

Matthew 9:35-38
(2 Corinthians 1:8-11)
“A Call to Mission: Pray!”

Introduction

Every year at Cedar Springs on the first Sunday of March we begin our Global Mission Conference. Each year we remind ourselves that the great theme of the Bible is God on Mission. Every year we are challenged to hear God’s call to each of us to join him on mission by praying, going, serving and giving. This year, I thought it would be good for us to spend the four Sunday mornings leading up to the conference by looking at these four calls to mission engagement, seeking a deeper understanding of why they are not simply a seasonal call, but rather are at the heart of God’s call to those whom he loves and has redeemed through Christ Jesus.

Prayer is not simply presenting a list of our hopes and dreams to a sort of cosmic Santa. It is rather, at its deepest and best, communion with God in Christ through the power of the Spirit, in which we align ourselves with God’s deepest purposes for us, and join him on mission. Thus, in our epistle lesson, we hear the apostle Paul plead for more prayer from his partners in ministry, because those prayers would be God’s means of grace for Paul, the instruments through which and in response to which God would deliver Paul from “deadly peril” and make him a blessing in his missionary labors: “On him we have set our hope that he will deliver us again. You also must help us by prayer, so that many will give thanks on our behalf for the blessing granted us through the prayers of many” (2 Corinthians 1:10f).

It is the prayers of God’s people that call down God’s power enabling God’s mission to be accomplished. A prayerless church will never accomplish the task assigned them because it cannot be done in merely human power and wisdom. But a praying church – praying with Spirit-empowered passion in accordance with God’s will – is able to pull down Satanic strongholds and accomplish its God-appointed mission.

Look with me at Jesus’ simple, clear, and compelling instruction on how to begin the mission entrusted to us. He does this by telling us three things: he first describes the great opportunity presented to us in mission, then he describes the mission problem, and finally he describes the divine solution to that problem.

Body

1. The mission opportunity: “The harvest is plentiful.”

If the harvest was plentiful in Jesus’ day, when it is estimated that there were only about 800 million people on earth, how much more is it true today, when the population has reached about 7.5 billion people? Of that 7.5 billion, about 2.5 billion identify themselves as Christians, and of those, about 750

million are evangelicals, that is, Christians who believe that salvation is in Christ alone, that the Bible is God's Word, and that it is the responsibility of the church of Jesus Christ – and therefore of every Christian – to reach every person on earth with the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ. This is not a mission vision derived from focus groups or strategy sessions, but is a commission given by Christ to his disciples:

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age (Matthew 28:18f).

We know that many, perhaps a majority, of those who identify as Christians have no living relationship with Jesus Christ, but they do have the opportunity to hear the gospel. However, of the 5 billion people who do not identify as Christian, about 1.5 billion are completely unevangelized and have, at present, no hope even of hearing the message of the gospel. In the Great Commission, the Greek word translated "nations" is *ethne*, from which we get the word, "ethnic," and which refers to people groups. Two thousand years after Jesus gave his people the Great Commission, of the 16,500 people groups on earth, nearly 7,000 are still unreached by the gospel. Truly, "The harvest is plentiful!" But what of the laborers?

2. The mission problem: "The laborers are few."

There are, today, approximately 430,000 missionaries from all branches of Christianity – Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Protestant – of which 140,000 are Protestant. However, 90% of all missionaries work among people already reached with the gospel leaving only 10% who work among the unevangelized, and even fewer among completely unreached people.

What is the result? In just the last forty years since I entered the ministry and began to follow these statistics, over one billion people have died without ever hearing the good news of God's grace in Christ Jesus, and this coming year another 30 million will die without hearing the message of salvation. Such statistics can overwhelm us and tempt us to turn away from a task that seems too great, unless we focus on Jesus' solution to the mission problem.

3. The mission solution: "Therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest."

Jesus does not say that his people should simply work harder or work smarter. His proposed solution reminds us that the mission is the Lord's and that he alone can ensure the harvest. Yet it does not call us to quietism or

passivity. It simply reminds us where all true Kingdom work must draw its wisdom and power, even its resources. Jesus words have three emphases:

How are we to pray? Pray earnestly: Jesus does not tell us to add the need for Christian workers to our list of things for which we pray. He tells us to pray earnestly. Some translations use “beseech the Lord of the harvest.” It is a prayer of deep earnestness and longing, a pleading with the Lord. How are we to know enough and care enough to pray like this? We cannot and must never try to manufacture or work up false emotion in prayer.

I would recommend as an aid to prayer two resources: The first is the mission guide we supply every year at our global mission conference in order that you may know those people and projects with whom we are presently partnering. Study what we are doing together as a church and, as the Lord puts particular people, places and projects on your mind and heart, begin to pray for them daily. Email them and ask how you can pray, encourage and support their work. Get to know them when they are visiting us, and if you are able and it is good for them, visit them in their place of ministry. As you come to know and love them, you will begin to pray for them as you pray for friends and family.

But this does not address the need for which Jesus here calls us to pray. So the second resource I would recommend is Patrick Johnstone’s *Operation World*. It will provide all you need to begin to investigate the work of global mission, its challenges and opportunities. The Operation World website provides a guide for daily prayer that can be emailed to you daily and that will literally take you around the world each year, providing you with the stories and statistics that will begin to give you a picture of the sweep of God’s mission in our time, along with the places that need the concerted, earnest prayers of God’s people.

To whom are we to pray? Pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest: Don’t ever be satisfied simply to say your prayers, even with passion, without considering the One to whom you are praying. You are coming to the Lord of all, the Creator, Redeemer, the Sovereign King, who is your loving heavenly Father, and “Lord of the Harvest.” The mission is his and he has called you to join him through his Son, Jesus, in the power of his Spirit. Thus we remember that the task is not beyond our power, for we are empowered with the very Spirit of God. God will accomplish the harvest, and he offers us the inestimable privilege and honor of joining him in the work that lies at the heart of the meaning of human history.

And what are we to pray? Pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest: Before we do anything else – and because the harvest is entrusted to us, there is much more that we must do,

but it all depends on this first – we must “pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.”

Why, after two thousand years, are there still so few laborers compared to the vastness of the harvest? Because the church has been relatively prayerless. We pray, but it is usually about what is important to us, our hopes, our dreams, our disappointments, our failures, rather than about what is most on God’s heart and what should increasingly be much on our hearts: the mission of God, the ingathering of God’s family – our family! – from every tribe and language and people group and culture.

Conclusion

At the dawn of the twenty-first century, Billy Graham, Bill Bright, John Perkins, and several other Christian leaders, issued “A Nationwide Call to Prayer to the Church in America.” The call included these words:

We strongly urge all churches and all Christians of America to unite in seeking the face of God through prayer and fasting, persistently asking our Father to send revival to the church and spiritual awakening to our nation so that Christ’s Great Commission might be fulfilled worldwide in our generation.

Sadly, we, the church in America, did not heed the call, except by fits and starts. Now that generation that issued the call is passing away, and our nation has continued its moral and cultural decline, we have been embroiled in the longest war in our nation’s history, church attendance increasingly resembles that of Europe, where Christians too often view the Lord’s Day as free time for family fun rather than a restful day of family worship with the people of God.

I plead with you, young and old alike – but especially you young people: The Lord has placed his mission in our hands. It is not impossible. He has shown us where to begin: “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.” And Paul adds his words of challenge and encouragement: “You also must help us by prayer, so that many will give thanks on our behalf for the blessing granted us through the prayers of many.”

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