

Preaching the Word

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[0 : 00] Now let's turn to the first passage of scripture that we read in Matthew chapter 9. Matthew chapter 9, and we read again from verse 35 to verse 38.

Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness.

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

Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field. What does the world need today is a question that may sometimes bother us.

What is it that we should really be concentrating on for the needs of the world around us today? What should the Christian Church be concentrating its mind on as we look at the situation in the world and in society today?

[1 : 23] Well, there are many things that can spring to our minds concerning the needs of the world. There is the need of health, medical care.

In our own country, we are well supplied with these things, although there are changes taking place in that area. Other areas of the world, great need in that particular area.

Education, again, changes taking place in our own society. Other parts of the world, in great need of basic education. Many parts of the world, in great need of agricultural development.

Whereas, in our own Western world, it seems as if we are overproducing for the number of people that we have. Then there is the whole question about the care of the planet in which we live.

The concern about the environment, ecology. There is also concern about political freedom. There is also concern about the world, many areas of the world, still in oppression and tyranny.

[2 : 28] So many things for us to be concerned about. Many, many other areas we could mention as things of tremendous importance in their own right. There are so many things that perhaps we feel a little bit like Martha.

Remember that time when Jesus came to the house of Martha and Mary. And Martha was worried and upset about so many things, Jesus said. There were so many things that she saw that needed to be done.

And she was complaining about her sister Mary who was sitting down at the feet of Jesus, listening to him, drinking in his words. Jesus said, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things.

That Mary has chosen that one thing needful that will not be taken from her. What had Mary chosen? She had chosen the thing of greatest importance.

The words of Jesus Christ. Because you see, everything else hangs on that. That is the great powerhouse from which everything else comes. The Christian church is weak and helpless in face of all the manifold problems of the world unless it knows that power of God in the word of Jesus Christ.

[3 : 44] And so tonight I want to consider what the Lord Jesus has to say to us here in these verses at the end of Matthew chapter 9. Because I believe these verses are teaching us, as many other passages in the New Testament do, the need of preachers of the word of God.

The great need of preaching of God's word in the world today. Now that's not to say that all these other things I mentioned are not important.

Of course they are. But what the emphasis of the New Testament is, is that if we have our priorities right, if we lay our foundation right, if we bring the word of God to bear on all these different situations, then we will begin to deal with some of the problems of the world.

But first, we must make known this word. What did Jesus think concerning this matter? And what did he do?

What was his practice? Because what you do shows what you think in your heart about things. Well, we know what Jesus did. We see in verse 35 that he went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and preaching the good news of the kingdom.

[5 : 07] But right away, you will say, there in that same verse 35, we read that Jesus also healed every disease and sickness.

So Jesus, you say, was not just concentrating on preaching. He was doing other things as well. He was doing what we may call social work as well.

Well, that's true. Because the Lord Jesus came to declare the love of God to the whole man, not just to some disembodied spirit, because that is not what we are essentially as human beings. We are body-soul units. Jesus cared for people's bodies as well as for their soul. But I would suggest to you that the main emphasis of Jesus' practice and of his teaching was concerning the preaching of the word.

Now, I know this, in a sense, is going against the trend that is taking place in the Christian church at the present time. And this trend, it bases itself upon the example of Jesus in healing people.

[6 : 22] The example of his apostles in healing people. And so this trend in the Christian church today says, we don't need to concentrate on the preaching of the word so much.

We need to concentrate on the practical works of caring for people, whether in terms of spiritual healing, supernatural healing, or in more ordinary and mundane ways.

Well, we need to get the perspective right here. Jesus certainly healed people by the word of his power.

His disciples certainly healed people by his authority. There is absolutely no doubt about that. That is part of the great supernatural power of Jesus Christ, part of the evidence that he was whom he claimed to be.

But Jesus himself teaches the meaning of this ministry of his in miracles. He himself calls those miracles signs.

[7 : 36] Do you remember what we've noticed before in John's Gospel, John chapter 6, where there the people were so taken up with the bread that perished?

