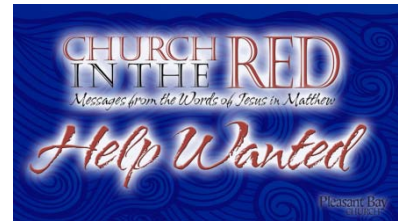


Sermon Help Wanted

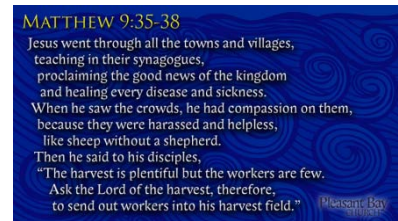
Dan Neary

I hope this series is remaining as *fresh* for you as it has for me. We've been at this series now for over 30 sermons (this is #33), by far the longest series we've ever done here (most have been around a dozen, a few have been 20). But, at least for me, these words of Jesus in Matthew continue to bring a fresh challenge every time we come together.



While the passage is short, there are at least three **big ideas** here in our text for today.

- v.35 summarizes the **ministry of Jesus**
- v.36 introduces the metaphor of **sheep and shepherd**, and
- vs.37,38 introduce the metaphor of **harvest**



³⁵Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. ¹

This is the **ministry of Jesus**. We've seen this *troika* before; it echoes what we read today in our creed. Jesus:

- Taught (head)
- Proclaimed the Good News of the Kingdom (heart)
- Healed disease (hand)

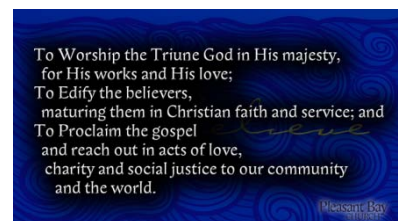
If you are wondering what Jesus is up to, or what marks the work of Jesus, these are the markers:

- Hearts are being encouraged by the Gospel (Good News of the Kingdom),
- Heads (minds) are being renewed by teaching about God and His ways, and
- Hands are engaged in meeting needs

If you want to know if a church is following Jesus, walking in the ways He has established, you should be able to see these same markers.

We say

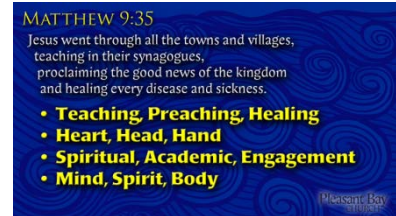
- Heart – Worshiping God in His majesty for His works and love
- Head – Edifying believers, building up and maturing folk in our Faith, and
- Hand – Reaching out in acts of love, sharing the Gospel in both word and deed



¹The Holy Bible: Today's New International Version. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005). Mt 9:35.

This simple three point checklist can be really helpful to us:

- Teaching, Preaching, Healing
- Head, Heart, Hand
- Spiritual, Academic, Engagement
- Mind, Spirit, Body



We can use it to, check

- Our understanding of Jesus and His work
- Our personal devotion and demonstration of His work
- Our church's effectiveness is carrying out our work together as the Body of Christ, and
- We can even use it to evaluate those who claim to be operating in Jesus name.

The next of these three **big ideas** is the metaphor of **sheep and shepherd** that we see in v. 36.

³⁶When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.²

Sheep and shepherd... this is a pretty common picture associated with our Bibles and our Faith. For example, when I was ordained one of the charges was to be a shepherd of God's flock. They even handed me a staff. This idea has its Scriptural basis in 1 Peter 5.

To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder and a witness of Christ's sufferings who also will share in the glory to be revealed: ²**Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, watching over them—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not pursuing dishonest gain, but eager to serve; ³not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. ⁴And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away.³**

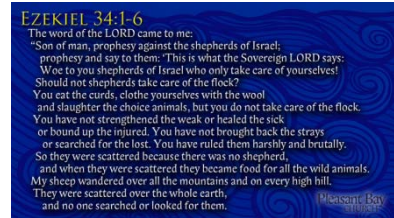
This is certainly more than a New Testament picture, it is found throughout the Old Testament too.

