

A CHURCH WHERE PEOPLE MATTER
Matthew 9:35-38

Matthew 4:23 says: “And he went throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every disease and every affliction among the people.” And in almost identical language, **Matthew 9:35** says: “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.” And in between those two summary statements, Matthew records specific episodes of the teaching, preaching, and healing ministry of Jesus Christ. But 9:36 marks a transition in Matthew’s record of the ministry of Jesus. The opening line of 9:36 tells us that Jesus encountered multitudes of people during his circuit ministry. And the rest of that verse goes on to tell us that Jesus was “moved with compassion” toward these hurting, harassed, and helpless people. Then the opening line of 9:37 tells us that he called his disciples together. And the remaining part of the chapter records his message to the disciples. “The harvest,” he said, “truly is plentiful, but the laborers are few. Therefore pray the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest.”

This passage records a collision between the dual natures of Jesus Christ. Here, Jesus’ deity and humanity collide as he recognizes that he will not be able to personally or physically touch everybody in the multitudes who needed to know the love of God. Get that. Indeed, Jesus was and is God. But in becoming human, he willingly limited himself to time and space. And add to that the fact that, as **Matthew 10** begins, we are just 10 chapters away from the events of the final week of Jesus’ life. And our text marks this significant transition in the ministry of Jesus. It sets the stage for what Jesus does as he comes to grips with the fact that the limitations of time, space, and mission render it humanly impossible for him to reach every person who needs his divine touch. So what does he do? He transfers the reigns of ministry over to the hands of his disciples. He called them together, empowered and instructed them, and then sent them out to carry on his work. And I submit to you that Jesus has never repossessed the reigns of his ministry from his disciples. He still intends for his work to be carried on by his disciples, who the New Testament ultimately calls the “CHURCH.” In fact, **1 Corinthians 3:9** says, “For we are God’s fellow workers; you are God’s field, God’s building.” Here’s the point: **Jesus intends to continue his ministry to people through us.**

Have you every thought about the glorious homecoming Jesus must have received when he ascended back to the right hand of the Father after his earthly ministry. Imagine the adoration and celebration of all the heavenly hosts who witnessed, with amazement, the sovereign act of Jesus taking for himself the keys of death, hell, and the grave. It was, no doubt, a glorious homecoming that is still going on right now. And it won’t be culminated until the great Marriage Supper of the Lamb, when the

bride of Christ, the Church, will join in the eternal worship of King Jesus. It must have been a time. But I picture this homecoming encountered a strange interruption, as an angel sheepishly said, "Lord, I don't want to mess up the party, but I have a question. Truly, you are worthy of our worship and praise because of the victory of your ministry. But you're here. And your work on earth is not complete yet. Who is going to continue your work until you return?" And I picture Jesus pointing down to the ragamuffin members of his newly-established Church, and confidently saying, "They will." And then there was silence. But then that same angel spoke again: "Forgive me, Lord," but what's plan B?" And I hear Jesus firmly declaring, "There is no plan B." And, again, there was silence.

I repeat: The Lord Jesus intends to continue his ministry to people through us. And there is no plan B. In fact, as **ARCHBISHOP WILLIAM TEMPLE** noted, "The church is the only cooperative society in the world that exists for the benefit of its non-members." But the sad indictment is that far too many churches are preoccupied with hollow traditions, institutional survival, personal aggrandizement, vainglory, and political-correctness. And despite our pious sounding slogans, we are not truly committed to intentionally and actively fulfilling the Great Commission of Jesus Christ. Rather than being fishers of men, we are content to just be keepers of the aquarium. But I stand to remind us that the Church is in the people business. Mark it down. If people want to see what God is like, they only have two options. They can read the Bible. Or, they can watch the lives of Christians. And since most non-Christians have no interest in reading the Bible, we who are Christians are usually the only opportunity people have to see God. That leads us to some important questions.

- How clearly can unbelievers see God through your life?
- How clearly can they see him through our church?
- Are you and your church offering a clear view of God?

