Studies in The Gospel of Matthew: A Primer for Discipleship

Lesson Ten

What Jesus’ Disciples Do

Focal Text
Matthew 9:35—10:15, 24-31

Background
Matthew 9:35—11:1

Main Idea
Jesus calls his disciples to engage in his mission and provides instructions for doing so.

Question to Explore
How do Jesus’ instructions to his disciples to follow as they participated in his mission apply to us today?

Quick Read
When we follow Jesus’ ministry strategy, he will use us to reach the world.

Commentary
In late 1966, Herb Kelleher, John Parker, and Rollin King met at San Antonio’s St. Anthony Club to talk about the need for an air carrier in Texas. Their idea was simple: to connect Dallas, Houston, and San Antonio. The result is the most profitable airline in aviation history. But their cause was their real genius: to make air travel affordable for people who could not otherwise fly. That cause is the reason Southwest Airlines is still a low fare airline, and still constitutes the airline’s passion and purpose for being. From the chief executive to baggage handlers, their cause is their corporation.
Elton Trueblood, the great Christian philosopher, said that every organization, to be successful, must have a passion, a philosophy, and a program. I’m convinced he’s right. So was Herb Kelleher. More important, so is Jesus.

What is to be our passion as disciples of Christ? our philosophy? our program?

Our passion: love those God loves (9:35–10:1)

Our text begins: “Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness” (Matthew 9:35). “Went through” translates periegen, to go about; it describes continued action to travel throughout a region. “All the towns and villages” encompasses a significant ministry tour—Josephus states that there were no less than 204 such villages in the first century.

Jesus continued his three-fold ministry strategy: “teaching in their synagogues” on the Sabbath as a visiting rabbi, “preaching the good news of the kingdom” to the crowds wherever he found them, and “healing every disease and sickness.” This approach was consistent across his ministry (see Matt. 4:23).

In the midst of this Galilean tour, “when he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd” (9:36). “Saw” translates eidon, meaning to look with attention, to understand and perceive. “Compassion” translates esplanchnisthe, literally to feel in the bowels. The word is used often to describe Jesus’ concern for the people (see Matt. 14:14; 15:32; 20:34). He felt their pain to the depths of his being.

In his compassion, Jesus knew that the people were “harassed” (eskylmenoi, meaning to be weary, troubled, burdened) and “helpless” (errimmenoi, meaning to be thrown down). The text likely refers to the legalistic burdens placed on them by their spiritual authorities, as they were “like sheep without a shepherd.” “Shepherd” translates poimena, the word rendered “pastors” in Ephesians 4:11.

Moses (Numbers 27:17) and the kings (1 Kings 22:17; 2 Chronicles 18:16) had been the “shepherds” of the nation. After them, God raised up spiritual leaders who were to shepherd and care for his people (Ezekiel 34:2-6). However, as in the time of Ezekiel, the spiritual shepherds of Jesus’ day had failed.

Our Lord indicted them: “you load people down with burdens they can hardly carry, and you yourselves will not lift one finger to help them” (Luke 11:46). As a result of such dereliction, Jesus “said to his disciples, ‘The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few’” (Matt. 9:37). The religious authorities would not care for the people, and so Jesus commissioned his disciples to take up this responsibility.
Their first response was to pray: “Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field” (9:38). “Ask” translates deethete, meaning to request or plead. “Lord” renders kyriou; in this context it could be translated master or owner. “Send out” translates ekballo, meaning to drive out, send forth.

I once heard Chuck Swindoll at a Texas Baptist Evangelism Conference state, “You can do great things for God after you pray. But you cannot do anything for God until you pray.” Andrew Murray agreed: “They [churches] know not that God rules the world by the prayers of his saints.” John Wesley was even more specific: “God does nothing but in answer to prayer.” And E. M. Bounds claimed, “The church upon its knees would bring heaven upon the earth.”

Once we pray, we are then to go as God sends: “He called his twelve disciples to him and gave them authority to drive out evil spirits and to heal every disease and sickness” (Matt. 10:1). “Authority” translates exousian, meaning capacity, power, the ability to do something. Jesus would later state, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me” (28:18). Now he conferred this spiritual authority on those who would go forward to continue his ministry.

Our passion, our highest calling, is to love God and then love our neighbor as ourselves (Matt. 22:37, 39). As we love our Father, we will love his children. And we will serve because we are compelled by compassion to do so.

