

The Harvest is Plentiful; Care, Pray, & Go

Matthew 9:35-38

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A few years ago a guy named Rick Richardson decided to do some of his own research in order to find out whether or not people were still open to or interested in having spiritual conversations with Christians. Richardson was concerned that many of our ministries and gospel-sharing strategies were based upon the assumption that Americans didn't care about (or even care for) the Christian message anymore. He had read the many doom-and-gloom reports of the diminishing American Church, that millennials and Gen Z don't like religion, and that the culture at large distrusted Christians so much that we now needed to worry more about protecting ourselves instead of proclaiming our message.

The truth, Richardson discovered, was quite a bit different from the myths and false narratives that declared the decline and forecasted the death of Christianity. In his book, "You Found Me", Richardson explains that the data he collected through interviews and surveys overwhelmingly indicates that people – young and old, church and unchurched, spiritually sensitive and even apathetic or atheistic – are still willing to have deep, meaningful, spiritual conversations when approached with respect, kindness, and genuine mutual engagement. Throughout the book Richardson goes to great lengths to show that if we as Christians are willing to be compassionate people, genuine friends, and good listeners...then those we meet who do not follow Jesus will very likely be willing to tell us about what they do believe, and listen to us share about our own faith too.

As a result of his findings, Richardson wanted the readers of his book to walk away being sure of this one thing:

*"I believe that Jesus' words about a plentiful harvest are just as true today as they were in his day. What we need is not naysayers, pessimism, and doom but rather laborers who see the harvest that is there and know how to cultivate it...The harvest is plentiful to those who have eyes to see it, a heart that is open to how it is expressed, and the skills in watering nurturing, and cultivating the spiritual interest that is common among people in our culture today."*¹

I agree with Rick Richardson – and more importantly, with Jesus Christ– that "*The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few*". I believe that if we go do the hard work of loving others, caring for their needs, and showing them the grace and mercy that are the hallmarks of the Kingdom of God, that we would find all around us a spiritual harvest of people who not only need to hear the Gospel message, but who the Holy Spirit has made ready to receive it as well.

¹ Rick Richardson, *You Found Me*, p54

I think we need to take seriously the truth that the people we meet and live among and interact with every single day are all people Jesus loves, God longs for, and the Holy Spirit pursues. The question is not whether there is a harvest to be gathered. The question is whether or not we are willing and able to do the work to see this plentiful harvest of lost and broken people find their restoration and salvation in Jesus Christ.

If we want our answer to be “yes” – if we are willing, if we want to share our faith with others, how might we get started? Or, if sharing the Gospel with others is something you have been doing for a long time, how do you keep going? How do we as Christians come alongside Jesus as he looks at the harvest, then follow his commands to go and gather?

I’d like to suggest that Jesus actually gives us both the example and the instructions we need in Matthew 9:35-38. In this passage we can see that as followers of Christ we must:

Care About the People Around Us (v. 36)

Pray for the People Among Us (v. 38)

Go to People Both Near and Far (vv. 37-38)

In Matthew Chapter 9 Jesus is spending some time traveling throughout the region of Galilee. At this point his ministry is pretty well known and gaining a bigger and bigger following day by day. Huge crowds of broken, hurting, and lost people began to seek him out. Villagers and townsfolk by the hundreds, maybe thousands, headed for their local synagogues (Jewish places of worship) hoping for a chance to hear the amazing teacher and see for themselves the extent of his power. Matthew doesn’t tell us much about these people, but he does tell us very clearly how Jesus responded to them and received them:

35 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. 36 When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.

Matthew 9:35-36 (NIV)

Jesus had compassion for those who came to him with their needs.

Jesus cared about the people around him.

Jesus saw the crowds, saw the sick, saw the suffering, saw the people who were harassed and rendered helpless by a hard life in a sinful world...and he did not turn away.

If you want to be a follower of Jesus Christ, then you need to realize that this is the sort of attitude and character that you are called to emulate. Jesus allowed himself to be emotionally impacted and deeply moved by the sorrow and the pain of people, and then he tried to engage it in a meaningful way. He did not think less of these people for being broken. He did not lash out and begin labeling them as sinners,

or enemies, or animals, or monsters, or anything that diminished their humanity. Their helplessness did not draw out any judgment from Jesus. Instead, it brought forth this love and compassion.

If we want to be followers of Jesus, we must respond to the needs and circumstances of others with this same kind of love and compassion, too. **We need to care about the people around us**, just as Jesus cared about the people around him.

Think for a moment about your normal daily routine. Where are the places to go? Who are the people you usually bump into? Co-workers, fellow students, other parents at play-groups, grocery store clerks, friends you spend time with, family who live close by, the people you share an apartment complex with, your neighbors, your favorite coffee shop workers...the list could probably go on.

As you think about all these people, ask yourself this: if Jesus were to go along with you on your day-to-day, when and where might he stop and say *“here is a place where the people are harassed and helpless. This is where we can find sheep who need a shepherd, lost souls who need someone to care.”*

Who are the people Jesus wants you to care about? What attitudes or judgments might you need to change in order to make your heart more compassionate, more loving, and more ready to see others the way Jesus sees them?

