

Matthew 9:35-10:42

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[0:00] 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. 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 are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field. Jesus called his twelve disciples to him and gave them authority to drive out impure spirits and to heal every disease and sickness.

These are the names of the twelve apostles. First, Simon, who is called Peter, and his brother Andrew, James, son of Zebedee and his brother John, Philip and Bartholomew, Thomas and Matthew the tax collector, James, son of Alphaeus and Thaddeus, Simon the zealot, and Jesus Scariot, who betrayed him.

These twelve sent out with the instructions, do not go among the Gentiles or enter any towns of the Samaritans. Your Samaritans, apologies. Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel.

As you go, proclaim this message. The kingdom of heaven has come near. Heal the sick. Raise the dead. Cleanse those who have leprosy. Drive out demons. Freely you have received. Freely give.

[1:17] Do not get any gold or silver or copper to take with you in your belts. No bag for the journey or extra shirt or sandals or staff, for the worker is worth his keep. Whatever town or village you enter, search there for some worthy person and stay in their house until you leave.

As you enter the home, give it your greeting. If the home is deserving, let your peace rest on it. If it is not, let your peace return to you. If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, leave that home or town and shake the dust off your feet.

Truly I tell you, it will be more bearable for Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for that time. I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves.

Be on your guard. You will be handed over to the local councils and flogged in the synagogues. On my account, you will be brought before governors and kings as witnesses to them and to the Gentiles.

And when they arrest you, do not worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time, you will be given what to say. For it will not be you speaking, but the spirit of your father speaking through you.

[2:27] Brother will betray brother to death and a father his child. Children will rebel against their parents and have them put to death. You will be hated by everyone because of me, but not the one who stands firm to the end will be saved.

When you are persecuted in one place, flee to another. Truly I tell you, you will not finish going through the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes. The student is not above the teacher, nor a servant above his master.

It is enough for students to be like their teachers and servants like their masters. If the head of the house has been called Bezebul, how much more are the members of his household? Do not be afraid of them, for there is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed or hidden that will not be made known.

What I tell you in the dark, speak into the daylight. What is whispered into your ear, proclaim from the roofs. Do not be afraid of those who kill the body, but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the one who can destroy both soul and body in hell.

Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground outside your father's care. And even the very hairs on your head are all numbered.

[3:37] So don't be afraid. You are worth more than many sparrows. Whoever acknowledges me before others, I will also acknowledge before my Father in heaven. But whoever disowns me before others, I will disown before my Father in heaven.

Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to turn a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law.

A man's enemies will be members of his own household. Anyone who loves their father or mother more than me is not worthy of me. Anyone who loves their son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.

Whoever does not take up their cross and follow is not worthy of me. Whoever finds their life will lose it. And whoever loses their life for my sake will find it. Anyone who welcomes you welcomes me.

And anyone who welcomes me welcomes the one who has sent me. Whoever welcomes a prophet as a prophet will receive a prophet's reward. And whoever welcomes a righteous person as a righteous person will receive a righteous person's award.

[4:44] And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones who is my disciple, truly I tell you that that person will certainly not lose their reward. Well, I have three points this morning.

Three things that are going to guide our sermon. Here they are. One, the harvest is plentiful. Two, but the hatred is powerful.

Three, so the church of Christ is paramount. The harvest is plentiful, but the hatred is powerful. And so the church of Christ is paramount.

Where I'm breaking the verses here is a bit more rough. But I guess for the first point, I'm kind of focusing on 935 to 108. Secondly, to 1016 to 1039.

And then the third point kind of focusing on 109 to 15 and 1040 to 42. It's quite rough, but I guess that's kind of how the passage moves. I had originally planned to do this passage in two sermons.

[5:48] But because I was sick a few weeks ago, I had to move a few things around. Hence why we had that mega reading. And so therefore, I can't focus on all the details of the passage, which is a little bit frustrating because there is important details.

But I'll do what I can with what we've got. Do keep your Bible open. This is a long passage. And the words in front of you are indeed the words of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

And so please do keep your eye on what Jesus is saying throughout this whole sermon. Why don't I pray? Father, we know that your word is serious. And the passage that we have before us is no easy one.

And so I do pray for myself as I preach that I would be able to helpfully explain what you are saying. And Lord, we thank you that this passage gives us a realistic expectation of life as Christians.

