

Thinking it Through & Talking it Over

A Study Guide for Small Groups
By Rev. Dr. James R. Wilson

A Study Guide of the Texts of the Bible From the Common Lectionary Year A, Week 29 June 15, 2008

*"Thy word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path."
Psalm 119:105*

Sermon Title: *Hard Words of Jesus - The Workers Are Few* **Sermon Passage: Matthew 9:35 - 10:10**

Lectionary Scripture Passages:

Genesis 18:1-14; Psalm 116:1-2 and 12-19; Romans 5:1-8; Matthew 9:35 - 10:10

Warm-up

The world's population today is around 6.6 billion people. The Joshua Project - a group that studies the impact of Christianity worldwide (www.joshuaproject.net) - estimates that 2.68 billion (or 41.4%) are among "unreached" people groups. These are groups (defined as a group of people having a common language and culture) with no existing Christian church or on-going communication of the Christian gospel. 41.4% of the world's population is yet to be reached with the message of the gospel. Further, there are over 6,500 living languages today, but the Bible or portions of it exist in only 2,400 of them. That leaves 4,100 languages into which the Bible must still be translated if people are going to be able to read it in their own language. Currently 1,600 translation projects are underway leaving 2,500 to be done. What is your reaction to these statistics?

Introduction

Matthew describes Jesus' activities among the Jewish population in Galilee - going "through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness" (Matthew 9:35). Jesus communicated the fact that the divine activity or rule of God (Kingdom of God) was present on earth. He taught about it, he proclaimed its presence, and he demonstrated its reality by healing diseases.

As we will see, Jesus also invites his followers into these activities of the Kingdom. We are called to teach and preach and demonstrate the reality of the Kingdom. Just as Jesus was sent into the world by the will of God the Father, we are sent into the world by the will of Jesus. But are we responding to this call to be "sent ones" - in homes, neighborhoods, work places, classrooms, community, and to the far reaches of this world?

Exploring the Texts

Read Matthew 9:35 through 10:10. Notice the way Matthew describes Jesus' reaction to the crowds of people gathering to hear him.

1. In 9:35, Matthew describes Jesus' activities in "all the towns and villages" of Galilee. This activity is centered in the synagogues – places for Jews to gather for study of the Law, worship, and for connecting as a community of faith. Why do you think Jesus centers his teaching, preaching, healing activities on the synagogues? Who is his "target" audience?
 2. Again we find Matthew referring to Jesus preaching the good news of the kingdom. The Kingdom of God refers to God's divine activity or divine rule in the world and particularly in human hearts. How would you relate Jesus "teaching and preaching the good news of the kingdom (of God)" to Jesus "healing every disease and sickness?"
 3. Look at verse 36. Jesus saw the crowds and had compassion on them. The Greek word translated here as "compassion" has to do with "being stirred deep within" or being "emotionally deeply moved." Why did Jesus react this way? How were the people being harassed? By whom? Why were they shepherd-less?
- Note:** From other references such as Matthew 11:28-30 we know that the Jewish religious establishment placed a heavy burden on the people to strive for adherence to the Law of Moses and the hundreds of traditional "rules and regulations" to be followed in order to be eligible for God's blessing. We also know that the Roman oppressors often treated the people brutally. Matthew presents Jesus' reaction as one of compassion. The people are oppressed and brutalized by Rome and they are without the right kind of leadership and care by the Jewish religious leaders. As a result, the people are helpless, lost, not connected to God.
4. Compare the description of the "lost" people of Israel with people today in our community. Are people today oppressed? If so, how? By Whom? Are our neighbors shepherd-less? "Lost?" "Not able to connect to God?" How does your reaction to the "harassed and helpless" around us compare to Jesus' reaction?
 5. Verse 37. "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few ..." It's a hard word because it comes out of Jesus' "being deeply moved." The harvest is plentiful – many will hear the good news and believe it, and enter the Kingdom of God. But what will that require? Who are the workers?
 6. A recent survey indicated that 75 to 90% of "unchurched" people (not involved in a church) who came to faith in Jesus and active in a church, did so because of a friend or relative invited them to church and/or talked to them about faith in Jesus. What does this say to you about your role in "the harvest" around you? Are you willing to pray that the Lord will send you into this harvest?
 7. Chapter 10:1-10 describes Jesus developing his disciples as harvesters. Look over these verses once again. To whom are they sent? What are they to do? What power or authority is given to them?

8. How can you live out this same calling today? How can our congregation live it out?
9. This can be a question for personal reflection – talk about it in the group only if you are comfortable to do so. Into what harvest is God calling you? Is it within your own family? Is it those with whom you work? Your campus? Your neighborhood? Is it a particular people group in another part of the world that does not yet have a Bible in its own language? How can you be part of the answer to the prayer for workers going into the Lord’s harvest fields?

Going Deeper

1. **Genesis 18:1-14** describes a visit to Abraham by God who comes to him, it appears, incarnate in “three men” (verse 2). Some scholars have thought that these may have been three angels. Others think it is two angels and God incarnate – in human form. Abraham offers them hospitality and they communicate God’s intentions (good news about a son to be born to Abraham and Sarah. How does this scene parallel that of Matthew 10:1-8?
2. Notice that the Lord appears as “three men” and how the “human” speaker is equated to “the Lord” throughout this encounter. Why do you think God has chosen to have human beings communicate the good news of the kingdom to other human beings?
3. How did Abraham learn that there is nothing “too hard for the Lord” (verse 14)?
4. **Romans 5:1-8** is one of my favorite passages of scripture. It comes on the heels of four chapters of heavy theological teaching by Paul, and serves as a summary of God’s gracious acts. It also reminds us that God has blessed us by pouring out divine love into our hearts – pouring it out abundantly and faithfully. How does the reminder of the depths of God’s love for you motivate you to share that love with others?

On August 31, 2005, FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency) regional director Marty Bahamonde emailed the FEMA director regarding the situation in New Orleans immediately following Hurricane Katrina: “Sir, I know that you know the situation is past critical. Here are some things you might not know. Hotels are kicking people out, thousands gathering in the streets with no food or water. Hundreds still being rescued from homes. There are dying patients at the DMAT [disaster medical assistance team] tent. Estimates are many will die within hours. Evacuation in process. Plans developing for dome evacuation, but hotel situation adding to problem. We are out of food and running out of water at the dome, plans in works to address the critical need. DMAT staff working in deplorable conditions. The sooner we can get the medical patients out, the sooner we can get staff out.”

The director responded: “Thanks for update. *Anything specific I need to do or tweak?*”

Chicago Tribune (11-3-05)