

Our Responsibilities to the Unchurched

Matthew 9:35-10:8

³⁵ Jesus traveled through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every disease and every sickness. ³⁶ When he saw the crowds, he was moved with compassion for them, because they were troubled and downcast, like sheep without a shepherd. ³⁷ Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. ³⁸ Therefore pray that the Lord of the harvest will send out workers into his harvest." ¹ Jesus called his twelve disciples to himself and gave them authority to drive out unclean spirits and to heal every disease and every sickness. ² These are the names of the twelve apostles: first, Simon (who is called Peter) and his brother Andrew; James the son of Zebedee and his brother John; ³ Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James the son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; ⁴ Simon the Zealot and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him. ⁵ Jesus sent these twelve out and commanded them, "Do not go among the Gentiles, and do not enter any town of the Samaritans. ⁶ Go instead to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. ⁷ As you go, preach this message: 'The kingdom of heaven is near!' ⁸ Heal the sick. Raise the dead. Cleanse lepers. Drive out demons. Freely you have received; freely give.

As Father's Day approaches, we remember there are many responsibilities in being a father. You make sure there's a roof over your family's heads, that there's food in their bellies, and clothes on their backs. But your responsibilities do not end with meeting their physical needs. You are responsible for your family's spiritual needs as well. Listen to what God says: "*Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord*" (Ephesians 6:4). Did you notice that God calls on fathers, not mothers, to raise their children as God's own. Dad is to make sure their children say their prayers, learn their memory work, make it to church regularly, and attend Sunday School. That's some responsibility. And we fathers gladly accept the challenge and with all of our God-giving ability, we make sure our children make it through life and to eternity. Fathers share that responsibility with their wives and other family members. They share it with pastors and teachers as well because we recognize that we belong to the same spiritual family.

There's another group of people for which we all share responsibility. Our text describes these people as being *troubled and downcast, like sheep without a shepherd*. God the Holy Spirit had the apostle Matthew use these words to describe the spiritual condition of people in Jesus' day. *Troubled and downcast, like sheep without a shepherd* is a good way to describe many people in our day. They may appear to have their lives in order. But spiritually they haven't a clue about the next life and how to get there. In the Scripture before us, Jesus shows us our responsibilities to the unchurched: by showing compassion for them; by praying for them; and by sending workers to them.

Jesus understood his responsibility to those who had no clue in how to get to heaven. That is why our text tells us, "*Jesus traveled through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every disease and every sickness.*" With his miraculous healing he wanted people to know that standing before them was God himself in the flesh. With his teaching and preaching he wanted people to know why he came, why he left his heavenly throne to be with them. He came to rescue them from the gates of hell and lead them to eternal pastureland.

Jesus shows his compassion for them by healing their sicknesses. But Jesus saw they had an even greater need. Matthew tells us, "*When he saw the crowds, he was moved with*

compassion for them, because they were troubled and downcast, like sheep without a shepherd." Jesus' heart was moved for these people. They were trouble and downcast because of their religious leaders. Plenty of demands were made of them. But no comfort was given. Faithless shepherds did not lead them to God but down a destructive path. They were harassed by their sin and their guilt. Never before were they lead to believe in a Savior. They were helplessly, spiritually lost.

Does our heart go out to the unchurched? Almost two years ago, many of St. Michael's members participated in an Everyone Outreach workshop. It reminded us that our responsibility to the unchurch does not just lie with our pastor and our Outreach committee members. We've been learning that the best way to do outreach is not with programs at church. The best way is building relations with people, building trust with them that leads to a heartfelt discussion about their relationship with our Lord. Building such relationships comes from having compassion for them. It certainly pained our Lord to see crowds of people harassed by sin and hopelessly lost in unbelief. He had such compassion for them that he was willing to go to a cross and suffer for everyone of them. He wanted his disciples to share his compassion for the lost. That compassion would lead them to also pray for the lost.

Our Lord's compassion for the lost moved him to take action. He said to his followers, *"The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Therefore pray that the Lord of the harvest will send out workers into his harvest."* Can you sense the urgency in your Savior's voice? On another occasion our Lord told his disciples, *"Do you not say, 'Four more months and the harvest will be here'? Pay attention to what I am telling you. Open your eyes and look at the fields, because they are already ripe for harvest"* (John 4:35). There was no time to waste in bringing in the harvest. But Jesus wasn't talking about grain like corn or wheat. There was a plentiful harvest of souls ready to be brought into God's kingdom. But there was a problem. There were so few workers. Jesus revealed the solution: *"Pray that the Lord of the harvest will send out workers into his harvest."* Desperate times require desperate measures. Jesus urged his followers to beg and plead, to storm the Lord's throne with their prayers. That way he would send more workers to bring in ripe souls from his harvest field.