But before anything else, let these words be reassuring and helpful in our lives. And particularly in our own families as we witness to you and represent you in these sometimes difficult places.

[6:51] Amen. Well, in 936, Jesus walked through the towns and villages and he saw the crowds and he had compassion on them because they were harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd.

It's an upsetting illustration, isn't it? Jesus saw people throughout this land of Israel who were harassed and helpless, troubled and cast down.

These were the Israelites, the people who were supposed to be God's covenant community of faith. And instead of rejoicing and thriving, they are weary and thrown down.

And Jesus likens these harassed and helpless people to shepherdless sheep. A sheep without a shepherd is pretty precarious. Sheep are fairly unintelligent animals and humans have known for thousands of years that sheep are easily led.

They are unlike goats who prefer to do their own thing. A sheep's nature is to follow a leader. And so without a leader, the sheep end up getting lost and maybe getting themselves into danger.

[8:02] In Jesus' illustration, the people are like sheep. And those who should have been leading them are indeed the careless shepherds, the Jewish leaders of the day.

It is a repeat of the days of Ezekiel 34 when God pronounced woe to the shepherds, those priests who only take care of themselves and left the people here they're supposed to be leading, lost and needy.

Careless shepherds leave sheep lost. Compassionate shepherds see themselves as sheep led by Jesus the good shepherd. Careless shepherds leave sheep lost.

Compassionate shepherds see themselves as sheep led by the good shepherd. It is clear, isn't it, that in God's design for his creation and in his church that there will be leaders.

Jesus has compassion on lost and harassed sheep. And in this passage, he gives authority to his disciples to be the new leaders of his people to guide and teach and care for them so that they don't get lost or get led astray.

[9:13] And what's crucial about these shepherds is that they cannot be careless shepherds. They are shepherds after God's own heart. They are emissaries of Jesus Christ, the great shepherd.

And so they copy his pattern and they must have the same compassion for lost sheep that he has. Peter, who was one of these 12, writes in 1 Peter 2, Any authentic pastoral shepherding that any human may do must be informed by the pattern and attitude of Jesus Christ, the good shepherd. So in his first quite sad illustration, he talks about these shepherdless sheep. But then in 937, he mentions to his disciples about a plentiful harvest.

And the harvest is usually a negative word in the Bible. It's a word often used to describe God's judgment. But here it is the total opposite. It's not a harvest of judgment, but it is a harvest of salvation.

And the issue is not that there is a small harvest in Israel this year. It's not that the soil of people's souls are dry and infertile. Indeed, the harvest is plentiful.

[10:40] There are plenty of lost sheep, but there are few shepherds to lead them. So folks, can I suggest that this is the mindset which we should have towards Jesus' mission?

The lack of conversions and pressure of church decline across most of the UK is not because there are no lost sheep here. The issue is that we have fewer and fewer good shepherds here.

It is not that people aren't ready to hear the word. It is that few Christians are ready to share it with them. The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few.

The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. So ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.

Helen Gilmore, one of our church members, who's sadly not here today, has absolutely devoted herself to this prayer. Mostly every week in our Wednesday prayer meeting, Helen prays that more church leaders would be raised up in this country.

[11:46] And in the midst of church decline, that is the right prayer to pray. We must take the same attitude as our Savior. We must take the same attitude as our Savior.

A tax collector, a zealot, that's a member of a political Jewish group that opposed the Romans. And of course, Judas Iscariot, the man who would ultimately betray him.

Jesus calls 10 men with different backgrounds and jobs and circumstances. And they're all used by him in expanding his mission across Israel.

The 12 apostles are, in 10 verse 6, to go to the lost sheep of Israel. The mission will obviously expand further to the ends of the earth by the time we get to the end of this book.

But for now, the mission is to be centered on this immediate vicinity. The lost sheep of Israel. This covenant community. Those who have been oppressed by these careless shepherds for these many years.

[13:12] Are now given the opportunity to respond to the good news of God's kingdom of heaven coming near. In verses 7 and 8, they're given power to proclaim the good news of the kingdom of heaven.

Healing the sick, raising the dead, cleansing lepers and driving out demons. The apostles obviously had these gifts. Though I don't think they're given in quite the same measure to Christians of a post-apostolic era like us.

As Christians today, we are not one of the 12 apostles. We have not visibly encountered the risen Christ. And so we shouldn't expect to have the same guarantee of resurrecting healing powers that they had.

