

## Historic Commentary

(Second Sunday after Pentecost - Year A)



The Liturgy Letter

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### Commentary on Matthew 9:35-10:8 from Selected Church Fathers and Calvin

[Thomas Aquinas' curated commentary on Matthew 9](#), from a 13th century document called the [Catena Aurea](#) that contains compiled verse by verse commentary on the Gospels from the patristics and others.

[Chrysostom](#): Jesus not only refrained from punishing his detractors for their insensitivity, but he did not even give them a simple rebuke. This gives further evidence of his meekness and refutes their malicious talk. He exhibits further proof of his glory by the signs that were to follow and the refutations that would become more explicit. For these reasons he went about in all the cities, in the countryside and in the synagogues, instructing all to respond to those who attacked him, not with fresh vilification but with ever greater benevolence. So do good to your companions not for their sake alone but for God's sake. Whatever they may do, do not cease doing them good. Your reward will be greater. When you are vilified, if you quit doing good, you signify that you are seeking the praise of others, not the praise of God. For this reason Christ was sent to teach us that he came simply to do good. He did not wait for the sick to come to him. He himself hurried to them, bearing them a twofold blessing: the gospel of the reign of God and the healing of their diseases. And for this he went everywhere, not overlooking the slightest village.

[Jerome](#): An abundant harvest signified the multitude of people. The few laborers signified the dearth of teachers. He commands them to ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest. These are the laborers of whom the psalmist speaks: "May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy! He that goes forth weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, bringing his sheaves with him." And that I may speak in broader terms: an abundant harvest represents all the believing multitude. The few laborers imply the apostles and their imitators who are sent to the harvest.

**Chrysostom:** He shows how great the gift is when he says, “Ask from the Lord of the harvest.” And in an inconspicuous manner Jesus indicates that he himself is the one who holds this authority. Then to signify how promising is the harvest, Jesus calls them to “pray therefore the Lord of the harvest.” In doing so he indirectly declares this lordship to be his own prerogative. For after having said, “pray therefore the Lord of the harvest” when they had not made any request or prayer, he himself at once appoints them, reminding them also of the sayings of John, about the threshing floor, the separation of the husks from the kernels of grain, the husks that are left over, and of the One who is winnowing. From this it is clear that he himself is the farmer, he himself is the Lord of the harvest, he himself is the master of the prophets. For if he sent them to gather the harvest, it is clear that they do not harvest what belongs to someone else. Instead, they harvest the things that he sowed through the prophets. In calling their ministry a harvest, he was encouraging them but also empowering them to this ministry.

**Chrysostom:** Note the careful timing of their mission. They were not sent out at the beginning of their walk with him. They were not sent out until they had sufficiently benefited by following him daily. It was only after they had seen the dead raised, the sea rebuked, devils expelled, the legs of a paralytic brought to life, sins remitted, lepers cleansed, and had received a sufficient proof of his power both by deeds and words—only then did he send them out. And he did not send them out unprepared to do dangerous deeds, for as yet there was no danger in Palestine. They had only to stand against verbal abuse. However, Jesus still warned them of larger perils to come, preparing them for what was future. What kind of people were these? Fishermen and publicans. Indeed, four of them were lowly fishermen and two were publicans—Matthew and James—and one was even a traitor. These “he sent!

**Jerome:** This passage is not contrary to the command given later: “Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” The former command was given before the resurrection and the latter after the resurrection. It was necessary to announce Christ’s first coming to the Jews, lest they have a good excuse for saying that the Lord rejected them because he had sent the apostles to the Gentiles and the Samaritans. In line with the metaphor, we who call ourselves Christians are advised not to walk in the ways of the Gentiles and heretics, for they have not only a separate religion but also a separate way of life.

