

Introduction

It's February. Snow is on the ground. Summertime and homegrown tomatoes seem far away. But there is no reason we can't dream. On the Old Farmers Almanac website, I came across some instructions for harvesting homegrown tomatoes. A couple of them were news to me.

- If tomatoes fall off the vine before they appear ripe, place them in a paper bag with the stem up and store them in a cool, dark place.
- Never place tomatoes on a sunny windowsill to ripen; they may rot before they are ripe!
- If your tomato plant still has fruit when the first hard frost threatens, pull up the entire plant and hang it upside down in the basement or garage. Pick tomatoes as they ripen.
- Never refrigerate fresh tomatoes. Doing so spoils the flavor and texture that make up that garden tomato taste.

It is one thing to put the seedlings in the ground, but there is more to effective harvesting than just pulling the tomato off the vine. In our study of Matthew, we have seen that Jesus sees the lost world as a bountiful harvest. He had told his disciples to pray that God would send out laborers into the harvest. He then called his closest disciples, the twelve, and appointed them as his special representatives to go out on his mission and labor in the harvest of souls. And in our text this morning, we see that Jesus gave explicit instructions about HOW they were to do the harvesting.

[Read Text; Pray]

This passage is pertinent to every Christian. Jesus was sending out his earliest followers on a local mission under his careful supervision. He was training and preparing them for a world-wide commission to make disciples that would be theirs when he would no longer be bodily present.

We are under that great commission now. The instructions for effective ministry on that first local mission trip are basic to our effectiveness today.

But this text is also of particular importance for those who do not follow Christ as well. There is the message you need to hear, plus, as we near the climax of the passage we will see a stunning alert that should wake every sleeper from slumber and make us sit up and take notice.

As a whole, though, this text presents protocols for effective harvesting. These are Jesus' directions for effectively bringing people to him. How do we work the harvest? And that is how we are going to break it down.

Instruction #1

I. Start Close to Home.

A. It sticks out quite noticeably that Jesus restricted the people and places to which his disciples were to go. In verse 6, Jesus commands, "Go nowhere among the Gentiles and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of Israel." He was limiting his disciples to their own people. The Gentiles had no biological connection to Israel. The Samaritans were the result of Jewish inter-marriage with Gentiles. They were part Jew but not fully Jew. Jesus told his twelve, who themselves were Jews, to go only to the Jews. There is an important caveat to bear in mind. Jesus was issuing this restriction only temporarily. It was always the intent of Jesus for the gospel to go to the nations. But the gospel was for God's chosen people first. The Great Commission to go into all the world and make disciples of all the nations was coming, but this is where they would start. They would start with those from whom salvation was coming and to whom the gospel was to be offered first. And they would start close to home with their own people to whom they could relate.

B. Starting with the Jews gave the disciples a manageable focus group. You have to start somewhere. And we all need to remember that none of us can do it all. Each of us must do our part in our place with the tools God has given us. When we look to carrying out the Great Commission, some will be near and some will go far. But none should wait until he goes far away and we must all be involved right where we are. So start close to home. That will prepare you to go far if that is where God calls you.

Instruction #2.

II. Speak a Clear Message.

A. Jesus instructed the Twelve to proclaim that the kingdom of heaven is at hand. Their mission then, fundamentally, was to speak and to speak a clear and concise message.

B. The gospel is a message. It requires words in order to be expressed. From the beginning good news has consisted of words. God proclaimed good news even going back to his confrontation of the serpent after the Fall. The good news was that though the serpent would bruise the heel of the Savior, the Savior would crush his head. By grace are you saved through faith. Without faith it is impossible to please God. And faith believes even what it does not see. It believes God and it believes His message; it believes his word.

God proclaimed a message to Abraham. He said, "Look toward heaven and number the stars if you can." And then he said, "So shall your offspring be." It was a promise that Abraham could imagine but he could not see. Genesis 15:6 says that Abram believed the Lord. That is faith, believing God, and the Lord counted it to him as righteousness. In this way God forgives sin; he covers disobedience for those who believe. Paul told the Ephesians, "By grace you have been saved through faith."

But for persons to believe, a message must be proclaimed. Paul asks in Romans 10: "How will people call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? Here in Matthew, Jesus tells the disciples as they go they are to preach; they are to proclaim. They are to speak.

The reason why I am making such a big deal about speaking is because there are those who seem to think you can spread the gospel without it. It seems popular these days to bandy about a slogan which goes like this, "Preach the gospel at all times. Use words if necessary." It seems to communicate that you could conceivably preach the gospel without words. Let your life do the talking; only resort to words if necessary. But the fact of the matter is that your life can demonstrate a change that has occurred

in you because of the gospel, but your life lived in silence will never proclaim the gospel. The gospel must be preached. It must be communicated with words. It does not suffice for any of us to think that how we live our lives is all that people need or that drilling wells in parched lands, or showing people how to more effectively grow crops or teaching them good healthcare is all they need. Those are all good things. Yet most of all, people must believe. And to believe, they must hear. And for them to hear we must speak.

