

TO SEND OUT LABORERS

Matthew 9:35–38

Key Verse: 9:38

“...therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest
to send out laborers into his harvest.”

What kind of person do you want to be? That’s a big question! Many would say they just want to be chill. A few would say they want to change the world. Most are modestly interested in improving their own lives. Some fiercely fight for the most elite education. You may be dreaming to make it big in business or in research or to become that star athlete, musician, or designer. Or you may just want to have a quiet, meaningful job, working with your own hands.

We may have our own dreams, but today our Lord Jesus urges us to adopt a dream way bigger than us: that the Lord of the harvest would send out laborers into his harvest. Ah, what a passion! But to our ears, being a “laborer” may not sound like such a great life. Yet Jesus made it the most vital prayer topic, not only in his time, but for all time. It’s Labor Day weekend, a time to honor those who’ve built and are still building this country with their blood, sweat, and tears. In light of today’s passage, laborers for God’s harvest are those who work to build his kingdom with the same intensity and self-sacrifice. But what do such kingdom laborers actually do? In today’s verses, we gain four insights into the kind of laborers God wants to send. May God speak to us today through his word.

First, laborers “go among the people.” In chapter 9 Jesus encounters constant opposition from the Pharisees. They were the religious critics who shadowed his every move, and because of their envy, couldn’t see the wonderful things God was doing through him. They focused on outward appearances, constantly finding fault with Jesus’ grace. But Jesus refused to get entangled with them. He focused on what God wanted him to do.

Let’s read verse 35. Going through the towns and villages in Galilee may not seem like much. But the area was more densely populated than we realize, with maybe 3 million people. Being among all those people was a physically grueling task. Still, Jesus was ready to do it. Why? He knew God wanted him to go after the lost sheep of Israel (15:24), to be a spiritual doctor for the spiritually sick (9:12).

We live in an age of convenience, where people retreat and build walls to protect their time and energy. We'd rather avoid other people's messy, complex needs. We'd rather hide in a place where we can just decompress and contemplate. But a kingdom laborer doesn't retreat; he follows Jesus' example, stepping out of his comfort zone, choosing availability over isolation. God still needs laborers who don't hide but go out among the people.

Second, laborers teach and proclaim the kingdom. Let's look closer at verse 35a. Jesus wasn't just walking among crowds; he entered their synagogues and taught them. And he wasn't giving good advice or moral rules; he was giving people the good news of the kingdom. From John the Baptist (3:2) to Jesus (4:17) to the apostles (10:7), the urgent call was the same: "The kingdom of heaven is here!" Think about that. All throughout his ministry Jesus told unforgettable parables to paint pictures of a kingdom unlike any other on earth. While human kingdoms are built on arrogance, deception, and injustice, God's kingdom is built on his amazing grace and truth.

With this proclamation of the kingdom, God is actually stepping into our lives, offering us real salvation. He's inviting us to leave behind the darkness of Satan's influence and step into his own loving, kind rule. This invitation is not exclusive, for the "super-religious"; it's for everyone—no matter who you are, where you've been, or what you have.

Why did Jesus teach and proclaim the kingdom? Because it speaks to our deepest needs. It guides us back to God, our Creator, offering us our true "home" which is really "paradise" in him. Throughout history, people have tried to create their own kingdoms on earth, but they never lasted. We all need the good news of a kingdom built not by people but by God himself. This is the only place where we discover our true worth, dignity, and belonging. Rather than offering people the hollow promises of a fantasy life, we proclaim the kingdom of heaven in Jesus as the only true and living hope in this world. It's a reality worth living for, and even dying for. Laborers help people receive the living hope of this kingdom.

When we say "proclaim the kingdom," we may picture standing on a street corner with many listening, or having an intense theological debate. But the kingdom usually gets shared in boring, ordinary places—like over a cup of coffee. I remember studying Genesis with a student who was deeply skeptical. He wasn't a "seeker" asking great questions; he was checking his watch every few minutes. I felt like I was failing. I remember walking home, thinking, "This is a waste of time; he doesn't even want to be here." But the next week, we read God's promise to Abraham. For the first time, he didn't check his watch. He just looked up and said, "Wait, does God actually promise that?" He didn't have a lightning-bolt experience; he just realized that God's word is true. The labor to

proclaim the kingdom is not about having the perfect argument; it's about having the patience to sit with someone, week after week, until the light finally comes on. It's not flashy, but it's how the kingdom actually advances. Apostle Paul told his spiritual son Timothy: "...preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching" (2 Tim. 4:2).

Third, laborers bring God's healing. Now let's think about the last part of verse 35. "...and healing every disease and every affliction." Jesus didn't just proclaim the kingdom; he was actively laboring to restore those broken by disease and suffering, both physical and spiritual. The author Matthew was one of them. Working for Rome as a tax collector, he lost his integrity. But Jesus was patiently with him, with his mercy and grace, until he was healed. Jesus wasn't performing these miracles from a safe distance; he was personally present, staying with sick and wounded people until they were made whole. His healing was as graceful as it was powerful. The prophet Isaiah once described the Messiah as one who wouldn't break a "bruised reed" or snuff out a "smoldering wick" (Matt. 12:20; Isa. 42:1–4). Jesus lived that out. As the best kingdom laborer, Jesus treated fragile, hurting people with immense patience and gentleness, tenderly nurturing them back to strength.

