

Laborers for the Harvest

(What did Jesus mean?)

Matthew 9:35–38

The Immediate Context

Before Jesus' call to prayer (Matthew 9:18–34)

Jesus restores a ruler's daughter to life. (vv. 18–19, 23–26)

Jesus heals a woman with chronic bleeding. (vv. 20–22)

Jesus heals two blind men. (vv. 27–31)

Jesus delivers a man unable to speak because of demonic oppression. (vv. 32–34)

The hinge (Matthew 9:35–36)

Jesus is **teaching, proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, and healing** (v. 35).

He sees the crowds as **"harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd."** (v. 36)

Jesus' call to prayer (Matthew 9:37–38, ESV)

"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."

After Jesus' call to prayer

Jesus **commissions and sends the twelve apostles** into the harvest.

(Matthew 10; esp. 10:5–8)

Further context: Jesus sends out **70 (or 72)** other disciples. (Luke 10:1–20)

What "Laborers" Means Here

In this surrounding context (Matthew 9:18–38), "laborers" aren't generic volunteers. Jesus uses a harvest metaphor for **gathering people into God's kingdom** through repentance and faith, and **into Jesus' care**—people who are currently **"harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd"** (9:36). So the "work" is not farming; it is **mission and shepherding**.

What Jesus Expects Laborers to Do (Matthew 9:37–38)

1) _____ **where the people are and "gather" them for God (reaping).**

The image of harvest points to **bringing people in**, not merely observing need. In context, the crowds are spiritually leaderless; the labor is connecting them to the true Shepherd by calling them to repentance and faith and drawing them into God's care.

2) _____ the kind of ministry Jesus has been doing in this passage.

Matthew summarizes Jesus's pattern: **teaching, proclaiming the kingdom, and healing** (9:35). Laborers extend that same work—**word + deed**—so the crowds are no longer abandoned.

3) _____ **shepherding leadership (not just initial contact).**

“Sheep without a shepherd” means the need is not only initial response; it is **ongoing shepherding**—guidance, instruction, protection from exploitation, and care for the weak. Laborers function as **under-shepherds**.

4) _____ **“sent out” under God’s authority.**

Verse 38 is explicit: pray that the Lord of the harvest would **send out** workers. This is not self-appointed hustle. It is **God-directed mission**. (*The verb behind “send out” can carry urgency—more like deploying than casually recruiting.*)

Matthew 10 Shows What This Looks Like

Jesus, the Lord of the harvest, immediately acts on his call to prayer. In Matthew 10, Jesus sends the Twelve with a **Job Description** like this:

_____ : “The kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

_____ : heal, restore, confront evil.

_____ the lost: focused outreach (*first to “the lost sheep of Israel”*).

What Jesus Meant

In Matthew 9:37–38, Jesus expects laborers to participate in God’s active rescue and shepherding of people—by proclaiming the kingdom, embodying its mercy and power, and gathering the scattered into care and discipleship.

One last sharp edge in the text: Jesus doesn’t say the harvest needs better marketing. He says it needs workers—people willing to _____, not just agree.

Prayer and Practice

One-sentence prayer:

“Lord of the harvest, send out laborers—including me—into your harvest.”

Two prompts:

1. Who are the “harassed and helpless” within my reach right now?
2. What is one concrete “labor” step I will take this week (invite, serve, teach, pray with someone, follow up, disciple)?