

TO SEND OUT LABORERS

Luke 10:1–24

Key Verse: 10:2

“And he said to them, ‘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.’”

Do you have a vision? About 60 years ago Martin Luther King, Jr. gave a famous speech called, “I Have a Dream.” It inspired the civil rights movement that pushed this entire country to start changing. It’s why people often say, “Dream big.” When we stop dreaming, we start dying. It’s true both individually and collectively. So what’s our dream, our vision? If we have one, hopefully it comes from our Lord Jesus. In today’s passage we see his vision for a spiritual harvest. What is it? Elsewhere the Bible tells us he’s out to “ransom people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation (Rev5:9b). His passion is to train and raise laborers for this great harvest. What does this mean? How can we become part of it? May God open our hearts and speak to us through his living words today.

In the previous chapter Jesus already sent out the twelve to proclaim the kingdom and heal the sick (9:1–6). Now he sends out many more to do basically the same thing. As we’ve seen, Jesus is now headed toward Jerusalem. It means his time on earth is limited. Today’s passage, right at the beginning of this journey, shows that raising laborers for God’s spiritual harvest is the main part of being a disciple of Jesus. It also shows that to be such laborers requires training. His words today are like a training manual on how to grow as kingdom laborers. So, are we ready to learn? How did Jesus train kingdom laborers?

First, appointed by the Lord. Read verse 1. “After this the Lord appointed seventy-two others and sent them on ahead of him, two by two, into every town and place where he himself was about to go.” Notice how the focus here is on Jesus. He’s called “the Lord.” He’s the one going to towns and places. He’s the one bringing the good news of the kingdom. But he doesn’t work alone. It says he “appointed” these 72 others. He’s making them his representatives. Because he chooses and sends them, they go with his authority and power. Likewise, to be kingdom laborers, we need to see that it’s our Lord Jesus who’s choosing and sending us. Are we depending on his appointing, his authority?

Second, for all the people of the world. Verse 1 says there are 72 of them. At first this number seems random, but it's not. In the Bible, the number 72 symbolized all the nations of the world (see Genesis 10). Luke's major theme in this Gospel is that Jesus is the light to the Gentiles (2:32a). This word "Gentiles" refers not just to one race or people, but to all peoples on earth. This was God's big plan from the beginning, when he called one man Abraham (Ge12:3; 18:18; 22:18; 26:4; 28:14). Here, Jesus' appointing and sending these 72 people shows God's unchanging heart's desire to reach all these peoples, no matter who they are or where they live. It's not about political boundaries or national entities. Missionary researchers today explain it's about people groups, and reaching them requires crossing every ethnic or language barrier, even though many people groups may live in the same nation. According to the Joshua Project, they are still discovering people groups, and today there are roughly 10,000 of them throughout the world.¹ Clearly, we need a lot more kingdom laborers. To really be one, we need to learn God's heart to bring his salvation to all peoples, no matter who or where they are. There are no people on earth our Creator God doesn't love or care for. The Bible says Jesus died for all (2Co5:15a). It's so easy to get engrossed in ourselves. Is God's vision for the whole world our own? Are we ready to participate in it?

Third, co-working. Read verse 1 again. "After this the Lord appointed seventy-two others and sent them on ahead of him, two by two, into every town and place where he himself was about to go." Notice what's happening here. First of all, Jesus is coworking with these people. He's sending them ahead of himself, meaning he trusts them as his co-workers. They're like his prep team. They go in first, then he comes. Their ministry is similar to John the Baptist's, who prepared the way for the Lord by going ahead of him and helping people repent (3:2–17). Like him, kingdom laborers persistently keep the focus on Jesus and get people ready to receive him.

It also says here that Jesus sends these people out "two by two." Why? Partly, it's to confirm the truth of what they're saying. And partly, it's so they can help and support each other. The greatest missionary Apostle Paul frequently called people "fellow workers" (e.g. Ro16:3,9,12,21; 1Co3:9; 16:16; 2Co8:23; Php2:25; 4:3; Col4:11; Phl1:1,24; cf. 3Jn1:8). Kingdom laborers are never a one-man show, for personal glory; we're a team. We point people to Jesus, and we encourage and support each other. Are we humble enough to truly co-work?

