

Title: It's Harvest Time
Date: October 24, 2021
Subject: Followers of Jesus Christ are to focus on more workers for the harvest.
Scripture: Matthew 9:36 - 38; 28:18 – 20; Colossians 4:2 – 6; Ephesians 6:19, 20; 2 Corinthians 8:1 - 5

God designed our brains to respond to what it's exposed. The more focus given to something, the greater the interest. For example, the more focus given to painting landscapes, making wigs out of yak hair, turning Jello into intricate works of art, collecting the elements from the periodic table or constructing a model city out of paper buildings, the more ingrained it becomes. All real hobbies, by the way. Paul Sperber of Germany has been working on his model city for 65 years.

Interest increases as more focus is given. The same is true in the spiritual realm. More focus leads to more interest. Jesus Christ says we're to focus on helping people come into a personal relationship with him. The more focus we give to it in our lives, the greater the interest will be. How can we give more focus?

Pray

READ Matthew 9:38.

One of the great things about the Bible is that Matthew 9:38 is preceded by Matthew 9:37. There we find Jesus telling his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few." That verse is preceded by the example of Jesus having compassion on the crowds because they were harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd. They were lost without hope, doomed to die apart from knowing the love of Christ.

When Jesus asks his disciples to ask the Lord of the harvest to send out workers it's not an empty command. He points to himself as doing what he asks them to do. It's not "do as I say, not as I do." Jesus saw needs, had compassion and acted. He instructed his disciples to pray because the harvest is ripe for the picking... but there's a labor shortage. Pray that the harvest wouldn't go bad before harvesters would arrive, that there would be more harvesters.

What does the prayer for harvesters involve? Obviously, for more to be involved. Beyond that.

Colossians 4:2 – 6. READ. The passage begins with a plea to be devoted to prayer. Devoted...like a dog to its owner, not like a cat. Think Snoopy not Garfield, though Snoopy has his moments of independence.

Paul asked for prayer for him and his team. Pray they'd have an open door for the message of Jesus Christ, opportunities to speak about him. I think it's fair to assume Paul was the kind of guy who was looking for opportunities, but I don't think he was under the assumption opportunities would just happen. He wanted people to pray for opportunities to happen. And maybe more opportunities would happen if we prayed for opportunities to happen. The prayer isn't just about what happens to an individual. It's about the whole group having opportunities.

When opportunities came, Paul desired to be clear. Clearly can refer to not being tongue-tied, at a loss of what to say. He wanted to be mentally sharp and alert. The main meaning is to be understandable to the

person to whom he was talking. Followers of Jesus Christ can use a lot of Christian-ese, words understandable to like-minded people but fairly meaningless to those who aren't. It's fine to use those words but we need to explain them. Saved...from punishment in hell and to a reward in heaven. Or we can substitute. I found these suggestions on an InterVarsity site: "Repentance" > "Turning back to God." "Sin" > "My rejection of God." "Grace" > "God's goodness and generosity, in spite of whether or not we deserve it." "Born again" > "God changing me from the inside out." "Savior and Lord" > "Forgiver and leader." "Faith" > "Trust." (evangelism.intervarsity.org/resource/how-not-speak-christianese).

The teaching is given that we need to be wise in the way we act so we can make the most of every opportunity. There are similar words of encouragement and warning in other Scriptures: "Be very careful, then how you live -- not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. Therefore, do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is" (Ephesians 5: 15 – 17).

What can happen if we act in an unwise manner, if we're foolish, if we behave not in keeping with what God desires and expects? We'll be unprepared for opportunities. Outsiders won't think we have anything to offer. We need to be wise because those who don't know Christ may attempt to hinder our connection with Christ. We're to make sure that what we say and the way we say it, is gracious, kind, loving, something that appeals to their spiritual taste buds.

There's a related passage in Ephesians 6. It comes after the teaching on the armor of God which closes with an appeal to pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests and to always keep on praying for all the saints (Ephesians 6:18).

READ Ephesians 6:19, 20.

Instead of open doors, it's an open mouth. It wasn't to insert his foot, say something dumb. That was covered in Colossians. Opening the mouth is equivalent to having an opportunity. The added aspect is about being without fear so he can fearlessly declare Jesus. To that end, pray for courage and boldness.

