

“A Missional Life: Missions and Prayer” | Matthew 9:35-38

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(Discussion questions on page 11)

Intro

Imagine something with me for a moment.

Imagine you worked in a fairly large organization, and that you were put in charge of devising the strategic plan for its mission.

You have to come up with the plan for what your organization is going to do with all its resources.

- What would all of your company's time be devoted to doing?
- Where would you direct all of its talents?
- What would you spend all of its treasures on?

What would your plan be?

And,

Where would prayer be in your plan?

A Missional Life

Today we begin a 4-week series called “A Missional Life”.

Thinking about missions through the topics of Prayer, the Word of God, our Neighborhood, and our Church Community.

This morning I get the privilege of beginning the series with the topic of Prayer.

We going to reflect on the relationship between missions and prayer, thinking about what part prayer has in God's purposes for this world, and why Jesus calls us to pray.

Let's dive into the text, and see what the Lord has for us today.

Context

The context for our passage this morning, is early stages of Jesus' ministry. Matthew's Gospel, which is one of four biographies of Jesus' life, it is the first book of the section of the Bible we call the New Testament. If one of your goals this year is to read the Bible, Matthew's Gospel is a good place to start.

We meet Jesus as he is travelling throughout the region of Galilee, which is in the northern part of Israel, he is teaching, and preaching, and performing miracles.

Seeing the crowds that are following him, and having compassion on them, he turns to his disciples, and tells them; “the Harvest is plentiful and the laborers are few”.

Because of this, they should pray to the Lord of the harvest, that he might send out workers into the field.

Now, this work of harvesting the field is a metaphor for evangelism and conversion. Jesus is referring to God's mission of redeeming, and rescuing, and reconciling people to himself, which the Bible tells us happens by grace, through faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

This passage is not about building more hospitals or starting more homeless shelters, or schools, which are all good things that Christians have done in the past and should continue to do in the future.

This passage is about the mission of conversion, and we know this because in two other places in Matthew (Matthew 3:12 and 13), the harvesting of wheat is used as a metaphor for bringing believers into heaven.

What we see in this passage is that according to Jesus, the work of Mission in our world is plentiful. God has a lot of work to do. And he wants to include us in that work.

We are going to be focusing on verses 37 and 38, and breaking them down into three points:

1. The Reason for love
2. The Rule of Love
3. [Comments]

1. Point 1 - The Reason for love

So, point 1, "why we pray."

Did you notice that the main thing Jesus wants us to do; is pray?

The question this raises is: why? Why pray? Out of stones, God can raise up laborers for the harvest. Why does Jesus want to include us in his mission of redeeming all things? And why, out of all the things he could ask us to do, does he want us to pray?

The answer to the question is because he said so. But I want to dwell on this question for a moment.

So let's listen to verses 35 through 38 again, so that we might have it afresh in our minds;

³⁵And 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. ³⁶When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. ³⁷Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is

plentiful, but the laborers are few; ³⁸ therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest."

Picture the scene with me. Jesus is out and about, doing his thing; teaching in synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing everything.

As is to be expected, a crowd of people are following him.
He notices the crowd and he had compassion for them, because they seemed like sheep without a shepherd, harassed and helpless.

Confronted by their suffering, Jesus feels moved to do something for them.
So, what does he do?

He truly cares about the people.
He wants to help them,
so what help do you think Jesus offers?

Now, I know, you know, the answer.
You have heard it at least twice now, and hopefully you can see it in front of you.

But think about this. This is the linchpin of this passage.
What follows on from the period at the end of verse 36, and what Matthew writes in verse 37, directs the course of history.

Think about all the endless possibilities that could come next.
Jesus had compassion on them, so he "dot", "dot", dot".

This is God we are talking about!
The creator of all things. The one "who gives life to the dead and calls into being things that were not." (Romans 4:17)
The next sentence could literally be anything. Not figuratively, not metaphorically, but could literally be anything.

Jesus had compassion on them, so he....

- decided enough was enough, and he re-created the world, removing evil and free will, so that no one would experience pain and suffering anymore.
- So, he sent his army of angels to destroy their harassers.
- So, he wrote them a really nice card to give them a pick me up. I mean a **really** nice card.

If you were writing this story, what would you have written next?

Or, if you were Jesus, what would you have done?

- Maybe you would have taken the crowd in and offered them something to eat? (What do you cook for a large crowd?)

Needless to say, the possibilities of what Jesus could have done are endless!

With that in mind, think about what Jesus says and does in here,

"Then he said to his disciples, 'The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few, therefore (.....) Pray!'".

Pray?!

Umm, excuse Jesus, but what?

I was hoping for something a little more tangible. You know, something I can get people excited about doing with me.

Prayer doesn't look very good on my resume.

- Post Graduate Degree.
- Many Years Work experience.
- Volunteer at Homeless Shelter.
- Aid Work with Orphanages in Indonesia.
- Prayer for the Harvest.

Of all the things that Jesus could have said, of all the things he could have done, he tells his disciples, and he tells us, to pray.

