

Matthew 9

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[0 : 0 0] Are you a disciple? Are you an apostle? That's got a bit of a similar ring to this morning's sermon. I'm not going to preach the same sermon if you're concerned, but we are preaching on the same theme and on the same passage. And this morning we were able to establish, I hope, that as Christians we are all disciples. We were thinking of those two words, disciples and apostles, in their literal meaning as describing something more than status, as describing action and activity. So, we're disciples. We're learners. We're learning from the Master. But we also suggested that we are all apostles, not in the technical sense of the twelve in distinction from the other disciples, but we're all apostles in the sense that we are all sent out, which again, we were indicating is the literal meaning of the Word. We're all sent out. Disciples become apostles as they are sent out, and crucially, as we obey the commission to go and to do the work of Jesus.

Matthew 9, from verse 35 and through to where we read in chapter 10, indeed, the following verses as well, but we are limiting ourselves to those verses, is a passage that presents us with a portrait of both the apostle—we were identifying Jesus as the apostle, the one who was sent out, sent by the Father.

So, there's a portrait of the apostle in the person of Jesus, but also a portrait of the apostles, or sent ones, particularly those who are named and listed in chapter 10, the twelve, though as we were again suggesting this morning, by extension and by reasonable extension, we too come into that grouping of the apostles, those who have been sent out. So, this morning we consider the portrait of Jesus. We notice, picking up on the verbs that we find there in verses 35 to 37, or at least the critical verbs, Jesus went, Jesus saw, and Jesus said, in saying, commending the disciples that they would pray that workers would be sent into the harvest field. Now, this evening we turn to the apostles, the twelve, and what we can learn from the passage there in chapter 10 and through to verse 15.

We won't be considering everything that we find there. In a moment I'll explain how we will at least try and do that, but we certainly won't be doing that all this evening. Now, before we dive into the passage, we need to recognize that this is a passage that must be read and understood at two levels.

It describes the historical, and in that sense, unrepeatable mission of the twelve in the time of Jesus. This was a unique time in what we sometimes call redemption history, and as a unique time, there is a very real sense in which the task that they were given and that they performed, commissioned by Jesus, it was unique and unrepeatable. And so, in that sense, we're not looking at it to say, well, we're going to do exactly the same as they did. There is that historical level, if you wish, that we can look at the passage. But I think we can also legitimately look at it at another level in the sense of what we can find in this passage of enduring principles concerning how we are to do the work of mission, how we as sent ones are to conduct the mission of those who are sent, the mission of the church. And three questions will help us draw out the truths and lessons for us as apostles or sent ones. And the three questions that we're going to consider are the following.

[4 : 36] Who are the apostles or sent ones? What are the apostles to do? And the third question is, how are they to do it? And that third question is going to be answered by means of identifying those continuing principles for mission and, if we can use the term, apostleship today. Again, emphasizing that we're using that word in that literal sense of those who are sent out.

Now, it had been my original intention to answer these three questions this evening, but the more I thought through and studied the passage, the more struck I was by just how relevant and indeed numerous are the principles to be found in a passage that at first glance appears quite alien and otherworldly to us.

You know, instructions to disciples to go out and raise the dead. Very exciting, but very alien to us, if we're honest. I don't think any of us anticipate in this week that has begun going out and raising the dead.

And we read that and we say, well, yes, we accept this is the Word of God and this is the task that these disciples were given, but it's just so different for ourselves. And yet, in the midst of the differences, and there are differences, there are a great deal of enduring principles. And that's what we're going to try and do in answering that third question. How are the apostles to do the work that they're given to do? But we're not going to do that this evening. That will remain for next Sunday, God willing. So, what we're going to do is to answer the first two questions. Who are the apostles, and what are they to do? First of all, then, who are the apostles? Who are the sent ones? I think we can answer that question from both a broader perspective and at the more specific level of the identity of the actual twelve named individuals there in chapter 10, verses 2 to 4. At both levels, at the broader level and at the more specific level, I think there are helpful and revealing lessons and insights for us today. So, if we begin at the more general level in answering that question, who are the apostles? Who are the sent ones as they're identified here in our passage? In order to answer that question at the more general level, we do need to backtrack a little to the end of chapter 9 and from verse 38.

