

Introduction

Chapter 9 of the Gospel of Matthew is about the nature of Jesus' ministry, particularly with how His ministry incorporated miracles into it. In 9.35, we have an important summary about His ministry, namely, that the ministry of Christ was to give us the gospel, to give us the gospel in word (preaching & teaching) and deed (healing).

And 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 (9.35).

Thus, miracles are enacted parables of restoration by which Jesus teaches the physical, down to earth character of the gospel. His miracles reveal that the salvation of the kingdom includes the whole man, body as well as soul, the conquering of death, and the gift of eternal life. Matthew 9 explains and shows, among other things, what Jesus meant when He said, "Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?" (Mat 6.25). Life and the body are so much more.

When we come to verses 36-38, we have a shift in thought. This section directs our attention to the fruit of our Lord's ministry. A harvest will come from His ministry. There will be a harvest of sinners forming the Christian Church, the bride of Christ (cf. 9.15). My title for today is therefore "The Christian Harvest," which I will cover in three main points: the abundance, the problem, and the duty associated with this harvest.

1A. The Abundance of the harvest

Verse 36 tells us that Jesus viewed the multitudes with compassion. "**When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.**" The wilderness of the Near East is quite inhospitable to straying sheep "without a shepherd." Being "harassed" means that they are subject to many dangers, even fatal ones. The word "helpless" creates the picture of sheep "giving up and lying down in a state of exhaustion." This analogy shows the people of Israel wandering "aimlessly from one misfortune to the next" and the result was "deep spiritual depression from which they did not have the strength to arise" (Ridderbos, *Matthew*, 194). Without denying the fact of personal responsibility, the text states that the cause of this unfortunate condition was the lack of a shepherd. They are like sheep "**without a shepherd.**"

Seeing the crowds with this heart of compassion prompted Jesus to introduce the harvest theme. Interestingly, Matthew places these words in between the summary of Jesus' ministry (9.35) and His sending out of the twelve apostles (10.1-42) suggesting that the harvest will come by His gospel through His sent ones.

The harvest He speaks of is plentiful. It is an abundant harvest. The point of this should not be blunted by the reference either to the shepherd-less and helpless state of Israel or to the scarcity of workers. There is no threat here of failure to gather and reap in time. There is no suggestion that the harvest depends on the workers for its abundance. To be sure, in farming, a lack of workers at harvest time could, and probably would, result in serious loss, waste, and forfeiture, unless there was a timely ingathering. However, Jesus does not say, "the harvest could be plentiful" or "the harvest would be plentiful if only there were enough workers." Instead, He straightforwardly states that the harvest is plentiful. There is a harvest. It is certain, and it is plentiful. The harvest is abundant.

In context, this harvest language arises from the compassion Jesus felt for the distressed and outcast multitudes of Israel. Therefore, the harvest concerns the ingathering of the lost sheep of distressed people that have no shepherd. In other words, it is a harvest of sinners in great need who come under the shelter, safety, and protection of His gospel.

This context also indicates that Jesus is going down the road prepared by John in calling a new Israel out from old Israel. Thus, we are led to inquire as to how the presence of the harvest is

to be squared with the fact that the multitudes of Israel admire Christ and His works with their lips while their hearts are far from Him. They are represented in those who laughed at Jesus and attributed His works to the prince of demons (9.24; 34; cf. they marveled at the man who performed miracles in a self-complementing way, 9.8, cf. Ridderbos, *Matthew*, 181, 175).

The rejection by Israel leads to the rejection of Israel. Nevertheless, there is a sure harvest. Therefore, we have the seeds here that grow into the Church as the new covenant people of God. God rejects Israel and forms a new Israel, but if God set Israel aside, then where does the new Israel come from? This sounds like God creates children for Abraham from the stones, to use the words of John the Baptist (Mat 3.9). The new Israel will come from nowhere, from the most unlikely places, from the stones beneath old Israel's feet. In other words, the new covenant community will come from outside Israel and it will constitute the Christian Church, a people who will come into the covenant community by repentance-baptism (Mat 3.1-6; Acts 2.38-39). Who are outside Israel? Gentiles are outside of course, but remarkably, so is Israel! Israel becomes "not my people," in order to become His people again in restoration. When the Lord goes to those who are not His people that means that He goes to the Gentiles made up of Gentiles and Jews alike. When the Lord forms the new Israel, He draws from both Gentiles and Jews to constitute the Christian Church. Therefore, the harvest of sinners is a harvest of Christians.

The harvest is now begun; the formation of the Christian church has begun and Jesus is the master builder. He *will* bring in the full harvest. The harvest is now and not yet, just as the kingdom is now and not yet. The kingdom has come; the new day has dawned and the harvest has begun (Rom 13.11-12). When it reaches its consummation, there will be a multitude of the redeemed that no man can number from every tribe, kindred, and nation of the earth (Rev 7.9.10). Certainly, inescapably, and without question the harvest is plentiful.

