

Perilous Fields; Precious Harvest

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My first summer job was great. I worked for what was essentially a raspberry farm. Some customers came to pick the berries for themselves. But it seemed no matter how many people came to pick berries, there were always many left on the plants each day. So each day my coworkers and I would set to work harvesting all that we could to bring to the local food markets. Perhaps you can imagine the different feelings that came with such work. There was excitement when the picking was easy. There was some frustration when customers only picked the easy to find berries. There was that feeling of being overwhelmed when we realized we couldn't pick every berry that needed to be harvested. Then there was the resentment of having to go after the hard to find berries which the self-pick customers didn't always find. There were nice fresh mornings with cool breezes and easy pickings. Then there were the days when the rain poured or when the hot sun came out. Often the pesky flies found your face and the persistent mosquitos made the work less than pleasant. In the end it was one of my favorite summer jobs.

Today we read about Jesus referring to some very important work as harvesting. He refers to the spiritual harvest of the kingdom of God. This work can bring many different feelings with it. It can bring excitement at the great harvest potential. It can bring resentment at the other workers who only do the easiest work and leave the hard work for everyone else. Or it can bring an overwhelming despair at the harvest that is left to slowly rot because there is so much to do. Which feeling do you identify with when you consider the spiritual harvest? Do you identify with those who would rather just avoid participating in the harvest work and see what the grocer has on sale? Maybe sometimes you identify more with the pickers who only go after the easy harvest and ignore the harder work. Perhaps you are the one who at times feels frustrated because he or she has to go and do the hard work of the harvest. Or do you feel, as many do, despair and overwhelmed when you compare the number of workers to the overwhelming harvest size? Today we consider how Jesus wants us to approach his harvest field of souls. As we look at Luke 10 we see just how we participate in that harvest.

Recall what we read last Sunday. Jesus is headed south to Jerusalem. As he travels, he seems to be recruiting people for an urgent mission. "Follow me" he invites, "proclaim the good news of the kingdom." We saw last week how this is work which demands total commitment. Yet we see that the Lord didn't have any problem recruiting 72 new harvesters.

They were to go out and spread the good news of the kingdom of God. They proclaimed that God's harvest was approaching. For those who trust in Jesus that meant being gathered from this world of sin, suffering, and death into his eternal kingdom. It's good news that God's kingdom is near! By spreading this message they were gathering God's harvest in. As that message was proclaimed, people would be brought to turn from sin with repentance. They would come to faith in Jesus and through faith in him brought to peace with God.

Jesus first outlines the situation for his disciples. The work is already cut out for them! "The harvest is plentiful..." It can seem overwhelming because there is a need for workers. But take note that the task Jesus is sending these 72 on is not to do groundwork. It is not to lay out the plans and dig the dirt. There already is a full and ready harvest. I was blessed at my first summer job to be able to focus on the harvesting. Years later when I moved to a new home, I was pleasantly surprised to see that there was a row of raspberry plants in the yard. I had done nothing to create the harvest in either situation. I only had to go and gather it. That's what Jesus asks his workers to do. They only go to gather his harvest. It is the same today. God has a spiritual harvest. He died to save the whole world. His harvest is plentiful! It includes all those whom he will call into his kingdom. And the number is immense.

But what about the number of workers in this harvest? "The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few." So what comes to mind when we look at the harvest and the workers? It's easy to look at ourselves and our limited resources and abilities. Ten years ago that was the case in our church body. Like many other churches in our country we had workers willing to serve, but they were not able to be supported due to financial challenges. We had mission fields around the world that were forced to bring back missionaries from the fields. This wasn't because of a lack of need in the mission fields. It was because support wasn't there for them to all stay doing full-time ministry. Our home missions and Christian schools faced the same challenges. As a church body we operate over 300 Christian elementary schools and 25 high schools in the United States. But just like many other Christian school systems the numbers have decreased over the past decade in our elementary and secondary level schools. It's not because there are less children in our nation (there are in fact more today than a decade ago). The support from parents and churches has continually and gradually dwindled.

In recent years there has been another concerning trend. It is also one which faces most other Christian church bodies in our nation. There are less people willing to do full-time ministry. There are a number of schools in our church body which cannot find workers who are qualified and willing to serve. Many congregations are unable to obtain a full-time pastor to serve because the workers are fewer and fewer in recent years. Enrollment at our worker training college, Martin Luther College, where our student teacher for the summer is studying, is trending lower than previous decades. Our seminary enrollment is at a low point. Though the population of the earth has only grown, there are less people studying there to prepare for full-time gospel ministry. The harvest is plentiful, but the workers fewer and fewer.

How long can these two trends go on?

