

A New Opportunity

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Matthew remembered Jesus' reaction to a crowd of people one day. He wrote, "When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd" (Matt. 9:36). What was it about this day and this group of people that elicited this noticeable reaction from Jesus? This must have been how Jesus always responded to people.

The Bible often describes us as sheep. This is a characterization that our society strongly rejects. We typically think of ourselves as strong and independent; whereas, sheep are practically helpless animals. They cannot protect themselves. They cannot provide for themselves. They are entirely dependent on a shepherd.

The people Jesus saw on this day were helpless. They were sick. Their only hope was Jesus. Jesus would help them, but He also wanted others to share in His work. Jesus said, "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. 9:37-38).

Today, some people are beginning to recognize they are like sheep. They are harassed and helpless. Despite the cultural narrative that we are strong, independent, and free, many people are walking around weak, trapped, and overwhelmed by a sense of condemnation. But, they do not know what to do about it.

Today's culture tells people that an education and a well-paying job will give them security. But, people are racked with student loan debt and working a job that failed to deliver what was promised. The Millennial generation has experienced one crisis after another in their lifetimes: 9/11, two wars, the Great Recession, and a pandemic. They have experienced one setback after another.

Many people today are depressed and defeated. They are unfulfilled and disappointed. They are disillusioned and anxious. Much of what they were led to believe has failed to deliver. When our cultural securities are stripped away, we will feel harassed and helpless. Now, some people are beginning to search for greater meaning.

Many people in our culture do not have a background in faith. They are unfamiliar with the Bible. They have never considered the Gospel. They were raised to believe that they did not need religion. Religion was bad and oppressive. Yet, everything else they have been trying to find meaning and stability in has failed them. We may be at the beginning of a new opportunity to point the harassed and helpless to the Good Shepherd.

1). Spiritual hunger. There is a deep spiritual hunger that everyone possesses. We have a desire for fulfillment and contentment. Yet, our culture offers food that cannot satisfy. On one occasion, Jesus said, "Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to

eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you. For on him God the Father has set his seal” (John 6:26).

Most of the food we work for in life perishes. Despite all the academic credentials and career achievements, many people struggle to measure up and be satisfied. If people feel dissatisfied and hungry despite all their work, they should. Money, possessions, status, and fame cannot fill the hunger of our souls.

Our souls need righteousness. Righteousness can only be received through faith in Jesus. People today need to take a fresh look at Jesus. He promised, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied” (Matt. 5:6). Faith in Jesus is the means for satisfying the hunger we all know we have. We do not have to wonder where to find food which endures to eternal life. Jesus revealed, “I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst” (John 6:35).

2). The role of faith. Many dissatisfied people do not have faith. They have never considered the practical role of faith in life. Belief in God is not just believing there is some creative power somewhere out in the abyss. Paul stated that true belief in God is about believing how He raised Jesus from the dead (Rom. 4:24-25).

Faith gives us strength to find hope in a hopeless world. The resurrection of Jesus demonstrates what is possible through faith. Faith in the God who raises the dead is the only firm foundation on which we can build a life. Faith in this foundation empowers us to withstand the storms of life.

Faith eases our anxiety. Trust in God’s provisions helps us accept situations that are beyond our control. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, “Therefore do not be anxious, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. "Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble” (Matt. 6:31-34). Much of the fear and anxiety that overwhelms people could be relieved through faith in Jesus.

3). The role of the Church. Many people today have been led to believe the Church is unnecessary at best and evil at worst. The Church is a collection of people who share faith in God. The Church is relational and communal. The Church was created to support and encourage Christians as they face life.

People today are overwhelmed by a sense of loneliness. Depression, anxiety, and mental health problems are increasing. Teenage suicide rates are as high as they have ever been and increasing. God made us to be relational and communal. In the Church, God brings us together for a common purpose. He gives us identity and direction.

There is no substitute for the Church. Politics, sports, and or social engagement cannot provide for us what alone the Church can. Paul wrote, “And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all” (Eph. 1:22-23). By Christ and the Church, we are made whole.

Conclusion

Without question, our society has moved away from God. This drift has created problems previous generations did not quite experience. While this is not good, it does create a new opportunity to introduce people to the God who raises the dead. So, let us compassionately direct the harassed and helpless to Jesus.