God has an elect people. He has chosen them out from the fallen sinful human family. He owned them for His own and appointed them unto salvation before the foundation of the world. He gave this people to Christ in the covenant of redemption. Thus, Jesus said, "Yours they were and you gave them to me." Therefore, Jesus gave Himself as an offering for them as He said to this effect in His high priestly prayer, "I pray, intercede, and thus die on the cross not for the world, but for those you have given to me" (Jn 17.1-9). By the Holy Spirit and through the gospel, God irresistibly calls these specific sinners out of darkness into light and life based on the atonement procured by Christ. Thus, as the Good Shepherd, Jesus lays down His life for His sheep, and the sheep include Jews and Gentiles that He must bring and that therefore hear His call and follow Him (Jn 10.14-16). He is the sacrifice that brings cleansing from the defilement of our sins and deliverance from the punishment of our sins.

The effectual, saving, call of God takes place in history in the life experience of the elect. Its source is vividly illustrated for us in this text. We have the harvest tied to the compassion of Christ for the multitudes. These multitudes remind Jesus of the fallen human race, and of the great multitude that He came to save. They are in need. They are blind, diseased, mute, unclean, and dead because of sin. They have lost their humanness. They are lost and their lost condition shows in the ravaging effects of sin on the human body. Thus, the compassion of Christ is so strong, so deep, so angry, and so determined that it must find satisfaction and fulfillment (He must bring His sheep into the fold, Jn 10.16). Therefore, our Lord sets His heart on the great goal, the great abundant harvest of Christians. He sets His heart, emotions, and determined will on a fruitful harvest of Christians to bring them from the wilderness of the world to peace, safety, purpose, worth, resurrection, and life everlasting. Here we have the basic gospel message preached to the Romans by Paul: confess with your mouth and believe in your heart that Jesus is risen Lord and you will be saved, you will be part of that grand harvest (both now and not yet).

2A. The Problem of the harvest

In the saving of sinners, Jesus gets His hands dirty and so must we. There is difficulty with regard to the harvest summarized in the words, "the laborers are few."

We need to focus the reference here to workmen or laborers. Who is Jesus talking about? Again, context is our guide. Verse 36 deals with the same problem, but with a slight difference in imagery. We should put the lack mentioned in verses 36 and 37 back to back: first, there is a lack of a shepherd; second, there is a lack of workers. “Workers” refer to shepherds, to under shepherds and thus in the forward movement of the history of redemption to pastor-shepherds, teacher-preachers of the gospel.

At an initial level (thinking history of redemption), the problem is that there are multitudes in Israel under the leadership of priests, Pharisees, lawyers, scribes, and elders, but they lack shepherding; they are without a shepherd. This in no way denies the personal responsibility of the crowds for their sins, but it does accent the fact that the so-called shepherds are blind leaders of the blind. The fearful thought is that there can be religious communities or groups of religious people that have priests, preachers, pastors, clergy, elders, and bishops at the same time that they lack shepherding. They carry on day-to-day activities of religion and yet they operate without a shepherd. They may lack the Good Shepherd. They may lack under shepherds. The problem is that there are many unqualified leaders and few true workmen. The true workmen will, in the first place, give nourishment to God’s people like a shepherd nurtures and cares for his flock.

Thus, we have insight into what it means to labor in the harvest. It is not securing the harvest *per se*. Securing the harvest is God’s work (He gives the increase). To labor in the harvest means giving nurture to the flock of God. This comes out in a number of ways. 1) It comes out in the idea of a shepherd that cares for the flock and leads the sheep to the refreshing waters of God’s word. 2) The parallel in Mark 6.34 combines the compassion of Jesus for the needy sheep with His teaching: “**having compassion...Jesus began teaching them.**” 3) The worker in Matthew 10.10 is one who gives words of peace with God and words that call for obedience to God (12-14). 4) The NT title of pastor indicates his primary role in gospel ministry, which is to be a shepherd. Moreover, he is a pastor-teacher (Eph 4) as he gives himself to the word and prayer.

In this context, I have to speak here to myself and with humility before the Lord petitioning that He grant me the ability to fulfill this calling. The idea of nurture, nourishing, and feeding the flock is primary (Jn. 21.15, love for the Lord shows itself in feeding His lambs). This must determine my philosophy of ministry, as it ought to determine what you expect from ministry. “Feeding the sheep” suggests the meaningful analogy of a diet. We need a good diet on the word of God just as we need a good diet of food and drink. As a pastor, I feel like a mom providing food and saying, “come and enjoy a good meal.” Sometimes the meal includes things that different family members may not like. My job is to provide a healthy balanced diet on the word of God. That is why I work at the sermons with a high priority. As you know, it is with concern for a more balanced diet that I have added the OT study, brief as it is. With prayer, these efforts take first priority in my work each week. This goes with a philosophy of worship that emphasizes the primacy of the preached and taught word among the elements of worship. It guides our praying about the communion book and its usefulness by pastors helping them in doing their good work in the word. Hence, pastors and flocks need to have meat, potatoes, and a variety of vegetables on the table that combines a regular diet with a communion diet on the word.

