

## Help Wanted

Matthew 9:35-10:8

Second Baptist Church, Memphis

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Here in the Gospel of Matthew today, Matthew moves from one phase of Jesus' ministry to the next. For the last several chapters leading up to this today, we have seen great demonstrations of Jesus' power.

He heals a man with leprosy, and he heals the centurion's servant. At Peter's mother-in-law's house, he heals many people. Jesus calms the storm with a word on the water, he heals a man possessed by a demon, and he heals a paralyzed man. He heals another woman and brings a girl back to life, heals a blind man and gives a mute girl the ability to speak.

All of this in two chapters. Matthew has stockpiled miracles and healings in these two chapters as demonstrations of Jesus' power and proof of the fact that Jesus is the Messiah.

And now the verses we have read today are a transition to another phase. There is a nice summary of Jesus' mission, and then there is the expanding of the mission from Jesus himself to Jesus' followers.

First in verse 35 there is a summary of what Jesus had been doing: *He went about the cities and villages, teaching in the synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness.*

And then Matthew sums up Jesus' ministry on earth in one sentence: *When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them.*

Remember last week Jesus said, *Do you want to know what God wants more than anything else? It's not purity; it's not sacrifice; what God wants is mercy.* When Jesus saw the crowds, he had compassion on them.

The New Testament was written in Greek, of course, and the Greek word there for the compassion Jesus felt is the verb form of *splanchnon*. I talked about this word a lot in a sermon last summer. There are a lot of places in the Gospels where Jesus is said to have compassion, but there are only a few places where this particular word

*splanchnon* is used. It's used in the story of the Good Samaritan. And it's used in the story of the Prodigal Son.

This word *splanchnon* has a real physical imagery to it. Literally what it means is that Jesus opened up his guts to the crowd. It's basically a wimpy translation to say he felt compassion or had mercy.

What it's literally talking about are Jesus' inner parts, his guts. The glossary in my Greek New Testament says the word refers to *entrails*. The King James actually translates it *bowels*. What this is talking about is the deep inner feelings of Jesus that go way beyond "heartfelt concern" or anything like that.

In other words, when Jesus was confronted with these crowds, who were wandering around like lost sheep, he was shaken up in his gut with compassion for them.

So what verse 36 is saying about Jesus' ministry is literally that, *When Jesus saw the crowds, his guts opened up with compassion for them.*

Jesus' guts. There is no superficial sentimentality here. We're talking here about the gut-wrenching compassion of Jesus.

Jesus looks at the people who crowd around him, so many of them, and he sees them as distraught and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. And that brings to mind an image of lostness, bewilderment, vulnerability. And when Jesus sees the lostness and vulnerability of the people around him, he feels this gut-wrenching compassion.

And then here's what happens. And this is where we get roped in. Jesus' vision of the people, his compassion for the people, leads to a "Help Wanted" moment. Jesus' compassion for the people leads to a call for more workers to get to take on his mission of responding to the lost and vulnerable people all around us.

Jesus says, *The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few.* A harvest is traditionally seen as an occasion for joy—a time of abundance, a time of rejoicing over the blessings that have been bestowed.

There is this positive image, which suggests that the harvest Jesus is talking about is the good things of the kingdom Jesus has been preaching and teaching about. Like

all the healings and other miracles Jesus has been performing as evidence of the approaching kingdom.

*The laborers are few.* More laborers are needed. It's not so much to "rescue" a few before judgment descends, but so that more people can be exposed to the blessings of the wonderful kingdom that Jesus is bringing. It's not really about trying to save people before God strikes them down; it's about getting more people to share in the blessings of being a part of the family of God.

Jesus is still calling new disciples today to respond with that same compassion and with that same mission.

Dennis Folds tells the story of a damaged Jesus in London. The city had been devastated by the bombings during World War II. The bombs that dropped on the city struck and destroyed buildings of every kind: office buildings, factories, apartments, homes, museums, government buildings, churches.

Soon after World War II, a group of German students, motivated by kindness and love and a deep desire to return Christian love to those who had lost so much, volunteered to go to London to help rebuild an English cathedral that had been severely damaged by German bombs.

As work progressed, they became greatly concerned about a large statue of Jesus Christ, whose arms were outstretched and beneath which was the written inscription from Matthew 11:28: *Come to me, all of you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.*

The student volunteer workers had great difficulty trying to restore the hands, which had been completely destroyed. They worked and worked and tried and tried, but nothing seemed to successfully replace Jesus' outstretched hands.

