

Jesus' Compassionate Response to the Lost
Matthew 9:35-38

Pastor Tom
July 19, 2015

As I saw him walking down the street, I finally understood the question he'd been asking over and over. He had asked for help. He needed that help now. So we had to help him. But who was he?

His name was Bill and he began attending the small church we served in the western suburbs of Ottawa. I still remember his first Sunday with us. He walked in looking fairly nervous. Then he would walk up to people and say, "Hi, my name is Bill, what's your name?" Then he would ask people "what are you doing here?" Most responded "we're here to go to church." Then he'd ask a third question. "What do you do when you get lost?" That's kind of an unusual question to ask someone you've never met before. But he circled the room and that question was asked of everyone.

Soon we realized Bill had some special needs. But we were very glad that he joined us that day. I will never forget Bill's singing. It was loud, way off tune and often started before the worship leader. Yet people were so gracious to him. They all talked of how this was his way of worshipping. To the Lord's ears, Bill made a joyful noise.

But after the service, he again started asking the question. "What do you do if you get lost?" So people answered "you ask for directions or you ask for help or you look at a map." He would just nod and say okay and then go on. People began to clear out and Bill said his goodbyes. We were usually the last ones to leave. So we began our short drive home.

Just before we got home, we saw Bill wandering on the street next to our home. As I saw him walking down that street, I finally understood the question he'd asked about getting lost. He was obviously lost looking at houses and house numbers with a confused expression on his face.

We drove up to him. "Bill, are you lost?" "Yes, I'm lost. I don't know what to do?" "Do you know the address of where you live Bill?" Then he pulled out a piece of paper with the address on it. His caregiver had provided this for him in case he would get lost. It was not far away. So we drove him there and dropped him off. He was so thankful to be found and brought home. From that time on, our little church family ensured that Bill would find his way to our church and back home after church to protect him from getting lost.

The dictionary defines a lost person as someone who is unable to find the way. They are confused and disoriented like Bill. The Bible uses the term lost to refer to those apart from God like a sheep apart from its shepherd. Shepherds were responsible to care for their flocks. If a sheep went missing, the shepherd would try to find it. When sheep got

lost they may at first have liked it. They could go and eat grass wherever they wanted. But soon they would be disoriented and scared. They would be unable to find their way back to the shepherd. They were vulnerable to predators and might not survive.

It's not often that you see people on our streets who don't know physically where they are or where they're headed. But there are people everywhere who don't know where they're headed spiritually. Many of them don't even know they're lost. They think they're fine and headed in the direction they need to go. But according to God and His Word, they are lost sheep.

The question we face today is how do we respond to lost people around us? How do you respond to the spiritually lost? Do you see them? Do you care about them? Do you think you have any responsibility towards them?

The next passage in our journey through Matthew brings us to these questions. If you've grown up in a church or been in the church for a while, these verses may be very familiar to you. But they might be so familiar that we can just brush by them to get on to the next thing. Yet in them, we will see Jesus' response to the lost. Our calling is to become more like Christ. So Jesus' response needs to be our response. To bring this a little closer to us, would you ask the Lord to bring to mind some lost people in your life – family; friends; neighbors; coworkers; classmates. How would Jesus respond to them according to this passage? How does our response to them compare to His? Then we will seek the Lord and His Strength to help us have a more Christ-like response to the lost around us.

Matthew 9:35-38 (ESV)

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

Verses 35 is almost identical to Matthew 4:23. Matthew gives us a clue that he is closing the section that started with the Sermon on the Mount followed by the miracles. Matthew told us that Jesus would teach, preach and heal. Then he showed us Jesus' teaching, preaching and healing. Now he reveals that Jesus' preaching, teaching and healing ministry extended far beyond Capernaum into all the towns and villages and synagogues.

But now Matthew closes this section of chapters 5-9 with the same statement he started with. Then verses 36-38 lead us to next major piece of this Gospel. Here, we will see how Jesus responded to the lost.

How did Jesus respond to the lost?

1) He saw their need Verse 36 begins “When he saw the crowds. .” Jesus saw the people. He noticed them and their need. He identified their poverty, hardship and lack. He noted they were like sheep without a shepherd. He saw them as people who would run out of pasture and starve or they may get lost and die. But to actually see them and take in their need, He needed to turn His eyes away from Himself and onto them.

This challenge faces us concerning to the lost. If we have Jesus’ heart for the lost, we first need to take our eyes off of ourselves and see the lost. Of course, that does not mean you neglect your marriage or family or responsibilities in other areas. The balance of Scripture instruct us to take care of family and work to gain the respect of outsiders.

But we certainly need to guard against the self-absorbed bias of our society where everything is about me. If everything is about me, then I seldom if ever see others and their needs. I will view as either tools to help me get what I want or obstacles preventing me from getting what I want. I won’t really see them as people who are lost. We need to take our eyes off ourselves to see others. We also need to guard against overwhelming our lives with so much activity that we neither have the time or energy to even notice others in need.

