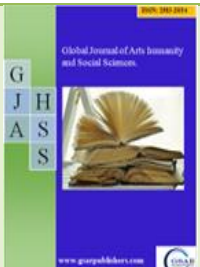
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THE HARVEST AND THE NEED FOR MORE WORKERS: AN INTERPRETATION OF MATTHEW 9:35-38

By

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Abstract

The observation of Jesus Christ and his statement concerning harvest and the need for more workers over 2000 years ago still proves cogent in the world today, filled with bountiful harvest and in need of genuine, diligent and faithful workers. In the Gospels, Jesus often spoke about harvest in regards to mission and eschatological events, both metaphorically in term of souls winning, that is, the winning of new disciples into God's kingdom, as it is in Matthew 9:35-38, which is the primary concern and heart of God. Matthew 9:35-38 paints the picture of Jesus' mind towards the bountiful harvest and a need for more workers to be added to the few ones who are available, in order to accomplish the task and mission of God here on earth. The study of Matthew 9:35-38 will enable the contemporary believers to gain insight into Jesus' desires and expectation concerning the harvest and the need for more workers. The purpose of this article is to interpret Matthew 9:35-38 and argue that through prayer more workers who are motivated by compassion will be sent to the field for a bumper harvest. In order to achieve the purpose, the descriptive method is adopted in the article. Consequently, the following implications are drawn in the article. First, the ministry of the church is not different from Jesus' threefold ministry of teaching, preaching and healing. Second, the motivation for ministry should be compassion. Third, there is need for willing and faithful workers to join Christ in the harvesting work. Conclusively, there is a need to pray more fervently like Jesus, for the increase of compassionate and faithful workers and God will definitely respond to the prayer.

Keywords: Harvest, Need, Workers, Matthew 9:35-38, Christian Missions

1.0 Introduction

The truth and the relevance of the Word of God cannot be repudiated in all ages, no matter how old it is. The observation of Jesus Christ and his statement concerning harvest and the need for more workers over 2000 years ago still proves cogent in the world today, filled with bountiful harvests and in need of genuine, diligent, and faithful workers.

The harvest which is the culmination of the agricultural cycle could refer to as the ingathering of ripened crops. The word 'harvest' has been used in different contexts of both the Old and New Testaments. In the Gospels, Jesus often spoke about harvest in regards to the mission and eschatological events, both metaphorically in terms of souls winning, that is, the winning of new disciples into God's kingdom, as it is in Matthew 9:35-38, which is the primary concern and heart of God, and parabolically,

in term of final judgment as found in Matthew 13:30, when the wicked and ungodly people will be separated from the righteous ones in the last day.

While the primary focus of Matthew 9:35-38 is on the mission before the final judgment, the attitude of some so-called ministers of God and the churches is incoherent with the Mission of God. The priority of such ministers is not the harvest of souls. The focus of their preaching is not the salvation of souls. Their eyes are closed to the plight of the lost souls who are being harassed and in need of salvation. These ministers are not true and genuine workers who prioritize mission or souls winning for God above any other things. While there are many whose hearts are eager to receive the good news of salvation and are ready to be won into God's kingdom but no one to reach out to them or meet appropriately their spiritual need, thus, they are ignorantly perishing.



Matthew 9:35-38 paints the picture of Jesus' mind towards the bountiful harvest and a need for more workers to be added to the few ones who are available, to accomplish the task and mission of God here on earth. The study of Matthew 9:35-38 will enable contemporary believers to gain insight into Jesus' desires and expectations concerning the harvest and the need for more workers. The purpose of this article is to interpret Matthew 9:35-38 and argue that through prayer more workers who are motivated by compassion will be sent to the field for a bumper harvest. Consequently, many souls will be won into God's kingdom, more disciples will be made for the kingdom's purpose and many will be delivered from the power of darkness.

2.0 The Interpretation of Matthew 9:35-38.

35 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.