Well, **1 John 4:8** says: "Anyone who does not love does not know God, for God is love." Yes. Your life and our ministry can truly offer a proper view of God only to the degree that people's eternal destiny and daily needs matter to us. And becoming that kind of church - a church where people matter - requires a commitment to three priorities of Jesus Christ:

I. A CHURCH WHERE PEOPLE MATTER IS MARKED BY COMPASSION.

Notice 9:36. Matthew says that Jesus "saw the multitudes." And, of course, the vision of Jesus transcends our casual observance, fickle attention, and limited perspective. Jesus, the God-Man, saw beyond the outward appearance. He saw their hearts. And 9:36 tells us that from his divine vantage point he saw 3 deep, heart-level problems among the people. They were "weary." They were

“scattered.” And they were “like sheep having no shepherd.” Now, rather than going through an extended explanation of those phrases, let me instead just summarize the condition of the people in one word: LOST. Yes. The people were lost, like weary, scattered, shepherdless sheep. And Matthew tells us that when Jesus saw their lost condition, he was “moved with compassion.” That phrase is just one word in the Greek, *splagchnizomai*. It is the verb form of the noun, *splagchnon*, which refers to the bowels, the intestines, or the visceral parts. It’s what we would call the “guts.”

Often, when we experience violent emotions – like love, hate, or jealousy – there is a physical response to the strong emotions that seems to move our stomachs. And, consequently, the ancients viewed the bowels as the seat of the emotions. They mentally associated one’s emotions with the intestines. And so Matthew tells us here that when Jesus saw the lost condition of the multitude, he was moved in his innermost being. He felt the limp of the cripple man. He sensed the darkness of the blind man. He identified with the rejection of the leper. He was moved with compassion. In fact, except for 3 references in the parables of Jesus, every time *splagchnizomai* is used in the Greek New Testament, it refers to Christ himself. And it is used of Christ to describe what **Hebrews 4:15** declares: “For we do not have a High Priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.” Let me bottom-line that for you: Whatever you are dealing with right now, Jesus knows how you feel. I don’t care what you’re dealing with, from the joy of birth to the sorrow of death, Jesus knows how you feel. The God of scripture is the God of compassion. And that word “COMPASSION” is derived from two terms *con*, which means “with,” and *passion*, which means, “to suffer.” Literally, “compassion” means, “to suffer with” someone. And the Bible says that the sovereign God of heaven suffers with us in our human needs, because in Christ he was tempted and tested at all points just like we are.

Picture these three scenes. A politician dons a hardhat and enters the factory like he is one of the employees. A social worker goes to the inner city and spends the night on the streets with the homeless. And a general walks into the mess hall and sits down with the soldiers like he is one of the enlisted men. Now, all three do this because they want to communicate the same message: “I identify with you. I can understand. I can relate.” There is one problem, though. The factory workers know that the politician’s hardhat will come off when the television crew is gone. The derelicts know that the social worker will be in a warm bed tomorrow night. And the soldiers are well aware that for every meal the general eats in the mess hall, he’ll eat dozens in the officer’s quarters. Try as they might, these well-meaning professionals don’t really understand. Their participation is partial. Jesus’ participation, however, was complete. He fully shared all of our experiences. And so he is moved with compassion when he sees your needs, hurts, and frustrations. And we must share his loving-kindness, tender mercy, and active goodwill, if we are going to be a church where people matter.

E. STANLEY JONES, a foreign missionary with a tremendous passion for bringing people to Christ, was pleading with a group of young people in India. "I wish you would stand up and tell me, if you will, why you are not Christians," he said. "Why will you not become Christians? What do you think of Christ? Why will you not follow him?" Then one young Indian answered, "Your Christ is wonderful, but you Christians are not like him." Listen. People want to be healed. And they will submit themselves for healing, if they are accepted and loved without condition. So here's the first ingredient to honest outreach: If we are going to be a church where people matter, we must give people this ironclad guarantee - that they will be accepted and forgiven, no matter what. Like the Good Samaritan, our compassion should move us to get off of our high horses, bend down, and bind up the wounds of the abused, suffering, and dying people around us.