Jesus saw the crowds. In fact, in Luke 19:9-10 after his encounter with Zacchaeus the tax collector, Jesus says “Today salvation has come to this house. For the Son of Man (Jesus) came to seek and save the lost.” Just like a good shepherd that goes after lost sheep, Jesus came to seek and save lost people. If you are a Christian here today, Jesus saw you in your need. He came to seek and save you. When we think that we don’t have time to see the lost or think they might interfere in our busy lives, we need to recall that Jesus saw us in our lost state. Where would we be if He didn’t take the time to see us? But Jesus didn’t only see the crowds.

2) He had compassion on them because they were harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd. New Testament writers used compassion often to refer to Jesus Himself. It literally talks about a gut reaction. He was moved with pity. He had deep compassion; a strong feeling of concern for the desperate state of the crowds. Why did Jesus have such compassion? The crowds were harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd. Harassed and helpless is literally “torn and thrown down.” That’s what happened to unprotected sheep when they encountered a predator. They were torn when the predator bit them. They were eventually thrown down when the predator overcame them.

In this comment, Matthew charges the religious leadership of Jesus' day with gross negligence. Perhaps he even sees some of those religious leaders as the ones doing the harassing through their strict and legalistic demands upon the people. Such demands may have driven the people further from God as they were more weighed down with keeping rules rather than walking in close relationship with God.

Today, lost people continue to be harassed and helpless. They may also be weary chasing after all the other things that promise meaning or purpose but in the end result in emptiness. They have a deep spiritual need. Their lives may have no center or be centered on wrong or falsehood. Their existence seems aimless and their experience is one of futility.

We can see people like this all around. But do we have compassion on them? It's one thing to see a need. It's another to actually have compassion. When was the last time you felt a deep pity for a lost person, for unbelieving neighbors, friends, family and colleagues? We need to feel compassion because of their need. But we also need to be honest and admit that compassion may not come very naturally to us. So we need God's work in our hearts to cultivate that for others.

It's true that we can't meet every need or solve every problem. But Jesus wants us to feel and see clearly the plight of our neighbors and loved ones and coworkers and classmates who don't know Christ.

This is an area where the false teaching of universalism or the denial of hell does so much damage. Universalism says everyone is going to heaven. Well then we don't really need to feel compassion for people without Christ because they'll get there anyway. If there is no hell, then we don't need to feel a lot of compassion for people apart from Christ because they will be annihilated after death and won't know any different. But if there is only one way to God and its through Christ; if there is an eternal existence in Hell apart from Christ, then we begin to see as the Lord sees and feel as He feels.

So Jesus saw the crowds. He had compassion on them.

3) He was hopeful and expectant of their potential as believers. In verse 37, Jesus speaks to the disciples about what he sees. He doesn't say, "Wow, look at the huge crowds. There are so many lost people. They'll never turn to God. They're too far gone. So sad." No. "The harvest is plentiful but the laborers are few." Jesus sees the crowd as a potential harvest field.

Now if you're not from the country, you might not get this image. So let's just quickly review the how harvest works. I know this might be a surprise to some of you. Bread does not grow on trees wrapped in the plastic bags we buy in the grocery store. Bread actually comes from flour that is used to bake bread. The flour comes from ground up grain seeds. The seeds were once in the plant that was in the field. So harvest involves going out into the field and first cutting down the grain plant. Then you would take the cut down plant to thresh or beat the seeds out of the head of the plants. Today, farmers have these massive machines called combines that cut the grain, thresh the plant and collect the seeds while you're driving in the fields. But in Jesus' day, workers had to actually go out into the fields. Some cut down the grain and then gathered together several grain plants into stalks. Others would collect the stalks which would then be harvested on maybe the town threshing floor or your own floor.

Jesus sees the crowds as a field ready for harvest. You might look at the unbelievers in your lives and see anything but a potential for harvest. You may think they are so far gone that there's no way they would ever come into God's kingdom. But Jesus doesn't see them like that. He sees the potential for plentiful harvest. He has the ability to overcome the hardest heart. Just as we need God's help and work in our lives to feel compassion for the lost, we need God's work in our hearts to see lost people with the hope Jesus has for their salvation. I'm sure there are some here today that may be discouraged about the people in your lives or family that don't know Christ. You need to pray for Jesus' hopeful outlook and that He can reach them. Or you may think you're too old or that we as a church have seen harvest times in the past. But we're not going to see anything in the future. Yet we can still see harvest times in our lives after years of fruitlessness.

But how will He reach them? This brings us to the final response of Jesus to the lost crowds. **4) He commanded His disciples to pray to the Lord of the Harvest to send out laborers into the harvest.** Now I think this is an unexpected command for a couple of reasons. First, we might expect that Jesus' seeing the harvest would Himself just go out into the fields and collect the harvest. After all, we've seen Jesus doing the entire ministry. Jesus preaches, teaches and heals. He brings the good news of the kingdom. But here we see that God's plan to spread the Gospel of the Kingdom through laborers; disciples of Christ who go out to work in the harvest field.

