

We are going to look at this passage this morning for what it tells us about Jesus and his mission. It is summary passage that serves as a transition. It summarizes what Jesus had been doing so far in Matthew's account and it marks a transition in his ministry from Jesus working alone to Jesus including his disciples in his mission. Matthew 5-7 records the Sermon on the Mount. Matthew 8-9 tells of Jesus' preaching and doing various miracles. In chapter 10 Jesus sends out his twelve disciples to extend his ministry of proclaiming the kingdom, healing the sick and casting out demons. And the verses that we are going to look at this morning summarize what Jesus had been doing and describe him laying the foundation for including others in his mission.

Verse 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." Jesus was proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom. This is a common way of referring to Jesus' message in the gospels. The term "gospel" means good news. And the good news that Jesus was proclaiming was the good news of the kingdom.

That term "kingdom" is used many times in Matthew, as well as in Mark and Luke as a term for Jesus' message. John the Baptist preached, "Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." John the Baptist was the forerunner of Jesus and by preaching that the kingdom of heaven was at hand he was saying that Jesus was coming to bring God's kingdom. Jesus was coming as the King so that when he came the kingdom would come.

When Jesus began to preach, his message was the same as that of John the Baptist. Matthew 4:17 says, "From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.'"

The kingdom is God's kingdom. The message of Jesus was that God was going to establish his kingdom on earth. The background is that Satan had set up a rival kingdom when he tempted Adam and Eve to sin and so the coming of God's kingdom had to do with defeating Satan's kingdom and re-establishing God's kingdom over the whole world. So when Jesus preached the good news of the kingdom of God, he was inviting the people to enter the kingdom of heaven through repentance and faith. To remain outside of the kingdom was to be subject to God's wrath. To enter the kingdom through repentance and faith was to enter the realm of life and blessing. In the Bible where God is obeyed there is life and blessing. Outside of the kingdom is the realm of death.

The kingdom was closely related to Jesus himself. In Matthew 12:28 Jesus says, "But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you." The kingdom of God had come in Jesus himself. His mission was to overcome all opposition, deliver his people from the tyranny of sin and Satan and so establish God's kingdom on earth. And this was very good news. It was the good news of escape from the wrath to come. It was the good news of deliverance from the power of sin and death. It was the good news of blessing in the service of Jesus as the gracious and powerful king.

So Jesus is described as going throughout the cities and villages preaching the good news of the kingdom. And along with his preaching he also healed every disease and every affliction. These healings powerfully made the point that the coming of the kingdom was associated with the undoing of the curse on all the world because of sin. Sickness began with the fall of Adam and Eve into sin at the instigation of the devil. And so Jesus, by healing many people of their sicknesses, was making the point that the good news of the kingdom was about undoing the curse of sin. Jesus' healings were signs of Jesus' mission to break the power of sin in people's lives. They point towards the fullness of God's kingdom where there will be no more sickness and pain.

Our text describes Jesus going "throughout all the cities and villages" bringing this message. Jesus was God in the flesh and there he is travelling about "proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction." He's putting a lot of effort into this. He is extending himself to bring this message of good news, and calling people to repentance. It is very important to him that as many people as possible hear the message that he was bringing. He did not look any different from any other human being, but he is God the Son going from city to city and village to village personally preaching to whoever would hear him to enter the kingdom of God through repenting of their sins and following him. He was the creator of those to whom he was preaching. He was the eternal Son of God. And there he was having humbled himself to become a man travelling through the cities and towns seeking the salvation of sinners.

It is an amazing condescension! He is God. The people to whom he was preaching had rebelled against his authority. They had turned away from him. They deserved condemnation. And yet there he is pursuing them. He would be perfectly in his right to come in wrath and give them all that they deserved. And yet there he is – a dusty itinerant preacher – travelling around – preaching the good news of the kingdom. There is a way to be spared the coming wrath. There is a way to enter the kingdom of God. By following him. By becoming disciples of Jesus.

Have you seen how amazing this is! There is a kind of divine humility here. God in the flesh. Pursuing hell-worthy sinners. Not to destroy them but to bring them good news of the kingdom of God. They are invited to enter. This is amazing grace. And it is still amazing grace that Jesus has sent the church to bring the message to the whole world. Good news for enemies. An opportunity for forgiveness – for reconciliation with God. "The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost." (Luke 19:10)

Think of that with respect to your own life. Think of how the Lord pursued you. He is no longer on earth, but he still pursues sinners through the gospel message, through the work of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of those he saves. He still goes from town to town and city to city wherever the gospel is preached with the good news of the kingdom. We all deserve condemnation for our sins. And yet he comes to us with good news – the gospel of the kingdom.

Verse 36 speaks of his compassion. "When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd." The people had leaders, but they had no

shepherds. The people Jesus was preaching to were Jews. They had leaders. They had teachers. But those leaders and teachers were harming the people rather than helping them. Jesus describes what the scribes and Pharisees were doing to the people. Matthew 23:4, "They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people's shoulders." And as a result the sheep were "harassed and helpless."