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

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 9:35-38NIV

Matthew 9:1-34 focuses on Christ's ministry of harvesting. He went around healing the paralytic, a woman subject to bleeding, calling the sinner to be his disciples, raising the dead, opening the eyes of the blind, and teaching about fasting. Matthew 9:35-38 belongs to the discourse of Matthew 9:35-10:42. R. T France says that the discourse deals with the disciples and Jesus' mission. Hence, the focus of this discourse is primarily on the mission. France tags the pericope Matthew 9:35-38 as 'Workers for the Harvest'.ⁱ Thus, Matthew 9:35-38 gives a summary statement about Jesus' ministry and the need for more workers in his harvest field. The interpretation of Matthew 9:35-38 is given as follows:

2.1 Verses 35, 36

In verse 35, Matthew reveals Jesus' threefold ministry namely: teaching, preaching, and healing, which are requisites unavoidably paramount to his mission on earth.ⁱⁱ He taught the kingdom principles in the synagogues. He preached the good news of the kingdom. Jesus healed all kinds of sicknesses and diseases. For Jesus to accomplish this threefold ministry, he went around villages and towns. He went to catch fishes where they are located. He worked in this way, purposefully to win the lost souls back to God's kingdom. As an exemplary leader to his disciples, Jesus participated in the task of harvesting. He became a good model for the disciples.

In Verse 36, the spectacular nature of Jesus' ministry eventually attracted large crowds, and as Jesus observed the crowd, he had compassion toward them. Compassion is one of the numerous attributes of God. Thus, compassion is part of the nature of Jesus. It usually motivates Jesus in his mission on earth. Jesus was always

looking for the lost and needy souls with compassion because they were valuable in his sight.

The three aspects that compelled Jesus to be compassionate to the people are their number, their condition, and the reason for their condition - their having no shepherd.ⁱⁱⁱ Jesus saw a large crowd of people, who were harassed and helpless. They were like sheep bothered and set to confusion by wolves - the religious leaders who should have been their shepherds but were trying to keep the sheep from following Jesus the true Shepherd. These sheep were lying down and unable to help themselves up and having no shepherd to guide and protect them, the people were continuously maligned by the religious leaders, helpless before them, and wandering about with no spiritual guidance like sheep without a shepherd, which is the reason for their condition. Taking cognizance of the Greek comparative particle *w(sei) (hosei)* 'like' - in verse 36 - 'like sheep without a shepherd.'^{iv} Jesus could have employed this statement as a simile, to stress the great importance and essence of the need for a genuine and loyal shepherd over the sheep, and what tragedy the absence of such can eventually bring upon the sheepfold.^v

Jesus did not just observe and continue to look at the situation, rather in response to the people's 'helpless' condition, Jesus had compassion on them, and he was moved with a bowel yearning, sympathy, and pity toward the people.

2.2 Verses 37, 38

In these verses, the compassion of Jesus from the preceding verse hereby metamorphosed into the action of opening the eyes of the disciples to the situation and condition of the world around them and what steps ought to be taken. Truly, unless there is a feeling of compassion there may be no missional action or effort.^{vi} Jesus disclosed to his disciples that the field is full of plenty of harvests, people who need the gospel of salvation, healing, deliverance, spiritual guidance, and nourishment for spiritual growth and maturity.

However, the workers who are divinely qualified and called to gather them in 'are few.' Hence, additional workers are necessary to complete the harvest.^{vii} At that time, many people were blindly led by legalistic teachers, whose ultimate ambition was just to maintain their position and power over the people, following their deceptive philosophy and human traditions.^{viii}

Meanwhile, there were few among the people who were spiritually leading the people according to the grace and love of God.^{ix} It was for this reason Jesus decided to encourage his disciples to pray to the Lord of the harvest, namely, God the Father, to send out additional workers (cf. Luke 10:2). For he could not do the work alone, he needed others to join him in what he was already doing. He requested that His disciples pray that God would provide the needed workers. It was not long after this event that the disciples themselves were involved in the ministry of preaching, teaching, and healing as seen in Matthew 10. Jesus established two facts that the harvest is plentiful and that the workers are few.

The plentiful harvest implies a large number of people in need of the Gospel of salvation. The 'few workers' implies a few people who are referred to as toilers, laborers, or teachers from the Greek text, who would not be sufficient to carry out the task of harvest efficiently and swiftly. 'Few workers' does not necessarily mean the absence of people who are to work, rather, the exposure of people who are in a position to harvest souls for God's kingdom but instead, they abandoned divine assignment and sought their gain alone.

