HARVESTERS NEEDED

Matthew 9:36-38 When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful but the workers ae few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.”

Setting

Matthew 9:35 Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness.

This is more than two years after He was baptized by John. Great crowds are following Him and significant opposition has already been organized. Matthew 9:34 But the Pharisees said, “It is by the prince of demons that he drives out demons.

Why Jesus felt Compassion

Matthew 9:36 When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.

Bible Gateway gives the following possible translations for the two Greek words translated “harassed and helpless” in the NIV: abandoned, aimless, bewildered, cast aside, confused, dejected, dispersed, dispirited, distraught, distressed,

downcast, harassed, harried, heart-broken, helpless, hurting, malaised, miserable, scattered, travailed, treated badly, troubled, weak, weary, worn out and worried.

Malaise is “a general feeling of discomfort, illness or uneasiness who exact cause is difficult to identify.” Travailed is “engaged in painful or laborious effort.”

 “Harassed” translates *“skullo”* which means to skin, flay or metaphorically to trouble. “Flay” literally means to whip or beat someone so harshly as to remove their skin. It’s most common usage today is to verbally assault someone (usually in public) so violently that they are left raw and wounded and bleeding emotionally.

“Helpless” translates *“rhipto”* which means to be “thrown, cast, or hurled down, to be prostrate.” Luke 4:35b Then the demon threw the man down before them all and came out without injuring him.

Both words are used metaphorically, which is why the translations vary so much. Jesus saw the people as have been assaulted so violently that they were emotionally raw, wounded and bleeding. They had been thrown down so violently that they found it hard to get up.

What Jesus is describing are people who are deeply wounded and troubled and see no real hope for their future. They are like sheep who desperately need a shepherd to care for them and take care of them. The Living Bible paraphrases the last part of the verse this way: “Their problems were so great and they didn’t know what to do or where to go for help.”

The Jews remembered the “glory days” of David and Solomon that were long since gone. They had hoped for better days when they came back from Babylon, butt those days had never really come. Except for a brief period of independence under the Maccabees, they had been under foreign control ever since. Now the Roman occupation was harsh and cruel, and their own Jewish political and religious leaders were notoriously corrupt. Things were a mess, and they had little hope that they would get better.

We are living in a time in the United States that is more like this than any time I can remember. We are sick and tired of Covid and are beginning to wonder if it will ever end. The problems caused by drought in the west continue to go one and on. The problems of hurricanes and too much water persist in the east and southeast. Violence and lawlessness are increasing. Biblical morality is being openly challenged. Despair (alcohol, drug and suicide) deaths are increasing. Trust in government and institutions, including the church, is at a very low point. No one seems to have believable answers.

Jesus’ Response to What He Saw

Matthew 9:37&38 Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.

Matthew 10:5a These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions:

 Matthew 5:16 “I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves.”

 Luke 10:1-3 After this the Lord appointed seventy-two others and sent them two by two ahead of him to every town and place where he was about to go. He told them, “The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field. Go! I am sending you out like lambs among wolves.”

Is the Need for Harvesters Urgent?

John 4:35&36(NASB) “Do you not say, ‘there are yet four months, and then comes the harvest.’ Behold, I say to you, lift up your eyes and look on the fields, that they are white for harvest. Already he who reaps is receiving wages and is gathering fruit for life eternal; so that he who sows and he who reaps may rejoice together.”

 I Corinthians 3:5&6 What, after all is Apollos? And what is Paull? Only servants, through whom you came to believe – as the Lord has assigned to each his task. I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow.

I Corinthians 3:7&8 So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who makes things grow. The one who plants and the one who waters have one purpose, and they will each be rewarded according to their own labor.

 John 4:37&38 “Thus the saying ‘One sows and another reaps’ is true. I sent you to reap what you have not worked for. Others have done the hard work, and you have reaped the benefits of their labor.”

The Good News and the Bad News

According to Christian pollster George Barna, church attendance is down more than 30% from pre-pandemic levels. (Part of that is the ongoing fear of covid and people absent because of covid, but the numbers are still significant.)

However, internet ministries report substantially higher participation and conversion rates. A number of Christian radio and television ministries report the same.

Franklin Graham’s Route 66 Tour experienced a response rate of just under 9%. How good is that? The average response to a Billy Graham evangelistic event was between 2 and 3 percent, and, although Franklin is a good man and a good preacher, he is nowhere near the preacher his father was.

The Mario Murillo Crusade in Batavia in October brought in almost twice as many people as they expected, and the response rates looked like they were over 10%. The service started early the first two nights because people had been standing outside the tents in the rain waiting for the service to begin.

Things to Remember

When people are hurting emotionally, like they were in Jesus’ day and like they are now, it is a great time to do evangelism.

The potential for harvest is great, but those doing the harvesting are few.

Jesus said the fields in His day were white for harvest; they were over-ripe, so the need for harvesters was urgent. I believe the need is urgent today.

Church attendance is down; although inviting people to church is a good thing, it is not the most effective thing.

Outreaches outside the church walls, both media and events held outside the church, are very effective right now.

After telling people to pray, Jesus sent them out.

The Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20) starts with “Go,” not with “Come.”