The leaders were not feeding the sheep what they needed to hear. Ezekiel describes how the shepherds of Israel had not cared for the sheep. Ezekiel 34:3-5, "You do not feed the sheep. The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the injured you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought and with force and harshness you have ruled them. So they were scattered because there was no shepherd."

This was what Jesus has in mind when he saw the people as "harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd." The message of their leaders was a legalistic message. It was a message of works. It left the people crushed, burdened and in despair. And that is what every other religion and worldview besides the message of Jesus is like. They leave people "harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd." They all are religions of works. They all encourage the worship of false gods – gods who are cruel and without grace.

But Jesus had come to be their shepherd. In John 10 Jesus says, "I came that they may have life and have it abundantly. I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.... I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me." Isaiah had prophesied in Isaiah 40:11, "He will tend his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms; he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young."

When Jesus "saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd." Jesus is described as compassionate. He was deeply moved by the spiritual pain and despair that the people were experiencing. He was deeply moved by their burden of guilt. He was very disturbed by the fact that the people were harassed and helpless.

Jesus cares about our burdens and our struggles and our helplessness. He is compassionate. Isaiah 63:9 says of God as he witnessed the suffering of his people Israel, "In all their affliction he was afflicted." That is compassion. When we suffer, Jesus suffers with us. He feels our pain. He cares. Hebrews 4:15 says that Jesus "sympathizes with our weaknesses."

Life can be very hard. There is much that is enjoyable, but there is also much that is hard. Like the crowds that moved Jesus to compassion, we too can feel harassed and helpless. These were crowds. That means that what they were experiencing was common. Jesus saw crowds of people and there was a lot of suffering in those crowds that moved Jesus to compassion. Some of the pain that we feel is not directly related to our sins, but more generally to the fact that we live in a fallen world. We lose loved ones. We or someone we love gets sick. Our bodies break down as we age. We may experience loneliness or rejection. But much of our pain is related

to our sins and our sinfulness. We are burdened with guilt. We are ashamed of things we have done or failed to do. We feel helpless to make progress against sin. We are anxious and weighed down with care. Sometimes we feel hopeless.

We see in our text that Jesus had compassion on the crowds. Jesus looks upon us with compassion when we suffer – when we experience pain – even when it is our own fault. Jesus cares deeply about the pain that we feel. And he is ready to help. And the way that he helps is through the good news of the kingdom. The way that he helps is by being the Good Shepherd who gives his life for his sheep. In our text his compassion is expressed by the great effort that he puts into bring his message of hope and salvation, the gospel of the kingdom.

The gospel of the kingdom is a message of hope for the harassed and helpless. It is a message of reconciliation with God, the forgiveness of sins. It is a message of entrance into the realm of life and blessing – the kingdom where God’s authority is honored and because of that blessings abound. It is a message of hope in that the kingdom will one day come in all its fullness and sin and all its affects will be completely overcome. Those who enter the kingdom are renewed so that they begin to live lives to the glory of God – lives of love – lives of purpose. There is peace with God. There is victory over sin. There is living in the love of Jesus. And in all of that our sins are forgiven because Jesus laid down his life for his sheep.

It is important for us to think of Jesus’ compassion when we feel harassed and helpless. When we are in pain, we can feel isolated in our suffering. It helps when people show us compassion. But let us also think of Jesus’ compassion as he is described in these verses. He is traveling throughout the region motivated by compassion because he knows that the news that he is bringing is good news for people in their helplessness and in their need of salvation. Think of Jesus in heaven now – aware of our struggles – aware of our secret pain – aware of our failures – aware of our disappointments. And he looks upon us – not with disappointment – not with indifference – not with anger – but with compassion – sympathy – concern – and a great desire to bring comfort – strength – forgiveness – peace and joy. That is why he was traveling throughout the cities and villages proclaiming the kingdom of God. He knew that that message is exactly what the harassed and helpless crowds needed to hear. And he has send his church into the world with the same message.

When he began his ministry he said, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set a liberty those who are oppressed, and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (Luke 4:18-19). Another time he said, “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” Jesus is one who has great compassion on those who suffer and he is able to grant the healing and renewal and rest and joy that our hearts long for. And all of that is rooted in the salvation that he came to bring – the good news of the forgiveness of sins and reconciliation with God that he came to bring. Through faith in Jesus he is the good shepherd who restores our souls and leads us beside still waters. By receiving him as our Saviour and

Lord we become children of God – adopted by God the Father – who knows what we need – who cares for us and who works everything together for our good.