Fourth, see God as the Lord of the harvest. Read verse 2. "And he said to them, '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 verse is so hopeful! In ministry, things can get so discouraging. As we saw in the previous passage, some people reject Jesus;

¹ https://joshuaproject.net/resources/articles/how_many_people_groups_are_there

others choose not to follow him for various reasons. Still, Jesus says, “The harvest is plentiful.” He’s not talking about farming. It’s a big world out there, with so many people in it. Are our eyes open to even see it (cf. Jn4:35)? So many people are actually ready to receive the gospel, if only somebody would speak up and tell them about it. Some people, like the Ethiopian eunuch (Ac8:29–35), are even reading the Bible on their own right now, longing to know what it means. It’s the same reason Apostle Paul eagerly wanted to go to Rome, to reap a spiritual harvest among both Jews and Gentiles (Ro1:13,16). How can we see the world like that? Instead of looking at people and their problems, we need to look at God. Jesus calls God “the Lord of the harvest.” Because our God is the Lord of all the earth, always working, there’s always hope for a great spiritual harvest. Are we looking at God, the Lord of the harvest? Do we have this hope?

Fifth, pray earnestly for more laborers. As Jesus was sending out the 72, he told them to pray for even more laborers. Read verse 2 again. “And he said to them, ‘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.’” To pray this, we need to believe who God is. He’s Lord of the harvest, and he’s the God who hears and answers prayer. To pray this so earnestly, we need to see the reality: there’s so much work to be done, yet too few laborers.

But what does Jesus mean that “the laborers are few”? We may have heard that the recent pandemic has created a severe labor shortage. It’s been referred to as “the Great Resignation.” Shockingly, so many American men have withdrawn from the labor force. But Jesus is not telling us to pray for men to get back to work. He’s telling us to pray earnestly for more laborers for the spiritual harvest. Who are these people? These “laborers” are people who’ve become disciples of Jesus. As we saw in last week’s passage, they are those who, like Jesus, have accepted the hard way of the cross. They’ve decided to live sacrificially for the kingdom. They’ve made his kingdom their top priority, and they’ve learned the wholehearted focus that makes them fit for his kingdom. They’re not just thinking about it. They’ve chosen to get out there and actually do what Jesus said.

This word “laborers” also tells us that kingdom work is never easy; it requires hard work. This labor is not physical, but spiritual. First and foremost, the Bible calls it “labor” in preaching and teaching (1Ti5:17), “labor” in shepherding people (1Th5:12), and “labor” in prayer, that people “may stand mature and fully assured in all the will of God” (Col4:12). Preaching, teaching, shepherding, praying—that’s a lot of labor! Often we’re called to share in it, like tag-team members (Jn4:38). Laboring for souls involves suffering, toiling and engaging in a great struggle for people; but we do it with God’s energy, not our own (Col1:24,29; 2:1). And if we labor in the Lord, it’s not in vain (1Co15:58). Kingdom

labor is so meaningful, so joyful. But, as with any labor, we need to keep learning about how to do it better. Our best example is our Lord Jesus himself. Are we really learning from him how to be kingdom laborers? Are we praying earnestly that God may send out more laborers into his harvest?

Sixth, “sent out.” In verse 2 Jesus tells us to pray that God may “send out” laborers. In English the word “send” seems plain. And we see it repeated in verses 1,3 and 16. The Greek word for “send” is our word “apostle.” But here in verse 2 the Greek word for “send” is different. It literally means to “thrust them out” or even “cast them out.” The Bible authors use this same Greek word to describe casting out demons (e.g. Lk9:49; 11:14). So Jesus is telling us to pray that God may cast people out as kingdom laborers! Wow. It reminds us of a mother bird kicking her chicks out of the nest so they can learn to fly. Christians famously like to gather in “the holy huddle.” We like to stick together at church meetings and hang out in church buildings, but rarely go out among nonbelievers for the sake of ministry. We need to pray that Jesus may kick us out into the real world to labor for his kingdom. Will we pledge today to pray earnestly for this?

Seventh, wisdom. Look at verse 3. “Go your way; behold, I am sending you out as lambs among wolves.” Jesus knows their mission is going to be dangerous. This phrase “go your way” literally means “go in secret.” He’s not saying to be sneaky, but to be wise. The image of lambs among wolves is striking. Lambs are innocent and gentle, whereas wolves are ferocious and ready to rip lambs apart. To work as lambs among wolves requires God’s wisdom. James 1:5 says, “If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him.” In laboring for his kingdom, are we humbly asking God for wisdom?