So taken up with the bread and fish that Jesus had multiplied to feed the 5,000. They were taken up with this worldly concerns. And Jesus says, that is not what I've been teaching you.

He was teaching them concerning the bread from heaven, which was himself. He said, the words that I speak to you, they are spirit and they are life. In other words, he was directing people's attention away from the things of this worldly concern primarily to himself.

Because it was only through him, it was only through hearing his word, it was only through coming to a personal relationship with him, that there could be solution to the problems and the troubles. Because, you see, there were those who wanted to come and to make him king by force. And Jesus knew, apart from anything else, that that would simply not work.

[8 : 45] Just another political revolution or solution or policy, it would not work because it would not change the hearts of men. They showed that they were unchanged. They were still concerned about the food that perished.

Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God. So Jesus spoke of his miracles, healing and otherwise, a sign. And a sign points, it points to Jesus. And it says, this is the Son of God. This is the one who is the Savior of the world. This is the one who not only can heal bodies, but he can heal what is even more important, he can heal spirits. He can heal souls. He can heal that great division that has been brought in between God and man. by human sin. So he came to concentrate his attention on the greatest disease of all.

That is the disease of sin. And that is where his emphasis lies. People say, well, Jesus healed the sick, so we should do the same today.

[9 : 56] But we also read that Jesus raised the dead and his disciples also. Does that mean to say that we should have today a ministry of raising the dead? There is no command given to the ongoing church to do that in a physical way.

But certainly, these things were signs concerning our great work of raising the spiritually dead. the great miracle of the regeneration of a soul dead in trespasses and sins.

And that is the great commission that the Lord Jesus gives to his church. So Jesus himself did not single-handedly attempt to right all the wrongs in the world.

Those who go to the New Testament looking for that kind of Jesus will be disappointed. They will not find such a one there. There were many problems in his day. There were political problems, problems of injustice and all the rest of it.

But Jesus did not set about trying single-handedly to change the whole of society, to change political structures and all these things. He focused his attention primarily on his preaching of the good news of the kingdom.

[11 : 14] That is what Jesus did when he went throughout the towns and villages, whether he was in the synagogue or whether he was out on the hills or by the seashore. That is what he was doing. He was teaching.

He was preaching. He was preaching the truth concerning himself, concerning the needs of mankind and concerning the great way of salvation. But Jesus was not forgetful in doing that of the great and crying social needs of various kinds.

Think of the great example of the town of Jericho. There was the town of Jericho and if an army of modern sociologists and psychologists were to come there and were to figure out what was wrong with the place, they would soon be able to tell you.

There was a corrupt system. There was a corrupt system of tax collection. There were all these tax collectors who were taking their own share out of the taxes and then passing it on to a cheap tax collector and he took out his own big share out of it all and then he passed on what was left to the Romans.

And of course, anybody could see that the whole system was corrupt. Anybody could analyse that situation and see what was wrong. But the modern world thinks that because we can look at a situation and analyse it and see what's wrong, we have the solution of it.

[12 : 36] You don't. But Jesus walked into Jericho one day and he changed the situation. Not by trying to change the structure but by changing a man.

That man was Zacchaeus, the little chief tax collector who wanted to see Jesus and he even climbed up a tree to see Jesus. And Jesus noticed that one lost poor soul, rich in material things, but so poor spiritually.

And Jesus said, come down Zacchaeus, I must come to your house today. And that coming of Jesus to Zacchaeus' house and to Zacchaeus' heart was a turning point not just for Zacchaeus himself, but surely for the whole structure of the tax collecting system in Jericho.

because he said that he was going to put right what had been wrong. He was going to give back what he had taken wrongly. And he was going to give his money to the poor.

A tremendous transformation because Jesus changed a human heart. And so we need to have this perspective on the world in which we live today. So many needs, so many problems.

