

**Introduction:**

Ten years ago our church was stepping into a building program. All our energy had been focused on discerning what we should do and then in asking our people to double their giving! *Double!* Which, by the grace of God, we did! We'd put a lot of effort into all that and I knew that once a new building was done we needed to focus that energy into fresh ministry for Jesus. I prayed, looked at Scripture, and at what God was surfacing in the hearts of our people. I felt God led me to **Matt 9:36**, "*When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.*"

We took on several ministries of compassion, and we added this line to our Core Values: "*as a church, we will pursue ministries of compassionate outreach, recognizing with Jesus that people are 'harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd'.*"

To set this imagery in our minds I began calling VCL the Church of the Good Shepherd. I bought a shepherd's staff and hung it in the foyer where we could all see it. A year and a half later, when we dedicated our new building, I spoke on this text again. Then two years ago, the elders were again thinking through our church's identity and Chris summed it up, "*VCL is a shepherding church. That is what we do.*" We all agreed so again we focused our attention on that imagery, and Pastor Michael preached a sermon on this text.

So this passage is important to VCL. We think of ourselves now more in terms of *home* than *shepherding* but the point is the same: **Our church must meet the people around us with Christ's compassion because they are "harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd."**

I. **WE TAKE OUR SHEPHERDING CUES FROM JESUS (9:35-36)**

**V.35** says, *“Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness.”* That is how Jesus, the Good Shepherd, found lost sheep. So let’s look at those three phrases:

- A. “Teaching in their synagogues.” What did Jesus teach? We know that from the Sermon on the Mount. This was the heart and essence of Jesus’ teaching. Look back at **Matt. 5-7**. Jesus taught people things laying undiscovered in their own Scriptures, obscured by clueless and heartless religious leaders. For example, he taught them that to live in God’s kingdom you must be small—poor in spirit, meek, merciful. He showed them how God’s laws had been emptied of their meaning, and what they required would drive anyone to their knees seeking God’s mercy. He taught people the religious forms didn’t matter if you didn’t have a heart to match. He taught them out to tell genuine from counterfeit faith. And when he was done, Matthew says, *“the crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law”* [7:28-29].
- B. “Proclaiming the good news of the kingdom.” The Jews knew God had a kingdom. They just had never really seen it and they didn’t know for sure just how they’d get in if they did. Jesus’ first sermon was, *“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”* Jesus, of course, was how it came near. Jesus was himself the door. He said later, *“I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”* People didn’t get into the kingdom by birth nor by righteousness, but by believing in Jesus who, in turn, would open wide the gates to them.

There’s something else to see in this phrase.

Remember what the angel said to the shepherds: *“I bring*

*you good news of great joy.*” Good news comes with joy. We almost always picture Jesus as serious; somber, even. But Jesus must have infused everything he did with the very joy of the Lord himself. Imagine what it was like to hear him preach, so full of joy at the good news he brought that he was irrepressible.

Illus.: Did you ever see the film, *“The Gospel According to Matthew”* with **Bruce Marchiano** as Jesus? He just exuded joy. He was asked about that in an interview. He said, *“Well, the joy was a surprise to me. In my church background, joy was not part of the program. You could use the word in a song, but you'd better not actually show it. The director pointed me to Hebrews 1:9 where it says of Jesus, ‘Therefore God, your God has anointed you with the oil of joy above your brethren.’ So that's where the joy came from, and that built and built. It just opened up—joy. Joy, that's what the kingdom of God is. It's joy.”* **Jesus' joy filled his good news.** His joy drew people in.

[<http://www.gci.org/CO/marchiano>]

- C. “Healing every disease and sickness.” Matthew has already told us several stories of Jesus healing. Jesus healed people and cast out demons because he cared about them. But these miracles were another way of speaking. They were the proof that Jesus was God’s Messiah. Sometimes you get the vague impression that miracles happen all over the Bible story. They don’t. Not one Israelite leper had ever been healed. No one blind or crippled or deaf person had ever been healed. No demons had ever been cast out. Then Jesus came doing those things. Look at **Matt 8:16-17** says, *“When evening came, many who were demon-possessed were brought to him, and he drove out the spirits with a word and healed all the sick. **This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah: ‘He took up our infirmities and bore our diseases.’”*** In other words, when you see this happening you’re seeing the Messiah!