Thereafter, Jesus, in verse 38, declares to his disciples that the only solution to this particular challenge is the need to pray for more workers. The Greek word *de/omai* (*deomai*), 'to pray' employed in Matthew 9:38 can also be rendered as 'to beg' or 'to make petition'.^x And the Greek word for 'Lord,' *ku/rio\$ kyrios* also bear the meaning of someone in supreme authority and the controller of a particular thing, being used in its genitive form; *kuri/ou*. Jesus told his disciples to make a petition to God, who is the supreme controller of the harvest, and who knows those who are capable, qualified, and suitable workers for the harvest.^{xi}

Thus, Jesus Christ intently acknowledged God as the principal subject in the issue of bountiful harvest and the need for more workers and directed the attention and focus of his disciples on the same principal subject who is the only one who can proffer a solution to the perceived need.

3.0 Implications of Matthew 9:35-38 for the Church Today

3.1 The Ministry of the Church

The ministry of the church is not different from Jesus' threefold ministry of teaching, preaching, and healing. All Christians and ministers should not joke with this ministry. The first is the teaching ministry. By teaching, we mean Christian teaching. Christian teaching is one fundamental way God planned to let people know about himself. It recognizes the relationship between God and Christians. It leads members into a life of confession of Christ providing the conditions under which he may grow into a perfect man. It also leads members to the consecration of their lives to God for service. God's expectation for the ministers of the gospel is to share his word and example with all members so that they can find the truth, fulfillment, and eternal life. Thus, the ministers should read, properly interpret and teach the word of God.

The second is the preaching ministry. Preaching is the act of, first, decoding God's message from the Scripture, which was first given to the biblical people in their contexts, and then making the listeners participate in translating the meaning to their context. This implies that preaching constitutes two important things: message and form. The message must be led out of the Bible, and the form must be that of the listeners' context. The focus of preaching should be the life, death, resurrection, ascension, and the second coming of Christ.

The third is the healing and deliverance ministry. This ministry is described in terms of spiritual warfare. It is Christians or ministers

fighting against the demons in the lives of people, and ministering deliverance to those who are troubled by demons. It is the kind of ministry that Jesus demonstrated during His earthly ministry. During His earthly ministry, He fought against the demons by casting them out (Mark 1:27). They obeyed Him (Matt 12:28-29). And on the cross, He defeated Satan and all demons altogether. At the final judgment, Satan and all demons will be thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur (Rev 20:10). Furthermore, Jesus has given authority to all Christians to cast out demons, resist demons, and destroy all activities of demons (Matt 10:8; Mark 3:15; 1 Peter 5:8-9; Luke 9:1).

Christ set an example of who a faithful worker is, through his ministry of teaching, preaching, and healing. As an exemplary leader, he worked to save the soul, which was his ultimate purpose while on earth. His goal was to make sure that the people (the harvest) are gathered into the kingdom of God. His disciples follow the same example in Chapter 10, in the gospel according to Matthew. Since God has endowed believers and His church with diverse gifts and ministry.

The purpose is to save a soul and for the expansion of His kingdom in contrast to what is seen today among believers, who use their ministry to swindle the gullible ones, who milk the sheep to dryness instead of feeding them with correct nourishing spiritual food, and who feather their own nest flamboyantly regardless of any member's misfortune. The Church should imitate Jesus, his purpose, and his ultimate goal in ministry as faithful laborers, making the winning of the soul which is the mind of God their priority. "But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well." (Matthew 6:33NIV).

3.2 The Motivation for Ministry

Jesus is presented in the text as the true shepherd who had compassion on the people, considering their number (crowd), their condition (helpless and harassed), and the cause of their condition (no genuine and compassionate shepherd to guide them and cater for their needs). The motivation for ministry should be compassion.

