

Sending Disciples

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[0 : 0 0] Well, let me welcome us to this Lunchtime Bible Talk. It's very good to see you, and particularly if this is your first time, particularly warm welcome. This is the fifth and last of this short series on the kingdom advancing in Matthew's Gospel, and the last few weeks we've concentrated on those passages that tell us about the miracles, the mighty acts of Jesus.

Moving into another section now, which is going to concentrate, as Matthew regularly does, on teaching, particularly teaching here about disciples and about mission.

And we're going to read from Matthew chapter 9, verse 35, to Matthew chapter 10, verse 15. Matthew 9, 35.

And 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.

When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few.

[1 : 2 0] Therefore, earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest. And Jesus called to him his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits to cast them out and to heal every disease and every affliction.

The names of the twelve apostles are these. First, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew, his brother, James, the son of Zebedee, and John, his brother, Philip and Bartholomew, Thomas and Matthew, the tax collector, James, the son of Alphaeus and Thaddeus, Simon, the Canaanian, and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him.

These twelve Jesus sent out, instructing them, Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel, and proclaim as you go, saying, The kingdom of heaven is at hand.

Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, cast out demons. You received without paying, give without pay, acquire no gold, nor silver, nor copper for your belts, no bag for your journey, nor two tunics, nor sandals, nor a staff, for the laborer deserves his food.

And whatever town or village you enter, find out who is worthy in it, and stay there until you depart. As you enter the house, greet it, and if the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it.

[2 : 5 6] But if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you. If anyone will not receive you, or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet, when you leave that house or town.

Truly, I say to you, it will be more tolerable on the day of judgment, for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah, than for that town. Amen.

This is the word of the Lord. Let's pray. Father, we praise you for the gospel. Praise you for the gospel that is for the salvation of all who believe.

Good news for everyone throughout the earth. Not a localized gospel only for a particular geographical or social or ethnic group, but a gospel for everyone.

And we pray, Lord, that as we consider these great words, this unique moment in the history of salvation, and also the part we have to play in our day, that you will indeed open our eyes, open our ears, and open our hearts, so that we may go away from here with a greater resolve to be effective disciples in this world, and to proclaim the Lord who bought us and who called us from darkness into his marvelous light.

[4 : 23] Amen. The great reformer, Martin Luther, often used to say that humanity was like a drunk man on a horse.

It falls off on one side, gets up on the horse, and falls off immediately on the other side. And that, of course, is very true in the history of humanity, not least in the history of Christian humanity.

So often, throughout the history of the church, and today as well, people have extreme views, extreme views on one side or on the other.

When it comes to the question of mission, of sending disciples, there are probably two extreme views. One which actually prevented the Reformation church spreading the gospel for a long time, the Lord, it was said, can convert the heathen without you and me.

And also, the idea, if the Lord had already chosen those who were elect, they were going to be saved anyway. Now, as you can imagine, that kind of view leads to an exclusivism, leads to a narrowness, and leads to a kind of joyless legalism.

[5 : 43] And also, it's fine if you're convinced that you are one of the elect. I remember many years ago, listening to a very powerful sermon, Willie's dad, the late James Philip, who said, the question each of us must ask is not, am I one of the elect, but will I believe?

And that's the question as it comes to everyone. So that's one thing. The other extreme is, if I don't do it, it won't happen. Unless I talk to absolutely everybody, share the gospel with them every minute, every day, make a thorough nuisance of myself, people are not going to be converted.

That's often expressed in a phrase which I used to think was just silly, but now I think is dangerous nonsense. God has no mouths but our mouths, no hands but our hands, no feet but our feet.

And you see how these views are extreme. One view is that, one view is that we do nothing at all. The other thing, other view is that we have to do it all. And God can't save people unless we do it.

Now both are clearly totally unbiblical as most extreme views tend to be. And the point is, like most extreme views, there is truth in both of them, isn't there?