In this meeting with his disciples, Jesus' first action item for missions is to pray.

Later, his second action item, will be to send his disciples out on mission.

But the very first thing that the Lord of the universe wants to happen, is for us to pray.

Application – Is prayer important to you?

(Now I am sorry if you are a little tightly wound like me and you are taking notes, I am not actually going to answer the question that I am raising, though I will offer some thoughts later.)

We are never told exactly why it is that we should pray.

But what is clear is that prayer is important to God.

It's at the very top of his list.

This makes me wonder; is prayer important to you?

Is it your first thought or your first action?

- When you look at the community around us, is your first thought prayer?
- When you see someone asking for help at a traffic light, is your first thought prayer?
- What about if I looked in your calendar, would I see prayer as a priority in your life?

- Where did prayer land on your list of new years resolutions? If you are anything like me, it probably didn't even make it on.

If prayer is important to God, shouldn't it be important to us?

Sum:

So, point 1, why do we pray?

- Because God asks us to pray.

2. Point 2 - The Rule of Love

This brings us to our second point; How we pray?

What exactly does Jesus mean when he asks us to pray?

What method of prayer should we use?

- Should we do a chant, or meditate,
- Should we kneel, or go into our prayer closet?

Who should we pray to? How often should we pray?

How exactly should we pray?

Look at verse 38 again with me,

³⁸ *therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest."*

We are to pray - earnestly, to the Lord of the harvest.

So, our prayers should be prayed earnestly.

And should be directed to the Lord of the Harvest.

A. Earnestly

Earnestly is a strange word. Some would argue that it is important to be earnest.

According to the Macquarie Dictionary, it means to be "serious in intention, purpose, or effort."¹

It means our prayers should sound like we are begging or pleading with God.

It seems a little redundant to qualify that we should pray earnestly.

As though the alternative would be to pray half-heartedly:

- "God, maybe, if you would like, could you maybe save some people, only if it is not too much trouble of course!"

¹ The Macquarie Dictionary is Australia's National Dictionary; (<https://app-macquariedictionary-com-au.ezproxy.slq.qld.gov.au/>)

But sometimes this is how we pray. We might not say it like that to God. But often our hearts, and our minds, are not fully behind our prayers.

Whether this is because of our lack of belief that God can do anything.
Or maybe it is because of our apathy towards others, and their need for salvation.

In both cases, if we haven't fully caught the vision of missions or for the importance of prayer in mission, then we won't pray earnestly. We won't pray with serious intention, purpose, or effort. And yet this is what God calls for. And this is exactly what is needed.

What could be more important than the salvation of sinners from an eternity of punishment?
What could be more worthy of our prayers?

So, let us pray earnestly, with serious intention, with great purpose, and with maximum effort.
Let us scuff our knees, and furrow our brows,
Begging the Lord to save some.

B. To the Lord of the Harvest

When we pray earnestly, we are to direct our prayers to the Lord of the Harvest.

This seems pretty obvious doesn't it.
It's no good praying to your mate down the street.
They won't hear you, nor can they do anything about it.

So, we pray to the only one who can do anything about the Harvest, God.
The one who not only rules over it as Lord, but also the one who directs the hands and feet of the workers.

And through the act of praying to him, we slow, right, down.
Praying takes the power out of our hands, and it puts us on our knees.
It reminds us that ultimately whatever we do is utterly useless, if the Lord is not at work.

We can get so caught up, so filled with anxiety and nervous energy, about **OUR** plans.
We start thinking about all the different things we could do to help people.
Causing us to forget that God has compassion for them too, and he already has a plan.

Prayer helps us to acknowledge that God is in complete control, and we are not.

- As one pastor puts it,
*"Prayer, (...), is (the) confessing of impotence and need, an acknowledging of helplessness and dependence, and an invoking of the mighty power of God to do for us, what we cannot do, for ourselves."*²

² J. I. Packer, "Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God", 119.

Sum

1. Why prayer? Because God ask us to.
2. How do we pray? Earnestly, to the Lord of the Harvest.

3. Point 3 - [Comments]

Third, what do we pray?

We ask God to send out workers into the field.

For the last time, look at this verse with me again, I want it ingrained in your head.
Look at verse 37,

³⁷ Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; ³⁸ therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest."

This is not rocket science, but it is always worth reminding ourselves of the fundamentals.

A. Prayer is the best strategy.

When we think about missions, what our plan is, what our strategy might be;
Praying for God to send out workers into the harvest **is the best strategy.**

- There doesn't need to be anything fancy about it.
- We don't have to make anything up.
- We don't need to have all the answers.
- There is no need for trick plays or elaborate schemes.
- We don't need to write essays or PhDs on the subject.
- You don't need to be a professional Christian or expertly trained in prayer.
- You don't even need to put your hand up to talk to anyone.

We just simply ask God to send out workers into the field.
That is all there is to it.

This is so simple, and yet it is so important.

Because often our strategy for mission might be human-centric, or determined by the market place of ideas, as we read the latest books on how do to missions or evangelism.