But the second reason why this command is unexpected relates to the command itself. Why would Jesus command the disciples to ask the Lord of the harvest, God, to send out workers into the harvest field? God didn't need

to be made aware that there was a lack of harvesters. He knows everything. God doesn't need motivation to bring in the harvest. It's not like He doesn't care. After all He sent Jesus to seek and save the lost.

So why ask a farmer who already knows the state of his fields and already knows about the lack of workers to send out workers? There's one answer that makes sense. John Piper puts it like this – "God has willed that his miraculous work of harvesting be preceded by prayer. God loves to bless the world. But even more, He loves to bless the world in answer to prayer. It is God's way before he does a great work, He pours a Spirit of "supplication" (or desire to ask) upon His people so that they plead for the work."

But this begs another question for me. Why wouldn't God just act anyway? Why does He need people to ask Him to do this work? It kind of seems like He just wants glory and fame for Himself. It could seem like He's the big wealthy person who won't help unless He's asked and gets all the praise.

But I think there's a deeper purpose here. Say we were able to see the lost, feel pity for them, recognize the potential for great harvest and also discern the lack of workers. Then imagine we rushed into the harvest field and began to do the work and God quietly and secretly blessed the work allowing us bring in the harvest – to bring lost souls to Jesus, the good shepherd. What might we be tempted to conclude if that was the sequence of events? I think that we might conclude that we can do this harvesting thing apart from God. I think we might begin to believe that if we just work hard and put our efforts in the right areas and say the right words, we can save people. We're doing a great work for God.

It sounds great at first. But what if the person we're sharing with doesn't come to Christ? What does that do to us? We can begin to think that their response or lack of response to God is on us. If we only did the right things or said the right words, they would be found. That's a lot of guilt to carry. Or we can begin to believe we have the power, that only God has, to bring spiritual rebirth to a soul. But we don't have the power to save people. We don't have the ability to change someone's heart or make them come to Christ. And then there is that matter of wondering whether something is really a work of God. Sometimes, there's lots of action and activity. But it may have nothing to do with God. It's simply human effort to put on something big.

But when we have to first pray before the Lord starts harvesting, it brings us back to this being His work. The harvest of souls is impossible for men to do. New birth is a miracle. Oh, we have to obediently respond to our part in

the process. But it is God who does the harvesting work. Therefore, if we would ever expect there to be a great harvest of souls here at SVBC, it would be preceded by a great movement to prayer by the people. This might be something where spontaneous prayer groups arise. Maybe people will respond to this message by spreading it to those who aren't here today and exhort others to start praying for the Lord to send out these workers. Maybe it's something that we need to emphasize more and provide more opportunities. Maybe it's where we need to start praying collectively as a church. "Lord move us to earnestly pray for the lost."

God has blessed us with a harvest recently. If you were here for our last baptism service you witnessed God's work in 4 lives. 3 out of the 4 had come to Christ in this past year. Another had come back to Christ. Many of you commented on the encouragement and refreshment provided through that service. That is what God's harvesting work looks and tastes like. Could it be that the Lord wants to do a great work among us – but He is waiting for us to pray?

Today we have seen Jesus' response to the lost. **Jesus' response to the lost reveals how we need to respond to the lost.** How have we responded to the lost this past year? These verses extend the call of discipleship beyond every day disciples. Jesus calls us not only to every day discipleship but missionary discipleship. I think most of us are okay with being everyday disciples of Jesus. We like it when Jesus speaks into our lives about living every day. That's what the Sermon on the Mount was all about. But it's quite another thing to become a missionary disciple of Jesus. Yet that is what Jesus is moving toward through chapter 10 of Matthew.

We have been saved not only to be sanctified and become more and more like Him. We have been saved to go out and send others out to work in the harvest field. We have been called to not only be disciples but to become disciple-makers. This is not some optional call on the Christian's life for those who are spiritually elite. It's not like God has one group of regular Christians and then another super-sized group that goes out and makes disciples. All regular Christians are called to make disciples.

So what do you need to ask the Lord for today?

- Do you need to see lost people?
- Do you need to grow in His compassion for the lost?
- Do you need to regain hope that those around you can be saved?
- Do you need to pray earnestly that the Lord of the harvest will send out workers to his harvest field?

- Do you need to receive Christ yourself?

Maybe you have been lost and know exactly what it means to be harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd.

Today is the day Jesus calls you to receive Him and trust Him with your life. If there is anyone who is called to receive

Christ today, I would like to invite you to come and meet me here at the front during the singing of the last song. Bill

kept asking the question "What do you do if you get lost?" Thankfully he was found and brought home. Jesus found us

and saved us. He calls us to pray and go as workers into His bountiful harvest. Let us pray.