[7 : 02] It is truth that God will, and all of us, perhaps some of us here were converted without anyone speaking to us. Perhaps we read a text of scripture, perhaps we, some other way.

On the other hand, it's also true that most people who come to faith in Jesus come to it because people have told them, come to it because people have shared Christ with them.

So, let's look at this passage with that in mind. And first of all, in 935, we have a summary of the Galilean ministry. That's really what we've been looking at in the last few weeks.

Jesus went through the synagogues teaching, proclaiming the gospel, healing every disease and every affliction. That's been what the last two chapters have been about.

And, but he's also preparing for a new phase with the calling of the twelve. And you see, we see here both his power, healing every disease, every affliction, proclaiming the kingdom.

[8 : 05] It's in verse 35. But in verse 36, we have the other side, his compassion. He had compassion because they were like sheep without a shepherd.

And, what I want to do is to look at the similarities and the differences. What in this passage is unique to this moment in salvation history and what continues.

Now, once again, we mustn't fall into two extreme views. One of saying that this is only for that time, which means that nothing can learn from it. Or the other of saying everything that happened then ought to be happening now.

And there are two main themes. Basically, chapter 9, verses 35 to 38, is a great and continuing need.

This is the need. It's a great need. It's a continuing need. And then, in chapter 10, verses 1 to 15, there's a great and continuing provision for that need.

[9 : 11] So, we have the great need and we have the provision. So, let's look, first of all, at the great and continuing need. In the book of Ezekiel, chapter 34, God is the shepherd who longs for his sheep.

They are straying. They are injured. They have no one to help them. The kings who are supposed to have been leading them have been thoroughly, thoroughly vicious.

But now, the good shepherd has arrived. I am the good shepherd, Jesus says in John, the good shepherd who gives his life for the sheep. The harvest here, verse 37, the harvest is plentiful.

Now, the harvest is used throughout Scripture as a picture of God's bountiful provision. Sometimes, the literal harvest, many of the Sems celebrate that.

And, of course, the harvest festivals which ancient Israel had year by year. But harvest, of course, has another implication, doesn't it? It means the work will be completed.

[10 : 19] I think that's so important. The work is going to be completed. There will be a harvest. Even if, at any given time, the pickings are thin and the reaping is poultry, there will, the harvest will be completed.

Because he is the one who causes the seed to grow and in the end he will gather the sheaves. Now, we're all familiar with the parable that we call the parable of the sower.

There's also a little parable in Mark 4. Now, the parable of the sower, of course, emphasizes the duty of the sower to spread the seed and the necessity of the soil to be good soil prepared for it.

A little parable in Mark chapter 4. Only Mark tells us this. The farmer sows his seed and then leaves it. He sleeps and he rises.

In other words, he gets on with his normal life and the growth happens without him and then one day the harvest comes and he gets his sickle to reap the sheaves.

[11 : 23] Now, you can see how that fits in with the two extremes I was mentioning already. If we overemphasize our part or if we say that we have no part at all, it's bad.

Now, that little parable here is emphasizing God's part. He sleeps, he rises, he gets on with his normal business and the natural processes or perhaps better the God sent process is the rain, the sun and fertilizing the soil and the processes under the soil bring a harvest.

So, the growth, but the important thing of course is the seeds were sown first. The seeds aren't going to grow unless they're sown and that is the importance to think of the part of Christians then and now.

But the other thing is the lack of laborers. The harvest is plentiful but the laborers are few.

Now, the need of the world is so great there's always going to be a small number, isn't it? The numbers of people who sow the seed compare with the millions upon millions who either have never heard or have heard and ignored or have heard and rejected.

[12 : 43] And that's why the importance of prayer here because pray therefore the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers. Notice the beautiful balance here.

Don't, it's not that our prayers produce the laborers, it's that our prayers put us in touch with the Lord who then sends people out into the harvest. That's why it's so important not just to pray for those who are already laboring in the harvest field but to pray for others who will come into the harvest field.