The miracles were to help make the point that the kingdom of heaven was near. And miracles still do happen today at times. But that probably shouldn't be our normal, everyday expectation of what ministry and evangelism looks like.

What we should focus on and what affects us all is the second half of verse 8. Freely you have received, freely give.

[14:24] Instead of seeing Christian faith as a passion we have chosen and got good at over the years, it's much better to see our faith as a precious gift.

If we are strong and committed Christians, that is a gracious gift that has been given to us. Not something that we have worked hard at ourselves.

It's so easy, isn't it, to think about grace as a past gift. But we can easily forget that it's a sustained, everyday gift that the Lord pours out on us.

Through every day, he gives us the spirit to sanctify us each day. If we see our role as evangelists out of our own skill and strength, we've got the wrong attitude.

A better attitude to have is one like, My faith is the greatest gift that has been given to me. I have done nothing to receive it. And therefore, I am more than willing to share it.

[15:25] And I expect nothing in return. We serve Christ out of heartfelt duty, not coerced necessity. There is much work to be getting on with while the harvest is in its plentiful season before Christ returns.

And thank God for the gifts that he has given us to reap in that harvest. Now, I want to move on to our second point. We've seen that the harvest is plentiful.

But now we must consider that the hatred is powerful. Now, we would love to say that evangelism always goes well and people always respond joyfully. But of course, we all know, don't we, that whilst optimistic, that is ultimately unrealistic.

Can we jump to verse 16? This is an important verse, yet it is so often avoided. Jesus says, I am sending you out as sheep among wolves.

Therefore, be as shrewd as snakes and innocent as doves. Here's the reality. These wolves are the Pharisees. And therefore, we need to remember that the predators of the sheep are maybe not going to be those outside of the church, but sadly those who operate within it.

[16:42] Folks, trust me, I do not enjoy having to say this, but Jesus has already warned us, hasn't he? Matthew 7, 15. Watch out for false prophets. The wolves are probably not people who would say that they are non-Christians.

The wolves are people who operate within the realm of the church. And so sadly, we cannot assume that everyone who calls themselves a Christian and wears sheep's clothing is a Christian. Because the workers are sheep among wolves, they need to be as shrewd as snakes and innocent as doves. They must be sensibly prudent because not everyone can be trusted.

Yet though, they must be kind and gracious and irreproachably honest, striving for peace when possible. The disciple should not let himself be walked over.

He must exercise sound judgment in his dealings with people. And do you see that being a disciple of Jesus Christ means that we are likely in line for suffering similar to that he experienced?

[17:54] In verse 17, we may expect trial from the religious establishment. In verse 18, we may even expect accusations from the wider society or the state.

It is only sensible to expect this. In verse 25, it says, If the head of the house, that is Jesus, is called Beelzebul, that is the prince of demons or Satan, how much more the members of his household? If we call ourselves the name Christian, it's only wise to acknowledge that we may well experience the same suffering and temptation that our saviour Jesus experienced from Satan, his greatest enemy.

But the hardest suffering of all, I think, is, of course, that which we experience in our own families themselves. In verse 21, and again in verses 34 to 37, we see the unavoidable tension that will be experienced by many families.

Jesus is here riffing off Micah 7, verse 6, where Micah laments how he cannot trust his friends or family because of the corruption in his land, which has forgotten its Lord.

[19:12] And I'm speaking in a very general sense here. What can happen in families is that those who are not in Christ can at times cause conflict and controversy for those who are.

Verse 22, You will be hated by everyone because of me. And families are not exempt from that. Now, not all of us, but most of us, especially those of us who are Europeans, I think we have to humbly admit that we don't really know what this is like.

Christians in most North African, Middle Eastern, and Central Asian countries experience persecution and rejection from their families and societies in ways that most of us will likely never know.

And so perhaps an application for us today is to pray for our persecuted church across the world who, frankly, would be completely unsurprised by this chapter and indeed probably find it a massive encouragement.

When Jesus says that he has not come to bring a piece but a sword in verse 34, what he's trying to say is that taking the name of Jesus, Christian, is in this fallen world inevitably going to cause division.

[20:29] Because being a Christian is so radically life-changing. Those who stand against Christ and want nothing to do with him will inevitably cause great division in a community involving Christians as life's values become noticeably more separate.

The sword in verse 34, I think, is a divisive sword because not living and not living for Jesus are such radically different lifestyles.