We might even see some success doing these things.
But we end up leaving God out of the whole process.

Instead we should bring God, and his purposes for this world, right in at the beginning.
Asking that he would lead, guide, and shape our plans.

One pastor put it this way,

“the closest we can get to the proper allocation of resources (...) is prayer.”³

Prayer is the best strategy because, we can't see everything.

- We can't see the harvest,
- we can't see the workers.
- We can't see which workers need to be sent to which part of the field.

Only the Lord of the harvest can see the whole field.

- Where the harvest is,
- who is ready to be sent out,
- who is ready to be brought in.

Prayer is our best strategy!

B. The harvest is many/big/plentiful

We need a good strategy because the need is great!

Like me, you may have heard this passage so much that it just becomes a dull tone in the background.

But listen again to what Jesus says, he says the harvest is plentiful.
To put it another way, the harvest is huge!

It is huge because according to the bible, “there is no one who does not sin.” (1 King 8:46)
All of humanity have turned away from God, and sought to put themselves, or the things of this world, in the place of God.

Each and everyone of us has rejected God and his rule over our lives.
Because of this, we are all deserving of his judgement and punishment.
We are all in need of salvation.

The potential pool of people who need to be harvested is the entire human population, throughout all of human history.

But thanks be to God, that he is rich in grace and mercy, and that Jesus' death and resurrection is sufficient for the sins of the whole world, and efficient for those who trust in him. As Pastor John reminded us last week.

It stands to reason,
that if the harvest is so big,
then there is also a big need for more workers.

In our own strength and ability,
Even with all the resources that a church like ours has;

³ Osborne, Grant R. Matthew (Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on The New Testament Book 1) (p. 521). Zondervan Academic. Kindle Edition.

All the talented and motivated people.
Even we are still completely insufficient for this task.
We just can't do it ourselves.

But there is someone who can.
Someone who is bigger and mightier.

Just as my 3-year-old son preaches to me, "I may be small, but my God is big!"
"Bigger than a train, bigger than a plane. Big, big, bigger, so much bigger."

Conclusion

With all this in mind, I just want to give you a pastoral word.
My intention this morning is not to guilt you into action.
There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. (Romans 8:1)

I am not trying to come in here with the stick, to try to get you to pray more.
My hope is to give you a bigger vision for prayer in the work of mission.
That there would be a shift in our thinking, in our desires, and in our actions,
so that we would value prayer more and more.

For myself,
I want prayer to become more and more of a habit in my life.
We are by nature habitual beings.
And I have many habits. Many of them good, many of them not so good.
I want to cultivate a habit of prayer missions.

One of my goals for 2025 is that I might be able to say, like Sam's mentor said to him,
that the time I spend in prayer might be the time I am most certain **is time not wasted.**

SMART GOAL

As it is the beginning of the year, and this being a very business minded church, full of
"consultants",
I want to set a SMART goal for you as the application of this sermon.

For those of you, who aren't in corporate America, a SMART goal is:

- Specific,
- Measurable,
- Achievable, which I am going to change to Assignable.
- Relevant, which I am going to change to Realistic.
- Time-bound.

SMART GOAL	
1. Specific	Pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.
2. Measurable	Pray one time, earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.
3. Assignable	I want you, to pray one time, earnestly to the lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.
4. Realistic	For one minute, I want you, to pray one time, earnestly to the lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.
5. Time-bound	Today! for one minute, I want you, to pray one time, earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.

Let's pray that now.

But this one doesn't count towards your SMART goal!

<Pray>

Dear Heavenly Father, Lord of the harvest,

We earnestly pray this morning, that you would indeed do what you have promised, and what we cannot do, in our own power or strength; please raise up laborers for the harvest.

This morning, this day, this month, this year, please make me, make us, people of prayer.

People who count one day in your courts better than a thousand elsewhere.

By your Holy Spirit, help us to pray.

And move powerfully in us and through us, that even some of us in this room might be sent out as your laborers into your harvest.

This we ask, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

Discussion Questions

What does the text say? (Exegesis)

1. What emotion does Jesus have for the crowds? (v.36)
2. What causes him to have this emotion? (v.36)
3. What does this emotion cause him to do? (v.37-38)

What does the text mean? (Hermeneutics/Interpretation)

4. Why do you think Jesus tells his disciples to pray?
5. This passage doesn't explicitly say it is about evangelism and conversion. How do we know it is about God's mission of bringing people into his kingdom? (see Matthew 3:12 and Matthew 13. Also; Isaiah 27:12–13, Micah 4:11–13; Joel 3:13)
6. Why is the harvest plentiful?

How does it apply? (Application)

7. What stops you from praying to God for workers to be sent out into the harvest?
8. What are some ways you might incorporate this prayer into your life?
9. This week (January 6-10, 2025) is prayer week [Prayer Week 2025: Centered on Missions — The Falls Church Anglican](#), and next Sunday (January 12, 2025) is our Missions Fair: [Missions Fair — The Falls Church Anglican](#).
Is there a mission partner or organization that you, or your family, or your small group could be praying for this month or year?