

Matthew 9:35-10:20 – He's Not Kidding

You've got to be kidding! I think that had to be one of the first thoughts to race through the minds of the twelve when Jesus told them what He was sending them out to do. Because did you hear that list? Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, cast out demons. Sure, they had seen Jesus do these things, but ... we can't do that!

Well, they were right. They had to learn what every pastor has to learn and what every Christian has to learn: to get over yourself. It wouldn't be them doing these things. For it would not be anything in them that would qualify them or enable them or empower them to be disciples or apostles. Not their learning, their scholarship, their leadership, their charisma, their strength, their skill, or anything else in them. Those things have their place, but it is only the power and authority of Christ that would or could accomplish these things. The very power and authority Christ had given to them. But this they had to learn. To get over themselves, their doubts and fears, and do what had been given them to do ... and have Christ work through them.

And so as if to emphasize that point, Jesus continues with a description of how they are to go, and what it's going to be like out there. Don't take any supplies, He says. Rely on what you are given. I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves. You will be dragged into courts. You will be flogged. It just keeps getting worse and worse! First, a list of impossible tasks to do, and then do them in the midst of an impossible situation. What had they signed up for? Discipleship never seemed so ... so deadly.

Precisely. For if they are to be followers of Jesus, where are they following Him to? To the cross. They too must die. They must get over themselves (or in other words, die to themselves), so that they live in Christ. In Him and His Word alone. Relying solely on Him. For it is His work, not theirs. His Word, not theirs. His authority, not theirs. His mission and harvest, not theirs. And the less of them and the more of Him, the better. And so Jesus sends the twelve out with nothing, to do what they themselves are unable to do, to teach them. That it will be Christ and His Spirit working and speaking through them. They need only go.

Pastors need to learn this as well. To get over ourselves. For we are not in control. The Word and work and power is Christ's. Pastors need simply to do what they are given to do, speak what they are given to speak, and give what they are given to give. God alone grants the growth, gives faith, and changes hearts and lives. No pastor can do these things.

For only the Word and power and authority of Christ can use water to cast out demons and raise a person dead in sin to a new life.

Only the Word and power and authority of Christ can heal those who are leprous and sick with sin through the word of absolution and forgiveness.

Only the Word and power and authority of Christ can make bread and wine the body and blood of Jesus to feed and strengthen us Christians with the faith and forgiveness we need for this life.

Only the Word and power and authority of Christ can fill preaching with the power to grab hold of a hell-bent sinner on the road to Sodom and Gomorrah and turn him (or her) in repentance.

Pastors need to learn I can't do that! Any of that. And no amount of learning, scholarship, leadership, charisma, strength, or skill will be able to change that. Those things have their place but cannot take the place of the power and authority of Christ.

But not just disciples, apostles, and pastors need to learn this—as we begin this second half of the church's year, the long green Pentecost season, with its focus on the church and life and growth—it's not just pastors who need to learn to rely on Christ, so do you. You as the priesthood of the baptized. You have not been given the same task list as the disciples or pastors, but what has been given all Christians to do? Well, it sounds

something like this: Love your enemies. Pray for and do good to those who hate and persecute you. Be perfect. Be a perfect father, mother, son, daughter, husband, wife, boss, worker, friend, neighbor, and citizen.

To which your response should be: You've got to be kidding! We can't do that! Or maybe, in our zeal, we answer like the Israelites did at Mt. Sinai: yes, we will ... and then we don't. Not even close, right? We hate our enemies, forget to pray, do good mostly to those who can do good back to us, and demand perfection from those around us, even as we fall far from the same standard. And the kicker: that despite our sin and failure, how often do we have the audacity to look around, filled with pride, and think: I'm not doing so bad! The road to Sodom and Gomorrah is a crowded one indeed.

We too need to get over ourselves. And if pride is to be full of ourselves, then it is repentance that empties us of ourselves. Repentance is the road of discipleship that takes us to the cross and kills us. To confess that we are that bad. We are the persecutors, not just the persecuted. We're the wolves who bite and devour one another. We put people on trial in our own courts with laws and standards of our own making, and sit as our own one-man judge and jury. We don't drag people before kings—but how often do we take on that role ourselves, with our condemning thoughts and words, assuming the worst about others, and taking delight in our superiority. Yes, it's true that Jesus sent the disciples out as sheep among wolves because He sent them to people like us.

But if He sends apostles and pastors to people like us, it is because He came for people like us. He sends them to us to give Himself to us. For He is the Lamb of God who came into the midst of a world of sinful wolves. He is the One hauled before Governor Pilate and King Herod. He was the One flogged by men and then devoured by death on the cross, that in His resurrection from that death, He defeated all that defeats us. Our sin, our enemy Satan, and our death, all swallowed up in His victory. That His life become our life. To make us wolves into sheep and sinners into saints through the resurrecting forgiveness of our sins. To be for us what we could never be for ourselves: a perfect son of God. And then to give that perfection to us. A free, undeserved, gift of grace.

And while some hear this gift talk and say: You've got to be kidding! It can't be that easy—this is what St. Paul was talking about in his letter to the Romans. That while we were still weak—or in other words, powerless, unable to do anything for ourselves; while we were still sinners, ungodly and unrighteous; while we were facing a future of death, physically and eternally ... God sent His Son, who took our place and died for us. Not because we were good people, or righteous folk who needed a little help, or because we had any redeeming qualities in us. But God simply saved us because of who He is; solely because of His love. Because He wanted us, and we needed Him. And so Jesus came to undo what Adam did. He came to undo his sin, his death, and his expulsion, so that for us there is forgiveness of sin, life from death, and a home in heaven.

That is the gift Jesus sends His disciples to give. That is the gift through which the kingdom of heaven is at hand. All those other gifts—the healing, cleansing, casting out demons, and raising the dead were not ends in themselves, but signs that the kingdom of heaven was at hand. Signs that the forgiveness of Christ was a full and complete forgiveness and triumph over all that affects us in this body and life. Little pictures of, and pointers to, the resurrection and new life that is ours in Christ.

And so the disciples went, following in the footsteps of Christ. And so we go, following those same footsteps. And you know what? The disciples did those things they thought they couldn't do. Because they were not alone. And as we go, it is the same for us. And as you live in Christ and Christ in you, you begin to do those things you thought you couldn't do. Those things Christ has given you to do: helping, praying, forgiving, serving, loving. Even to those who sin against you. Even to those who hate you. The love of Christ living in you. Never completely perfectly in this life (to be sure!), and so also always following in the footsteps of your Savior to His cross, to die and rise with Him daily. As often as you need it, repent and receive His perfect forgiveness. To grow in faith and hope and love. For that's truly the Christian life.

So follow those footsteps now again today to this altar, to your Savior, where He is for you, to eat and drink His body and blood; to live in Him and He in you; to receive the faith, forgiveness, and resurrection, you need to live this new life, this Christ life, you have been given to live.