This is the heart of every true kingdom laborer. When we're filled with the Holy Spirit, we gain more than just God's power—we gain his gentle and lowly heart. Laboring for the kingdom means being the kind of Spirit-filled person who stays with someone until they are healed. That's the labor of love that truly pleases God.

We talk about nurturing people back to strength as if it's a serene, beautiful process. It's not. Years ago we took in a student. He wasn't a project; he was a person. Honestly, it was pretty hard. He couldn't hold down a job. He'd leave our Bible house kitchen a wreck. There were times I was so frustrated. I wanted him to "get it" faster, and just grow up. Then I remembered the "bruised reed" image. It reminded me that my frustration wasn't righteous; I just wanted to feel good seeing visible growth. So I repented, and instead of complaining, we just kept walking with him. We kept loving him even when he got so sick he had to go home. I believe that was the messy labor Jesus was thinking about. It's not about having an epic victory in a week to brag about. It's about being that person who refuses to stop caring just because things got inconvenient.

Fourth, laborers "see" people. Now let's read verse 36. "When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd." It's stunning how Jesus saw the crowds. Imagine being surrounded by people who are sick, broken, and hungry. It

would be so easy to view them as an annoying interruption, or a burden. But the verse says Jesus saw them with “compassion.”

The Greek word used here is visceral; it means experiencing pain in your internal organs. It's a gut-level response—the original “I feel your pain.” Jesus wasn't calculating the cost; he was moved, from the inside out. Why did he feel this way? Because he saw the truth: “...they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.” “Harassed” literally meant to be flayed or ripped open. Jesus' insight here is profound. He could see these people were being chewed up by the demands of religious, political and business leaders. “Helpless” meant to be thrown down—so wounded and exhausted, they had no power left to stand. Jesus could feel their utter weakness.

Does this resonate with you? Like you are just one crisis away from totally collapsing? Without a shepherd, sheep are vulnerable, wandering, and malnourished. Jesus looked at the people of his day and knew that without a personal relationship with God, we're all essentially sheep without a shepherd. Our souls are hungry, thirsty, and dissatisfied. We get caught up in the wrong things, suffer from fear, and can even get self-destructive.

It's so easy for us, in our busyness, to be indifferent or judgmental toward those who're suffering, thinking, “I'm glad that's not my problem!” But Jesus' response was not to avoid people; it was to care, to be moved, to get involved. He understood that if these people had the Good Shepherd to care for them, they wouldn't be suffering this way. How can we tap into that same affection and sympathy? It starts by being in fellowship with Christ (Phil. 2:1). Without a spiritual connection with him, our human empathy fades. But we also need to get close to people—we can't shield ourselves from their pain and expect to minister to them.

It's easy for us to focus on the “problem” people. The ones who are loud, or clearly in crisis. But I ask God to help me see those who are just...invisible. Like that student in the back row who never asks a question, never causes a scene, the one everyone assumes is fine. Because they don't seem to be “harassed,” we assume they don't need a shepherd. But often, the quiet student is the one who is most lost. They're the ones who get forgotten. To “see” people means to notice the ones who seem okay and ask, “How are you, really?” And then have the patience to wait for an answer. It's the kind of “seeing” Jesus did. He didn't just see big numbers; he saw the one.

It's why Jesus immediately pivots. Let's read verse 37. “Then he said to his disciples, ‘The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few...’” Jesus sees the situation around him with faith. “The harvest is plentiful” means that many are

ready to receive the good news of the kingdom and the healing only he can give. To Jesus, the people aren't the problem—the shortage of laborers is.

Kingdom laborers are those who “see” God's timing. They set aside the pursuit of comfort, they get their hands dirty, and they address people's real needs. It's not about being perfect; it's about being available to do the messy, holy work of love.

“The harvest is plentiful; the laborers are few.” Jesus saw the massive, daunting spiritual need, but he didn't launch a recruitment drive; he launched a prayer movement. He knew that the work of the kingdom is fundamentally God's work, not ours. It's why, before he sent his disciples into the field, he directed them to the Lord of the harvest.

Let's read verse 38. Jesus our Lord told us to pray **earnestly** for this. This prayer is our lifeline. It acknowledges that we're helpless on our own, but the Father is actively drawing people to himself. It shows that raising such quality laborers is God's responsibility, not ours. When we pray for this, we're shifting the weight off our own shoulders and placing it on God's. Jesus wasn't discouraged in the least by the intensity of the opposition to him or by the lack of laborers. He didn't despair; he prayed. And with that same faith he pressed forward—never losing sight of the harvest he knew God would bring in.

So, what kind of person do you want to be? As we celebrate Labor Day, let's commit to Jesus' prayer: “Lord, send out laborers into your harvest.” This week, all of us, both our students and our families, face the pressures of a new season. But we don't have to face the world around us as if we were sheep without a shepherd. Jesus is calling us to be the kind of laborers he was. Let's not just work for our own gain. Let's live as those who've been moved by the compassion of our Lord Jesus Christ. May God use us right where we are—in our dorms, offices, or homes—to labor patiently to share the grace and love we've found in Jesus with the people God brings to us.