[13 : 55] But we must lay this great emphasis where Jesus laid it upon the preaching of the word. Because it is in that preaching, it is in that witness of his people and in the public proclamation of God's word that human hearts will be changed.

And it is by human hearts being changed that a change will come in all different areas of society. What did Jesus commission his disciples to do?

We've looked at what Jesus did. We've looked at his emphasis. And we've looked at the affected hand. But we might say, well, that was what Jesus did.

Maybe he told his disciples to do something else. No, we find that Jesus commissioned his disciples in the same terms. Yes, we see that during his earthly ministry especially, there was still an emphasis with the disciples on doing things like healing and even raising the dead.

death. But when he gives his great commission, his lasting commission to the church, which we read at the end of Luke's gospel, the beginning of the book of Acts, and at the end of Matthew's gospel, we read that he spoke in these terms, you will be my witnesses.

[15 : 14] And he said, go and make disciples of all nations, teaching them to observe all that I've commanded you. These were the terms in the great abiding commission of Christ to his church.

And so we see that when he came to choose the apostle Paul to be the great missionary to the Gentiles, to be the one who really was going to take on the work beyond what the twelve had already started to do, he commissioned him in exactly those same terms.

We read of it in Paul's own account, given before the governor Festus and King Agrippa. And there he spoke quite clearly concerning what Jesus had told him, that he was going to be sent to be a light to the Gentiles.

He was going to be sent to bring them this message of hope and of salvation, to bring them out of darkness into life, from Satan's kingdom to God.

God. So again we see that the abiding message of Christ's commission to his church is this great spiritual one, because there lies the key to all benefit for mankind.

[16:32] time. So we have seen what Jesus thought by how he acted. We see his priority.

We see his thinking concerning how to approach the manifold needs of the world around him. But then secondly I want to look with you at the heart of the preacher.

preacher. He has said we need preachers. By his own action and by his commissioning the church he has said we need preachers. We need this preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

But Jesus himself also evidenced the heart of the preacher. What kind of preachers do we need?

What kind of preachers does this poor, lost and confused and bewildered world actually need?

Well they need preachers like the Lord Jesus Christ who had the heart of a shepherd. Jesus here says or said of Jesus when he saw the clouds he had compassion on them because they were harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd.

[17:49] We notice Jesus' observation. Jesus noticed things. Jesus was a keen observer of human behaviour and that's no doubt a great part of the explanation of how he knew people's need.

Of how he could lay his hand exactly on the spot where that person was needy, where that person needed his grace. so that he could speak to a person often for the first time and he could immediately assess their situation.

He observed. He watched the crowds. He saw the crowds. And he saw them with a particular kind of understanding. Other people might have looked at those crowds and they might have just seen crowds.

They might have been like the disciples on one occasion saying how can we feed all these people?

They saw the crowds just as a botheration. On another time the crowds were so great around Jesus they were standing on each other trying to get near him.

On another occasion they were pressing in on him and Jesus was on his way to heal Jairus' daughter. And he was being held back by the crowds that were there.

[19:12] so often his disciples would have looked at those crowds and they would have wished them far enough. They didn't want them to be there they just saw them as a bonnet. Maybe that's the way we think of crowds.

We walk down Union Street and bustle here and there and there's crowds of people. We see people pouring out of a football match and again it's just a botheration. But Jesus saw the crowds. He observed them and he saw something different. He didn't just see an amorphous mass of people. He didn't just see people who were a bother to him.

But he saw people who were needy. He saw people who were harassed and helpless. That could also be translated he saw people who were distressed and downcast.

You see he saw people as they really were. Not the outward shells but he saw into their hearts. He saw people who were in distress.

[20:17] People who didn't have the answers to life. People who couldn't cope with the difficulties that they had to face up to. People who were downcast, who were depressed.

Their heads, their very heads were hanging down. They were like sheep that were sort of at the end of their tether.

They were staggering along with their heads down. He looked at them and they looked to him like sheep without a shepherd. They were pastorless. There was no one to guide them or to direct them.