Compassion is one of the numerous attributes of God. God's compassion can be shared with humans, especially with God's children and servants. God's compassion is compelling. This attitude of compassion always results in God's understanding of the condition of the needy and consequently moves him to act on their behalf. God is compassionate toward all. God exercises his compassion on all peoples of the earth, on both Jews and Gentiles, Christians and non-Christians, men and women, and children and adults. He wishes to save all. He cares for all. He wants all to know his loving concern. Though the sinners stand condemned in their disobedience and disbelief, God's compassion is available if they will believe and repent. Even to his children who are in difficulty or God's compassion is available if they will humble themselves and cry to Him in prayer.

Compassion should likewise characterize the heart of genuine workers in God's vineyard. J. Parker comments on this:

Nothing but compassion will carry you through any tragedy in life; you cannot go through it merely for its own sake. The hireling will fall asleep over the sick child, but the mother will drive sleep away from her dwelling place till she has rescued her little one from the power of the enemy if it is within the scope of her endurance and skill to win so great a triumph. Her compassion keeps her awake, her love makes the night as the day, and her pity stops the clock so that she takes no note of the time. Every other emotion grows dumb; wonder must sometimes close its eyes, admiration palls upon itself, states its appetite, and dies of the satiety, but compassion grows by what it feeds on, and is of the very nature of the love of God. He grows in the development of his compassion; he will succeed yet.^{xii}

Thus, all believers must fill the atmosphere of their service with compassion, without which it is impossible to participate faithfully in the harvest. The world craves compassionate shepherds.

3.3 A Need for Willing and Faithful Workers

Jesus was neither slack nor complacent in doing the will of his Father, to this he invited his disciples to join him for the propagation of the divine task, that is, the harvest. He noticed that the harvest was bountiful and more workers are needed. The word of God in the book of Joshua 13:1NIV says "When Joshua had grown old, the LORD said to him, "You are now very old, and there are still very large areas of land to be taken over." Just as God was trying to reveal to Joshua the situation then, likewise Jesus was revealing to his disciples and us today, that there is a vast number of people whose lives need to be taken over for God's kingdom through the good news of salvation. Meanwhile, Paul has this to say in his epistle to the Romans, Romans 10:14-15NIV. "How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?" the last question in this verse reveals the need for willing and faithful workers who will join God where He is working (harvest) and work. This is the present state of our world today, and the eyes of every believer and the church at large must be opened to, that there are a lot of people who are perishing today, being helplessly harassed by the devil and his agents who are self-centered and not God-centered in their service on the harvest field, while there are only a few genuine shepherd, laborers or workers in the field of harvest who focus not on self, but on God instead.

3.4 Prayer as an Effective Means of Solution

Prayer is communication and relationship between God and Christians. It is usually initiated by God. It is talking back to God about what he has initiated. Jesus emphasized the importance of prayer in his ministry throughout, practically as an exemplary leader who always prayed and was always in communication with his Father. He taught disciples how to pray, and would always encourage them to pray on several occasions in the New Testament gospels. The only means to solution to the challenge of bountiful harvest and the need for more workers as Jesus told his disciples is just to pray to the LORD of harvest, asking him to send more workers. In other words, the disciples and Christians are to acknowledge the sovereignty and Lordship of God over the harvest

as the one who is in charge and control of all the harvest activities and who has the power to send more faithful workers. The scripture has this to say:

"Elijah was a man just like us. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. 18 Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops." James 5:17-18 NIV.

All these are good indications that the church needs to pray so that genuine workers can be sent by God to the ripened field. Because of Jesus' prayer in Matthew 9, the Father sent Jesus' disciples into the ripened field. Today, if Christians can pray to the Lord of Harvest, the Father will send more workers into the ripened field and there will be a bumper harvest.

4.0 Conclusion

There are several people in the world today who need salvation from darkness, who are being harassed helplessly by the devil and false shepherds who cause more harm to them instead of good, few are those who genuinely and compassionately work in this aspect according to the will of God. Therefore, there is a need to pray more fervently like Jesus, for the increase of compassionate and faithful workers and God will respond. More workers will be sent to the field for a bumper harvest. Many souls will be saved from the power of darkness. Many Christians will experience spiritual maturity.

Endnote

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^{iv}Matthew 9:36, *Interlinear Transliterated Bible*. Copyright © 1994, 2003, 2006 by BibleSoft, Inc.

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