It might strike us as strange that the Apostle Paul would ask people to pray he'd fearlessly talk about Jesus. After all, he had a spectacular conversion (turn to God). How many other people can speak about being knocked to the ground and blinded by a super bright light that his companions saw but weren't blinded? He heard the voice of Jesus distinctly speak to him but they only heard a sound not understanding what was said. Who else could talk about being dramatically having their vision restored? Later his enemies threw stones at him until they thought he was dead and then dragged him out of town (Acts 14:19, 20). He didn't die but got up and went back into town. And this guy who needs prayer to be fearless, bold and courageous?

Maybe that's the point. If the kind of person Paul was needs prayer for boldness and courage, so do we "normal" Christians. No one can take matters into their own hands and speak about Christ in and of themselves. We are dependent on God. Pray for ourselves and for others to have the courage he gives.

Another Scripture (2 Thessalonians 3:1) adds an element of speed: "Pray for us that the message of the Lord may spread rapidly and be honored, just as it was with you." The New King James Version phrases

it: “that the word of the Lord may run swiftly and be glorified, just as it was also with you;” In other words, pray the good news would spread like Usain Bolt.

The impact of speaking clearly and fearlessly when there’s an open door is that many will give thanks because these are answers to the prayers of those who’ve been praying (2 Corinthians 1:10 – 11).

After Jesus rose from the dead, he appeared to his disciples over a period of 40 days. When that came to an end, his disciples wanted to know if Jesus was going to restore the kingdom at that moment, now that he had been crucified and raised from the dead. It made sense to them. He could present himself to the masses and they’d have to believe. They’d be ready for the real idea of who Jesus was. The disciples certainly were ready and eager. No time like the present.

Jesus told them it wasn't for them to know when the kingdom would come. The heavenly Father had it under complete control. Jesus told them to wait till the Holy Spirit came. They needed to depend on the Holy Spirit’s power and enabling. We do as well. Pray for him to empower us and give us words to speak.

After Jesus ascended to the Father, the disciples returned to Jerusalem where they gathered in an upper room and joined together constantly in prayer (Acts 1:14). We aren’t told what they prayed about except for choosing a replacement apostle to take the place of Judas (Acts 1:24). They likely prayed about the things Jesus told them. Movies depict them reciting the Lord’s Prayer. It would have been fitting as they were looking for guidance and waiting - “Your kingdom come. Your will be done.”

We began with the passage from Matthew where Jesus asked his followers to pray for more laborers for the harvest because the harvest was plentiful and the workers were few. Jesus said the same thing at another time just before he sent out 72 of his disciples (Luke 10:2). He told them to “Go!”

Go

READ Matthew 28:18 - 20.

The command is given to a group – those who are Christ’s followers. Individual Christians sometimes think of being exempt because someone else will accomplish the mission. However, the group is comprised of individuals which makes it all of our responsibility to be involved in some way, shape and form. It's not only my responsibility, not just your individual responsibility. It's all of our responsibility. Being a witness isn’t an option. That's who we’re to be. Tell what we’ve seen, heard, know and experienced.

A few translations put “go” in a different form - “having gone” or “as you go.” It speaks of the normal course of life. The people of Israel were to teach and impress God's commands upon their children during the normal course of life: “Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up” (Deuteronomy 6:7).

Going doesn't only refer to relocating to another part of the world, pulling up roots like the Gilberts. Jesus said we will be witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8) -- in the place where we live, the area around us, to those who might not be exactly like us and the remote parts of the earth. Some may go to Senegal like the Gilberts or Japan like the Schaeffers.

Going is about any place and every place we go – the far ends of the earth, or the neighborhood we live in. It can be jumping through hoops and metal detectors to get into the jail to talk to women about Jesus. It can be talking with co-workers. It can be through ministries to children and youth.

It can be while we're shopping. On Tuesday I was at Kohl's to pick up an order. The woman ahead of me was in a wheelchair. The worker told her "I can help you now." The woman had a difficult time getting the chair to move. I asked if I could push her. She said, "That would be wonderful." A different worker handled my order. The woman and I got done at the same time. I asked if she'd like more assistance. She said she was done shopping and just needed to get to her car and that she had a hard time walking. I told her I'd be glad to help. She asked, "Do you work here?" I told her no. She commented it'd be nice if more people were helpful. The lights went off in my brain - here's an opportunity. I need to say something. I told her, "After all Jesus has done for me, I feel I should be willing to help people." I was hoping she might say something about knowing Jesus or wanting to know him or ask a question. Instead, she turned more quiet and said little after that. When we got to her car she slowly stood, turned and said, "God bless you." I told her, "God bless you too." I'm hoping the gesture of kindness and the few words about Jesus will make her think, connect with something she already knows or make her go on a search to find him.