And as we follow the passage from verse 38 of chapter 9 through to the first verse of chapter 10, we'll be able to see how the answer to the question at that more general level unfolds before us.

[7 : 45] And we will note that there are three answers to the question at this more general level concerning who are the apostles. Three answers. The first answer in verse 38 of chapter 9 is, the apostles are those that the disciples have prayed for. The apostles are those that the disciples have prayed for. The disciples, as instructed by Jesus, pray to the Father.

And in fairness here, we're presuming that they do so. In verse 38, we have the instruction that they're given by Jesus, ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore to send out workers into His harvest field.

And we're presuming that they obeyed and that they did what they'd been instructed. And if that's a reasonable presumption, then the apostles are those that the disciples had prayed for. They present this request, this requisition to the Father, workers are required. The harvest is plentiful. We need more workers. And what is, I think, very evident, and we might call the twist in this, is that in the event, those who request and those who are provided are one and the same. The same disciples who pray that workers would be sent into the harvest field then discover that they themselves are the ones who Jesus is sending into the harvest field. I don't know if the lesson there is be careful what you pray for.

I don't know if they anticipated that this would be the outcome of obeying Jesus' instructions to pray to the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into His harvest field. But more seriously, I think the lesson is evident that the task of mission is not for an other. The task of mission is for us. It's our task. We are the apostles. We are the sent ones. If we recognize Jesus' conclusion that the harvest is plentiful, if we accept His diagnosis that the workers are few, if we obey His command to pray to the Lord of the harvest that He would send out workers into His harvest field, we ought to be prepared that we will be the ones who He will send. It is our task. It is our mission. We are the apostles.

We are the sent ones. So, that's one answer, or one part of the answer to the question, who are the apostles? Well, they are the ones that the disciples have prayed for. But we can also say, and of course, this is just the other side of the coin in a sense, the apostles are those sent by the Father in answer to the disciples' prayer. It goes hand in hand with what we've just said, but it does merit being highlighted. It is God who chooses and sends His apostles. He is the Lord of the harvest, and He selects and hires His own workforce. But then thirdly, the apostles are those called by Jesus.

[11 : 05] And all of these things, of course, work together, but we can distinguish them for the purposes of what we're saying. The apostles are those called by Jesus. In chapter 10 and verse 1, we read, He, that is Jesus, called His twelve apostles, sorry, His twelve disciples to Him, and gave them authority to drive out evil spirits and to heal every disease and sickness. The Father selects His apostles, but at the appointed time, Jesus calls His disciples. This call of Jesus, I think, encompasses both the initial call to follow and learn and the call to apostleship, to go and work and harvest.

They're not two completely distinct calls, but there is a sense in which you can distinguish between an initial call. Some of that is recorded for us in the Gospels when Jesus, for the first time, approached those who would become His disciples, His apostles, and He calls them, follow me.

They become disciples. They're learning. They're following. And then, with the passage of time, there comes the moment, and we have it here recorded for us, when they move on to another phase.

They remain disciples, but there is this new phase of apostleship, of being sent out. The harvest is plentiful, the workers are few, and they need to put their hands to the till. They need to be involved.

And so, there's this call to apostleship, to go and to work and to harvest. If you are a Christian, then you are an apostle in this sense. You are sent by Jesus to work, to do His work.

[12 : 54] You are prayed for by God's people, chosen, sent by the Father, called by Jesus to go into the world in mission. So, that's how we can perhaps answer the question, who are the apostles at that more general or broader level. But then, we can move to the more specific level in identifying the twelve listed and named in Matthew, in chapter 10 from verse 2 onwards. And as we think about the men who are presented to us here in the passage, here too, we can discover useful lessons.

And the way we can do it is by simply noticing three features of this group as it is presented to us in the passage. Three features. The first thing that I want to say may seem a very obvious thing, but I think there's something important to draw from it, and that is that it is a group.