Gregory the Great: Isn't it clear to all, dearly beloved, that our Redeemer came into the world for the salvation of the Gentiles? Yet when we behold Samaritans called daily to the faith, what did he mean when he sent his disciples to preach and said, "Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel"? He wished that the proclamation be offered first to the Jews alone. Then it would be offered to the Gentiles. This conclusion we draw from the actual outcome of history. When the former were called but refused to be converted, the holy preachers would turn to the calling of the Gentiles as outsiders. So what happened to the Jews by way of example proved to be an increase of grace for the Gentiles. For there were at that time some from among the Jews who were to be called and some from among the Gentiles who were not to be called.

Chrysostom: Do you perceive the unparalleled magnificence of their ministry? Do you comprehend the dignity of the apostles? They are not authorized to speak of things perceivable by the senses. They do not repeat what Moses said or the prophets before them. Rather, they spoke of new and strange things. Moses and the prophets spoke of temporal promises of an earthly land. The apostles proclaimed the kingdom of heaven and all that this implies. Not only does the loftiness of their message characterize them as greater, but so does the lowly nature of their obedience. They were not reluctant nor irresolute, like those who came before. Instead, warned as they were of perils, wars and intolerable evils, they receive his commands with simple obedience. They immediately became heralds of the coming kingdom.

Gregory the Great: But let us hear what the preachers were commanded when they were sent out: "Go and preach," saying, "The kingdom of heaven is at hand." Even if the gospel were to be silent, dearly beloved, the world now proclaims this message. Its ruins are its words. Struck by so many blows, it has fallen from its glory. It is as if the world itself reveals to us now that another kingdom is near, which will succeed it. It is abhorred by the very people who loved it. Its own ruins preach that it should not be loved. If someone's house were shaken and threatened with ruin, whoever lived in it would flee. The one who loved it when it was standing would hasten to leave it as soon as possible when it was falling. Therefore if the world is falling, and we embrace it by loving it, we are choosing rather to be overwhelmed than to live in it. Nothing separates us from its ruin insofar as our love binds us by our attachment to it.

It is easy now, when we see everything heading for destruction, to disengage our minds from love of the world. But then it was very difficult, because the disciples were sent to preach the unseen kingdom of heaven at the very time when everyone far and wide could see the kingdoms of earth flourishing.

Jerome: Lest anyone hold as unworthy of belief these rough men bereft of eloquence, unschooled and unlettered, as they promise the kingdom of heaven, Jesus empowered them to cure the sick, cleanse the lepers and cast out devils. Many signs would confirm the promises made. And because spiritual gifts are defiled if connected with rewards, Jesus adds a condemnation of avarice: “Freely you have received, freely give.” I, your Lord and Master, have given this to you without cost, and you should give, lest the grace of the gospel be corrupted.

Jerome: “Nor staff.” Why do we who have the Lord as our help seek the aid of a walking stick? And since he had sent the apostles out to preach somewhat divested and ill equipped and the teachers seemed to be in difficult straits, he tempered the severity of his command with the following sentence: “The laborer deserves his living.” However, Jesus said, except by way of food and clothing whatever you need. Jesus’ teaching is reflected in Paul’s words: “Having sufficient food and clothing, with these let us be content.” And in another place: “Let one who is instructed in the word share all good things with the teacher,” so that the disciples of those who have a healthy fear of the demonic will make them sharers of their own material goods, not because of greediness but genuine need. We said this by way of interpretation. According to another scriptural interpretation, teachers may not possess gold or silver or money in their belts. Gold is often understood to mean feeling, silver to mean speech and copper to mean voice. We are not allowed to accept these things from others but to possess them as given by the Lord. Nor are we allowed to accept the teachings of heretics and philosophers and false doctrine or to be burdened by the cares of the world or to be two-faced or to have our feet bound by deadly chains. But we are to be divested of everything as we advance on holy ground. We are not to have a staff that is changed into a snake or to lean upon the flesh for any support. A staff or walking stick of this kind is a reed: If you press on it just a little, it will break and will pierce your hand.

Chrysostom: By saying “the laborer deserves his food,” Jesus is not implying that every door will be opened to you. Rather, this saying requires great prudence. It will profit you both with respect to your reputation and for meeting your needs. His meaning is that you will be given food in due season insofar as you are worthy of it. And you will be worthy of it if you ask for nothing beyond mere necessities.

