

August 30, 2026

Pursuing the Kingdom: The Compassion of the King

Matthew 9:35-38

Vernon Advent Christian Church

There is a difference between looking at people and really seeing people. Its possible to walk through a crowded room and see hundreds of faces without really noticing anyone. We can drive through a neighborhood and see houses without ever thinking about the stories taking place behind those doors. We can sit in a restaurant surrounded by people and never stop to consider what burdens they may be carrying. Now, some of that is because of our deeply rooted, rugged, New England individualism but part of it is also our selfish, human nature. We see people every day, but seeing someone physically is not the same thing as seeing them spiritually.

Imagine for a moment walking through a crowded city with Jesus. You see the crowds pressing around Him. You see the sick, the poor, the curious, the desperate and the people who have come simply because they have heard that this teacher can do things no one else can do. Now imagine looking at that same crowd through the eyes of Jesus. What would you see?

Matthew tells us exactly what Jesus saw. Jesus didn't simply see a crowd. He saw people who were confused, hurting, lost and desperately in need of the grace of God. And instead of becoming irritated by them, Jesus had compassion on them.

And that is important for us to realize because the passage we're going to look at today serves as a kind of summary statement for everything we have been seeing in chs. 8 and 9, essentially everything that has taken place after Jesus' sermon on the mount. And Matthew has spent these chapters showing us the authority of Jesus. We've watched Him heal diseases, calm the storm, cast out demons and even raise the dead. Again and again, Matthew has shown us that Jesus is the King who possesses authority over every area of life.

But now Matthew pauses and gives us a glimpse into the heart behind the power. Jesus has authority, yes, but He is not cold. He is compassionate. Jesus is the King, but He is not distant from the people He came to save.

The question becomes whether we see what Jesus sees. Do we see people as interruptions to our daily schedules? Do we see the lost as people to avoid, criticize or argue with? Or do we see people as those Christ came to redeem?

And that is what I want us to consider today as we continue our journey through the book of Matthew, discovering together what it means to pursue the Kingdom of God. So, let's read the passage shall we? If you are able, please stand with me as I read God's word found in Matthew 9:35-38. [Read passage]

The King Is on Mission (Matthew 9:35)

The first thing I want us to consider this morning is that Jesus was a King on mission. Matthew begins by saying, "And Jesus went throughout all the cities and villages." That sentence sounds simple, but don't miss what it tells us about Jesus. Jesus didn't establish

Himself in one comfortable location and wait for people to come to Him. He went to them. He traveled through the cities and villages. He entered synagogues. He encountered people in their homes and on the roads. He went where people lived. [picture]

And there is something significant about Jesus' movement. Jesus was not simply interested in gathering a crowd around Himself. He was on a mission. Matthew says that He was "teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction."

Notice those three activities: teaching, proclaiming and healing. Jesus taught the truth of God's word. He proclaimed the "gospel" of the kingdom. This is an interesting phrase as we think of the "gospel" in terms of the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus and what the forgiveness and salvation that accomplishes for us. But the crucifixion hasn't happened yet. So, what is Matthew talking about here?

Well, we have to remember that the simplest definition of the word "gospel" is "good news." What Jesus was sharing with the people was the "good news" that the kingdom of God had come through Him and He demonstrated that kingdom through acts of compassion and power. His ministry involved both the authority of His word and the authority of what He did, namely His miracles, ultimately proving who He was.

You see, Jesus didn't simply tell people about the kingdom of God. No, He demonstrated what God's kingdom looked like when it broke into the world. When He healed a sick person, when He forgave sins, when He delivered people from demons, when He welcomed outsiders, touched the untouchable and restored the broken, He was showing us what the kingdom of God looks like.

You know, sometimes pursuing the kingdom will mean standing before hundreds of people and proclaiming the gospel, or leading a Bible study or serving in various ministries within the church.