I learned this lesson in a powerful way many years ago. While serving as pastor of First Baptist Church in Midland, Texas, I attended a missions banquet sponsored by our WMU. The speaker was Sam James, a retired Southern Baptist missionary to Vietnam.

During his talk, he described a particularly hard period in his ministry to the Vietnamese. The people were unresponsive, the church was troubled, things were difficult. At the end of an especially long and hot day, he returned to his apartment to discover that thieves had stolen all their possessions. Everything was gone except their couch.

That was too much. Sam collapsed on that couch and cried out to God, “You have to get me out of here. I just don’t love these people. I don’t love the Vietnamese any more.” Sam told us that late that night, as he lay on that couch, the Lord spoke to him and said, “You’re not here because you love the Vietnamese—you’re here because I love the Vietnamese.”

Why will you teach your class this Sunday? Why do you serve the Kingdom in other ways? Do you love God so much that you love those God loves? Would those you serve say that you do so out of love for them?
Our philosophy: join God at work (10:2-6)

Many years ago, Henry Blackaby popularized this philosophy of life and ministry: “Join God at work.” Jesus’ disciples, then and now, do not serve their purposes but his. We are commissioned to advance the Kingdom he came to inaugurate. As our Lord had been ministering throughout Galilee, now he called his disciples to join him in that service. He invites us to do the same.

The Twelve

Our text continues: “These are the names of the twelve apostles: first, Simon (who is called Peter) and his brother Andrew; James son of Zebedee, and his brother John; Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; Simon the Zealot and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him” (Matt. 10:2-4).

These men were the “apostles,” a smaller group within the larger crowd following Jesus as his “disciples”: “One of those days Jesus went out to a mountainside to pray, and spent the night praying to God. When morning came, he called his disciples to him and chose twelve of them, whom he also designated apostles” (Luke 6:12-13). Early Christians later understood the “apostles” to be those who had seen the risen Christ (1 Corinthians 9:1) and served alongside him (Acts 1:21-22).

Jesus “sent them out two by two” (Mark 6:7), which explains why Matthew listed them in pairs. But note his arrangement. The first two sets are expected, as they were brothers. The third is interesting: “Philip and Bartholomew.” “Bartholomew” (son of Tolmai) is likely the last name of the disciple whose first name was “Nathanael” (John 1:45; 21:2). He is always listed with Philip in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. As Philip led Nathanael to Christ (John 1:45-49), his pairing with Bartholomew makes sense.

Thomas and Matthew make an interesting set as well. Tradition states that Thomas became the apostle to India while Matthew served in Parthia and Persia, regions close to Thomas’s ministry assignment.

The last two pairs (“James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; Simon the Zealot and Judas Iscariot,” 10:3-4) may all have been members of the Zelotes, a band of guerilla nationalists fighting to free Israel from Roman tyranny. We know that “Simon the Zealot” was part of this movement. “Judas Iscariot” may have been as well. He may have been named for “Kerioth,” a town in Judah; however, it is plausible that “Iscariot” was a Semitic form of sicarius, “dagger bearer” or “assassin.” The sicarii were aligned with the Zealots in their hatred of Rome. Judas’ pairing with Simon the Zealot adds credence to this theory.

“Thaddaeus” was likely a nickname, as it means breast child. He was probably “Judas son of James,” the disciple linked by Luke with Judas Iscariot (Luke 6:16; note that Luke...
does not list Thaddeus in his Gospel). If Judas Iscariot was a Zealot or sicarii, his association with Judas son of James could implicate him in their movement. And an early document called *The Apostolic Constitutions* states that Thaddaeus was “surnamed Judas the Zealot.” “James son of Alphaeus,” by virtue of his pairing with Thaddaeus, may have been part of the Zealots as well.

**Their assignment**
The identities of the Twelve are not as important to us as their assignment: “These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: ‘Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans’” (Matt. 10:5). “Sent out” translates apostello, describing one sent by the authority of another. “Instructions” renders parangeilas, meaning commands, orders, direct edicts.

“Do not go among the Gentiles” could be translated, *Do not go on the way of the Gentiles*, perhaps describing roads leading to Gentile cities. Nor were they to “enter any town of the Samaritans.” The Samaritans populated the region between Galilee and Judea. They were descendants of the Jews who intermarried with Gentiles transplanted into their area by Assyria after 722 B.C. Since Galilee was surrounded by Gentile populations on three sides and Samaritans to the south, Jesus’ instruction would limit his apostles’ work to their immediate region.

