

## When He Saw the Crowds

David Flatt

And Jesus went throughout all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, "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." (Matt. 9:35-38).

The days of Jesus were filled with a ceaseless stream of activity. After preaching His Sermon on the Mount, He gained an even greater popularity among the people. Jesus distinguished Himself in a culture filled with "teachers" (Matt. 7:28-29). Matthew chapters eight and nine documents one account after another of people seeking Jesus for healing.

Near the end of Matthew chapter nine, a transition begins to take shape. Jesus healed sick people; however, Jesus did not come just to heal sick people. Jesus came to save sinners. He came to draw the human family to His Father. He came to urge us to repentance. In the above-cited passage, Jesus begins to focus the disciples on the mission of evangelism.

Evangelism is a core activity of disciples. Communicating the message of the Gospel is the task Jesus has given to us. He expects all disciples to engage in this work. Yet, we tend to struggle in this endeavor. We are often fearful and overwhelmed by the prospect of teaching the Gospel. We may feel ill-equipped or prejudge people who need to be taught. What can be done to prepare ourselves and overcome reservations we have about evangelism?

In approaching the subject of evangelism, we want a "how-to" guide. I have participated in studies like these and have even taught a few in the past. However, they are ineffective. There is no step-by-step guide for evangelism. Instead, we have examples of people who taught the Gospel. Even more, we have the example of Jesus who prepared disciples for evangelism.

For us to joyfully engage in evangelism, we must get our hearts and minds right. In preparing the disciples, Jesus teaches us how to properly approach evangelism. By learning the following lessons, we will recognize our need to teach the Gospel for the sake of the salvation of others.

**1. Jesus saw the crowds.** Jesus knew the crowds. He could know the hearts of every person in the crowds. However, we do not possess this ability. We cannot know the hearts of people. But, we can still see the crowds. We can listen and learn about people.

For us to see the urgent need for evangelism in our world today, we must see the crowds. Jesus saw people who were hurting physically. Even more so, Jesus saw people who were hurting spiritually. They were like sheep without a shepherd. They had no one to protect them, feed

them, and lead them. Sadly, there are people today who live like sheep without a shepherd. Do you see them?

**2. Jesus had compassion.** When Jesus saw the crowds, He responded to them with compassion. He was not indifferent towards their plight. He was deeply moved by their vulnerability. Without a shepherd, they would starve, be harmed by a predator, and or fall off a cliff. Jesus was worried about their survival.

Compassion is to shape the hearts of evangelists. Without compassion, we will respond to sinners with indifference, condescension, and or self-righteousness. Compassion will compel us to lead sinners to Jesus. Compassion will season the words we choose to teach the Gospel. Compassion will aid in persuading sinners to be receptive to the Gospel.

**3. Jesus saw potential.** When Jesus saw the crowds, He saw their potential. He compared the crowd of hurting people to a field of wheat ready for harvest. Jesus often spoke of hurting people as being the kind of people who are ready for salvation. Hurting people realize their helplessness. Hurting people realize they cannot continue on a path of sin. Hurting people realize that only Jesus can heal them.

Sadly, we do typically view hurting people as being ready for harvest. We tend to look at such people as beyond help. Or, we think hurting people should get help before coming to Jesus. Such views will hinder the work of evangelism.

On this occasion, Jesus was trying to change the disciples' perspective of hurting people. Jesus sees hurting people as those who are ready for Him. They are ready to receive the remedy of the Great Physician and begin a new life of wholeness.

**4. We must labor.** When Jesus saw the crowds, He called for laborers. Jesus was laboring to gather a harvest for His Father. His work to save the crowds would lead Him to die for the crowds. Knowing His future, He prepared the disciples to carry on His work in the world. They were to labor and so must we. Our labor must be motivated by love for the Shepherd and compassion for sinners.

### Conclusion

Evangelism is challenging. The work may expose our inabilities. If we identify a personal weakness, let us work to improve. However, inadequacies will abound. There will always be aspects of ourselves that are lacking. We will always be weak, clay pots in which the treasure of the Gospel is kept (2 Cor. 4:7). We must remember that the message of the Gospel is ultimately what will persuade sinners to obey Jesus.

Therefore, instead of focusing on why we are challenged by evangelism, we must focus on the crowds. Noticing hurting people will soften our hearts. Compassion for sinners will give us the courage to lead them to salvation. When we develop true compassion for the eternity of sinners, we will not be able to be silent. We will find the words, conquer fear, and do the work.