But sometimes pursuing the kingdom means sitting across a table from one person and listening to their story. Sometimes it means visiting someone who is lonely, or praying with a hurting friend or inviting a neighbor to church. Sometimes it means having a conversation with someone who doesn't know Jesus. You see, the kingdom advances one person at a time. But it's active. We have a role to play. Just as Jesus was on mission, we as His followers are to share in that same mission. Hold that thought, as this will come back around later.

And so Jesus was on mission. And His mission was moving toward people. But Matthew now tells us what Jesus saw when He looked at the crowds. And this is where the passage moves from the mission of the King to the heart of the King.

Matthew says in vs. 36, "When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them..." Now, that may be one of the most beautiful descriptions of Jesus in the entire Gospel. Jesus saw the same people everyone else saw. But He saw them differently.

The crowds may have looked like a problem to the religious leaders. They may have looked like customers to merchants. And they may have looked like statistics to government officials. But Jesus saw people who were "harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd."

The word Matthew uses for "compassion" here describes a deep, inner movement of emotion. Jesus wasn't simply feeling sorry for them from a distance. Their condition moved

Him deeply. And this is important for us to realize because compassion is more than recognizing someone's pain. Compassion moves us toward the person who is hurting.

The point is, you can see someone standing on the side of the road with a broken-down car and think, "That's unfortunate." That's called sympathy. But compassion is pulling over and offering help. In the same way, you can see someone sitting alone at church and think, "I wonder why they're sitting by themselves." But compassion means going over and offering to sit with them. Or, you can hear that someone is struggling and say, "I'll pray for you." But compassion means stopping right then and there and praying with the person. Jesus didn't simply see the crowds. He was moved with compassion toward them.

And notice what Jesus saw. He saw people who were "harassed and helpless." The picture is of sheep that have been beaten down, worn out, scattered and vulnerable. Jesus was looking at people who were spiritually exhausted.

Why? Because they had shepherds who were not shepherding them properly. The religious leaders of Jesus' day had burdened people with rules and traditions but had failed to lead them to the grace and truth of God. They were supposed to shepherd God's people into the green pastures of peace, but instead they often used religion to elevate themselves and hold on to power.

Now, Jesus will confront this more directly when we get to Matthew 23 where He condemns the scribes and Pharisees for laying heavy burdens on the people while refusing to help carry those burdens themselves. But, for now, the people were spiritually hungry and their religious leaders were giving them spiritual stones to eat instead of bread. And Jesus looked at them and had compassion.

Again, this should challenge us because we can sometimes become frustrated with the very same people that are being described here that Jesus feels compassion toward. We see someone's bad choices and think, "They brought this on themselves." Or we see someone caught in addiction and think, "Why don't they just stop?" Or someone living in rebellion against God and think, "They don't deserve God's grace." But Jesus sees these same people as those who desperately need His grace.

Now, this doesn't mean Jesus ignores sin. Compassion moves us toward people but it does not mean approving everything they do. There's a major difference here. Jesus never compromised truth in order to demonstrate love. In fact, the most loving thing we can do in any given situation is tell people the truth. And the truth is, and Jesus understood this, that sinful people don't need our contempt. They need the gospel.

So, what would happen if we began asking God to give us the eyes of Jesus? Imagine going through your day at work, or walking through your neighborhood or when you're out some place and asking, "Lord, help me see these people the way You see them." If we honestly did that, it would change the way we pursue the kingdom. We would stop seeing people as interruptions and start seeing them as people who need God's grace.

And so, Jesus sees the crowds and has compassion for them because He understands their deepest problem. Their greatest need is not political, economic, physical or even emotional. Their deepest need is spiritual. They are sheep without a shepherd. And that leads us to the third truth.

Jesus says, again, in vs. 36, the crowds were "like sheep without a shepherd." That is not simply a clever illustration. It is a powerful statement that Matthew's original audience

wouldn't have missed. You see, throughout the Old Testament, God's people are repeatedly described as sheep and God Himself is described as their Shepherd. Psalm 23 begins with those familiar words, "The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want," written by King David who was, himself, a shepherd when God anointed him as king.