We can only expect that in this fallen world, claiming Jesus may cause serious division in our fallen society. Personal response to him is ultimately the dividing line here.

So though people may be angered by their truly Christian family members, ultimately in doing so, they are not just rejecting the Christian person, they are rejecting God.

And that will bring unavoidable tension into the family. Jesus wants us to be soberly aware of the fact that our earthly lives may not be made more peaceful after choosing to follow him.

[21:32] In fact, for now, some of our relationships may become a lot more complicated. Now, folks, this is very, very hard, isn't it?

Despite my perhaps show of confidence, I have not found any of these points easy to prepare or easy to say. But friends, though, following Jesus is the most costly thing.

Of course, it is also the most valuable thing. Let me just simply read some of the words of Jesus here in verse 37 to 39. Anyone who loves their father or mother more than me is not worthy of me. Anyone who loves their son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. Whoever does not take up their cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds their life will lose it.

And whoever loses their life for my sake will find it. Whoever loses their life for his sake will ultimately be the ones who find it.

[22:39] This is costly, but it's so valuable. To follow Jesus is a costly decision. We can't do it part time. We can't do it comfortably.

Nor can we expect to do it without likely disruption in our work, our family, our country. But is not this a worthy decision? You know, in all of the anxieties and strivings with opposition and persecution, there's one thing that God assures us that we can be truly confident in.

Verse 31. This fearful God who can destroy us in hell actually loves us instead. He cares for the sparrows.

He knows when they rise and fall. And of course, his people are worth much more than many sparrows. Verse 30 says that even the hairs of our heads are all numbered.

And we're likely familiar with that verse, but few of us are familiar with its context. In the midst of great and heart-wrenching opposition for your faith, remember, remember that your father knows the number of hairs on your head.

[23:52] Don't be afraid. Three times in this passage it says, do not be afraid. Remember that God who has the power to judge instead cares for you.

And because of that, we have every reason to show great perseverance amidst great persecution. This is hard, isn't it? Following Jesus can feel quite intense.

You know, sometimes when we think about these things too much, like it really does start to affect us and impact us. Not peace, but a sword. Not really. Flogging in synagogues, tension in families. Does it really need to be like that? Some of us here have in the past experienced weeks and maybe even months of thinking, am I doing the wrong thing by standing up for the gospel in my workplace? Is it really worth it? Because it feels like I'm the bad guy, and I'm just the catalyst of all this division in my workplace at the minute. Brothers and sisters, this passage is hard.

[24:56] It's really hard. It's really hard. But it is hardly unrealistic of being a Christian in this fallen world. And let's be thankful because I'm sure some of us can connect with it.

This will at times be hard, and in the heartache of those times, with a hard pull to perhaps compromise on what Jesus says, we ought to remember that God knows the hairs on our heads. He's closer than we realize.

He knows everything about us. He hears everything we say. He knows everything that we think. He is strong and powerful, and he is to be feared above all men. The Bible does warn us that tension will arise as a result of following Jesus.

But even though the hatred may feel relentlessly powerful, that doesn't take away from the fact that the harvest remains ripe and plentiful. The lost sheep still don't know who their shepherd is.

Jesus' mission plays on through the gifts he's given to his people. The God who holds the keys of death and Hades has freely given us his all and the gift of his saving grace.

[26:06] And so we ought to freely give of all that we have to serve him in our lives. We only have life because of him. So you are not in the wrong to be a Christian and to stand up for Christian values.

You are doing the right thing. Seemingly unimpressive perseverance will in the end be victorious over the popular persecution. And so I really do want to move on to our last point.

The harvest is plentiful, but the hatred is powerful. So the church of Christ is paramount. Did you notice those words in verse 11 to 13 about worthy people and worthy homes?

Or did you notice in verse 40 to 42 about welcoming prophets and righteous people? What have these hosts got to do with the disciples' mission?

Well, an awful lot. You see, the apostles were freely giving of the service that Jesus had appointed them to. And they weren't to bring lots of goods with them. They were to trust in Christ's provision through his church.

[27:20] Look at verse 11 to 13. They were to trust that there would be worthy people in those times they visited. They were to share peace and associate with the host to welcome them and the message that they bring.

Those who were not themselves apostles or preachers or missionaries still had a crucial role to play in the spread of this first missionary movement across Israel.