They were lost and bewildered. Jesus looked at the clouds and that's what he saw. Now we need today preachers of God's word who have this kind of heart.

Who have this heart that observes what people are like. This kind of heart that sees the world that we live in today. Not the world that we lived in last century or the century before.

[21:22] But this century, at the very end of this century, approaching the beginning of a new century and a new millennium. We need to see people as they are now. With their present needs.

With their present misunderstandings concerning the gospel. Their present ignorance of the gospel and all the rest of it. Their present needs and fears and hopelessness.

Their present concern with material things or whatever it may be. We need preachers who observe what is happening in the world around them. But more than that, we need preachers who have the heart of a shepherd.

Like Jesus who looked at those crowds and saw them as sheep without a shepherd. We need preachers who have a heart of compassion.

That's the word used here of Jesus. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them. This word compassion in the Greek is a very powerful word.

[22 : 24] It implies that he was deeply moved when he saw them. He was moved to the depth of his being by the needs of those people. He saw them as needy.

He saw them as wandering and helpless. And his heart went out to them. They were a sheep without a shepherd and he was the great and the good shepherd. And he was the one who could meet their needs.

And so he reached out to them to help them. He taught them. He preached to them. He healed their sick. He was concerned to help them. And so again, we need today to have those who will have that heart.

The heart of the Lord Jesus Christ. The compassion of the Lord Jesus Christ. To those who today are broken hearted. And those whose homes are broken up.

Their families destroyed. Their hopes dashed. Disillusionment in place of all perhaps the grand hopes and dreams that they once had.

[23 : 31] People perhaps still who are taken up with material things and finding in them no satisfaction. We need as Christians and we need as preachers to a people who are concerned for those who are lost.

people. So Jesus had the heart of a preacher and we today need to seek preachers with similar hearts.

In our concern for the world around us our concern ought to be that the word of God is preached.

And our concern ought to be that it is preached by those who have that pastor's heart.

That shepherd's heart. Seeing the needs of people and reaching out to them. But Jesus then speaks of a shortage of preachers.

Then he said to his disciples the harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Jesus I think spoke those words again out of his deep compassion.

[24 : 44] He was deeply moved by the scene before him. And it hurt him to see those crowds those masses of people. And they didn't have a pastor.

They didn't have a preacher. There weren't enough preachers and pastors to go around. Those who ought to have been shepherds of the people. They were as was prophesied in the Old Testament not looking after the needs of the sheep their people but they were looking after themselves.

They were lining their own nests whether materially or spiritually speaking trying to increase their reputation before men and if it were possible to increase their reputation before God.

And they spoke of the people dismissively as the people of the land. And Jesus saw all those crowds of needy people and he wanted there to be shepherds.

He wanted there to be preachers to minister to those people. He saw the situation that he says the harvest is plentiful. What did he mean by that?

[25 : 50] He meant that there was a great harvest of need. That was what he saw. He saw people who were needy.

People who were ready to hear the gospel because they didn't have answers. And the gospel was the answer to their problems and to their needs.

He saw this tremendous harvest. I didn't mean to say that he wasn't excluding here the idea of sowing. A great deal of work might have to be done before the full harvest was brought in.

But the point is there was a great harvest of need. And Jesus was moved with compassion when he saw that there weren't enough shepherds, there weren't enough preachers, there weren't enough people to be meeting that need.

The workers are few. Well, he was speaking here, no doubt, concerning himself and his own disciples, his own apostles, the twelve, just a group there of thirteen.

[27 : 02] And some of them even weren't very good, because amongst those was included Judas Iscariot. So Jesus looked at the massive need and he saw the fewness of numbers seeking to meet that need.

Why were there so few? Well, there were so few, probably for similar reasons to why there are few today. Those who would follow Jesus as closely as these men did and seek to serve him, they had low status in the society around.

Those who had status were the religious leaders like the Pharisees and the Sadducees. But those who followed Jesus, they were looked down upon.

