

SEEING THE WORLD THROUGH JESUS' EYES

SERIES: MISSIONS AND EVANGELISM: WHY ARE WE HERE?

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If you're like me, you have such a busy, full, highly stimulated life that it's really hard to pay attention to everything around you. You meet people and talk with them, and afterward you can't remember what their name was or what they were wearing. I am terribly inattentive to all kinds of details. I flunk the husband test all the time. On Saturday night when we're trying to figure out what clothes we're going to wear to church, if Ginger asks, "What did I wear to church last Sunday?" I'll say, "I don't know, why are you asking *me*...!"

In this series we're finding out what God's heart for the world is. In our first message (Discovery Paper 4851) we looked at some passages in Genesis where, in response to the need of the world, God promised Abraham that through his seed all of the nations of the earth would be blessed. We saw that Jesus was the fulfillment of that promise, the One who met the need of all the peoples of the world. We saw that God has always loved the whole world and has wanted to provide for the need of every man and woman on the face of the earth throughout all of history.

In our second message (Discovery Paper 4852) we looked at the importance of the gospel message of Jesus Christ. Because of the destructiveness of sin, the world really needs a Savior, and that Savior is Jesus Christ. God has satisfied his just wrath against sin and has opened up the floodgates of his love toward us through Jesus' sacrificial death. This message of salvation in Jesus is what the whole world needs, and God has entrusted it to us to proclaim to the world.

Starting in this message we're going to examine four key passages in the New Testament where we are challenged as followers of Jesus to be a part of the proclamation of that message to the world. The first two passages are the words of Jesus, and the next two are Paul's testimony of being sent out himself by God to reach into his world.

The passage we're going to look at now is Matthew 9:35-38. I hope it will open up a window of understanding to us, provide a starting point for us, as we seek to be the people of God in this task of obeying Christ as proclaimers of his truth.

Jesus was going through all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every kind of disease and every kind of sickness.

Seeing the people, He felt compassion for them, because they were distressed and dispirited like sheep without a shepherd. Then He said to His disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Therefore beseech the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into His harvest."

Jesus displays two things to us in this passage: an insightful vision of the world in which he lived, and a strategic involvement in it.

What Jesus saw

Jesus had been going from village to village teaching about the kingdom, healing people and ministering to them. Then in verse 36 it says, "Seeing the people..." This word "seeing" means to notice something with perception. He noticed the reality of what was happening around him. As I said a moment ago, it is very difficult for us to do that. We get so busy and caught up in what we're doing that life happens around us and we don't even notice. But Jesus paid attention to what was going on. And perceiving what was going on with the people, he was moved with compassion. Compassion is a great word that comes from the same root as our word intestines. Down in his gut he had this incredible compassionate feeling about what he saw.

What was it that Jesus saw? First of all, he saw hurting people. His compassion was poured out to them "because they were distressed and dispirited like sheep without a shepherd." The word distressed is derived from a word meaning to

skin an animal. This word came to mean annoyed or bewildered or harassed, unable to make sense of what is happening to you and what life is all about. Probably most of the people Jesus encountered were relatively poor and somewhat socially disadvantaged in their society. They were living in a culture in which there was a great deal of manipulation by religious leaders. Beyond that, they were politically very insignificant. We look at Palestine as being central to history as the place of Jesus' earthly life, but from the human perspective of that time it was a little nothing province way out on the fringes of the Roman Empire.

The second word Jesus used, *dispirited*, originally meant to throw or cast down, and it came to mean discouraged or without support. Even in a highly communal culture, people had a sense of being discouraged and without support. So when Jesus looked around, he saw past the surface issues of life, even beyond the physical needs, deep into the hearts of people. He saw people who were broken down and hurting, not able to answer questions about what life was all about, and feeling like they were in it all alone. That sounds like a picture of our world, doesn't it?

But that's not all Jesus saw. He also saw a plentiful harvest. Jesus was not overwhelmed by the sense of need, even though he was moved by it. He didn't say, "This problem is too great. There's nothing I can do." He didn't say, "I don't really know these people," or, "I've got another purpose in life, so I can't really worry about that." No, he looked at the hurting people around him and said, "There is a plentiful harvest!" Why would he say that? It's because he understood that what these people needed was hope, a sense that there was something they could have faith in, something that could meet the deepest needs of their heart. That was the gospel of the kingdom. So there was hope to be given to hurting, downcast, distressed people, and the hope was in who he was--the Messiah, who had come to set people free from the bondage of sin.

