

Harassed & Helpless

Matthew 9:35-38. That's how Jesus saw them. They were harassed and helpless sheep. After last week's sermon, it seemed that a follow-up lesson regarding the need to help and counsel the lost sheep of the world would be fitting. So, of course, I found myself gravitating to this passage. But an odd thing happened; the "harassed and helpless" portion stood out more than "sheep without a shepherd". I always think "sheep without a shepherd." But that's how Jesus also saw them. Harassed and helpless. This hit me (and stayed with me) as I began to consider my approach to today's message.

I couldn't get it out of my head. What is so beautiful, the more I thought of it, seemed to annoy me. Why? They sound like victims. "Well, yeah. They were, Shawn." I must admit that at times I struggle viewing others as victims because "victimhood", kind of like last week's "traumatized," can be used and abused. If you were to say, "Well, they were under the Roman rule. That had to be difficult!" In my heart, I answer: "yeah, and they were under the many nations before then because they couldn't keep their eyes on God." There's hope in this story - my better sense (and humility) began to kick in quickly. Jesus was perfect at seeing one's actual faults and struggles. He was able to see how someone could be a victim and an agitator at the same time. We tend to make too many things, and, more problematically, too many people's characters black-and-white. While it's true that people are generally speaking good people who do bad things, or bad people who do good things, dealing with that reality face-to-face proves challenging.

Why am I bringing this up? Well, I'm thinking about the most realistic reasons we struggle to share the gospel. Let's agree that the most obvious should be that we either (1) **don't believe in punishment**, so the sense of urgency is absent, or (2) **our love for others grows cold**.

I know there are other reasons that discourage sharing the gospel, but I wonder how strong they truly are. For example: do I think that not knowing what to say can hinder a person from sharing the gospel? Yes, but only to an extent. I've seen babes in Christ who make a mess of God's word try their best to share what they do know. Somehow, their zeal for God overcomes their fear of ignorance. We really can say, "That's a good point or question. I don't know how to answer, so I need to think and get back to you."

Another example: we can say, "Most people won't listen." I bring this up because I struggle with it, but to be fair, it hasn't actually stopped me from sharing the gospel. It has slowed it at times, but never snuffed it out. In fact, after having the pleasure of sharing God's word with hundreds of individuals outside the body, I've only seen less than a handful come to the Lord, and have of them turned back (but perhaps more turned to him down the road). You get the point. But I don't stop. We don't stop.

What if it's that we're losing our love for others? What if that's the simplest (albeit harder) pill to swallow? Could it be that as we live in a dark world, people begin to annoy us? Is it hard to help people who don't seem to want to help themselves? Is it hard to help someone

who will turn on you the minute you share something difficult? Why invest in such a people? Why waste time on such a people? We befriend such a people? And what sense would it make to preserve their friendship if they'd turn on you for sharing Jesus? Is that a true friendship? *Maybe we'll realize that "seeing people as harassed and helpless sheep without a shepherd" sounds beautiful, and IS beautiful, but difficult to practice.* And if one were to say, "No, that's not my problem. My problem is that I just don't think of them." Well, we're still in the same boat. Our love for self or this world might be taking over our love for others. We need to balance things out.

Jesus practiced it. It's why we need Him so badly. If a person doesn't have Jesus, who do they have? Us? I'm being a little light-hearted, but we need to turn people to Him because they need a better option than "us." In Jesus' day, He looked at people who a dying world had afflicted and diseased. He looked upon His people, Israel, who had lost their power and served under the Roman thumb. He could feel the weight of the Pharisees and religious dogma upon the shoulders of God's sheep. They had a history of sin, for sure! But they also had a history of being taken advantage of. Passages like Ezekiel 34:1-16 come to mind. Doesn't this help you appreciate Jesus taking the role of the "Good Shepherd?" And what does a good shepherd do? He cares for and protects his sheep.

If He is going to increase while we decrease, brethren, we have to be committed to change. This means being "fisher of men" and teaching sheep the voice of Jesus.

- It means looking outward more and inward less.
- Learning about Jesus more and our hobbies less.
- Speaking of Jesus more and myself less.
- Serving others more and myself less.
- Looking at others' problems more and my own less.
- What are the problems of the world? What is the peace we enjoy but have perhaps taken for granted? How are the sheep of this world being harassed and left helpless? What are the things that keep them up at night that you may not think twice about anymore?

But what if we're unable to do this, because we haven't realized that **we're still harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd**? What if we're not doing this because we're lost ourselves? What if we're lost? What if we're in the darkness? What if we've deceived ourselves? What if I was baptized but never converted? What if that's the main reason we haven't talked about Him, because we instinctively know we're disqualified? And I don't say that in an accusatory way, but rather a reality that is keeping us from speaking His name? What if speaking His name is too hard because we're not ready to face it? And if that were the case, what is it that's harassing you and leaving you helpless? Who have we allowed into our lives that has taken our eyes off Him? What are we turning to - this thing or person that has promised us freedom but has yet to deliver us? What do you think?

We want to help the world, brethren. We need to see them with compassion. We need to fear where they're headed, but we can't do this if we don't love them. And we can't help a person in a pit when we're standing by them. So if that's you today, and you're helpless and harassed,

let Him save you. Let Him liberate you, and experience the change that leaves you with compassion for others, a desire to let others know “the cage has no lock,” and the lack of self-condemnation because you’ve trusted in the Lord yourself. You’ve been set free.