Our Lord did not give this order because he cared any less for these peoples; he had already healed Gentiles (see Matt. 8:5-13, 28-34) and ministered to Samaritans (see John 4). Matthew 10:18 states that the apostles “will be brought before governors and kings as witnesses to them and to the Gentiles.”

I can think of at least two reasons for Jesus’ instructions in our text. First, he wanted his apostles’ initial ministry tour to be as effective as possible. By limiting their scope to the towns and people they knew best, he focused their attention on those they could most easily reach. In preventing their travel into Gentile and Samaritan regions, he also helped ensure that they would not be rejected because of racial discrimination by the Jews they sought to serve.

Second, his instruction set a strategy for others in the early church to follow. These were obviously not the only precepts Jesus gave his followers: “Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written” (John 21:25). Matthew was inspired decades later to include this section in Scripture, not for the sake of the apostles (many of whom had either died or left Israel by the time he wrote his Gospel), but for us.

We find this Jews-then-Gentiles pattern across the apostolic era. As Paul stated, “I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile” (Romans 1:16). Although he was called
to be God’s “missionary to the Gentiles” (Galatians 1:15-16), Paul typically began his work among the Jewish population:

- “Paul and Barnabas answered them boldly: ‘We had to speak the word of God to you first. Since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles’” (Acts 13:46).
- “When the Jews opposed Paul and became abusive, he shook out his clothes in protest and said to them, ‘Your blood be on your own heads! I am clear of my responsibility. From now on I will go to the Gentiles’” (Acts 18:6).
- “Paul entered the synagogue and spoke boldly there for three months, arguing persuasively about the kingdom of God. But some of them became obstinate; they refused to believe and publicly maligned the Way. So Paul left them. He took the disciples with him and had discussions daily in the lecture hall of Tyrannus. This went on for two years, so that all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord” (Acts 19:8-10).
- After the Jews in Rome rejected Paul’s message, he declared, “I want you to know that God’s salvation has been sent to the Gentiles, and they will listen!” (Acts 28:28).

As the gospel spread further from Jewish populations, this strategy changed over time. But Jesus clearly wanted his own people to hear the gospel from his apostles: “Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel” (Matt. 10:6). “Go” translates poreuesthe, meaning to proceed, travel, walk. “Lost” translates apololota, meaning perishing, ruined, destroyed. “Lost sheep” calls to mind Isaiah 53:6, “We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.” The Lord lamented:

My people have been lost sheep;
their shepherds have led them astray
and caused them to roam on the mountains.
They wandered over mountain and hill
and forgot their own resting place.
Whoever found them devoured them;
their enemies said, “We are not guilty,”
for they sinned against the Lord, their true pasture,
the LORD, the hope of their fathers (Jeremiah 50:6-7).

Jesus’ disciples are still commissioned to take the gospel to “all nations” (Matt. 28:19). Today, our missionary work joins the Spirit in the explosion of Christian growth occurring around the globe. More people than ever before are turning to Christ. More Muslims than ever before are converting, many after seeing visions and dreams of Jesus. The Holy Spirit is on the march. As we share God’s love with our community and world, we join him in his Kingdom advance.
Emil Brunner, the brilliant theologian, was right to say, “A church exists by missions as a fire exists by burning.” Phillips Brooks, the great Episcopal preacher and pastor, was once asked what he would do if sent to a declining church. His answer was simple: “I’d gather together as many people as I could, preach the finest sermon on missions I could, then take the largest offering for missions I could. When we have a mission, we have a church.”

Do you have a church?

**Our program: find effective ways to share the gospel (10:7-15)**

It’s been said that God does not call the equipped—he equips the called. When we make his passion and philosophy ours, he directs and empowers us to fulfill his program for Kingdom growth. What is this strategy?

*Preach the kingdom*

First, Jesus gave his apostles their message: “As you go, preach this message: ‘The kingdom of heaven is near’” (Matt. 10:7). “Near” translates *engiken*, meaning *approaching, coming near*. What is this approaching “kingdom”?

Jesus defined the kingdom of God most succinctly when he taught us to pray, “Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (Matt. 6:10). God’s kingdom comes wherever his will is done, where and when he is the King of our lives.