How can we sharpen our own sense of vision? Well, how did Jesus get to the point that he could see what he did?

How Jesus saw

The context of this story will tell us. Let's read all of chapter 9:

"Getting into a boat, Jesus crossed over the sea and came to His own city. And they brought to Him a paralytic lying on a bed. Seeing their faith, Jesus said to the paralytic, 'Take courage, son; your sins are forgiven.' And some of the scribes said to themselves, 'This fellow blasphemes.' And Jesus knowing their thoughts said, 'Why are you thinking evil in your hearts? Which is easier, to say, "Your sins are forgiven," or to say, "Get up, and walk"? But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins'--then He said to the paralytic, 'Get up, pick up your bed and go home.' And he got up and went home. But when the crowds saw this, they were awestruck, and glorified God, who had given such authority to men.

As Jesus went on from there, He saw a man called Matthew, sitting in the tax collector's booth; and He said to him, 'Follow Me!' And he got up and followed Him.

Then it happened that as Jesus was reclining at the table in the house, behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and were dining with Jesus and His disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they said to His disciples, 'Why is your Teacher eating with the tax collectors and sinners?' But when Jesus heard this, He said, 'It is not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick. But go and learn what this means: "I desire compassion, and not sacrifice," for I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners.'

Then the disciples of John came to Him, asking, 'Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but Your disciples do not fast?' And Jesus said to them, 'The attendants of the bridegroom cannot mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them, can they? But the days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast. But no one puts a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment; for the patch pulls away from the garment, and a worse tear results. Nor do people put new wine into old wineskins; otherwise the wineskins burst, and the wine pours out and the wineskins are ruined; but they put new wine into fresh wineskins, and both are preserved.'

While He was saying these things to them, a synagogue official came and bowed down before Him, and said, 'My daughter has just died; but come and lay Your hand on her, and she will live.' Jesus got up and began to follow him, and so did His disciples.

And a woman who had been suffering from a hemorrhage for twelve years, came up behind Him and touched the fringe of His cloak; for she was saying to herself, 'If I only touch His garment, I will get well.' But Jesus turning and seeing her said, 'Daughter, take courage; your faith has made you well.' At once the woman was made well.

When Jesus came into the official's house, and saw the flute-players and the crowd in noisy disorder, He said, 'Leave; for the girl has not died, but is asleep.' And they began laughing at Him. But when the crowd had been sent out, He entered and took her by the hand, and the girl got up. This news spread throughout all that land.

As Jesus went on from there, two blind men followed Him, crying out, 'Have mercy on us, Son of David!' When He entered the house, the blind men came up to Him, and Jesus said to them, 'Do you believe that I am able to do this?' They said to Him, 'Yes, Lord.' Then He touched their eyes, saying, 'It shall be done to you according to your faith.' And their eyes were opened. And Jesus sternly warned them: 'See that no one knows about this!' But they went out and spread the news about Him throughout all that land.

As they were going out, a mute, demon-possessed man was brought to Him. After the demon was cast out, the mute man spoke; and the crowds were amazed, and were saying, 'Nothing like this has ever been seen in Israel.' But the Pharisees were saying, 'He casts out the demons by the ruler of the demons.'

Jesus was going through all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every kind of disease and every kind of sickness.

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He had quite a day, didn't he? He healed a paralytic who was brought to him, and as he did that he taught about forgiveness of sins. He called out Matthew the tax collector and dined with him and some other tax-collectors and sinners, then he was criticized by the Pharisees for hanging around with such people, and defended his actions as appropriate. He taught the disciples of John about who he was and what the kingdom was about. He healed a woman with a hemorrhage while on the way to raising the dead daughter of a synagogue official. Then he healed two blind men and cast out a demon from a mute, possessed man. He kept on teaching about the kingdom and healing, and he did all of this under constant scrutiny and criticism from the Pharisees.

So how did Jesus sharpen his vision? By being out where people were, where the hurt was. As a way of life, he stopped and paid attention to the people he encountered. When he was going to raise the dead daughter of the synagogue official and was interrupted on his way by the woman who touched his garment, surely he could have said, "I am about to raise the dead girl, and I haven't got time for this." But even then he stopped and showed compassion to her before going on his way. At every turn Jesus was out there among people. He didn't isolate himself or get caught up in some sense of personal mission so that he had no time to give people.