But the Old Testament also contains heartbreaking warnings about the shepherds who had failed God's people. Ezekiel 34 speaks against Israel's false shepherds who fed themselves instead of feeding the sheep. They cared for themselves while neglecting the flock. And so, God promises that He Himself will come and shepherd His people.

And that is exactly what Matthew wants us to see in Jesus. The Shepherd has arrived. Jesus isn't simply another teacher giving advice to some lost sheep. He is the Shepherd who came to find them.

And if you anything about sheep, you know they need a shepherd. Sheep are not known for their intelligence. They wander. They can get themselves into dangerous situations without even realizing it. They need someone to guide them, protect them and bring them back when they wander off.

And the prophet Isaiah says, "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned, every one, to his own way." (Isa. 53:6) And that's the human condition, brothers and sisters. Left to ourselves, we wander. We think we know the way. We assume we can manage our own lives. And eventually we discover that our way leads somewhere we never intended to go. And we look up and realize that we're lost.

But Jesus doesn't look at wandering people and say, "They should have known better." In His compassion He says, "They need a shepherd." That is why the gospel is such "good news." Jesus doesn't simply give us directions back to God and then leave it up to us to find our way. No Jesus Himself, as our shepherd, comes and finds His sheep and brings them back to God.

The Apostle John, in his gospel, records Jesus as saying, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." (John 10:11) And in our passage, Matthew is pointing us toward that ultimate act of compassion. The same Jesus who looks at the crowds with compassion will eventually go to the cross and willingly give Himself up for sinners. That is the heart of the gospel. The King sees the sheep, He loves the sheep and, ultimately, He lays down His life for the sheep.

But if Jesus is the Shepherd and the crowds are sheep without a shepherd, then there is an enormous need. And Jesus now gives His disciples a remarkable perspective on that need.

Jesus says in vs. 37, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few." Notice the change in imagery here. He moves from shepherding to harvesting and from the need of the people to the opportunity before His followers. And notice, Jesus doesn't look around and say, "There are too many problems," or "The culture has gone too far." No, He says, "The harvest is plentiful." And we need to recover that perspective.

Sometimes we, as Christians, talk about the world as though all hope is lost. We look at the cultural changes, the moral confusion, declining church attendance, broken families and division and we conclude, "Things are getting worse, so why even try. Let's just stay in our "holy huddles and not even bother."

And all those things may be true. But Jesus looks at the same world and says, "The harvest is plentiful." Now, that doesn't mean the problems aren't real. But it means the gospel is still powerful and that God is still in the business of saving people. That's why Jesus says the harvest is plentiful. There are people all around us whom God is preparing to reach. The question is whether we are willing to be the laborers.

And it's here that Jesus now points to the problem. The problem isn't a lack of people who need the gospel. The problem is a lack of people willing to take the gospel to them.

And so, Jesus concludes with a command in vs. 38, "Therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest." Notice the first response Jesus gives us to the harvest. Pray.

Before Jesus tells His disciples to go, He tells them to pray. And that matters because the harvest belongs to God. Jesus calls God "the Lord of the harvest." We don't save people. We don't change hearts. We don't manufacture conversions. God does the work. But He chooses to accomplish His work through His people.

So Jesus says, "Pray." But, I want us to notice something fascinating about what happens next. In the next chapter, Matthew 10, the passage we will unpack further next week, the chapter begins with Jesus calling His twelve disciples and sending them out. So, what's happening here is that Jesus asks them to pray for laborers and then He makes them the answer to their own prayer.

And isn't that often how God works? We pray, "Lord, send someone." And God says, "I am, I'm sending you." We pray, "Lord, send workers into the harvest." And God says, "Will you be one of those workers?" And that is the challenge.