Very recently graduates from our seminary were assigned to their first parish. Two of those men were assigned to congregations across the river. But at our district convention on Monday our district president reported that there are still 128 remaining vacancies synod-wide. And there are 110 vacancies in our synod schools. These are desperate times for our synod and for our world. A vast majority of our world is harassed by sin and helplessly lost in unbelief. We all share a tremendous responsibility. But we cannot go individually to the four corners of the world and preach the gospel to all creation. Individually though we can go to our Lord in prayer. We can ask him to send out more workers into his harvest field. We know our Lord will listen to our prayers and answer them. Our Savior Jesus has removed the barrier of sin that separates us from God. Paul told the Ephesians, *"In him (that is in Jesus) we can freely approach God with confidence through faith in him"* (3:12). Let's take advantage of this wonderful privilege as God's children. Let's recognize our responsibilities to the unchurched and pray on their behalf.

Jesus urged his disciples to pray for more workers. Matthew doesn't tell us how they did this. Was it done on an individual basis or did they pray as a group. Matthew does tell us how God answered their prayers. Jesus called the Twelve to himself and sent them out to bring in the

harvest of souls for their Lord. That leads us to our final way in which Jesus shows us our responsibilities to the unchurched. We send out more workers to them.

Up to this point in his ministry, Jesus had been preaching and teaching pretty much by himself. Our Lord had called the Twelve to this important task at an earlier time. But they were not ready for it yet. They had to follow Jesus first and learn from him. But then the day came for them to do the work for which they were called. Matthew tells us: *Jesus called his twelve disciples to himself and gave them authority to drive out unclean spirits and to heal every disease and every sickness... Jesus sent these twelve out and commanded them, "Do not go among the Gentiles, and do not enter any town of the Samaritans. ⁶ Go instead to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. As you go, preach this message: 'The kingdom of heaven is near!' Heal the sick. Raise the dead. Cleanse lepers. Drive out demons. Freely you have received; freely give."* Jesus did not send out his apostles to do world-wide mission work quite yet. Their first assignment came when he sent them to the same lost sheep of Israel that Jesus was called to serve. He'd equipped them to do the same miraculous healing that he had done. This would show people that the apostles were truly sent by God to do this work. But this was not their most important work. They were not to think that some miraculous sign would win a lost soul. It's the gospel saves. So they were to keep proclaiming: *"the kingdom of heaven is near."*

That same gospel message is what saves people today. We must proclaim it in all its truth and purity. That message must follow the clear announcement of God's law. God must punish sin. For the wages of sin is death for every sinner. But by God's grace God found a way to punish our sin without punishing us. God sent his Son to save us. God's Son won us God's free and full forgiveness. He won it from on cross where Jesus paid for all sin with his life. Then God showed that Jesus' saving work was a success by raising him back to life. Our responsibility to the unchurched is to get that message out to them. And how can we best do this? In writing to the Romans, Paul asked some vital questions that we should consider: *how can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one about whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without a preacher? And how can they preach unless they are sent? Just as it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news of peace, who preach the gospel of good things!"* (10:14,15). If we take seriously our responsibility to the unchurched, then we must continue to send out more workers who can proclaim the saving message of Christ. Before our Lord sent out workers, he made sure they were well-trained. When we send out workers, they must be well-trained to preach the saving gospel message. That training starts in a classroom. For more than 160 years our Lord has blessed our church body with schools that can properly train those workers. Only by the grace of God will that training continue into the future. So encourage young people. We pray for them. Support them in their training at all levels of education. Then we'll continue to fulfill our responsibilities to the unchurched by sending out workers to them.

A week from Sunday we'll thank our dads for taking the responsibility of being a father seriously. As members of God's eternal family, we take our responsibilities to the unchurched seriously. We'll show compassion for lost souls and keep them in prayers. We'll keep equipping and sending out workers to preach God's saving message. We'll keep this up until everyone knee bows and every tongue confesses Jesus Christ as Lord. God grant this for Jesus' sake.