Finally, after much work and much discussion, they decided to let the hands of Jesus remain missing and they changed the written inscription to read this way: *Christ has no hands but ours.*

*[Mickey Anders, First Christian Church, Pikeville, Kentucky, June 12, 2005]*

Jesus is still calling disciples today to respond to the people of our world with his same compassion and with his same healing and life giving mission. He has passed

his mission on to us and commissioned us to his hand and feet and body right now in this place.

As you know, we have spent the week at Camp Second, our church camp for children. We had 78 children and 29 adults and teenagers helping out for a total of 107 people at camp this week.

We had a great week. It's such a great camp. I told someone a few weeks ago that I think this camp may be the best thing we do at our church—except of course the preaching. This was our 42<sup>nd</sup> year doing Camp Second. I think it's such a special thing to have children at camp whose parents grew up going to the same camp.

Sharon Ludwig led a Bible study each morning for the kids, and I led a worship time and gave a talk each night. During one of Sharon's Bible studies one morning, one of the younger boys actually threw up right there on the floor. I have since pointed out to Sharon on numerous occasions that I've never made a kid throw up during one of my talks.

The theme for the week was "Treasure Seekers." We used the verse from Matthew 6 where Jesus says, *Don't worry about all those other things. But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all those other things will be taken care of.*

And so I talked each night about seeking first the kingdom of God, and we showed the kids clips of the movie "Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade" that illustrated things that help us to seek God first like perseverance and making good choices, and having faith to step out there and try.

Friday night we had a closing worship time out by the lake. It's really a beautiful setting, and we have tiki torches all around. And what I said to the kids was that one of the best pictures I know of of what it means to seek first the kingdom of God is the picture of a race.

Remember in Hebrews the writer says to run with perseverance the race marked out for us, setting aside all the things that weight us down and trip us up, and focus our eyes on Jesus. What better picture is there than that of what it means to seek God first in our lives? Running with perseverance, putting aside all the things that weigh us down and tangle us up, fixing our eyes on Jesus. It's a great picture of the Christian life.

I said to the kids that there's one thing, though that bothers me a little about that image. It's a good image, but there is one important difference between running a race and the Christian life. Usually, when we run a race, we are trying to win, to come in first, to be better than everyone else. But the Christian life is a different kind of race. It is not a race in which we try to come in first, to beat everyone else, to be better than everyone else.

So Friday night I told the kids this story.

John Beck used to be a football star for the University of Kentucky. Later on he became a preacher and was named Chaplain of the U.S. Olympic Teams. For a number of years he traveled with our Olympic Teams all over the world, leading in their devotions, counseling and praying with many of the athletes.

As he watched these young men and women train for the events in which they competed, he decided that this was a picture of what Christianity really ought to be. Here were people who were sincere and fervent and dedicated to the task before them. They were willing to pay any price, regardless of how much suffering or pain they had to endure. They were willing to pay any price to be number one, to win.

Then one day John Beck was invited to visit the Special Olympics. Special Olympics, as you know, are made up of special athletes. All of them suffer from some kind of mental or physical impairment. He watched them as eight runners lined up for the 100-yard dash. They all took off when the starting gun fired, and he was amazed at how good they actually were. But as they reached halfway in the race, one of the boys fell down, skinned his knee on the track, and started to cry.

He said that what happened next was both beautiful and amazing. All seven of the other runners stopped, and all seven of them turned around and went to the boy who had fallen. Together they helped him to his feet. And the eight walked to the finish line together. Beck said that he then realized that he had seen the true meaning of Christianity right there, not in the Olympic athletes, but here at the Special Olympics.

Jesus has called us to join with him in his mission of mercy and compassion. The Christian life is not one in which we run only for ourselves, trying to be number one, single-mindedly trying to beat everyone else.

In the race of Christianity that Jesus has called us to, we pay attention to the other runners, and we watch for those who fall and skin their knees, and we stop and bend down and help them up, and we walk with them, together, to the finish line.

Jesus, when he saw hurting people, was filled with a gut-wrenching compassion. And now he has put out the "Help Wanted" sign, inviting us to join with him in his work in reaching out our hands to the lost and vulnerable people all around us.