C. We must speak a clear message. Jesus gave his disciples the very words they should say: "The kingdom of heaven is at hand." "God's kingdom is near." "The King is Coming in the power and glory of his kingdom to establish itself." Let's use our imaginations for just a moment. Imagine yourself to be a farmer working along a roadside. You have been a patriot in your own land and fly its flag proudly on your farm. A messenger comes by and announces to you, however, that a new government, one with which your land has long been in conflict, has seized control of the land. This government is in charge and the king of that new government will soon arrive with all his armies to assert his sovereignty, and you will be called to account for crimes committed against his kingdom, for loyalty to a rebellious land. If you want, however, you may become part of the new kingdom. All your crimes will be absolved. What you must do is confess your crimes and seek forgiveness. Trust the new king and swear allegiance to him. And do it now before he comes. Believe what you are being told even though you do not yet see.

D. This is the essence of the news Jesus' disciples were to preach. The kingdom of heaven is at hand. This is the essence of the message disciples of Christ are sent to speak today. This is the message lost folks need to hear. This is the message you need to hear if you do not follow Jesus Christ. The people of earth are rebels against the God of heaven. They have broken heaven's law. But the kingdom of heaven is about to be established and exert itself over the kingdom of earth. Its king is coming. He is Jesus. He will take his rightful seat on the throne of the universe. And its people will be called to account. All have sinned and come short of the glory of God. But the kingdom of heaven overflows with good will. It offers a free gift to those who will receive it—pardon, forgiveness,

reconciliation, a choice place as a joint heir with the king. People need to repent of their acts of disloyalty. They need to believe this message and trust in this coming king. They need to trust in Jesus. That is the message we are to preach. It is as simple as that.

Often times people want to get off on a side issue. They want to talk about denominations, lesser doctrines, and controversial matters. I am not saying those things are unimportant, but they are certainly less important in the grand scheme of things than the clear, plain, and main thing. We do not have to have a doctor's degree to share the gospel. We just need to communicate to people that the kingdom of heaven is at hand.

Instruction #3.

III. Display Your Credentials.

A. Police carry a badge. When they display their badge, we are alerted that they are official representatives of the government. Jesus instructed his disciples to carry a badge, so to speak. He authorized them with his own power to do signs and wonders. He directed them to "heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, cast out demons." So not only were these demonstrations of power but also of compassion. The kingdom whose imminence the disciples were to announce is supreme in authority but also supreme in compassion.

The announcement that the kingdom of heaven is at hand is not an announcement of a hostile takeover but the compassionate overthrow of the domain of darkness and evil and oppression. King Jesus is breaking in to set captives free. The kingdom of this earth and its prince is marked by sickness, death, misery, and demonic torment. The signs of the apostles were authenticating testimonies to the fact that these men came under the authority of the king of heaven. They further expressed that the king of heaven is at the same time powerful, merciful, and gracious. He has the well-being of people at heart. The disciples were to demonstrate that they were official representatives of heaven's king by these mighty works.

How does this apply to us as disciples of Jesus today? The time of signs and wonders is mostly confined to the age of Jesus and the apostles. Those signs confirmed those apostles. Nevertheless, we do have a badge to show.

There are credentials that mark Christ's disciples as messengers of the king. Our credentials are first that we continue in the faith proclaimed by those authenticated apostles. We continue in the faith that apostles preached. And yet we will demonstrate our connection to the king of heaven by our signs. They include transformed behavior, compassion, patience, kindness, and mercy. As we come with the message of the nearness of the kingdom of heaven, we must see to it that our witness is adorned by the character that marks heaven. We should exude compassion. We should demonstrate the truth of Christ's message that it brings life and purity and joy and liberates captives. The badge that we show is godly love through Christ. We show the power of God in the fact that he has changed our lives. We pursue holiness and the glory of God.

B. So credential number 1 is compassionate power. Jesus points to a second credential—generosity. He told his apostles, "You received without paying, give without pay." Most other translations say, "Freely you have received, freely give." The disciples were not to look to make money off their evangelistic efforts. It would be a total distortion of the essence of the gospel. You do not come to follow Christ to get money. You cannot obtain Christ with money and the goal is not worldly wealth. It is a relationship by grace through faith with Jesus for the sake of knowing Jesus Christ and possessing the righteousness of Jesus Christ. The gospel is all about the gift of God, the grace of God, and the glory of God. If you want to get rich off the gospel, you are completely off base.

In the book of Acts, Luke tells of one Simon the magician. He was amazed by the signs and wonders performed by the apostles, and he wanted to obtain the power to do them himself. So he offered the apostles money if they would give him the power to impart the Holy Spirit. Peter spoke to him sternly with these words, "May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money! You have neither part nor lot in this matter, for your heart is not right before God. Repent of this wickedness of yours!"

The message of the kingdom of heaven is that salvation is a free gift to those who will receive it. It cannot be earned. It cannot be bought. And it

is not for sale. It is costly indeed as it was purchased by Christ's own shed blood, but it can only be obtained by those who will receive it as a gift. Paul in Romans 6:23 declares that "the wages of sin is death but the FREE GIFT of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."