The command is given that we're to make disciples, baptize them and teach them to obey. It begins with sharing the good news with people so they understand and become fellow followers of Jesus. They're to be brought into the community of believers. They're to be instructed and guided towards living lives, not for their own purposes and honor, but for the purposes and honor of God.

Send

Back to Matthew 9:38

Jesus identifies God as the ultimate sender, the commissioner of workers into the harvest field. During Missions Festival we heard the story from the Gilberts how the Lord tapped them on their shoulders in through a message given by a missionary. We've heard from others who've also undertaken a mid-life change when God impressed on their hearts to go overseas. Others sense God moving in their lives when they're really young that he wants them to serve Him abroad.

However, most of the sending by the Lord doesn't involve a plane flight across the ocean to some exotic locale. It most often is a walk across the street, to the next workstation, the next school desk.

God uses the church as a sender. It can be to send someone over there. But again, most of the sending is to the near. Every time we gather for worship and study of God's Word, we're being prepared to be sent out. Some churches have a sign over the exit so people will be reminded as they leave: "You are now entering your mission field."

There's a third time when Jesus spoke of the harvest of souls as being ready (John 4:35). He said, "open your eyes and look at the fields!" The disciples didn't have computers or TVs they could access and look at the situation on the other side of the planet. They could only look at what was right in front of their noses. Followers

of Christ need to open our eyes to see the harvest and have open hearts to go. Fits with prayer asking the Lord to send more workers.

Give

READ 2 Corinthians 8:1 - 5

Today's situation is different from that facing the Corinthians. Churches at that time were collecting funds for famine relief. The Macedonian churches, who were extremely poor, had the desire to give. They urgently pleaded, begged Paul and the people gathering the funds for the opportunity and the privilege of being able to share with people who were in need. They had more than the desire to give...they actually gave and gave and gave and gave. We don't know what that looked like or how they sacrificed but are told they were generous.

Note what's written about the foundation of their generosity. REREAD v. 5. Not sure what to make about that first part about the people not doing as had been expected, especially since it's followed by the word "but" which normally leads to a contrast. The important insight is "they gave themselves first to the Lord." They presented themselves to God as belonging to him for him to use however he wanted.

We're engaged in a different kind of relief. It's caused by a famine, but not for physical food. It's about people who need to receive spiritual food so they can live forever with God and have forgiveness of moral crimes they've committed against him.

We don't give ourselves to a cause. We don't give ourselves to a person. We're to give ourselves to the God of the universe who is the ultimate person with the ultimate cause. We give ourselves to the Lord. Giving of finances begins with that essential consideration. Without that in place, giving doesn't really matter and it can become about us – the amount we give, how it's given to gain attention.

Our giving should encompass the same areas where Jesus said we're to be witnesses - Jerusalem, Judea Samaria and the ends of the earth – here, there and everywhere in between. We give to the Great Commission fund, our missions fund, for the needs and ministries of people like the Gilberts, Williams, Debbie Vik, the Schaeffers and others whom we can't name because they serve in creative access countries. There.

In between. A portion of what we give to the church general fund goes to the District of which we're a part - the Alliance churches in Wisconsin and upper Michigan. It's to help start up new churches and other ministries of the district.

Here. We give locally to support the ministries of the church whether it's through the general fund or to specific ministries. Our budget includes outreach. We have ministries like VBS, jail, Awana, youth group which are part of the giving package. There are mundane things like maintenance, utilities and office supplies that keep the local body going. Other avenues for giving like Operation Christmas Child span several areas.

The more focus we give to something, the greater our interest will be whether it's painting landscapes, making wigs out of yak hair, turning Jello into art, collecting the elements from the periodic table, constructing a model city out of paper buildings, or being a worker in God's harvest field. The first few provide interesting conversation tid-bits. The last one has eternal benefits.