²*The Holy Bible: Today's New International Version.* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005). Mt 9:36.

³*The Holy Bible: Today's New International Version.* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005). 1 Pe 5:1-4.

We read the passage from Ezekiel 34 this morning:

The word of the LORD came to me: ²“Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel; prophesy and say to them: ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Woe to you shepherds of Israel who only take care of yourselves! Should not shepherds take care of the flock?’⁴



These are harsh words, words of judgment... God’s judgment.

⁴You have not strengthened the weak or healed the sick or bound up the injured. You have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost. You have ruled them harshly and brutally. ⁵So they were scattered because there was no shepherd, and when they were scattered they became food for all the wild animals. ⁶My sheep wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill. They were scattered over the whole earth, and no one searched or looked for them.⁵

This is the same scene that Matthew recounts in our text.

³⁶When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because **they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.**⁶

These scenes are so similar, and the use of the metaphor so alike, that it is reasonable to conclude that this is more than a coincidence; it is reasonable to conclude that Matthew had the Ezekiel passage in mind, especially if we are to read on. Even if Matthew didn’t have the passage in mind, the same Holy Spirit that inspired both Matthew and Ezekiel brings these passages together.

In the verses that follow in Ezekiel, the words become even more directed toward the shepherds. We should consider just **who** these shepherds are. They are certainly not merely literal shepherds... just as the sheep are not merely livestock. The shepherds are **leaders**. Because of the New Testament imagery I mentioned earlier, we might think that the prophesy here is directed toward **spiritual** leaders. But generally, in the Old Testament, the term shepherd is used more for rulers. King David, for example, is referenced as one who rose from being a shepherd of sheep to being a shepherd of his people.

Our contemporary American thinking tends to draw stark lines of delineation between the *secular* and the *sacred*. We like to keep things separated when it comes to leaders. Separation of church and state tends to be a more cherished and well thought out doctrine than any truly spiritual doctrine. We even have that separation of powers persist into our concepts of government: legislative, executive, and judicial... military and civilian... elected and bureaucratic.

⁴The Holy Bible: Today's New International Version. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005). Eze 34:1-2.

⁵The Holy Bible: Today's New International Version. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005). Eze 34:4-6.

⁶The Holy Bible: Today's New International Version. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005). Mt 9:36.

But, of course, the lines are not so clearly drawn when we think of leadership in Biblical terms. While the shepherds referenced in this Ezekiel passage are most likely kings and other government leaders, it is not merely governmental affairs in which they are failing; it is spiritual too.

When leadership goes bad, any leadership (government, business, church, family, etc.), this is generally how it goes bad. When leadership turns from serving those being led to serving oneself, people suffer. When leadership turns from feeding those being led, to devouring those who are being led God hates it.

In the passage the prophecy progresses from merely describing the sad state of affairs to holding the leaders accountable.

¹⁰This is what the Sovereign LORD says: I am against the shepherds and will hold them accountable for my flock. I will remove them from tending the flock so that the shepherds can no longer feed themselves. I will rescue my flock from their mouths, and it will no longer be food for them.⁷

The Scriptural understanding of leadership and authority is that God sets up and empowers leaders. This prophecy indicates that the God who empowered leaders would disempower the failed leaders.

So would God leave his people leaderless, without shepherds? Would he set up replacement shepherds? Could better people be found to lead His people?

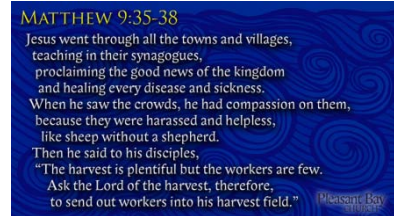
¹¹“For this is what the Sovereign LORD says: I myself will search for my sheep and look after them. ¹²As shepherds look after their scattered flocks when they are with them, so will I look after my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered on a day of clouds and darkness. ¹³~~I will bring them out from the nations and gather them from the countries, and I will bring them into their own land. I will pasture them on the mountains of Israel, in the ravines and in all the settlements in the land.~~ ¹⁴~~I will tend them in a good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel will be their grazing land. There they will lie down in good grazing land, and there they will feed in a rich pasture on the mountains of Israel.~~ ¹⁵I myself will tend my sheep and have them lie down, declares the Sovereign LORD. ¹⁶I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak, but the sleek and the strong I will destroy. I will shepherd the flock with justice.⁸

The promise of God in this prophecy is that **He** would be the shepherd of His people. While people want to be kings, and even cry out to be led by kings, God’s desire is that He would be the leader of His people. He is the king; He is the shepherd.