- We must accept people, as they are, where they are.
- The church must be an inclusive open-arms community, a family of sinners, where people don't have to pretend.
- Where there is safety, people let their defenses down. And, when defenses are removed, there is a natural tendency toward healing.
- Shiloh needs to become a church where people matter, so much so, that good rumors start going out of this place and people begin to say: "If you're looking for mercy, grace, and love, go to Shiloh!"

II. A CHURCH WHERE PEOPLE MATTER IS MARKED BY SERVICE.

Jesus was moved with compassion toward lost people. And 9:37 records his compassion-filled complaint to his disciples about the matter: "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few." In other words, a magnificent harvest had been brought to fruition by the combination of seed, soil, toil, weather, and providence. But the heavy heads of wheat were beginning to bend over and the entire crop was so ripe that it would speedily perish if reapers did not quickly enter the field to gather the harvest. Notice the pitiful contrast here: a plentiful harvest - few workers. You would think it would be the other way around. It would have made more sense if the Lord would have said, "I have a large and ready army or workers who are eager to bring lost souls to me, but people's hearts are hard and they won't receive the good seed of the gospel." But that is not what he says. He says that people's hearts are open to receiving the gospel of the kingdom. Yet, apparently, it's the Lord's own people who have hard hearts. And, consequently, there are only a few faithful, available, and teachable laborers. Dig that. Jesus says that the world is more eager to receive the gospel than we are to share it. What an indictment against the church!

Pollster **GEORGE BARN**A puts the bad news in terms of big, bigger, and biggest. This year, 2.2 million people will die in America. Their passing will lead

to months of grieving by tens of thousands of family members and friends. To them, the death of 2.2 million people will be a BIG TRAGEDY. Now, only God knows how many of those people who die will wind up in a state of eternal separation from him. But research suggests that more than 1 million of those people will go to hell. And the eternal condemnation and suffering of those million-plus people qualifies as a BIGGER TRAGEDY than the act of dying. And an even more devastating aspect of this tragedy is that many of those people were denied the opportunity to learn about the joy and comfort of God's eternal blessings. Nobody – not family members, friends, church members, work associates, educators, politicians, or leisure-time associates – loved them enough to introduce them to the living God. And the fact that millions of souls writhe in hell today could have avoided that sentence is the BIGGEST TRAGEDY of all.

Now come here, let me ask you something.

- Are you a working part of the Body of Christ?
- Is this local expression of the Body of Christ stronger and healthier because of you?
- You may have a high level of education or experience, or perhaps you know the Bible well, but are you vigorously using these blessings so that Christ can work through them to build up his body?

Mark it down.

A non-serving Christian is a contradiction. An uncommitted Christian is an oxymoron. It's not normal for Christians to be idle. **1 Corinthians 15:58** says, "Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain." Get that. Every member of the Body of Christ is a minister of Jesus Christ. And regardless of your educational level, IQ, experience, or talents, if you are a Christian, you have a Christ-intended function in the church. You are here for a reason. You are not just here for yourself and what you can get out of church. No. Jesus works in his church, and so do healthy members of it. And our attitude should not be, "How little can I serve without my conscience bothering me?" but "How much can I serve without neglecting my other God-given priorities?"

Loved-ones, I submit to you that a church where people matter requires the active presence of towel bearers and foot washers who have a servant's spirit. We must strive to become rivers of God's blessings to others, not just reservoirs of his blessings to us. We must do more than just tell people we love them. We must demonstrate it through our works. We must develop a culture of Christlike service by sacrificing our time, money, and energy to reach out to lost people. We must have an attitude that says: "I would never want to reach out someday with a soft, uncallused hand – a hand never dirtied by service – and shake the nail-pierced hands of Jesus." We must adopt the spirit of the prophet who said, in **Isaiah 6:8**: "Here am I. Send me." And the wonderful part of that text is that Isaiah signed up for service, even though he didn't know where the Lord was

going to send him. All he knew was that he had been forgiven and that the one who have forgiven him needed someone to go for him. We must be like that. Now, of course, everyone can't do the same thing. But all of us can do something. All of us have something we can do to advance the work of the Lord.

