

Week 2 (June 18) Matthew 9:35-10:8

The ministry of Jesus has just gotten a full head of steam by the time we get to Matthew 9. We have heard the Sermon on the Mount and Jesus has healed a number of people. Our passage begins with a summary that tells us that the stories we have heard in chapters 7-8 are just a sample of the healings and preaching Jesus has done. Seeing the crowds Jesus laments that such great need is a part of the lives of so many. It seems like too much even for the one who can calm the sea and heal from a distance, as we have already seen him do in this Gospel. After calling the disciples to pray that God will send helpers, Jesus takes it upon himself to appoint some. Jesus shifts the status of his closest followers. In 10:1 they are disciples, followers; in v. 2 they are named apostles, those sent. They are sent out with the power and message of Jesus.

The message Jesus commissions them to proclaim is: “The Kingdom of Heaven is Near.” As it is in Mark, this statement may include two aspects: the Kingdom (the realm where God’s will is done) is coming close chronologically and/or that the Kingdom is near you spatially when this message and the attending works are done. While elsewhere in Matthew such proclamations include calls to repent and warnings about judgment, here the emphasis is different. Here the emphasis is on the healing that the coming Kingdom brings. As Jesus commissioned them they are given power to exorcise demons and to heal sickness and disease (10:1). As he describes their task after selecting those he would send, they have the simple message and the command to heal the sick, cleanse the outcast, exorcise those tortured by demons, and even raise the dead (vv. 7-8). They are to work to create a world in which God’s people do not suffer from ailments from their own bodies or evils imposed by outside forces.

Matthew intends this mission of the newly minted apostles to set a pattern for the church that is led by those apostles. That church is to proclaim the coming of the Kingdom (in its future fullness and in its present proximity to the world through the church) and work to make the world conform to what God wants for it. The commission of the church is to work for healing and to end oppression from outside forces. Jesus commissions the church to live out the “thy will be done on earth” that it is to pray for. While the church does not wield the power to miraculously heal diseases, it can work to create structures that relieve the suffering and pain of so many in God’s world. Such a commission from Christ demands that the church work to eradicate the demonic forces that distort our society and a culture that does not value all God’s people. We should note that this is the first commission Christ gives to those whose mission the church is to continue.

This commission does not include the task of making new disciples. This story is not about getting more followers, but it is about spreading God’s salvation. We can be certain that the message of the coming of the Kingdom includes calls to repent in Matthew (just read chapters 24-25). But that is not the point here. The initial task the apostles are sent to do is work for a world that conforms to God’s will. That work will come to include calling people to repent and believe in Christ, as the Great Commission at the end of this Gospel shows, because only when people begin to live as Christ teaches can the world be what God intends.

You may also note that Jesus says that this commission is only to “the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (10:6). The work of establishing the will of God is first internal to the people of God. It is the people of God who are first to receive the gift of the vision of life as God intends. But the Commission that calls the church to make disciples of all peoples also means that this work of bringing healing and peace extends to all peoples.