The Gospel of Mark introduces the ministry of Jesus with the words, “The time has come. The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!” (Mark 1:15). Matthew records Jesus’ first preaching in the same way: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near” (Matt. 4:17).

This emphasis is consistent with the Old Testament’s view of God. All Semitic peoples thought of their gods as kings, but none more so than the Hebrews. Listen to this song of their faith:

> The LORD reigns, he is robed in majesty; the LORD is robed in majesty and is armed with strength. The world is firmly established; it cannot be moved. Your throne was established long ago; you are from all eternity (Psalm 93:1-2).

Moses and his people sang, “The LORD will reign for ever and ever” (Exodus 15:18). The prophet Balaam said of the Jews, “The LORD their God is with them; the shout of the King is among them” (Numbers 23:21). At the end of his life, Moses again proclaimed God King over Israel (Deuteronomy 33:5). The Lord claimed his rule over his people: “I
am the LORD your Holy One, Israel’s Creator, your King” (Isaiah 43:15). The Jewish belief in God as King was the foundation of their faith.

This rule is not confined to Israel, for the Lord’s claim to kingship extends to all the earth. Hezekiah prayed to God: “O LORD, God of Israel, enthroned between the cherubim, you alone are God over all the kingdoms of the earth” (2 Kings 19:15).

David declared the same: “The LORD sits enthroned over the floods, the LORD is enthroned as King forever” (Psalm 29:10). The other psalmists joined him in similar praise: “How awesome is the LORD Most High, the great King over all the earth!” (Ps. 47:2); “Say among the nations, ‘The LORD reigns’” (Ps/ 96:10); “The LORD reigns, let the earth be glad; let the distant shores rejoice” (Ps. 97:1). The Jewish hope was founded on the belief that their God is King of all the earth.

One day “the LORD will be king over the whole earth. On that day there will be one LORD, and his name the only name” (Zechariah 14:9). One day, the King promises, “I will create new heavens and a new earth. . . . I will create Jerusalem to be a delight, and its people a joy. I will rejoice over Jerusalem and take delight in my people, the sound of weeping and of crying will be heard in it no more” (Isaiah 65:17-19).

Jesus came to inaugurate this Kingdom. Isaiah said of him, “Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David’s throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever” (Isa. 9:7). When our Lord returns, his name will be “KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS” (Revelation 19:16).

In the meantime, we are to preach the kingdom as the central theme of our mission and ministry. We are called to invite people to make God their King, to surrender their lives and resources to his will and word. As we exalt the King, we advance his Kingdom. This is the message God empowers and blesses.

Meet needs with God’s love
We are to preach the Kingdom both with words and with deeds: “Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you have received, freely give” (Matt. 10:8). “Heal” translates therapeuete, from which we get our word therapy. The “sick” (asthenountas) are those who are weak, ill, or in need. To “raise” (egeirete) is to wake or help to rise.

“Cleanse” translates katharizete, from which we get catharsis. “Leprosy” translates leprous, a generic word for skin diseases, not necessarily Hansen’s Disease. The principle here is clear: God calls us to meet physical needs so we can meet spiritual needs. When we begin where people are, we can lead them where they need to go.
This was Jesus’ consistent pattern of ministry—he healed bodies so he could heal souls. He healed a man born blind so he could bring him to faith (John 9). When a Samaritan woman came to Jacob’s well for water, Jesus began a conversation with her need that led her to living water (John 4). Nearly every Gospel record of a physical miracle by Jesus describes a spiritual result.

The apostles continued this strategy:

- Peter and John were used to heal a man lame from birth (Acts 3:1-10), a miracle that enabled Peter to preach the gospel to the Jerusalem crowd (Acts 3:11-26).
- God used Peter’s shadow to heal the sick (Acts 5:15-16); these miracles were part of the explosive growth of early Christianity, so that “more and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number” (Acts 5:14).
- After God raised Aeneas through Peter, “All those who lived in Lydda and Sharon saw him and turned to the Lord” (Acts 9:35).
- When God raised Tabitha from the dead, “this became known all over Joppa, and many people believed in the Lord” (Acts 9:42).
- After God struck Elymas the sorcerer with blindness during Paul’s first missionary journey, “when the proconsul saw what had happened, he believed” (Acts 13:12).
- When “God did extraordinary miracles through Paul” in Ephesus (Acts 19:11), illnesses were cured and demons were cast out of people (Acts 19:12). Demons then attacked Jews who tried to mimic Paul; “when this became known to the Jews and Greeks living in Ephesus, they were all seized with fear, and the name of the Lord Jesus was held in high honor. Many of those who believed now came and openly confessed their evil deeds. A number who had practiced sorcery brought their scrolls together and burned them publicly. When they calculated the value of the scrolls, the total came to fifty thousand drachmas. In this way the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power” (Acts 19:17-20).