The real point is not that Jesus ushered in a new era of healing everyone who gets sick. The point was that God's long-promised, merciful Messiah had come. Only a few lines later, **Isaiah 53** says, *"We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all."* [53:6] The way Jesus *"took up our infirmities and bore our diseases"* proved that he was the one who would *"take up all our iniquities"* on the cross, and fling wide the doors of God's kingdom.

**Healing and freedom from the devil comes in believing that Jesus is God's Messiah come to save us.**

- D. **V.36:** *"When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd."* When Jesus did these things—teaching, proclaiming the good news, healing—they were all wrapped in his compassion. The word in Greek conveys a tenderness that he could feel in his gut. This is the same word that described the father who saw his prodigal son a long way off: *"He was filled with compassion."* It is so sensitive a sympathy that it hurts.

The Jews around Jesus were "harassed and helpless" because their shepherds had abused and abandoned them. In **Ezek. 34** God railed at Israel's shepherds: *"Woe to you shepherds of Israel who only take care of yourselves! Should not shepherds take care of the flock? ...You have not strengthened the weak or healed the sick or bound up the injured. You have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost. You have ruled them harshly and brutally. So they were scattered because there was no shepherd, and when they were scattered they became food for all the wild animals. My sheep wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill. They were scattered over the whole earth, and no one searched or looked for them."*

Those were the people Jesus saw. Jesus was their Good Shepherd. They were his sheep.

## II. JESUS EXPECTS US TO SEE PEOPLE AS HE DID (9:36-37)

- A. Jesus gives us two different ways of seeing the people around us. One is as sheep without a shepherd. This was especially true of the Jews. But Jesus said in **Jn 10:16**, *“I have **other sheep** that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd.”* That’s why Jesus told his disciples at the end of Matthew, to *“Go and make disciples of all nations.”* So, we are to see people around us as “sheep without a shepherd.”

The second metaphor is in v.37: *“The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few.”* Harassed and helpless people are like a field ready to harvest. The Jews in Jesus’ day were especially ripe for God’s good news. Remember how after Pentecost thousands of Jews became believers. **Not all fields are so ripe and ready, but there are always too few harvest workers.** There aren’t too few Christians; there are too few Christians in the harvest fields.

- B. Why aren’t we better at seeing people as Jesus did? In the interview I mentioned earlier, **Bruce Marchiano** also said, *“What an actor does is to try to step into another person’s heart. To catch a tiny, tiny, billionth of a billionth of a glimpse of Jesus’ heart was to rewrite my own heart, if I can put it that way. The depth of his compassion, the depth of his heartbreak over human pain, over the lostness of lost people, over people coming short of his plan and purpose for their lives.*

*“There are times to this day when sitting at a red light I’ll just break down in tears watching the people walking the sidewalk, as I think about their lostness, having caught a glimpse of Jesus’ reaction to these things that we just call normal life. To have those little seeds planted in my own life was to rewrite my entire life.”*

We can only effectively fulfill Christ’s commission if we are filled with Christ’s compassion.

- C. Here's an interesting connection. We are all harvest workers. **So are we all shepherds?** We know pastors are shepherds because that's what *pastor* means and what we're told to do. The sense I get here is not that we're each shepherds but that we're all shepherds—together. The church is Christ's Body, and Christ is the Good Shepherd, so... we as the church embody Jesus, the Good Shepherd, in this world. **We are a shepherding church.** Together, Village Church teaches through our words and lives about life in God's kingdom. Together we proclaim with joy the good news that Jesus brings us safely to God. Together, we affirm that Jesus is God's Messiah. **With Jesus as our Head, we are the Good Shepherd.**