It was only possible because of the kind hosts who received the gospel message with faith and therefore welcomed its messengers with grace. Folks, I know that not all of us would say that we are maybe gifted evangelists or gifted speakers, but we all have an important work to do with whatever gift God has given us, don't we?

I think these workers are simply people who are just freely giving of the gift that God has given to them. Look at verse 40.

Anyone who welcomes you welcomes me, and anyone who welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. Welcoming our brothers and sisters in the name of Christ is going to be of paramount importance in persecution and hardships because welcoming each other in the name of Christ is evidence and reassurance that we truly are in Christ together.

[28:54] If we welcome each other, we welcome who each other stands for, Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Verse 41 is saying that though we might think the hosts of the prophets are of lesser importance than the prophets themselves, well, we ought to remember that both the host and the prophet receive the same reward.

There may be leaders, yes, but our value is all the same. And God does not make a leadership role the arbiter of holiness. Associating ourselves with Christ means associating ourselves with each other.

To give even a cup of cold water to a child who is a disciple may seem like an insignificant deed, but this is actually evidence that we stand together and that whatever ministry you have in this church is indeed a very important one.

The apostles wouldn't have got very far if it wasn't for those who welcomed them and supported them. So no matter how insignificant the enemy may tempt you to feel, your contribution is vital to the body of Christ.

This church, Cornerstone, has certainly grown because of the faithful teaching of the Bible and the various contexts in which it is taught. But let's be realistic.

[30:16] We would not have the resources to grow without the financial support of many in our church community. People opening their family homes to host community groups, people persistently praying for each other and for the growth of the gospel witness in our communities.

People using the gifts that God has given them and standing together for the cause of the gospel is evidence that this is a living church full of genuine believers and that in the end, Christ's kingdom will be victorious over the kingdom of this world.

Jesus is the chief shepherd, the Lord of the harvest, who we are all being led by. And so we can encourage one another to look to him who has endured suffering and took up his cross.

In times when our families are excluding us for what we have said, our church family ought to draw close and draw near in support of what the Christian is doing. When we hear that our brother or sister is caught up in controversy at work or even with the courts about what they said or did or didn't do or didn't say, we as the church of Christ must persevere together in united support for that Christian in Christ's name.

This one is a massive rebuke to myself. We must make ourselves aware of the persecution which affects our spiritual family across the world. We must make ourselves aware of North India, North Korea, Somalia, and we must commit to pray for them.

[31:47] Understandably, sometimes the easiest thing to do is to say nothing. Many times though, it's helpful to move toward and show support, even in small ways, even if we don't know what to say.

We trust that the sovereign Lord knows the hairs on our head and so we need not fear him because he loves us, but we also must show that same love and care of Christ to our brothers and sisters here.

That is encouraging amidst the sufferings of the world. That is what will help us to have no fear. Jesus is the chief shepherd.

His call is serious. If he laid down his life and was heated by sinful men, we must realistically assume that we may endure the same. But we can persevere because Jesus is resurrected and sits on the throne.

He has given us each other. He has given us his spirit to speak the words we should speak at the times when they matter most. We will continue to live for his kingdom because we know that the harvest is plentiful.

[32:57] Evangelism and mission is valuable and necessary. Whether we are proclaimers and teachers or welcomers and supporters, we all have a role to play in this harvest.

Ultimately, Jesus' compassion for those lost sheep trumped any ridicule that he faced from his socio-religious opponents. Ultimately, Jesus' compassion for those lost sheep trumped any ridicule that he faced from his opponents.

Brothers and sisters, are we going to have the same attitude? Jesus, the good shepherd, has freely given us of his grace to become workers in his harvest field so we can trust that his grace will sustain us.

Christ's mission work to the ends of the earth continues through the spirit that he left with his people. And so, let's not be afraid.

The harvest is plentiful and the hatred is powerful, but Christ and his church will be paramount. Let me pray.

[34:10] Lord Jesus, we thank you that you have transformed us from lost and weak sheep to strong and useful plowmen. Lord, let us not forget how much you have given us.

As we cling hard to these gifts, may we use them to glorify you. Father, we pray for our persecuted spiritual family across the world. Lord, give them great comfort and perseverance from your word and your people.

And do help us, Lord, to be more diligent in praying for them specifically. Lord, please add more to our number here in Cornerstone because we do believe that your harvest is plentiful out there.

And so knowing that, may we be confident to speak to this lost sheep and welcome them in. Please strengthen your church as we grow and support one another in Christ together.

Amen.