As the saying goes, people don’t care how much we know until they know how much we care. Ministry begins with commonalities. If you know people who need to hear the gospel, begin by finding a way to meet the needs they recognize. If they’re new to your community, welcome them. If they’re lonely at work, befriend them. If they’re suffering physically, try to help them. Earn the right to share your faith by sharing your love.

Jesus’ strategy still works. Who needs to see God’s love in yours?

Rely on the provision of your Father
You cannot fulfill this Kingdom assignment in your ability. Human words cannot change human hearts. Oswald Chambers warned that “all our vows and resolutions end in denial because we have no power to carry them out.”

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Jesus taught us to rely on our Father’s provision for our needs: “Do not take along any gold or silver or copper in your belts” (Matt. 10:9). “Take along” translates kitesesthe, which means to acquire or gain. Jesus did not prohibit possessions (note that Peter still owned his house after joining Jesus’ movement, Matt. 8:14). Rather, on this occasion he told his disciples not to try to make money while on their missionary tour. Their focus was to be on ministry, not finances.

In addition, he instructed them to “take no bag for the journey, or extra tunic, or sandals or a staff” (10:10a). These were typical travelers’ supplies—a “bag” or knapsack, an extra “tunic” or shirt, extra sandals, and a walking staff. Why were they not to equip themselves in this way? Because “the worker is worth his keep” (10:10). As they served, they would be served. As they shared God’s word, others would share their resources.

In this way, the apostles would demonstrate absolute reliance on God. Since many of Jesus’ disciples were well-known business leaders in the area, such dependence would be notable and persuasive. Imagine some of the leading business people in your church and community setting out on foot to share the gospel, with no provisions for their journey. Their faith in God would be strong evidence that their message was worthy.

Influence the influential
Where would the apostles stay on their ministry tour? “Whatever town or village you enter, search for some worthy person there and stay at his house until you leave” (10:11). “Worthy” translates axios, meaning to be deserving, fit. Most communities have leading citizens, those whose character is commended by their neighbors. For the disciples to stay with such people not only ensured their safety—it added credibility to their ministry.

Once they identified such leading citizens, how would the apostles know whether they were to stay with them? “As you enter the home, give it your greeting” (10:12). Their “greeting” would have been shalom, an expression of peace and good wishes. Some would accept them, while others would not: “If the home is deserving, let your peace rest on it; if it is not, let your peace return to you” (10:13). The apostles were to stay only with those who welcomed them and whose reputation would enhance their ministry.

Otherwise, they were to leave immediately: “If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake the dust off your feet when you leave that home or town” (10:14). To “shake the dust off your feet” was to symbolize a rejection of the place, as if even the dust of its streets was unworthy of the apostles. Here’s an example:

The word of the Lord spread through the whole region. But the Jews incited the God-fearing women of high standing and the leading men of the city. They stirred up persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and expelled them from their region. So they shook the dust from their feet in protest against them and went to Iconium (Acts 13:49-51).
God’s judgment against such unbelievers is certain: “I tell you the truth, it will be more bearable for Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for that town” (Matt. 10:15). As these cities were destroyed by divine wrath (Genesis 18:20—19:28), so those rejecting Jesus’ apostles would face his judgment.

In our ministry strategy, it is important to concentrate our efforts where we can maximize results. Paul spent two years in Ephesus (Acts 19:10) but only three weeks in Thessalonica (Acts 17:2). He sought to share the gospel with leaders wherever he could. Every soul matters to the Father, of course, but utilizing methods that multiply and maximize our work is important in getting the gospel to as many as possible.

What is your strategy for reaching your community?

Persevere (10:24-31)
I recently heard a radio announcer state, “If you haven’t quit, you haven’t failed.” Perseverance is essential to Kingdom service.

Jesus knew that his disciples would be “sheep among wolves” (10:16), that they would be persecuted by the authorities (10:17-20) and their own families (10:21). In fact, “all men will hate you because of me” (10:22), so that they would need to flee persecution (10:23).