And if you have received that greatest of all gifts, you know others can also receive it but only in the same way—as a gift. Evangelism has been described aptly as one beggar telling another where to find bread. The work of spreading the gospel is concerned with magnifying the glory and grace of God and spreading the message of salvation, not about amassing wealth. The glory of God and the souls of men hang in the balance. To receive the glorious gift of forgiveness from God is a gift so great I should want to share it with the whole world with anyone who will believe as I have believed. Why would I want somebody to have to pay for something I have not had to pay for?

You know the parable of the unforgiving slave right? He owed an enormous amount of money to his master; it was so great a debt he could not have repaid him in a thousand lifetimes. When the master called him to account he begged forgiveness, and the master graciously forgave him. But the slave went out and found a fellow slave who owed him a small debt and began to demand repayment. That is what it is like for us to have received the free gift of eternal life and then to want to turn around and sell it to others.

One of the marks of genuine, disciple-making disciples is that they are not in it to get rich. We are in it to share bread with other beggars. Has the freeness of God's salvation become stale to you? We need regularly to remember that every ounce of payment for our right standing with God was rendered by Jesus Christ. What we have in him is the greatest gift ever given. And the whole world stands in as great a need as did we before we received it. We need to engage our lives in sharing this bread with other beggars. Sharing in this way is a badge of authenticity that we are saved and sent by Christ.

C. Now there is a third mark of credentialing, a third qualification that marks out those who go into the harvest to work according to the guidelines of the

Lord of the Harvest. It is faith. Jesus further instructed these disciples what not to take on this mission trip. He said, "Acquire no gold or silver or copper for your belts, no bag for your journey, or two tunics or sandals or a staff, for the laborer deserves his food." On the one hand, the disciples are not to engage in the preaching of the gospel to become wealthy. On the other hand, they should welcome hospitable provisions from those who benefit from their ministry. So they were not to sell the gospel, but they were not refuse gifts from those who believed and supported them.

It seems to me that the main thing Jesus was implying in this particular instruction is that these disciples were to trust God to meet their needs. They should go out with confidence that God will meet their needs as they go. It would demonstrate that they were truly convinced they were sent from God. The God who guided them would also provide for them. That is faith. That is trust. And this is indeed what the Lord wants from us—trusting obedience. That is a credential of the ones truly sent out by Jesus. If you grasp that the mission is God's, that the gospel is the free offer of life to those who will believe, that you have received this amazing gift through God's grace, that God has called you to go, then you can certainly rest in his ability to provide what you need in order to do what he has called you to do.

When the Apostle Paul went out, he was sure not to depend upon those to whom he went to sustain his ministry. He worked with his own hands. He also received support from other believers to keep him going. As we talk about going out and trusting God to meet our needs, it is important for all of us to realize that we have the opportunity, indeed the responsibility, to be involved in the ministry of those who go by financially supporting them. And when we do, from God's own perspective we are participating in their work. It is not simply the work of that missionary but our work in which we share an important role.

3 John is an interesting little book in the New Testament. John is writing to Gaius and rejoicing in the evidence that Gaius was walking in the truth. There was a group of brothers who were taking the gospel to the Gentiles. Following Jesus' instructions here, they went without accepting anything from them. But Gaius had supported them, and John had heard about it

from those brothers. And John commented to Gaius in this letter that such support actually amounts to a participation in their ministry. So even when you start at home and even when you remain at home but support faithful gospel ministers who leave home, you multiply and become part of that ministry. God sees it not just as theirs but also as yours.

Every Christian has the joy and responsibility of participating in the great commission this way. I hope you are mindful and intentional and prayerful in this way. Don't merely throw some money in a basket because someone's story moved your heart. Be intentional about gospel mission and realize that financially supporting the work of the gospel is part of freely giving because we have freely received. You may feel disconnected from mission work, but I want to encourage you that you don't have to go to be connected. Not everyone can go. It takes many to support the one who goes. Now I am not trying to dissuade anyone from going. But I am asserting that even if we are not the one who goes, we still can strive to be connected with the work. We do that through financial support, prayer support, and the work of contact and encouragement.

Conclusion

This is as far as I am going to go in the text today. There is much more here, and we will finish up next week looking at how to work the harvest. But I started out this morning talking about tomatoes and how I am looking forward to harvesting some this summer. Love those homegrown tomatoes! Yet that joy is nothing compared to the harvest of souls. It is a high privilege to be entrusted by God to be a part of going out into the fields and harvesting souls by proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of heaven.

Psalm 126 says,

Those who sow in tears shall reap with shouts of joy!

He who goes out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing,

shall come home with shouts of joy, bringing his sheaves with him.

It is an exhilarating joy when we come in from the Lord's harvest bringing our sheaves with us. God calls every Christian to get in on that joy. We learn from Jesus' instructions to the twelve that we need to start where we

are. You do not have to go around the world to go into the harvest. Are you going where you are? We also need to keep the message simple and clear. We have a glorious king and his kingdom is at hand. And we need to display our credentials. Let us grow in compassion, generosity, and faith.