There is no secret formula to gaining spiritual insight into people's lives. We need to grow in our knowledge and understanding of the kingdom of God, and we need to be out there with people. There's an attitude about life as ministry that permeates the texture of New-Testament descriptions of being a Christ-follower. Ministry is not something that belongs in a compartment. Ministry is paying attention to what's going on and being involved in the lives of the people God has placed in our path. So the way we sharpen our own vision is by simply getting out there and mixing it up, paying attention to people and seeing what God is doing in their lives.

Jesus went on to give the disciples, and us as an extension of them, an insight into strategic involvement. He did two things to get the disciples involved in the kind of ministry he was doing.

First, he called them to prayer. He didn't start by saying, "What are you sitting here for? Get up and do something!" This is a lesson that God has been teaching me a lot about. What happens when we just launch into ministry without prayer is that it's easy for us to be worn out by it, for it to become "our" ministry that we map out in a way that we feel comfortable with, and for us to somehow be a little detached from it.

But when we become men and women of prayer, two things happen to us. One is that it puts us in tune with what God is doing. It humbles us before the Lord and allows us to then approach life and ministry out of a sense of submission to his lordship in our lives and in the world. And the other is that it focuses our attention on the need as we cry out to God to help meet that need. *Nothing makes my heart more prepared to be involved in people's lives than to pray for them.* So we need to look around in our offices, in our families where there is trouble going on, or in our neighborhoods where people are distressed and downtrodden, and pray for those people, see them as the harvest that is plentiful, and ask God to raise up people who can be a witness for him, to send laborers into that harvest.

The second thing Jesus did was send the disciples into action. When we begin to pray about these things, God begins to prepare us for the next step. Right after this in 10:1, Jesus summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority to cast out unclean spirits and to heal every kind of disease and sickness, and after instructing them he sent them out. Having called them to pray that the Lord would send forth laborers, then he said, "Okay, now you're ready to go. You will be the answer to your own prayers." Their hearts were now tuned to God as the Lord of the harvest, their eyes were focused on the need of the world, they were praying that God would meet that need, and now their whole lives were ordered in the direction of meeting the need.

As we begin to pray and tune our hearts toward God, we are praying ourselves into the solution. So not only do we become men and women of prayer, we become men and women of action that flows out of our prayers. We are ready to be people who can make a difference in our world.

Now, these two simple things, insightful vision and strategic involvement through prayer and action in our own world, are not rocket science. But there are some profound implications for us. Let me share three things to think about.

Breaking out of self-focus, purposeful discipleship, praying for help

First of all, we need to break out of our narrow, self-contained, self-oriented worlds and get involved with the people around us. That sounds simple, but we all have ways that we are self-oriented and self-protective in our lifestyles. It's easy to do that even when you're in full-time ministry.

When we lived in Vienna, Sundays would be exhausting, just as they often are here. What with church services and teaching and dealing with people, I'd be pretty worn out by the end of the day. So late on Sunday evenings I loved to just plop into my recliner and relax. Around ten o'clock to midnight I would zone out in front of the TV, watching the British sports feed of American golf tournaments. And one thing I just hated was for the phone to ring while I was doing that. I had served God that day, teaching and preaching and talking to people, and now I was home and I wanted to rest. If Ginger answered the phone and said, "It's for you," my blood would boil. Who would dare interrupt my moment of respite from a hard day at ministry? You see, even in ministry it's so easy for us to make our lives about us.

So I would be on the phone with someone who had a real need or question, and inside me there was a battle going on: One side would be saying, "How can they interrupt my need for some rest?" The other side would be saying, "But this person is calling you because they really need some advice, and you've got to minister to them." We all know what that feels like. God is calling us to be men and women who see the need of the world and are able to break out of our selfishness, get out of our recliners when it's necessary, and be willing to engage the world around us with real caring.

The second implication for us is that we need to engage in what we at PBC like to call discipleship with a purpose. Notice that Jesus went around teaching about the kingdom of God while he was healing and ministering. It's not either one or the other. It all goes together. There is a partnership in the growing process. There is a place to be learning about the kingdom of God and teaching and proclaiming the kingdom of God, and there is a place for caring for people's needs. So our discipleship might consist of hearing the word of God taught on Sunday morning, going to a Sunday School class, being in a discipleship group or home group, or studying the Scriptures on our own. And as we grow in our understanding of the kingdom of God, who Christ is, and the wonder of his salvation, at the same time we're opening our eyes to the need of the world, so that as we live in the world as kingdom people, we actually have something to offer to the world. We are equipped to meet needs, to make a difference.

