

“Spiritual Harvesting”—Matthew 9:35-38

The text for this sermon, the theme of which is, “Spiritual Harvesting”, is Matthew 9:35-38 → *Jesus went throughout all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction. When He saw the crowds, He had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then He said to His disciples, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest.”* This is the text.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ Jesus:

Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord (cf. 1Timothy 1:2). Amen.

What does it take to produce a harvest of grain or fruit? The interval between seeding and experiencing fruit is filled with watering, fertilizing, and many other efforts to protect and nurture the crop or plant. All of this hard work is done in the hopes of enjoying the fruit of your labors, hoping that the plants will survive the elements of nature and pests, growing into proper maturity. However, when that maturity is evident

timing is very crucial. The harvest demands your urgency and action.

In our text Jesus used the picture of a harvest to describe the object of His earthly public ministry. The difference between His harvest and our harvests is the timing and the actions. The time for immediate action in our harvesting is determined by our observation of the circumstances in connection with the maturity of the grain or fruit. The time for action in the Lord's harvesting is determined by His timing and initiative. Thus, *when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law* (cf. Galatians 4:4-5).

Our text brings us about a year and a half into Jesus' public ministry as God's Son (c. 31 AD) in the region of Galilee (cf. Matthew 4:12-16). Verse 35 tells us that *He went throughout all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction*. Notice the parameters of the Lord's harvest at this point in His ministry. He taught in the *synagogues* in *all the cities and villages*. The *synagogues* were like the local congregations where the Jews gathered for worship of Yahweh and teaching from His written Word of the Old Testament.

Why specifically *their synagogues*? Because it was time for spiritual harvesting to take place amongst those whom Yahweh had "planted" and "nourished" by His grace. He had revealed Himself and His will to

the Israelites for centuries, choosing them to bring the good news (i.e. *the gospel*) of redemption in the Person & Work of the promised Messiah. The redemption from the power of sin and the devil in your life came through the Jews. This is what Jesus meant when He said that *salvation is from the Jews* (cf. John 4:22). Paul put it this way in Romans 9:4-5 → *To the Israelites . . . belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises. To them belong the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ, Who is God over all, blessed forever.* Jesus went to those whom God had “planted” (i.e. established as His people) and had “nourished” with His Word, both proclaimed and written, for centuries. This is why Jesus sent His twelve apostles into *His harvest*, telling them to only go *to the lost sheep of the house of Israel* (cf. Matthew 10:6). It was time for spiritual harvesting.

Thus also, His *healing every disease and every affliction*, along with many other miraculous works, should have been recognized as evidence of His being the promised Savior based upon the Old Testament Scriptures (cf. Matthew 11:2-6; Isaiah 35). Naturally, these wonderful miracles caused *His fame to spread throughout all Syria . . . and great crowds followed Him from Galilee and the Decapolis, and from Jerusalem and Judea, and from beyond the Jordan* (cf. Matthew 4:24-25) . . . basically the area we refer to as the Holy Land today. However, notice

how verse 36 of our text describes these people from all over the Promised Land—as *harassed and helpless*.

When you think of being *harassed and helpless*, what thoughts come to your mind? Bullying? Being physically or emotionally abused? Experiencing injustice after injustice with no reprieve, help or relief? Being taken advantage of and used by others instead of being cherished and loved by them? The *harassed and helpless* person is the one who is the victim of sin in its many ugly forms. It is actually you and me, all sinners. This feeling of being lost in the victimization of sin sends you searching for peace, help and relief through many avenues, most of which will be self, and even eternally, destructive in the end.

Our text also describes these people as *sheep without a shepherd*. Actually, the people were being led by the religious teachers and leaders—their spiritual “shepherds,” referring to *the scribes and the Pharisees* (cf. Matthew 23:2). The reason the people were *harassed and helpless* even under such leadership is because they were being led to their own works rather than **God’s work** to deal with their victimization and sin. Jesus told the people to *observe what* their religious leaders taught them from God’s written Word. However, condemning their hypocrisy, He said in Matthew 23:4 → *They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people’s shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger.*

These *heavy burdens, hard to bear*, refer to their shepherd's interpretations of what was necessary to be completely obedient to the law of God as laid down in the Old Testament. They put together volumes of books describing the slightest infraction of the Law and monitored the people to the point of driving them to despair under the burden of guilt because of their inability to work out their obedience righteously. Looking to your own works righteousness will never bring you the lasting eternal and true peace in the midst of your struggle with your sins, both those placed upon you and those you commit. Spiritual harvesting happens in God's way, in His time.

Jesus proclaimed *the gospel of the kingdom* as bound up in His Person & Work. This good news is that the burden of your inability to live in obedience to God's Law perfectly has been lifted in Christ. Jesus lived in perfect obedience to God's written Law **for you** so you can be declared righteous in God's sight by faith in Him. This good news is that the punishment which your sin brings upon you has been dealt with **completely** in Jesus' atoning sacrifice for the forgiveness of your sins. Thus, Jesus' invitation and promise in Matthew 11:28-30 is secured by His harvesting work: *Come to Me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. 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. For My yoke is easy, and My burden is light.* He did it all **for you**.

Spiritual harvesting is the work of *the Lord of the harvest* as the Holy Spirit works through the Gospel shared by His disciples. Notice in verse 38 what Jesus instructs His disciples to do—*pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest*. He points them to prayer first and foremost. Why prayer and not some kind of activism, such as that which Peter displayed when Jesus was being arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane by immediately taking up his sword to fight (cf. John 18:10-11)? Because *the harvest* belongs to the Lord, not to the laborers.

Praying to *the Lord of the harvest* is an act of submission which recognizes that He must bring people to eternal fruition (i.e. eternal life). It happens as the Holy Spirit works through the gospel which His **humble servants** proclaim (cf. Matthew 10:18-20). We laborers are simply to be faithful, confessing the Lord Jesus as we bring the good news of peace in the forgiveness of sins through faith in Him alone. The apostle Paul referred to himself and other workers in God's harvest as *servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God Who gives the growth . . . For we are God's fellow workers. You are God's field, God's building*. (cf. 1 Corinthians 3:5-9)

Spiritual harvesting is a matter of the heart, mind and body

transformed by God's grace through faith in Jesus, *the Lord of the harvest*. Prayer is such an act of submission that even while making intercession you may be the one sent to intercede in the lives of others **with God's written Word**. Even as Jesus instructed His disciples to pray that *the Lord of the harvest* would *send out laborers into His harvest*, Jesus sends them to proclaim the gospel. Prayer is not a way to manipulate circumstances (i.e. idolatry) but rather a submission to *the Lord of the harvest*, moving us to humble action according to His timing, in His way. That way is the heart, mind and life-changing power of the Holy Spirit working through the good news of forgiveness, life and salvation by faith in Jesus Christ alone for you, for all sinners. Amen.

You . . . were taught . . . the truth . . . in Jesus,
to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life
and is corrupt through deceitful desires,
*and to be **renewed in the spirit of your minds,***
and to put on the new self,
created after the likeness of God
*in **true righteousness and holiness.***

(Ephesians 4:21-24)

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