However, those who reject our message are actually rejecting our Master: “A student is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master. It is enough for the student to be like his teacher, and the servant like his master” (10:24-25a). A “student” was an apprentice, always subservient to his teacher. A “servant” (doulos, meaning slave) was always subservient to his “master” or owner. These relationships were the same every hour of every day.

When the teacher or master treats the student or servant as a peer, this is a great honor. Jesus extended this honor to us: “If the head of the house has been called Beelzebub, how much more the members of his household!” (10:25b). “Beelzebub” was a title for the lord of the high abode, the head of pagan deities, all of which were considered demons by the Jews.

Jesus had already been subjected to such an insult: “The teachers of the law who came down from Jerusalem said, ‘He is possessed by Beelzebub! By the prince of demons he is driving out demons’” (Mark 3:22). Now Jesus warned his disciples that they would face similar opposition.

When they did, they were not to be discouraged: “So do not be afraid of them. There is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known” (Matt. 10:26). “Afraid” translates phobethete, from which we get our word phobia. Jesus’
statement is a present tense imperative, a command never to fear his opponents. Their attacks are not “hidden” (krypton, from which we get the word cryptic) from God, and will one day be “disclosed” (apokalypthesetai, meaning to unveil) to all.

The apostles’ ministry should be equally public: “What I tell you in the dark, speak in the daylight; what is whispered in your ear, proclaim from the roofs” (Matt. 10:27).

“Proclaim” translates keryxate, meaning to preach. They should minister boldly, trusting their protection to their Father.

We are not to fear our enemies: “Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul” (10:28a). Justin the Martyr announced to the Roman emperor, “You can kill us, but you cannot harm us.” But we are to fear our Lord: “Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell” (10:28). Such judgment against those who reject the gospel is inevitable: “If anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire” (Rev. 20:15).

Our Creator knows all that happens in his creation: “Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father” (Matt. 10:29). A “penny” was an assarion, equivalent to 1/16 of a denarius. A denarius was a day’s wage. Each sparrow was worth the smallest unit of money in Jesus’ day, equivalent to fifteen minutes of a man’s labor. Yet the Lord knows about every one of them, so that they cannot fall to the ground in a forest apart from his providence.

If God knows about such seemingly insignificant creatures, how does he feel about those he made in his own image and likeness (Gen. 1:26-27)? “And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered” (Matt. 10:30). Jesus later warned his disciples that they would face great persecution (Luke 21:12-16), such that “all men will hate you because of me” (Luke 21:17). Then Jesus made this promise: “But not a head of your hair will perish” (Luke 21:18).

Our Lord concluded: “So don’t be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows” (Matt. 10:31). In fact, your Father considered your eternal life worth the death of his Son.

Remember Martin Luther’s advice:

Let goods and kindred go,
This mortal life also;
The body they may kill:
God’s truth abideth still;
His kingdom is forever.

Isaiah encouraged us to “trust in the LORD forever, for the LORD, the LORD, is the Rock eternal” (Isa. 26:4). It’s always too soon to give up on the Lord. After David was
delivered from his enemies, he counseled us to “taste and see that the LORD is good; blessed is the man who takes refuge in him” (Psalm 34:8).

Our Father promises, “Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up” (Galatians 6:9). Here’s a verse that inspired me when I found it recently: “Let him who walks in the dark, who has no light, trust in the name of the LORD and rely on his God” (Isaiah 50:10).

However black the night, remember: If you haven’t quit, you haven’t failed.

**Conclusion**

A young pastor once asked Spurgeon why he was seeing so few respond to his preaching. Spurgeon asked, “Well, you don’t expect someone to respond every time you preach, do you?”

“No, of course not,” the man replied.

“That’s why they don’t,” Spurgeon concluded.

When we follow Jesus’ ministry strategy, he will use us as he used his first followers. We will join his Spirit in reaching our community and world with his love. Is there a greater privilege?

By contrast, losing our passion for reaching the world is always the first step to decline and death. An insightful artist painted his subject, “A Dying Church,” in a startling way. He portrayed a beautiful sanctuary, sunlight streaming through the stained glass windows, the pews filled with worshipers, the pastor preaching and the choir in the loft. All looked healthy, even vibrant. But in the corner of the painting, on a table in the vestibule outside the sanctuary, stood a box with the sign: “Offerings for Missions.” There was a cobweb over the box.

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4 “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God.”