- **Reach out to an unwed mother.**
- **Go visit the sick and shut in at a convalescent home.**
- **Feed some hungry people or distribute some of those clothes in your closet to the needy.**
- **Use your vocational knowledge and experience to help someone who can't afford it.**
- **Join a ministry in the church that you are passionate about. And if it's not one there, create it.**

JOHN NEWTON callously dealt in the commodity of human flesh as a slave trader before Christ transformed his life. And now he's best remembered for writing the song, "Amazing Grace." But one of his most enduring insights was a comment about servanthood. He said that if two angels in heaven were given assignments by God at the same instant, one of them to go and rule over the greatest nation on earth and the other to go sweep the streets of the dirtiest village, each angel would be completely indifferent as to which one got which assignment. It wouldn't matter to them. Why? Because the important thing isn't what God has you doing; the important thing is that you're doing what God wants you to do.

III. A CHURCH WHERE PEOPLE MATTER IS MARKED BY PRAYER.

In 9:37, Jesus confronts his disciples with a spiritual crisis:

- **Who will reach the lost, hell-bound world of sinful, hurting people who need to hear and accept the gospel?**
- **Who will tell them of their plight and show them the way of escape?**
- **Who will share with them Jesus' love, compassion, and power?**

But then, in 9:38, Jesus prescribes the solution for this kingdom labor shortage: "Therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest." It's rare to be in a church service where someone openly prays for more preachers, teachers, and workers. No, when the church needs more workers, we do just about everything else - from general announcements to outright manipulation - but we don't pray. We'll even wear out the few active people we have, shuffling them from one ministry to another, before we just go to God and tell him about it. And that's why the church is sick. We won't follow the Lord's prescription: Pray that God will raise up more Christian workers.

That's always been the Lord's prescription **Luke 6:12-13** tells us that Jesus prayed all night long before he chose the twelve apostles from among the larger

group of his disciples. **Acts 13:1-3** tells us that while the church at Antioch was fasting and praying, the Holy Spirit spoke to the church and told them to set apart Paul and Barnabas for special missionary work. And in **2 Thessalonians 3:1**, Paul says, “Finally, brothers, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may speed ahead and be honored, as happened among you.” Here’s the point: It happens after prayer! After you have prayed, there’s a lot that can be done to change a situation. But there is nothing that can be done to change the situation, until you pray. Prayer strengthens our hands and softens our hearts for ministry. Let me walk you through that.

A. PRAYER STRENGTHENS OUR HANDS FOR MINISTRY.

In **2 Timothy 1:6**, Paul says to his young protégé: “For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands.” And the next verse (1:7) of the passage gives the reason for that exhortation: “For God gave us a spirit not of fear, but of power and love and self-control.” Dig that. God had gifted Timothy for service. But he was allowing his gifts to lay unused, because he was afraid. And Paul tells him that any fear that paralyzes us from active Christian service is not of God. God has given us the strength, compassion, and wisdom we need to carry out the work he has called us to do. And that’s why the Lord tells us to pray for workers. Prayer strengthens our hands for ministry. Many of you in this room are afraid to become actively involved in ministry, because you think you’re not ready. You feel you don’t know enough. You feel you’re not strong enough. You feel you haven’t been a Christian long enough. Well, let me be straight with you.

- There are some problems we cannot solve.
- There are some questions we cannot answer.
- There are some hurts we cannot heal.
- There are some needs we cannot meet.
- There are some issues that we would just rather not deal with.

But here’s the Lord’s prescription for that: PRAY! Prayer will make you usable to God. Prayer will put you in a posture of dependence before God. Prayer will change your perspective. Prayer will access the resources of God. Prayer will give you the strength you need. Prayer will give you the compassion you need. Prayer will give you the wisdom you need.

