery to portray the dynamic process of evangelism (e.g., John 4:35–39; 1 Cor 3:6–9). Crops do not simply “happen.” Reaping a harvest is the outcome of a lengthy series of events that cannot be bypassed or overlooked.

<sup>25</sup> Forms of *deomai* are translated “implore” (Luke 5:12), “pray[ed]” (Acts 4:31), “request” (Rom 1:10), “urge[ing]” (2 Cor 8:4), “ask” (2 Cor 10:2) and “beg” (Gal 4:12).

<sup>26</sup> Some scholars argue that it is unbiblical to pray for the lost. They point out that there are only two passages that seem to teach this (Rom 10:1; 1 Tim 2:1–4) and these passages should be understood differently. Although I empathize with their desire to prioritize Matt 9:38, I don’t agree with their final conclusion.

<sup>27</sup> It’s also possible that Jesus is the Lord of the harvest. Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans [1999] 2009), 309.

<sup>28</sup> In this context, the word means, “to cause to go or remove from a position (without force), send out/away, release, bring out.” See BDAG s.v. *ekballo* 2.