And it's important. We need to pray. We're older. We need to pray for newer and younger people to take up the task as time goes on. And the Lord of the harvest of course reminds us that it is his work.

He is the Lord of the harvest but he wants people to serve in the harvest. Laborers means of course he uses us. Does that mean that everyone, every Christian is an evangelist as the special gifts and talents?

That doesn't fit in what Paul says in Ephesians. Paul says the Lord, the risen Lord gave some to be evangelists, some to be pastors and teachers. Not all are called to that specialized gift but certainly all are called to evangelism.

[14 : 05] I think that's the important thing. Not everybody is called to be an evangelist as such but everyone is called to evangelism. Evangelism in their home, evangelism at work, evangelism wherever we may be.

Tell the world about Jesus wherever we may be. And to join in action and where we can't, to join in prayer. because after all the great commission at the end of the gospel is addressed to all believers go and make disciples of all nations.

And we know of course that the total teaching of the body of Christ, some people are extremely gifted evangelists and some people are gifted as teachers, others gifted as encouragers and so on.

Paul says in one, I planted, I preached the initial gospel and Apollos, the eloquent preacher teacher, he watered it. In other words, Apollos came to teach the converts.

Now of course that doesn't mean that Apollos didn't do evangelism or Paul couldn't teach. That would be nonsense. What it does mean is that everyone is called to share the good news.

[15 : 15] So a great and continuing need. Now let's look at the great and continuing provision. And let's look first of all at what is unique to this situation.

The first thing is the calling of the twelve apostles. Now here they are called apostles. And in 2 Peter 1 it's made very clear that it is the word of the apostles of the New Testament and the prophets of the Old Testament which together constitute the authoritative revelation.

None of us are apostles. apostles. And none of us ought to aspire to be apostles. They are unique and foundational. Their word is the revelation.

God's final word expressing fully the living word. And it's that word we are called to share. The twelve had a unique position in salvation history.

But relatively we are little known about many of them. I mean how much do we know about James the son of Alphaeus the deus Simon the Canaanian. We know hardly anything.

[16 : 32] There are many legends but we really don't. I once decided I would try and preach a series on the twelve apostles. I decided not to because I realized that with at least four or five of them it would be pure speculation because there is so little in scripture about them.

Legends for example that Thomas went to spread the gospel in India that may or may not be true but it's not in scripture and therefore it shouldn't be taught as if it were authoritative teaching.

We don't know this prominent group Peter James and John they are the group within the twelve who were closest to Jesus in his earthly life and John living on into his nineties and into the nineties of the first century probably the last person on earth to have known Jesus in his earthly life or certainly one of the last and in his later years writing the gospel his letters and the book of Revelation and remember the revelation is the revelation of Jesus Christ so they are unique and then in all the lists the dark shadow of the betrayer Judas Iscariot who betrayed him it's not insignificant you know that Paul in his account of the Lord's Supper says the Lord Jesus the night on which he was betrayed that really that really bit deeply into the consciousness of the early church Jude or Judas which had been a very common name until then almost dropped out of

Christian circles but anyway these twelve these are the people to whom was given the revelation of whom we build and Jesus says to them when the spirit comes he will lead you into all truth remember that's primarily addressed to the apostles people nowadays want to say that is addressed to the whole church meaning then that we can set aside the teaching of the apostles and the prophets teaching us something like this the Old Testament Jesus set aside the Old Testament and now we can set aside the Old and New Testaments because the spirit is leading us into further truth and that won't do they are unique it's on them and on the Old Testament we build the faith now you notice because they're unique some of Jesus' authority is delegated to them verses 7 and 8 proclaim the kingdom of heaven is at hand that's what's said of