B. PRAYER SOFTENS OUR HEARTS FOR MINISTRY.

Watch the progression of the text. In 9:37, Jesus says to his disciples, “the harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few.” Then, in 9:38, the Lord prescribes

the solution: "Therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest." Now, notice 10:1 - "And He called to him his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal every disease and every affliction." 10:2-4 goes on to name the twelve, then 10:5a says, "These twelve Jesus sent out..."

Did you get that?

At the end of chapter 9, Jesus informs his disciples of the need for more workers and commands them to pray that God would send more workers into the harvest. Then, at the beginning of chapter 10, he handpicks twelve of his disciples, whom he had just commanded to pray for workers to be sent out. He instructs them, empowers them, and then sends them out. Here's the point: The most effective prayers are those that are prayed by people who are willing to let God use them to be a part of the answer to the prayer. Let me say that again: Often, when we pray for something, God answers our prayers by using us. So be prepared for God to use you to show another person the way to him. Notice that Jesus did not command the disciples to pray for the lost, even though that's always appropriate. Instead, he commands them to pray for more workers. Here's why. It's possible and easy to regularly pray for a loved-one, friend, neighbor, or coworker, and let our concern stop with our prayers. But when we earnestly pray for the Lord to send someone to those unsaved people, we cannot help becoming open to being that someone ourselves. It's possible and easy to pray for someone's salvation, while keeping them at arm's length. But when we sincerely beseech the Lord to send someone to witness to them, we place ourselves at his disposal to become one his workers in the harvest.

I'll quit when I tell you one of my daddy's stories about an old woman who struggled to take care of herself. And then she became sick. And her instincts told her to go to church to find someone to pray for her. Unfortunately, the nearest church was full of snotty, uppity, insensitive members. But she didn't know that. So she dressed herself in the best clothes she had, and marched on to church. Can't you see her standing in the lobby, waiting for the ushers to open the door? She was dressed in a torn and stained dress, covered by a men's coat that was old and too big for her. Her shoes had holes in them. Her hair was matted. Her face was dirty. And she carried an unpleasant smell. Yet, she didn't notice all of the well-dressed church folk around her, staring her down. But when the ushers opened the door, she tried to enter the service like everyone around her. But when she got to the door, the usher stiff-armed her and told her she was not welcome there. And he sent her away.

Well, in the days that followed, her sickness grew worse. And by the time her landlord discovered her, she was nearing death. He inquired, "Is there anything I can do for you?" And she replied, "Go get a preacher to come and pray for me." And he did. He went and got the pastor of the church that wouldn't allow her to come in. And when she found out who he was, she told him what happened to her. And to her dismay, he didn't apologize. He explained to her that he had many rich, educated, and classy members who wouldn't feel comfortable having someone like her in the services. Then he prayed for her. And after he prayed, he asked if there was anything else he could do for her. And she said to him, "Rev., I've been saving some money."

And, before I die, I want to donate it to help your ministry.” She reached over to the nightstand and grabbed a jar of coins. She handed it to the preacher. And said, “Rev., take this money. And use it to build a church, where you can come to Jesus, no matter what you look like... no matter what you have on... no matter the color of your skin... no matter who you are...

I close by saying to us...

- Let’s build a church where addicted people can find deliverance.
- Let’s build a church where broken people can find healing.
- Lets’ build a church where deceived people can find the truth.
- Let’s build a church where lonely people can find community.
- Let’s build a church where needy people can find help.
- Let’s build a church where sinful people can find forgiveness.
- Let’s build a church where troubled people can find refuge.

RESCUE THE PERISHING, CARE FOR THE DYING
SNATCH THEM IN PITY FROM SIN AND THE GRAVE.
WEEP OVER THE ERRING ONE, LIFE UP THE FALLEN
TELL THEM OF JESUS THE MIGHTY TO SAVE