⁷*The Holy Bible: Today's New International Version.* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005). Eze 34:10.

⁸*The Holy Bible: Today's New International Version.* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005). Eze 34:11-16.

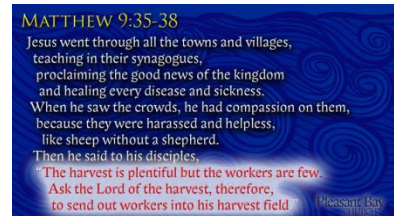
When Jesus saw the people “harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd,” He saw people without God, people without a Messiah, without a Savior. Jesus came to be that shepherd.



It turns out that this is the consistent New Testament concept of shepherd. Throughout the New Testament, Jesus is described as the Great Shepherd, the Good Shepherd. Even in that passage I mentioned earlier from 1 Peter that was referenced in my ordination, I was charged to be a shepherd of **God's** flock. I'm just a worker, an undershepherd, who leads only by following the Great Shepherd.

To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder and a witness of Christ's sufferings who also will share in the glory to be revealed: ²Be shepherds of **God's flock that is under your care**, watching over them—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not pursuing dishonest gain, but eager to serve; ³not lording it over those **entrusted** to you, but being examples to the flock. ⁴And when the **Chief Shepherd** appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away.⁹

Finally, the third big idea in this passage has to do with this **harvest** metaphor. These are the red letters, the words of Jesus, in our passage.



“**The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. ³⁸Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.**”¹⁰

We know from the whole of the Gospel accounts in our Bibles that there was some confusion about just what that “harvest” would be.

Would the suffering sowed for so many generations now be reaped in a nationalistic victory? Would that harvest be realized by God's chosen people rising above their oppressors? Would Jesus be that earthly King who would liberate God's children by whatever and every means? Would the harvest come with violence; would the opposition be leveled like so much wheat at harvest time?

While there may have been confusion among the original hearers of these words of Jesus, the context makes it clear. Jesus was calling for a harvest of lost souls; Jesus was calling for the harassed and helpless and scattered sheep to be gathered to Himself.

Jesus was calling for partners... partners in prayer, and partners in work.

⁹*The Holy Bible: Today's New International Version.* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005). 1 Pe 5:1-4.

¹⁰*The Holy Bible: Today's New International Version.* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005). Mt 9:37-38.

He said, "The harvest is plentiful." Every person needed to hear the Gospel, the Good News of the Kingdom. Every person needed to hear that there was a way back to God's flock because God Himself was calling and making the way back to Him. The Good Shepherd was calling and would lay down His own life for the sheep. "The harvest is plentiful," because everyone needs to hear.

"The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few." Jesus calls for partners in this work. His way is to not only transform lives for eternity, but also to use those transformed lives in the work of drawing others to Himself. He works both *in* us and *through* us.

"The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. ³⁸Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field."¹¹

It is funny, isn't it? In my way of thinking, verse 38 should just read "so get to work."

The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few... *so get to work*.

But Jesus says, "ask the Lord of the harvest;" Jesus says *pray*.

We know that He intended to send His followers into this work. If you have a Bible open to the text in Matthew 9, you can see where we're heading with next week's sermon. Chapter 10 starts with Jesus putting his followers to work.

When Jesus says "pray that God will send workers," it appears he means "pray for yourselves."