You see, the church was never meant to be a waiting room where we sit and watch the professionals do the work of ministry. The church is meant to be a community of disciples sent out into the harvest. You don't have to be a pastor to share the gospel and make disciples. You don't need a degree to tell someone what Jesus has done in your life. You simply need to be willing.

Perhaps the reason we sometimes don't see the harvest is because we're not looking for it. We are so busy with our own schedules that we don't notice the people God has placed around us. We are so focused on getting through our day that we don't see the person who needs the love of Christ who is right in front of us.

And so Jesus says, "Pray earnestly." That word means to pray with urgency. This isn't casual prayer. This isn't, "Lord, bless the missionaries." This is, "Lord, send workers. And if You want to use me, then send me." And that's a dangerous prayer. Because God may answer it.

And it's here that we begin to find some ways to apply this passage to our walk with Christ. First, we need to ask God to give us the eyes of Jesus. The next time you're surrounded by people, don't simply see a faceless crowd. Every person you encounter is someone who has been created in the image of God and who desperately needs His grace. Ask God to give you a compassion for people.

And second, let that compassion replace your irritation. There will always be difficult people. There will always be people who frustrate us. There will always be people whose choices we don't understand. But before you react, ask, "What might be happening beneath the surface?" Jesus saw harassed and helpless people. Maybe the person who

irritates you is hurting. Maybe that arrogant person who rubs you the wrong way is insecure. Maybe the rebellious person is searching. That doesn't excuse sinful behavior, but it can change how we respond.

Third, make the gospel central to your mission. Our mission isn't simply to make people happier or to make society better. Those are good things, but the church has been entrusted with something far greater. We've been entrusted with the good news of the gospel. People need to know that Jesus died for them, rose from the grave and offers forgiveness and eternal life to everyone who trusts in Him. That's the message the world needs. And that's the message that needs to come not only from our mouths but also from the way we live our lives.

Fourth, we need to pray specifically for laborers. Don't just pray, "Lord, bless our church." Pray earnestly, "Lord, raise up workers." Pray that God will raise up men and women who will teach, disciple, evangelize, serve, visit, encourage and proclaim the gospel. But don't just leave it there, because that's the easy part. We must be bold enough to ask the uncomfortable question, "Lord, do You want me to be one of those workers?" And then respond accordingly.

And finally, we need to remember that the harvest belongs to God. That means we can work faithfully without carrying the burden of the results. Our responsibility is faithfulness. We proclaim, we love, we serve and we pray. But God gives the growth.

And that should free us from fear. You don't have to convert your neighbor. You don't have to win every argument. You don't have to have the perfect answer to every question. You simply have to faithfully point people to Jesus.

And so, as we close, the question is whether we will see what Jesus sees. And will we pray the prayer Jesus commanded us to pray? "Lord of the harvest, send out laborers into Your harvest." And perhaps as we pray that prayer, we should be ready for God to say, "I am, I'm sending you."

Because pursuing the kingdom of God is not simply about coming to church and learning about the King. It is about following the King out into the harvest. The King has come. The King is still calling and the harvest is still plentiful. Let us pray.

Heavenly Father, give us the eyes of Jesus. Help us to see the people around us with compassion rather than irritation, and give us opportunities to love, serve and share the gospel with those who need You.

We pray that You would send laborers into Your harvest. Raise up faithful servants who will boldly proclaim the gospel. And Lord, if You desire to use us, give us the courage to say, "Here am I. Send me."

Help us to pursue Your kingdom faithfully, trusting You with the results and keeping our eyes fixed on Christ. May our lives point others to the Savior who came to seek and save the lost. We ask this in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Benediction:

May the Lord give you the eyes to see the harvest, the heart to feel compassion for the lost and the courage to proclaim the gospel of the kingdom. May you faithfully follow

Christ into the harvest, trusting Him to use your life for His glory. Go in His grace, serve with compassion and labor faithfully for His kingdom. Amen.