Concisely (in a nutshell), here is the problem (both then in the beginning and in many ways now in our place in the history of redemption): there is a harvest, a great harvest of people brought from darkness to light, and there are many unqualified leaders, but few true workers. This leads directly to the next point on the duty of the harvest.

3A. The duty of this harvest

When we look at the fallen world in the news and when we consider how widespread false religion is, we may find ourselves in despair. To a great extent religion comes into the news

as a primary cause of war and bloodshed over so-called holy land. Demonic distortion of the OT is part of this bleak picture. If we concentrate on what we can do about it, we have little hope of a harvest. However, the duty of this harvest points us in a different direction, away from ourselves and to our true resource, to the Lord of the harvest. Pure and simple, the duty is prayer: **“therefore, pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.”**

Because of the plentiful harvest, that is *His* harvest, and because of the fewness of the laborers, Jesus instructs us “therefore” to pray. We are to pray to the Lord of the harvest, pray earnestly, and pray for the sending of laborers into His harvest.

We are back to the basics. True religion is God-centered. In true religion, we acknowledge, worship, and depend upon God fully and utterly. All else is but straw if we do not pray. Everything that we do is but straw if it is not sent forth by prayer. This is the great means of caring for the harvest, of providing for the sheep: prayer.

This has to involve three important aspects: prayer for gospel ministers, for gospel ministry, and of gospel ministers.

1) First, this involves petitioning for gospel ministers

This should be part of our praying on a regular basis, namely, that we pray to the Lord Jesus that He send out ministers of the gospel for the nourishment and building up of the church. This has been and continues to be our prayer for my son Adam as he gets closer and closer to serving the Lord in the church (tonight Knox Presbyterian votes on his call).

2) Second, this involves petitioning for gospel ministry

That is, we should regularly pray, earnestly pray, about the work pastors do in the Scriptures. We should therefore pray for bold and clear preaching-teaching that has an open door for the word (Eph 6.19; Col 4.2-4).

Petitioning for both ministers and ministry should be in our prayers that the Lord would give such aspirations. What this means is that we earnestly petition the Lord that young people not be caught up in “effectiveness” and the limelight of having thousands sit at their feet, but that they will be sent forth with a single-minded devotion to love Christ by feeding His flock on a balanced diet of the whole counsel of God. This is how I pray for the seminary students I work with as they aspire to the pastorate.

3) Third, this involves petitioning as part of gospel ministry

Can you not see how the two fundamentals of the ministry surface here? Gospel ministry has two main tasks: the word and prayer. Thus, one way you can pray for me is to pray that I be able to give myself fully to the word of God and prayer. In this way, the sermon turns on me very directly: I have this two-fold responsibility. I must do my best to heed the words of Paul in 1 Timothy 4.11-16, and I need your help to this end by your prayers (cf. 2 Co 2.11). The goal is for your benefit, for your diet on the manna from heaven (Heb and John). This is why communion must come into view here in our prayers and as a vital means of grace (we come to communion in faith for the strengthening of our faith). Pastors must view communion this way as vital for the family of God.

Conclusion

In light of these things, let us now spend some time making application of the abundance, the problem, and the duty of the Christian harvest.

1) First there is hope for a lost and dying world

The multitudes laugh at the claims of Christ; they laugh to scorn and derision. Under the influence of gigantic demonic schemes of worldview proportions, the human family has lost touch with itself and the world in which it lives. Being deceived and deceiving themselves, unbelievers are blind, deaf, and mute to the truth in a radical way. They understand nothing; they do not see the world for what it is as the creation of Christ and the display of His glory. They are in darkness in their minds and they are mute in their speech.

Nevertheless, there is hope because there is an abundant harvest. Jesus secured it. It has already begun. He is the first fruit and the final harvest at the end of the age is certain. When we think of the needs of the human family and see them as sheep without a shepherd, we know they are oppressed, distressed, and helpless, but help is on the way for the harvest has already begun. Thus, no matter how captivated in sin, no matter how enslaved and gripped people may be in their idolatry, God will irresistibly conquer the stubborn hearts of sinners and bring them by His creative call into the kingdom of His dear son. Hope is therefore expectation.

2) Second, because there is such hopeful expectation, we must pray for workers

I do not believe that the Lord is telling us to pray that there be a harvest. The harvest is a fact and it is plentiful. We are to pray for shepherds who give sound teaching, who preach the whole counsel of God, and who give all that is profitable to God's flock. Pray, in other words, for reformed ministers who draw on the entire Bible and who confess a good confession in their labors in the word.

3) Third, pray for your minister

Pray earnestly for good work in the gospel harvest. Pray earnestly that your pastor will preach with good understanding, clarity, and boldness. Pray for an open door for the word and the courage to go through it without compromise. Pray for your minister to the end that you may have a good diet on the word of God and love Christ all the more. Pray that you will thereby have a song in your heart that says, "Thank you Jesus for teaching me as my compassionate teacher through ministry of the word, thank you Lord."