They came in for all sorts of hassle from these supposedly spiritual leaders. They came in for all sorts of opposition. We get some of the carping and sniping criticism that comes their way in the gospel.

Who was going to want all that? They had low status. But also there were low returns material.

[28 : 21] They were told simply to come and to follow Jesus and their needs would be met. Nothing extra, just their needs would be met. Low status, low pay, and maximum hassle, opposition, difficulty, misunderstanding, misrepresentation, all these things.

These things are just true today. If someone desires truly today to preach God's word without fear or favor, if someone today seeks to pastor God's people, not taking just the status of a minister, but seeking to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ, then he today no doubt will have all these things too. It's not a very attractive prospect. That's part of the reason, no doubt, why there were few laborers in those days. It's part of the explanation, no doubt, why there's few today.

Tremendous need, tremendous need in our nation for the church of Jesus Christ to be built up again, and so few to do it. We see in our own city here in Aberdeen, places that were once churches, once packed with people, and now some of them are houses for people to live in. Well, that's quite a good use for an old church. Others are places of entertainment, or eating places. You see where the emphasis has gone?

[30 : 02] The emphasis has turned from the spiritual. Those buildings that were built as testimony to the changing power of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Those buildings that were built to direct men's eyes heavenward are now being used to direct men's minds earthward. See the change that has taken place in our society.

And who is there today concerned to build up the church of Jesus Christ again in our land? we are concerned to build up things materially, but so slow to be concerned to build them up spiritually.

It is going to take hard work. It is going to be trouble and distress. But that is what the preacher of God's word is called to do. Jesus spoke of the shortage of preachers.

But finally Jesus provided the solution concerning this great need of preacher. And it's got two parts to it.

[31 : 12] The first is he told us to pray. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.

That's where we must begin, is it not? At the place of prayer. Prayer collectively, in the churches, prayer at prayer meetings, prayer individually, prayer of concern for our society, but prayer especially that God would raise up men to preach his word.

Ask the Lord of the harvest. Jesus tells us to pray because he brings a certain perspective to bear on this problem. what is that perspective? It is this.

He says, whose harvest is it? Whose world is it? To whom do all these people belong, these harassed and helpless? Who created them?

Who sustains them? Whose harvest field is this? It is God's. It is his field.

[32 : 23] It is his harvest. God's God's whole operation is his. This whole concern that the word of Jesus Christ should be made known into all the world.

It is God's concern. It is his doing that he sent his son into this world to be the savior of those who are poor and lost and needy.

He did it. He has thought it out and conceived it. He brought it to fruition. and he has got all the plans and he's got all the commandments and all the structures necessary in his word commanded as to how we are to go about making known this word.

Jesus therefore says pray. Ask the Lord of the harvest. That's where we must begin.

we believe in this church that God is sovereign. We believe it because God's word says it. But do we believe it in prayer?

[33 : 32] Do we believe it as we face up to those problems that confront us today? Or do we sort of lay the emphasis on what we can do and what we think? We must begin at this point of utter helplessness before God to bring the situation before him, the decline in our society, the tremendous problems, the tremendous apathy, the tremendous ignorance, the tremendous materialism, the tremendous growing interest in a false spirituality.

We must bring all these needs before him, this great harvest field of need, and we must cry out to him to send out the men into that harvest field, to send out workers into his harvest field, because these preachers, these pastors, they must be sent by God.

It is not enough for a man to raise himself up and to think that he can do things in his own strength. We need men who are commissioned by God and empowered by God, because the difficulties that will confront them are far greater than human flesh can bear.

In the ministry today, we hear all about it, the tremendous problems that there are, the burnout rate, as it is called in the ministry, the tremendous pressures and tensions, and people who simply cannot take it.

Well, who can take it unless the power of God is there? So we must ask that God is sending these people out, and God will sustain them, and God will raise up men enabled to preach the unsearchable riches of Christ.