Jesus himself in chapter 4 in those days Jesus came proclaiming the kingdom is at hand they were to preach they were to heal and they were to cast out demons now once again you've got extreme views some say that the healing the casting out of demons cannot happen and did not happen after the apostolic period that seems to me to be going far beyond what the New Testament says because it can happen and it does happen particularly in situations of pioneer ministry where people are working in areas perhaps which have been controlled by superstition by witch doctors and so on and not just there I've come across it in the university world in Durham people play people people having making dangerous experiments with the occult and becoming terrified by it and by the grace of God being rescued from it now the point is it can still happen but we should not see this as the norm you see you get some people who say unless a church is manifesting these things unless there is casting out of demons unless there is physical healing then it cannot be filled with the spirit well look at the church in Corinth these things are happening what else is happening pride triumphalism hype an adulation of personalities the people call the super apostles what I'd want to say is this that

[20 : 49] God in his grace sometimes does these things and we must not and must never limit him on the other hand we must certainly never say that if these that the presence of these things is an evidence of the unusual power of the spirit or that the absence is an evidence of the absence of the spirit remember the greatest miracle of all the gospel is the power of God to the salvation of everyone who believes notice not accompanied by the power of God the gospel itself the word of the gospel is the power of God which brings people from darkness to light and notice something go nowhere among the gentiles verse 5 go only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel well once again at that stage in salvation history that was absolutely right they've already seen of course the wise men from the east the centurion and son the gospel was never parochial but at this moment the important focus is on the lost sheep of

Israel calling back to God the people who had rejected him and who were in fact sadly to reject him even even more so and at the end go and make disciples of all nations that's not what the twelve were asked to do they're specifically told not to do that and also the details here hospitality of course remembering that this reflects the conditions of the time inns would be dirty and dangerous and extravagantly expensive charging exorbitant prices and it's not saying you must never pay anyone who's laboring in the gospel indeed there are different arrangements for this the labourer is not just worthy of his food if people are going to serve in the gospel without other income the people of God need to support them and that's not what and of course once we and in Paul's letters there's a great deal about that about supporting the

Lord's servants so we mustn't make absolutes about this even shaking the dust off your feet now remember the apostles were unique but even today there come times when sometimes sometimes a minister or preacher come to the conviction that that place has hardened their hearts and it's time to leave once again we can't judge for other people or say that other people were right or wrong but you see what I'm getting at and the twelve of course are part of a larger group Acts 115 speaks of 120 in the early church as they waited for the coming of the spirit and as you know on the day of Pentecost 3000 were added so we must not take this as a blueprint for what we have to do in our churches and therefore not only appoint teachers and evangelists and youth workers and so on but appoint exorcists and healers that's not what this passage is saying on the other hand what is continuing the message the fundamental basic message continues the kingdom of heaven is at hand that is the message to be preached in the 21st century as well as in the first and indeed in every century until the

Lord returns calling people to become children of the kingdom and preaching teaching the word and once again in all the ways we can all the different ways we can by straightforward preaching and teaching by house groups by discussion groups by one to ones and of course by increasingly by all kinds of media digital as well as written all this is part of the continuing message and once again some will accept and some will reject and those who reject Jesus said this kind of thing before Sodom and Gomorrah did not have the clarity of the gospel people these people to whom Jesus went to whom the apostles went the kingdom was preached clearly and that's why greater knowledge leads to greater responsibility and you can see what I say it's a great and continuing task none of us none of us will ever complete that task but remember what I said a few moments ago this passage looks to the harvest the harvest will come it's certain

Spurgeon in one of the great preacher Spurgeon in one of his last sermons concluded by saying this the gospel will succeed the gospel must succeed it cannot be prevented from succeeding and in times of barrenness let's remember that and look to the Lord of the harvest Amen let's pray Lord God as laborers in your harvest field workers in your vineyard we pray that we may indeed be faithful to the word of the apostles and the prophets that we preach the kingdom that we may have discernment of the times and know where you are leading us and we pray Lord in the days to come many people who do not yet know you will come to know you and rejoice on the last day in the great multitude that no one can count before the throne of God and of the lamb and so we pray

[26 : 47] Lord of the harvest send laborers into your vineyard we thank you for those you've already sent and for those that you're already calling in Jesus name Amen Lord of have you and fine you