

Prayer for the Harvest

Adapted from a sermon by the Rev. Donald L. Rose

“Pray the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest” (Matthew 9:38).

This is the final verse of the ninth chapter of Matthew. The Lord told His disciples to pray for something— to pray that the Lord would send forth laborers into His harvest. Do you think that the disciples did what Jesus asked them to do at that time? Did they kneel down and pray to God? We don't know. There were twelve of them. Perhaps some of them responded and prayed just as they were told. On a later occasion it was not just twelve but seventy that the Lord spoke to. He appointed seventy others and said to them, “The harvest truly is great, but the laborers are few; therefore pray the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest” (Luke 10:2). Again, did those seventy pray as they were told to pray?

The invitation to prayer is one that we respond to sometimes and not at other times. It is not a foregone conclusion that we will pray, or that the Lord's disciples would pray. Consider the time in the garden of Gethsemane just before the Lord was arrested. He told His disciples to watch with Him, and He went and prayed, and then He returned to them and found them asleep. He said to Peter, “What, could you not watch with Me one hour? Watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak” (Matthew 26:40,41). In Luke it is said, “When He rose up from prayer, and had come to His disciples, He found them sleeping from sorrow. Then he said to them, ‘Why do you sleep? Rise and pray, lest you enter into temptation’” (22:45-46). Do you think that those disciples in Gethsemane then responded to the Lord's urgent words? They probably did, but they were having a hard time staying awake. The life of prayer is like that.

But let us get back to the text: “Pray the Lord of the harvest that He will send forth laborers into His harvest.” The chapter ends by saying that Jesus was moved with compassion for the multitudes, who were like sheep with no shepherd. He saw their need, and He intended to do something about their needs. He intended to send forth twelve disciples. But first He asked the disciples to pray.

The next chapter, Matthew ten, opens as if in answer to that prayer. The Lord calls the twelve and sends them forth. He sent forth the twelve, and later He sent forth the seventy. And when He took leave of the disciples after He had risen, He told them to go and baptize all nations.

Historically, the scenario seems so unlikely: a group of people without wealth or power established that earth-changing entity which is called the Christian Church. But who really did that? Who actually did the work of establishing the Christian Church? With bravery and with zeal, fallible men did the work. Historically, that is the fact. But the Lord said to those men, “I sent you to reap that for which you have not labored; others have labored, and you have entered into their labors” (John 4:38). The Heavenly Doctrine for the New Church states that “It was the Lord by means of the angels...who prepared for reception those whom the disciples converted to the church. This is meant by...others have labored but you have entered into their labor” (*Apocalypse Explained* 911:16).

What the Lord was doing invisibly cannot be measured by historical record. But the things that happened long ago involved much more than what seemed to be the case. And the things that happen today also involve much more than can be observed by the natural person. And what is going on in your personal life is also much more than what it seems to be. In your relationships with other people, and in the private work of your regeneration, there is a dimension that is unknown to the merely natural part of you.

The church was established by people, the Lord working with them. These people were to act and do what needed to be done, and they were to pray. They were to ask the Lord to send forth laborers, and those laborers evidently were themselves. Now the purely natural person thinks to himself: "I'll just do what I have to do." To ask the Lord to send him is something the natural person does not contemplate.

What if such a person is told to pray to God to do God's own will? The natural person says to himself, "God will do His will regardless of what I do or say. Why should I pray 'Thy kingdom come'? If God wants His kingdom to come, it will. Why should I pray, 'Thy will be done'?" But think of this in relation to the harvest of your regeneration or spiritual rebirth. Is it the Lord's will that you be regenerated? Of course it is the Lord's will. But will it necessarily happen? And will the Lord's kingdom come and govern your life if you yourself do not also will it, desire it, ask for it, and pray for it?

The Heavenly Doctrine tells us that when angels are talking about regeneration, fields ready to be harvested actually appear in the world of spirits as a result of their conversation (see *Arcana Coelestia* 9272:2). The regeneration of the individual is truly a harvest for the Lord. That inward transformation is most certainly His will for each one of us. We sometimes think about our regeneration as something for later consideration, or something that will become the focus of our attention at a later time. But remember the Lord's words, "Do you not say, 'There are still four months and then comes the harvest'? Behold, I say to you, lift up your eyes and look at the fields, for they are already white for harvest" (John 4:35).

Part of living a religious life is setting priorities, deciding in our hearts what we consider important in life. Our willingness for the Lord's kingdom to come into our life is something to express in prayer. Thy kingdom come.

And in our relationships with others and in our enterprises what should be our highest agenda? Let the Lord's will be done in what I am undertaking. Please, Lord, send laborers into your harvest. Send me. Let me be an instrument of Your peace.

Sometimes with us the laborers are few in our motivation. That is, among our motivations in life there are a lot of personal agenda. We have concerns that center pretty much on ourselves, and perhaps at times the nobler motivations are in the minority. The harvest is plenteous, the laborers few. But when we are attuned to the Lord's purposes, we have a feeling of inspiration and a sense of "getting it together". At these times, we find ourselves clear on our priorities and ready to pray that His will may be done.

The Lord said, “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened”(Matthew 7:7-8). Could the Lord have been any clearer or more emphatic?

May you all have a sense not only of your own purpose but of the Lord’s purpose for you. May your mind be opened to opportunities to be useful. Lift up your eyes and look at the fields. They are already white for the harvest. “And he who reaps receives wages, and gathers fruit for eternal life, that both he who sows and he who reaps may rejoice together” (John 4:36).

Amen.

Lessons: Matthew 9:27-10:16; *Apocalypse Explained* 911:15-17