I believe that the harvest is plentiful. I believe that there are people in your life, in my life, and in the lives of Christians all over the world, that Jesus longs to see come to have faith in Him. And I believe that a critical first step in reaching those people is learning to care for them and about them in the same sort of way Jesus does.

We also **need to pray for the people among us**.

37 Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. 38 Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.”

Matthew 9:37-38 (NIV)

I love that Jesus makes it clear that we’re not supposed to carry the burdens of the world on our own. We’re not meant to try and be a one-person solution to all the suffering we encounter, and we cannot expect success if we try to share the good news about Jesus all by ourselves all the time. We need to ask God for help, and we need to ask God to send help. The ESV translation captures this a little more clearly in its version of v 38:

*“...therefore **pray earnestly** to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.”*

If we really want to see a major movement of the Gospel in our relationships, in our community, in our state, in our nation, and throughout the world...then we need to be praying, earnestly, for the people among us – our brothers and sisters in Christ – as well as for ourselves, to be energized and mobilized for carrying out the mission of God.

Years ago I traveled to South Asia with one of Faith's missionaries and had the chance to meet 30 or so of the missionaries in their network. During our visits I asked as many of them as I could, "What is one thing you wish the people from your church back home could do to better support you?"

Not a single one of these missionaries asked for more money. None of them asked for materials resources, or study materials, or sabbaticals, or anything like that.

Every single missionary said nearly the same exact thing: "We want people to know how desperately we need their prayers. Get people to pray for us, and pray for people to come join us."

Here at Faith we have sent and currently support 12 missionaries (and their kiddos), sent to places all over the world. You can find some of them listed on our website via the "Outreach" menu, while others' identities need to be treated with a bit more confidentiality. I can guarantee you, with all seriousness and no hyperbole, that every single one of our missionaries would be tremendously blessed by anyone's commitment to pray for them regularly. They all need God's blessings of provision and protection. They all need to know that we, as their sending church, care about their work and care about their lives. I encourage you to either visit the website and pick a few to pray for, or you can reach out to me and I will get you a complete list of who they are and how to get connected to them so you can learn more about their specific prayer requests. Just write "pray for missionaries" on the connection card, and you'll hear from me later this week.

And it's just not global missionaries who need us to pray earnestly. We also support dozens of campus ministers, and have even more who are a part of Faith's congregation. There are highschool students headed to Ghana this summer, and college students setting out for short term missions projects this summer.

We have a deep need for all who attend Faith to pray for the people among us. To stir up ministry, missional action through prayers that inspire hearts and help us see how the Holy Spirit is on the move here in Manhattan and all over the world.

Who might you be willing to pray for, or what sort of a commitment to prayer might you be willing to make, in order to see more people set out to share the Gospel? Can you think of a specific person to pray for, or a group of people who need believers sent their way?

Do you feel like perhaps you need to pray for yourself, and your own discernment, in your own call to the harvest?

Because the last thing we must do is *go to people both near and far* in order to share the truth about Jesus that can save and change their lives.

38 Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.”

Matthew 9:38 (NIV)

Right after this passage, in Matthew 10:1-15, Jesus challenges his disciples to put this prayer into action.

They are told to “go” -- go to the diseased, the dying, the despised, to those suffering from demonic affliction. They are to go into areas of great danger and speak with people who might do them harm. They will have to humbly rely on the hospitality of others and the provision of God. There will be abundant times and lean times, there will be acceptance and persecution, there will be great movements of faith and terribly slow moments where they are tempted to doubt their calling...but the harvest is too plentiful, and the workers too few, for followers of Jesus to do anything else but find their way to get involved and share the love and truth and Gospel that brings lost sheep into the fold of the Good Shepherd.

Our challenge really isn't to figure out *if we should go*, but rather, *who we should go to*. It might be your family. It might be your neighbors. It might be someone you meet at the park, while walking a trail, at the gym, or while you're finding a book at the library. Perhaps you will be among those who feel God prompting you to take seriously the chance to go a little farther, and consider a calling to international missions work. It always seems like a wild idea at first, but we worship a God who sometimes calls us to radical, life-changing service.

Whether it is “here” or “there”, local or global, domestic or foreign, Christians need to be people who go into the world and share the Gospel. It's who we are and what we do. It's part of our spiritual DNA. So, this week, I hope you take some time to seriously consider and pray about who God might be calling you to go to, and how.

To help with this, I've provided a small way to think about and commit to Jesus' commands of care, pray, and go.

This week I hope you all will spend some time with God and figure out how He has called you to complete these statements and follow through in their implications:

- I will care for _____
 - Who, by name, will you love, serve, and treat with compassion?
- I will pray for _____

- Can you find a missionary from Faith, a campus minister at K-State, or a gospel movement that you wish to lift up in prayer on a regular basis?
- I will go to _____
- Who are you called to share the Gospel with? Who can you pray for to receive your testimony with interest? Who can you go to, and when, and how?

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

You all can do this. You can care for the people around you. You can pray for your brothers and sisters in Christ. And you can go and share the Gospel with ears ready to hear and hearts ready to receive, in the name of Christ, for the glory of God.