Now remember how I said at the beginning that these verses are a transition in Matthew’s account of Jesus – a transition from Jesus preaching on his own to Jesus enlisting the help of his disciples. Jesus introduces this need for helpers in verse 37 where we read, “Then he said to his disciples, “the harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few....” Think of that in the light of Jesus going “throughout all the cities and villages ... proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom.” This is what he is thinking as he moves from place to place proclaiming the good news. There are so many people who need to hear this message. Jesus’ heart yearns for the people in the next town and the next town and the next village. There are always more who need to hear the good news of the kingdom. There is always another town full of harassed and helpless people, like sheep without a shepherd. And Jesus himself cannot reach them all.

Jesus is not thinking along the lines of pluralism – the idea that there are many ways to god. The urgency for more laborers has to do with the fact the gospel of the kingdom is the one message that everyone needs to hear. This is the only way to truly help the harassed and the helpless. This is the only message of salvation. Without this message and the way of salvation that it proclaims there is no remedy for the deepest needs of human beings – to be reconciled with the one true God and to be renewed to live the life of the kingdom.

Jesus says that “The harvest is plentiful....” That is a positive and hopeful message. Jesus says something similar in John 4:35 when he says to his disciples, “Look, I tell you, lift up your eyes and see that the fields are white for harvest.” This is the language of the expectation of an abundant harvest. Jesus is saying that there are many people out there who will receive the gospel of the kingdom if only there is someone to bring it to them. That is not to deny the doctrine of election. It is not to say that God can’t save people unless someone brings the gospel to them. But it is to say that God has determined to save people through disciples of Jesus bringing the message to them and from a human perspective there is a harvest out there that will not reap itself. Jesus is saying that the harvest needs laborers to bring it in.

Paul makes this same point without the harvest imagery. In Romans 10:13 he says, “For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” But then he continues, “how then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent?”

The language of a plentiful harvest is language of abundance. There are many people out there who will enter the kingdom through faith in Jesus if they hear the message. Jesus is saying that the labourers can expect to reap a plentiful harvest. The problem is that the laborers are few. It is not that the harvest is not there to be reaped. There is a plentiful harvest and what is needed is laborers to bring it in. The need that Jesus is expressing is for more workers to bring in the abundant harvest.

Here is one of the tensions in Scripture. In John 6:37 Jesus says, “All that the Father gives me will come to me....” There is no question that from the perspective of God’s election, not one of those whom God has chosen will not hear the gospel and come to Christ. Every single person whom the Father has given to Christ before the world began shall come to him. And yet we must give Jesus’ words in our text their full weight. There is a great harvest to be brought in and there is a great need for more laborers to bring it in. Just because we know that God will see to it that all his chosen ones will be saved, does not mean that we can sit back and have no concern about bringing in the plentiful harvest. Jesus is treating the lack of laborers as an urgent need. Without those laborers the harvest will not be brought in.

What does Jesus tell his disciples to do? Verse 38 “Therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.” Jesus does not immediately tell his disciples to get busy and help him to bring in the harvest. He tells them to “pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.”

Later on he will specifically send out the twelve on a preaching mission. But to his disciples more generally he tells them to pray that the Lord will send out laborers into his harvest.

When we look at how the NT describes the Lord answering the prayers to send laborers into the harvest, it is clear that the focus is on specific individuals who are called and equipped for that work. In the next chapter Jesus does not send out all of his followers but the twelve disciples. The book of Acts is largely the story of the preaching of Peter and the apostles and Paul and his fellow missionaries. The laborers sent into the harvest are specific people chosen to be preachers and evangelists and missionaries. And that fits with what Jesus says in our text that his followers are “to pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.”

This is not to say that regular church members have no direct responsibility to bring the gospel in their neighborhoods and workplaces and the like. In 1 Peter 3:15 we are all called to be “prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks [us] for a reason for the hope that is in [us].... Paul in Philippians 2:15 assumes that believers will “shine as lights in the world....” But the emphasis in the Bible as far as proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom is concerned is on specific people sent out as laborers into the harvest.

What Jesus emphasizes in our text is prayer and specifically prayer that the Lord will send out laborers into his harvest. It is still the case that “the harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few.” We know that the harvest is “a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages...” (Revelation 7:9). There is a vast number of people in the world who “harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.” And one of the great tasks that the Lord has given to every member of the church is to “pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.”

And behind Jesus’ exhortation for us to pray is his compassion for the crowds “because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.” That compassion is a great comfort for us in our struggles and

helplessness, but it is also a beautiful example for us to adore and seek to emulate. Behind Jesus' great desire that the harvest be brought in is his compassion for people who apart from salvation in him are still in the misery of their sinful condition whether they realize it or not. Jesus was passionate about preaching the gospel and about the need for more laborers because he knew that apart from that gospel people are lost and they are not experiencing the abundant life that he gives to his sheep. He felt deep compassion for people who were lost and helpless in their sins.

Jesus by his compassion models for us what it is to be truly alive. We worship him for that. And that worship – that admiration for his compassion is a powerful motivation for us to seek to be more like him. Let us seek to grow in compassion for those who are without abundant life in Christ. Let us think of Jesus and how he was moved by compassion and seek more and more to think of the harassed and helpless as he did.