Eighth, radical dependence on him (4–8). There’s another meaning in being lambs among wolves. Lambs are always dependent, even into adulthood as grown sheep. Likewise, when Jesus sends us, he wants us to depend on God always. Look at verse 4a. “Carry no moneybag, no knapsack, no sandals...” Partly this was to protect them from looking like tourists laden with too much stuff that could easily be stolen. But also it was to teach them to depend radically on God to provide for their needs. In verses 7–8 Jesus explains how people who hosted them would provide them with food and drink, wages and shelter. Through it, God himself would be providing for them. Later, in explaining how to live after his death and resurrection, Jesus tells disciples to take both a moneybag and a knapsack (22:35–36). It suggests people would no longer be willing to support them. But the fundamental truth is the same: even though we need practical preparations, to be kingdom workers we have to depend on God always. Are we?

Ninth, give the message of the kingdom. Throughout these verses Jesus instructs kingdom laborers what to say. Look at verse 5. “Whatever house you enter, first say, ‘Peace to this house!’” Notice the exclamation point. It’s so enthusiastic! It may sound like an old-fashioned, customary greeting. But it has deep meaning. Kingdom laborers, appointed and sent by Jesus, bring God’s message of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all (Ac10:36). Jesus himself is our peace (Eph2:14). His peace means peace with God (Ro5:1), and peace with each other (Mk9:50b). Jesus brings us all peace because he saves us from our sins and gives us God’s forgiveness. He brings us God’s kingdom within us, with “righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Ro14:17). Kingdom laborers have this peace and bring this peace to others. Are we helping people experience this peace?

Look at verse 9. “Heal the sick in it and say to them, ‘The kingdom of God has come near to you.’” They could heal by depending on the authority and power of Jesus. The Greek word for “heal” is literally “serve,” and the word for “the sick” is literally “the weak.” So “heal the sick” can simply mean “serve the weak.” We can do this when we are in Christ. The best way to help weak people is to give them the good news: “The kingdom of God has come near to you.” It points to Jesus himself, who is about to come to their town. It’s not about a territory; when we encounter Jesus personally, we experience the kingdom of God in our souls. It’s not about improving people’s lives with good advice. Kingdom workers help people open up and turn to Jesus, and put their hope in his kingdom. Is this the focus of our ministry?

Tenth, be clear with people. Look at verses 10–12. “But whenever you enter a town and they do not receive you, go into its streets and say, ‘Even the dust of your town that clings to our feet we wipe off against you. Nevertheless know this, that the kingdom of God has come near.’” It’s a warning of God’s judgment. Jesus goes on to talk about it in verses 13–15. He says these words to teach kingdom workers to expect repentance. Read verse 16. “The one who hears you hears me, and the one who rejects you rejects me, and the one who rejects me rejects him who sent me.” When we’re appointed by Jesus, sent by him, give his message and follow his instructions, we should expect rejection, but we shouldn’t take it personally.

Look at verse 17. “The seventy-two returned with joy, saying, ‘Lord, even the demons are subject to us in your name!’” They were so excited. They didn’t have any power or competence in themselves, but when they simply did what Jesus said, they experienced his power. It made them joyful. And kingdom laborers should always have such joy. Jesus responds by saying, “I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven” (18). It tells us that the message of the kingdom has the power of God in it to defeat Satan. Then Jesus reassures his disciples in verse 19: “Behold, I have given you authority to tread on

serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall hurt you.” It can be scary to out as kingdom laborers to fight against Satan and all his clever tricks. But we don’t go on our own, but in the authority and power of Jesus our Lord. He promises to protect us when we’re depending on him. Read verse 20. “Nevertheless, do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.” He’s telling us that our real source of joy is not a powerful ministry, but God’s grace to save us and include even sinners like us in his kingdom.

Then Jesus does a little rejoicing of his own. Look at verse 21. “In that same hour he rejoiced in the Holy Spirit and said, ‘I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will.’” When God works with those who are simple and humble like little children, displaying his power and helping them see what he can do, it still gives such great joy in the Holy Spirit. Jesus concludes: “All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows who the Son is except the Father, or who the Father is except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him” (22). Kingdom laborers know both the Father and the Son very personally through the Holy Spirit given through Jesus. Jesus concludes by telling these people how blessed they are (23–24).

So, what’s your vision? Is it Jesus’ vision that the harvest is plentiful? Can we see God, the Lord of the harvest? Do we see the great need for kingdom laborers to reach all the peoples of the world? Are we praying earnestly for it?