[35 : 23] But then we don't stop there. I know the chapter stops there, but the chapter divisions are not inspired. Matthew did not write in chapters and verses. The chapters and verses are only a convenient way of us dividing up the text so that we can refer to it.

Matthew went right on to say what Jesus said. He called his twelve disciples to him and gave them authority to drive out evil spirits and to heal every disease and sickness.

And read on right down to verse six, go rather to the lost sheep of Israel, and as you go preach this message, the kingdom of heaven is near. What am I saying?

I'm saying this. He didn't just ask his disciples to get down on their knees and pray. Yes, prayer is absolutely essential, but there's the opposite danger that we can say all that we have to do is pray. But tonight all that we have to do is not just pray. We have to pray and we have to begin by praying, but then we have got to be ready to answer God's call. We've got to answer God's call.

[36 : 28] Every single Christian person in the church tonight must answer God's call in this way, that we are not only to pray that God would act and do something, but that we are to say, here am I, send me.

Now, not all of us can be preachers of the gospel in the sense in which I've been concentrating on tonight, but all of us are called to be witnesses. It is the whole church that is to go into all the world. The whole church that is to carry out the commission that Jesus Christ gave us. The preacher of the word cannot go into every nook and cranny of the world, but the people of God can, because they are there, in the workplaces, in the home, in the contacts with friends, in their own leisure time, in all these places the people of God are.

And wherever we are, we are to be witnesses for the truth of Jesus Christ. So we don't just pray, but we act and we work in this harvest field.

But supremely, surely there is this. This word tonight is surely coming to some here as a challenge to consider, not just to pray that God would do something to raise up great creatures of his word, but that we might say, as Isaiah said, in answer to the call of God, who shall go for us, who will we send?

[38 : 00] Who will answer, here am I, send me. In face of all the difficulties, in face of all the troubles that confront the preacher of God's word today, and the one who would seek to be a pastor, who would seek to have that compassion upon the lost, in face of all these difficulties to say, here am I, send me.

Not because I have any great strength or wisdom in myself, but because I have this desire, I have this compassion of which Jesus speaks, this desire to make known God's word.

Now, of course, that is only part of that great call which God gives to men to be preachers of his word, because that call must be confirmed by the church of Jesus Christ.

Christ. It is not just simply one man's opinion of himself, or one man's response in his own feelings. It has to be confirmed by the views of the church of Jesus Christ, that here is someone with gifts, here is someone who gives evidence of having that concern, and having that God-given ability to make known the unsearchable riches of Christ.

but it must have that personal individual element. Are there those here tonight who are prepared to respond at one level or another, to respond to go and to make known the gospel of Jesus Christ, to go simply where you are to do it, or to go in this special way of being one of those who will publicly proclaim God's word, God's word.

[39 : 51] We need that great ministry today, and we need great preachers today, because there are tremendous difficulties of communication barriers, tremendous difficulties of people misunderstanding, tremendous problems of people not wanting to come to church.

So there must be people of tremendous God-given ability, tremendously blessed by the Spirit of God, to capture the attention in the hearts of men and women and boys and girls, men who are prepared to pray, as Dr.

Martin Lloyd-Jones advised, to ask God to set me on fire, that people will come to see me burn. We need people who are consumed by the love of Jesus Christ and concern for their fellow men, to that extent, to make known the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Let us then, in all our thinking about the troubles of the world around us today, make this a great priority in our praying, in our thinking, and in our acting, that God would raise up such men.

[41 : 06] Let us pray. our gracious and loving Heavenly Father, you know our hearts, and you know how cold they often are in the light of your great words to us.

O Lord, forgive us, and O Lord, we pray that tonight we might be moved by your word and spirit, to pray as we have never prayed before, to speak as we have never spoken before, to witness as we have never witnessed before, to love as we have never loved before.

We recognize we cannot do it in our own strength, for so often we have tried and failed. Grant us that patience and perseverance to continue to look to you, that the fire of your spirit may fall upon us and bless us, and consume us in service of the Lord Jesus Christ.

We ask these things in his name. Amen.