The third implication here is that we need to be people of prayer who ask God for eyes to see, courage to engage, and wisdom to know how. I am terribly oblivious to things around me, so God in his great mercy and his genius gave me a wife who is much more perceptive about things than I am, and she is constantly bringing me back to consciousness of things I need to be paying attention to. As we pray for God to give us eyes to see, maybe he will provide us with our own growing eyesight, or maybe he will provide us with people around us who can encourage us to open our eyes to ministry and need. But either way I believe we need to become men and women of prayer. God has taught me so much about this in recent years; particularly in the last year he has taught me how little prayer has figured in cultivating my heart for God and my heart for the world. I am really humbled and thankful that God has begun to teach me the wonder of what it means to really pray for people, and the difference it's made in my own approach to life and ministry. And I still have much to learn in that.

We need to pray for the courage and the wisdom to engage. It scares me to death to walk into situations where I am going to be asked questions. I've been in ministry all these years and I still don't have good answers for most of the questions out there. So I struggle and have to trust God for wisdom and courage. We all have to be able to say, "God, it's scary and uncomfortable, but I am going to walk into that with you." And the power of the Holy Spirit who lives in us will make it possible for us to do it. So we step out, trusting and praying for God to give us courage and wisdom. When I don't know exactly what to do, sometimes the right thing to do is just to be there, to comfort and care, and then God will give me the wisdom to know what to say in the right situation.

We need to be men and women of prayer who are seeing our world through Christ's eyes and embracing our world with Christ's love. God has taught me this lesson over and over in different ways. Let me share a story with you.

When we lived in Vienna, one of the ways we got involved in the community was through Little League baseball. I was part of a group of guys who started the program in Vienna. There was enough of an American family presence to start the core group off, and people from a lot of different countries got involved in the league. It was a lot of fun. And in any highly mobile population, as Vienna is, if you stay there long enough you become important. The other founders of the league moved on, and I was one of the original founders who stayed, so after a while I became an important person by the simple fact that I was still there.

We were the only official Little League registered in Austria, so we were automatically the Austrian champions, and we got to take our all-star team to the European tournament every year. For four years I coached the all-star team of eleven- and twelve-year old boys going to that tournament. One year one of the coaches in the group was really hard to get along with, and almost no one liked him. There were always problems, and I spent a lot of my time that year just trying to manage the dynamics among the coaches. It was a tough season.

We were involved with these families for several years, and when my fortieth birthday came along, Ginger planned a huge surprise party for me. I walked into the house one Saturday afternoon with these guys, and there were fifty-plus people in our house waiting for me. I was totally blown away. Later I was opening gifts, and when I opened one box, I looked up at the guy who had given me this gift and asked, "Is this real?" He said yes, and everybody started asking, "What is it? What is it?" It was a baseball autographed by Warren Spahn. It was actually authentic. This guy had had it autographed when he was a little boy. He'd had it all these years, and he gave it to me on my fortieth birthday. It's still the most sacrificial gift anyone has ever given me.

Later, the coach who had been so difficult to get along with came up to me and said, "I'm not jealous that you have

that baseball, but I am jealous that you have a friend who would give it to you.” In that moment God pulled back the curtain and gave me new eyes to see him. This guy was hurting and lonely. You could say some of it was his own making, but he needed someone to care about him. That gave us some opportunities to minister to him and his family.

How easy it is for us to say someone is just obnoxious. If they’re hard to get along with, or they have issues that are difficult, we want to just push them aside, shut them out, pigeon-hole them as impossible. But God reminded me that this guy was just one of the “distressed and dispirited like sheep without a shepherd,” and I needed to have God’s eyes to see that he needed a friend and he needed a Savior, to have that kind of insight and wisdom.

Jesus saw people. He noticed. He paid attention. And out of that a heart of compassion sprang into action to minister. He called his disciples to pray and be involved that way, and that’s what he is calling us to do. He is calling us to be men and women who can see the world we live in, perceive the needs, pray for God to raise up people to meet the needs, and then ourselves become part of the answer by being engaged in the wonderful harvest that’s out there.

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