It is a group. God doesn't work through lone rangers, through individuals doing their own thing. He calls us to mission as part of a people called to mission. We are to work together, or we are not to work at all. Also, notice along the same lines the revealing manner in which the twelve are further subdivided into pairs. As you read the verses there from verse 2 to verse 4, we won't do so again very clearly. You have twelve disciples, but they're presented to us as six pairs of disciples, and that also suggesting the importance of them working together. We know that in due course when Jesus sent out the seventy, He sent them out two by two, and there we have a principle of gospel work, of mission work. Not individuals alone, but rather in the context of a larger group where there's mutual support and indeed mutual accountability. So, it is a group.

The twelve are a group. But the next thing we can say, another feature that we can say of those who are called by Jesus to be apostles is that it is a group of very ordinary people. They were just regular guys. If we were to try and look at each disciple in turn, and think of maybe having a brief biography of each one, one of the commentaries that I was looking at attempted to do that. Took this passage, and each name attempted to say something about them. Now, the difficulty that the commentator had, and that we would have if we tried to do it, is that we know so very little about so many of them.

Now, that in itself is quite intriguing. Here we have the twelve apostles, men of great importance in God's purposes, and yet we know so very little about so many of them. They weren't particularly extraordinary or remarkable men. Of the twelve men that we have here named and listed for us, it's curious, I wouldn't want to draw a great deal out of this, but it is at least curious, that of ten of the twelve, we don't even have a single recorded instance of them preaching a sermon.

[16 : 26] Now, I'm not saying for a moment that they didn't preach a sermon. In this very passage, that is one of the tasks that they are given to preach. And so, I think it's reasonable to presume that that is what they did. But it is intriguing that in the gospel accounts, you have these twelve men who had a very significant role, and yet we know so very little about so many of them. And I think that just emphasizes the principal point that I'm trying to make here, is that they were a group of very ordinary people. The apostles of Jesus Christ, those upon whom the church is built. This church, the church, built on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets with Jesus Christ as the chief cornerstone. These men who did have a very important and crucial role in God's purposes, and yet they are so very ordinary. We might even say forgettable. What makes the ordinary extraordinary is the one that they are united to and empowered by, their master, Jesus Christ. And that is, of course, something that remains true today. We don't need to dwell on the very obvious application of that.

God calls ordinary people to be His disciples, to be His apostles. He sends out the ordinary to do the extraordinary. We are ordinary people with an extraordinary God. And none of us should feel ourselves less. None of us should feel ourselves incapable because of what we perceive to be our limitations, or our ordinariness, or when we compare ourselves to others and think, well, we can't do what they do.

If we begin to think in that way, we've lost the plot in many ways as to how God operates. God operates through very ordinary people. So, it's a group. It's a group of very ordinary people, but I think we can also legitimately notice and draw something from that it is a group of diverse people. They are ordinary, but they're not ordinary clones. They are individuals and very different individuals.

You have Matthew, the tax collector, a pillar of the corrupt establishment. And then you have Simon, the zealot, intent on bringing down that very establishment. You have a character like Peter, bold and impetuous. And then you have Philip, timid and tentative. And then, remarkably, in the mix, you have Judas Iscariot, of whom we're simply told who betrayed him. Very diverse, very different.

And again, it's not something we need to dwell on, but the application is obvious enough. I wonder if we, as believers, as Christians, as those who make up this congregation, I wonder if we sometimes fear diversity. Do we prefer a church of people who are just like us?

[19 : 31] After all, it's like us. We're comfortable to be among those who are just like us. It's very difficult, really, to find many people who are just like us, but we seem to be adept at least trying to do that.

One final thing to say about this group, we said there were three features I wanted to highlight, and we've already done that. But one final thing that we can say about this group is that this group of twelve named individuals represent all apostles, all of God's sent ones, all of God's workers, to use the language of our passage, all of those called and sent by Jesus. While it's sensible and prudent to be cautious in identifying symbolism where perhaps it's not present, I think we can, in this instance, legitimately see the number twelve, the twelve apostles as symbolic and as intended to be symbolic. The disciples do, to some degree, in some sense, represent, first of all, the twelve tribes of Israel, which in turn would be a representation of the totality of God's people. And this isn't just idle speculation built purely on the basis that they were twelve, but it is what seems to be implied, you might even say explicit, in what we read in the same gospel in chapter 19, where we have a reference again to these twelve men. So, we just quickly notice what is said there in Matthew chapter 19, and in verse 28, there we read Matthew chapter 19 and verse 28. We know the context of this as the disciples are working out what role they will have in the kingdom of the Lord. And then we read in verse 28, Jesus said to them, I tell you the truth, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on His glorious throne, you who have followed Me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And without getting into the details of what Jesus actually means by that, there is, I think, clearly a recognition on the part of Jesus that the twelve disciples were deliberately chosen to be that number as a means of representing the totality of God's people. We are all in that sense, as disciples, as apostles, as sent ones in the inner circle, if we want to use that language, of Jesus as disciples or apostles. There isn't an outer circle. There is only an inner circle.