So go get 'em! Get out there and preach the gospel. Oh, wait a minute. Jesus isn't finished. **V.38**, "*Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.*" Well, hasn't he done that already: "*Go and make disciples of all nations.*" So why pray? The Greek word for *ask* actually has a sense of urgency: *pray earnestly. Beseech.*

### **III. VCL CAN ONLY EMBODY THE GOOD SHEPHERD IF WE PRAY EARNESTLY FOR MORE WORKERS (9:38)**

Why do we pray if we have the command? *Illus.:* In the summer of 2005 when our church was being built construction was lagging behind. Our foreman, Bob the Builder, called his boss and said, "*If I don't get some more carpenters here we'll still be working when the snow flies.*" Lo and behold, the next week several more carpenters were sent. It took an urgent appeal for workers to someone who had the authority to send them. That's why we pray, too!

- A. We pray for God's shove. The word 'send' misses some of the muscle of the Gr. word. It means 'thrust, push, **shove.**' We often need God's inward shove. **Darrell Bock** wrote, "*Laborers are not to be coerced into the kingdom.*" [on Lk 10:2] But we all know our own spiritual inertia and lethargy. **So**

**that we freely do what we are reluctant to do, Jesus tells us to pray for each other.** Illus.: Years ago, there was a guy in my other church that nagged me about evangelism. He was a nuisance. Then he started praying for me—his version of this prayer. And that’s why I started hanging out at places like Einsteins Bagels. It is where I meet “harassed and helpless people.” **Frankly, it isn’t enough for us to have God’s command; we need God’s push.** And for that we pray, for our own good, and for each other’s.

- B. We pray for Christ’s compassion. We will only fulfill Christ’s commission if we are filled with Christ’s compassion, and compassion like that only comes from God. None of us, no matter how sympathetic we may be, are born with it. *“O Lord, give me your heart for the single mom and her kids next door. Give me your heart for the immigrants I so easily overlook. Give me your heart for my students, my customers, my friends at school. Give me your heart so they can see Jesus in me.”* Jesus’ compassion brings just the right timing and tone to our witness.
- C. This compassion of Jesus does not only come from seeing the lost sheep. Jesus’ compassion actually incubates into maturity within our church. Christians need the life of the church if we are ever to care about the lives of the lost. Praying together warms the urgency of our prayers. Hearing someone else’s growing burden for a friend, someone else’s encouraging opportunity to talk about Jesus, someone else’s insight into harassed and helpless lives—those things arising out of our life *together here at VCL* help us to be a church *together* who proclaim the good news.

We come into this congregation and here we find Christ’s compassion. We know what it is to feel harassed and helpless but we *have* a shepherd. Imagine what it is like to never once know the joy of singing to the Lord, of

never having people pray for you, of never finding truth and grace in the Bible, of never going to sleep certain of a safe eternity, or of never feeling clean. That is what stirs our Christlike compassion! Jesus said, *“Freely you have received; freely give.”*

### **Conclusion:**

I know that people aren't always ready to be invited to church, but I'll tell you this. If they come to this church, they will be safe. They will be fed. They will sense the peace and joy of Jesus. I've watched you and I know: given half a chance, you make people feel at home. It's one of the things I love about this church.

Illus.: Last summer, when I was back in South Dakota, a man from my home church, Roger, mentioned to me that our house had been his storm home when he was a boy. Many of you don't know what that is. My hometown is near the North Dakota border. It gets really cold up there and blizzards are a real danger. They can blow up suddenly and the heavily drifting snow makes travel exceedingly dangerous. Many of the kids in my school rode the bus in from farms. If one of those blizzards came up during the day it wouldn't be safe to send the kids home. So at the beginning of the year each of the farm kids was assigned a storm home in town where they would spend the night if a storm kept them from getting home. Roger's storm home was our home.

That is what Village Church is—a storm home. By the grace of God, this is a safe place. It is the home that some people have never had. Here we are with the Jesus, Good Shepherd and, incredibly, we *embody* him together when we're here and when we disperse into the harvest fields.

So Jesus says to us, as he did to his first disciples, *“Freely you have received; freely give.”*