What happens when the workers, those willing to take their hand off the plow and not look back, aren't supported by God's kingdom? The peace they proclaim isn't shared because they are not supported or sent. Whether it be for our own children, grandchildren, or friends and neighbors, the gospel isn't available because the support has disappeared. Whether it be for mission fields in our backyards in the USA, or in places around the world the harvest just falls to the ground. And whose fault is it if we have a lack of workers when so many who hear God's call won't respond? The harvest purchased by the blood of the Son of God is sitting on the vine, ready to wilt and rot to waste because too few answer the call to the harvest. Most concerning should be what is left if God's kingdom work is neglected. What kingdom is coming to take hold of hearts in this world if the Lord's harvest work is neglected? I know of only one other kingdom that fills the void: the prince of darkness. He will snatch away the harvest to devour and destroy.

But rather than getting discouraged or feeling overwhelmed, we need to look at what our God says regarding this situation. The fields are perilous, but the harvest is precious! Everything recorded here in Luke 10 reminds us to take our eyes off of self, off of our own limitations, our own smallness, and look to the Lord of the harvest! The harvest is big? "Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field." God's kingdom and the work of his kingdom is certainly done even without our asking. But we pray that it is done. And in doing so **we participate** in the Lord's kingdom work. And we show that **we rely on him** for the harvest.

Jesus, the Lord of the harvest, sent out those 72. "Go. I am sending you out like lambs among wolves." What could be more vulnerable than a little defenseless lamb in the midst of wolves? They are going out into hostile territory. God's kingdom workers are up against strong enemies with strong opposition. The work is perilous. Those participating in the Lord's harvest work shouldn't think they will go about in friendly territory. The devil opposes all harvesting of God's fields. But this only highlights one more important truth as one participates in the Lord's kingdom work: you cannot rely on yourself for strength or protection from enemy, you must rely on the Lord.

As if hostile enemies weren't enough, notice how Jesus sends them out. "Don't take a purse, bag, or sandals." What!? They have to face hostile enemies and be poor?! Is Jesus saying that we should expect workers in his kingdom to be poor beggars? No. This is not what he wants for them. He only further impresses reliance on the Lord of the harvest. He will provide the workers, and he will provide for his workers' needs. He always has done so. Recall in our Old Testament reading from 1 Kings 17 how the worker Elijah was to rely on the Lord of the harvest? God provided for him as ravens fed him. And God continued to provide for Elijah by having a poor widow participate in the Lord's kingdom work as she gave him food and shelter. She used the food which the Lord had provided for her to use in this work! God wanted the same for these 72 workers as they went out into God's harvest fields. "Stay in that house, eating and drinking whatever they give you, for the worker deserves his wages."

He wants the same today! Fellow members of the Lord's kingdom: You don't have to be a pastor or teacher or missionary to support kingdom work. Notice what Jesus says to these workers. They are to go about proclaiming the Lord's peace. And who else participates in the Lord's kingdom work? Those who would pray for them and welcome them and provide for their basic needs as they did kingdom work. It doesn't matter whether you are the harvester or another member of the Lord's kingdom, you participate. Not only does the Lord invite us all to pray that he sends out workers, but he wants his people to support full-time gospel ministry.

Finally, we rely on the Lord of the harvest as he has done all that is needed for his kingdom. The 72 were sent out to proclaim "peace" and "the kingdom of God is near." And they were proclaiming this like no other ever had or will! The very king himself was about to come through their towns! Jesus was on his way. The workers still go ahead of Jesus today. Only the next time he comes it will be to bring his kingdom's eternal reign.

Those 72 discovered an awesome truth as they participated in the Lord's kingdom harvest. The Lord did have a great harvest for them. And they could rely on the Lord as they did their work. They marveled at how with God on their side even the demons had to submit to them. But Jesus has to point them once again to the true marvel: Don't rejoice that you're doing that. Rejoice in the full defeat of Satan and the fact that you belong to my kingdom. Rejoice that your names are written in heaven. Rejoice that you can rely on what the LORD has done for you!

"I saw Satan, fall like lightning from heaven" Jesus says. Satan was defeated. When this king came to the earth it was to destroy the devil's work. Satan has led the whole world into sin when he ruined the fields by tempting Adam and Eve. But he could not stop one man who came to plant a new harvest. When this worker came for the harvest Satan could not deter him. Satan's temptations fell flat and did not lead Jesus into sin. Because Jesus came as true man and true God to live the sinless life we could not. He took our place and did it all for us so we could be members of his kingdom and taken out of Satan's grasp. He came to triumph over Satan on the cross. By the marvelous sacrificial death he did the work necessary to create a kingdom of his own people, holy and without sin, because he took that sin away.

The 72 had an awesome privilege. They were going ahead of the Lord himself saying "the kingdom of God is near you." Jesus is coming! This was good news for God's harvest! We proclaim the same message of peace today. Peace between us and our God. Peace regained through Jesus. Whether as supporter by your prayer, your pockets, or your preaching and teaching, you participate in the harvest work. And we never despair though the harvest is great, though the fields are filled with perils and the wolves who would devour the sheep. Because we carry out and support the work of peace proclaimed through Christ. And we rely on the Lord of the harvest. It's a perilous field, but a precious harvest.