So, that, in answer to the question, who are the disciples? But moving on to the second question that we want to briefly look at this evening, and that is, what are the disciples or sent ones, what are the apostles or sent ones to do? Another way of posing the question, really the same question, but posing it in a different way, is what are the apostles given? What are the apostles given? And we can identify a two-fold answer to that question of what the apostles are given. They, and we could say we, are given work to do, and they, we, are given the authority to do it. There is work to be done, we are given a work to do, but we are also given the authority to do it. But we can take that a little further, and we can say this, that they, the apostles, we, as apostles, are given the work of Jesus, and we are given the authority of Jesus. And notice that the stress is on the word of, the work of Jesus and the authority of Jesus, not just by. It's not just that we're given authority by Jesus, that's true, but we're given the authority of Jesus. And I think that is worth highlighting and making the distinction. First of all, the work of Jesus. Now, remember where this began. Jesus was going through all the towns and villages of Galilee, and He sees the crowds, and Jesus is moved with compassion. Jesus sees a great harvest that He, on His own, will be unable to bring in. So many villages, so many towns, and so little time, so many fields, and even for Jesus, just 24 hours in each day. So, what to do? What is He to do in the face of this reality?

I wonder if in your own life have you ever felt, in the face of multiple duties and responsibilities, the need to multiply yourself? Sometimes people express themselves in that way, if only I could multiply myself. But of course, you can't. You can't multiply yourself. But this maybe approximates in some measure to what Jesus is doing. By calling and sending His disciples to do His work, He is multiplying Himself. And here we need to pause and notice the striking parallels between the work that Jesus was doing, and we have described for in the previous verses, and the work that the disciples are commissioned or sent to do. Even the word parallels, when we speak of the parallels, doesn't really do it justice, because really what we find is that it's the same work. Let's just notice and compare. First of all, who are they sent to? Well, what are we told there in verse 6 of chapter 10? Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel. What did we notice even this morning about the commission that Jesus received? In chapter 15 and verse 24, Jesus answered,

I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel. Exactly the same. What do they preach? In verse 7 of chapter 10, what do we read? As you go, preach this message. The kingdom of heaven is near. And what are we told in verse 35 about what Jesus preached? Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom. What signs or miracles do they perform?

[26 : 03] In verse 1 of chapter 10, He called His twelve disciples to Him and gave them authority to drive out evil spirits and to heal every disease and sickness. Every disease and sickness. And what are we told of the work of Jesus in verse 35? Preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. Indeed, that phrase, every disease and sickness, is exactly the same, word for word, in describing the work of Jesus and in describing the work of the disciples.

Jesus isn't doing something that maybe we would have thought He might do. Well, I'm Jesus. I'm the Messiah. I've got these disciples. There's so much work to do. I'll delegate some of the easy stuff.

You know, I'll keep the difficult stuff. But the disciples, they can do some of the groundwork, you know, that I haven't got time for. No. What He was doing, they do. What He was preaching, they were preaching. The signs that He was performing, they would perform. And the work of the disciples is an extension of the mission and the ministry of Jesus as the sent one. Now, what can we draw from this for ourselves? We did flag that the passage can be seen at two levels, at the historical and at the permanent level in terms of its enduring significance or the principles that are enduring.

And we recognize that there is a sense in which the work given to the Twelve as an extension of Jesus' ministry was peculiar to the time of their apostleship. But it is also true for us that the work we are given to do is the work of Jesus. Not just work given to us by Jesus, but the work of Jesus.

And this is something that we find confirmed in a telling and yet unsung way in the manner Luke introduces the book of Acts. If we just quickly notice how he does so in Acts chapter 1 and verse 1.