There's a lot here in these few short words:

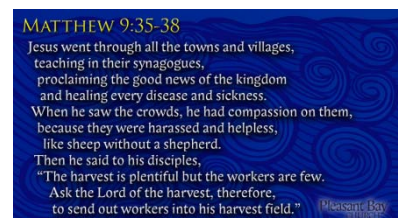
- Pray (before anything else)
- Look to the Lord of the harvest, the Great Shepherd, the true King and leader
- Pray for calling, pray that His workers will be sent

We can go ahead and ask ourselves "so what?" now. How does this apply to us? Is this for us?

As those endeavoring to follow Jesus, this certainly must be for us. These red letters, this directive by Jesus, is for us followers of Jesus today.

We cannot escape this command to:

"³⁸Ask the Lord of the harvest... to send out workers into his harvest field."¹²



¹¹ *The Holy Bible: Today's New International Version*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005). Mt 9:37-38.

¹² *The Holy Bible: Today's New International Version*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005). Mt 9:37-38.

We must pray, asking God to do His work through His workers in our day, in our land, through our networks. We are called to be devoted to prayer for those who are sent to work in His harvest field.

This is one of those **second Sundays** when we give special attention to our work in world missions. For those who have made monthly commitments to financial support for missionaries, we remind you to be faithful in those commitments when it comes time for the offering. We have guests on these missions Sundays from time to time and often have a special prayer emphasis for missionaries on days like today.

And that is good and appropriate... but there is more here, isn't there?

We have to be prepared that this is a *dangerous* prayer. The context of this command teaches us that if we ask the Lord to send workers, we have to be prepared to be sent. We should **expect** to be sent. We should, of course, pray for those who are sent, being sent, preparing to be sent... we should pray that the Lord will send workers, and we should pray anticipating that He will send each of us as a worker.

With that expectation to be sent, walk through this passage again and take courage. We went *forward* through the passage; now let's step *backwards* through the same passage.

Pray. It is so very easy to just go about this work based on what we think we see and based on what we think we know. Pray and pray without ceasing. Pray first, pray throughout, and pray when you think you might be finished. And when you pray, be sure to listen too. If you are anything like me, you might find that it is easy to just charge ahead without really seeking the Lord, praying, or hearing from the Lord. *All work and no pray...*

The harvest is plentiful. With so much to do, it should be easy to find opportunity. Sometimes I think we might expect something far too elaborate. With a plentiful harvest, helpless and harassed folk everywhere we might look or find ourselves, opportunities abound to be about this work.

Jesus is the Shepherd. He said to pray that the Lord would send workers... not leaders, not shepherds, simply **workers**. The work that we are called to is His work. We can't make a real difference for anyone's eternity unless we are responding to God's call to join in His work. When mere humans like us endeavor to make ourselves the shepherds, we fail. Our success in this work comes when we join the Apostle Paul is saying:

¹Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ.¹³

¹³*The Holy Bible: Today's New International Version.* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005). 1 Co 11:1.

Motivated by compassion. I think we fool ourselves with all sorts of motivations for this work. On one end, we can be motivated by obedience... on the other, we can be motivated by selfish ambition. We go about sacrificing for Christian service out of obedience, or we find some sort of personal gain as we grab for power. Both are common; neither last with impact.

The motivation that matters is the motivation demonstrated in this passage by Jesus: **compassion**. It is a great word that has two important components:

- Identification with the needs of others, and
- Desire to alleviate that distress.

We can have one or the other... but when we have both, as Jesus had both, we have compassion.

If we are going to pray that the Lord of the harvest would send workers (and send us as one among the workers) we would do well to pray for compassion. We'll reach our friends and family and neighbors and coworkers when we are struck with compassion... when we see people as Jesus sees people and are moved to help.

There are all kinds of work to do. Jesus embodied the fullness of His ministry; Jesus is all in all. Jesus taught, preached, healed, became the payment for our sins, was resurrected from the dead, and is ascended to Heaven.

None of us is Jesus. The succession plan for the work of Jesus was not to choose a successor... certainly not one of us would qualify. But all of us qualify. The work of Jesus is carried on through the work of the church. We all together, here and around the world and throughout history... we, the Church, are the succession plan for the work. The work is enormous, and diverse, and there is a role for each of us as we take our place.

Will we pray?
Pray ready to work?
All work and no pray?
All pray and no work?