[28 : 04] Notice how Luke expresses himself. At the beginning of his book, he's introducing the book. This is the second volume. And what does he say? In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach. That word began. It spoke to you about all that Jesus began to do and to teach.

The implication is that Jesus was going to continue teaching and doing. But in the book that he's writing, he's not writing about Jesus, he's not writing about Jesus. Jesus has ascended to heaven. The work has been done by the apostles, by the believers. And yet, from the perspective of Luke, it is Jesus' work that is continuing, simply being done by his disciples, by his apostles. The work that we are given to do is the work of Jesus. But then, secondly, we're also given the authority of Jesus. The disciples are given the work of Jesus to do. They are given instructions by Jesus. Then in chapter 10 and verse 5, these 12, Jesus sent out with the following instructions. And the word instructions, or the word used here, implies authoritative instructions, similar to what you might expect to find in a military setting.

But authoritative instructions are given hand in hand with the authority to carry the instructions out. In verse 1, we're told that he, Jesus, gave them authority. He gave them authority. And this is authority for the apostolic mission, not yet authority as leaders of the church. In due course, these men would be granted that authority. But at this stage, I think it's reasonable to understand this authority that they are being given as being limited to, or particularly applicable to, the apostolic mission that they're being given, and that is described for us in these verses. And that's an important distinction, especially as we would apply the matter of being given authority to ourselves, and to ourselves where we think of ourselves as all believers, all Christians who are sent out by Jesus. We are all given authority for our apostolic mission as those sent by Jesus. We're given the authority of Jesus. And remember that when we think of this authority that we're given, we're given the authority of the kingdom of heaven. Remember that the message concerns the kingdom of heaven. And we enjoy the authority of the king of the kingdom of heaven. In the case of the Twelve, one way this authority was made visible was in the supernatural powers they were granted. He gave them authority to drive out evil spirits and to heal every disease and sickness. But that's not the only authority they were given. That's what's particularly highlighted. But of course, they were given authority to preach and to do all those things that we also are to do, to communicate the message, to share the good news. We're not granted the same powers that the Twelve were granted, but we are given equal authority. The authority of Jesus to do the work of Jesus. And as we recognize that and as we come to terms with that, it ought to grant us a boldness and a confidence in doing the work we have been given to do.

We have the authority of the king. If we return to the harvest imagery that Jesus used at the end of the previous chapter of a plentiful harvest and the need for workers to bring in the harvest, if we just get our minds in tune with that imagery for a moment. Imagine a worker in a field harvesting the crop.

He's there in the field. He's harvesting the crop. And imagine if that worker was approached and challenged by somebody and said, what are you doing? What are you doing here in this field bringing in this crop?

[32 : 24] Why are you here? What would that worker say? Well, what the worker would say is that he would point out that the owner of the harvest has given him, a worker, the authority to be in the field doing the work he is doing. And the challenge to the worker would effectively be a challenge to the authority of the owner of the harvest. For somebody to come and to complain and say, you can't do this here. You can't harvest this field. You ought not to be here. Go away. That person would be challenging not just the worker.

Indeed, who he would be primarily challenging would be the owner of the harvest who would ask the worker to be there. And I think that helps us to grasp our privileged status as those who have been given a work to do, but who also have been given the authority to do it. And if we are to be challenged in what we're doing, we stand on the grounds of the authority that we have been given by the one who has sent us.

Now, it has very practical implications for us today in our own day and generation. We live at a time when we are increasingly being challenged as to what we can do and say in mission and evangelism. How often do you hear people say, well, you can't say that. You can't say that anymore. You can't do that. You can't go there. So many obstacles it would appear. So many prohibitions. Now, I don't think we should have, in fact, I would say we ought not to have any appetite for grand gestures or being deliberately provocative in the work of the gospel. There's no merit in that, nothing to be gained by that, but neither should we be bullied into silence and inactivity. We have been given a work to do, and we have been given the authority to do it. Well, we close with the question that we began. Are you an apostle? Have you been sent by Jesus? And if you have been sent by Jesus to do His work, and as you have been sent to do

His work, you have been given the authority of Jesus to do that work, then it's time to be up and doing. Let us pray.