Chrysostom: You be the first to show respect. Do not wait to be saluted by others. But this is not a mere salutation; it is also a blessing. For “if the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it.” But if they treat you with insolence, their first reproach will be to not receive the benefit of your peace, and the last will be that they will suffer the doom of Sodom. You are to seek out the houses of those who are worthy. If you shake the dust off your feet, you are showing either that you have not been received and heard or that you are attesting to them the long journey you have traveled for their sake.

Chrysostom: He is teaching them a new sort of warfare. He sends them out exposed, with only one coat, barefoot and without a staff, without clothing or provisions. The manner of their battle array is entirely unimpressive. He calls them to allow themselves to be totally supported by the generosity of such as receive them. All this is to accentuate his unspeakable power. Then, to press this reverse strategy to its limits, he tells them to exhibit the gentleness of sheep, even though they are going out among wolves, and not simply toward the wolves but trustfully moving right into the midst of the wolves.

Augustine: To be sure, we heard in that reading, “But when they deliver you up, do not be anxious how or what you are to speak ... for it is not you who are speaking but the Spirit of your Father who speaks through you.” And he says in another place: “Behold, I am with you always, even to the end of the world.” Does this mean that the people who heard those words of the Lord would be here until the end of the world? The Lord was referring, rather, not only to those about to depart from this life but also to the others, including us and those who would come after us in this life. He saw everyone in his single body, and the words he spoke, “I am with you even to the end of the world,” were heard by them and by us too. And if we did not hear them then in our knowledge, we heard them in his foreknowledge. Therefore, safe as sheep among the wolves, let us keep the commandments of him who directs us. And let us be “innocent as doves but cautious as

snakes.” Innocent as doves that we may not harm anyone; cautious as snakes that we may be careful of letting anyone harm us.

John Calvin: Vs. 37. The harvest is indeed abundant

By this metaphor he intimates, that many of the people are ripe for receiving the gospel. Though the greater number afterwards rejected basely and with vile ingratitude the salvation offered to them, yet the limited number of the elect, who were mixed with unbelievers, is compared to an abundant harvest, because God values a small band of his own people more highly than the rest of the world. Though there were at that time many who assumed this character, yet as few of them discharged it faithfully, he does not rank them among laborers: for he employs the word laborers in a good sense. When Paul complains (2 Corinthians 2:13) of bad laborers, he refers to their boasting: for he would not have bestowed the designation of laborers on those who devoted all their exertions to ruin and waste the flock, had it not been that they gloried in the false pretense.

Vs 38. Pray therefore to the Lord of the harvest

As no man will of himself become a sincere and faithful minister of the gospel, and as none discharge in a proper manner the office of teacher but those whom the Lord raises up and endows with the gifts of his Spirit, whenever we observe a scarcity of pastors, we must raise our eyes to him to afford the remedy. There never was greater necessity for offering this prayer than during the fearful desolation of the church which we now see everywhere around us.

And having called the twelve disciples The number, twelve, was intended to point out the future restoration of the Church. As the nation was descended from twelve patriarchs, so its scattered remains are now reminded by Christ of their origin, that they may entertain a fixed hope of being restored. Although the kingdom of God was not in so flourishing a state in Judea, as to preserve the nation entire, but, on the contrary, that people, which already had miserably fallen, deserved doubly to die on account of ingratitude in despising the grace which had been offered to them, yet this did not prevent a new nation from afterwards springing up. At a future period, God extended far beyond Zion the scepter of the power of his Son, and caused rivers to flow from that fountain, to water abundantly the four quarters of the world. Then God assembled his Israel from every direction, and united into one body not only the scattered and torn members, but men who had formerly been entirely alienated from the people of God.

It was not without reason, therefore, that the Lord, by appointing, as it were, twelve patriarchs, declared the restoration of the Church. Besides, this number reminded the Jews of the design of his coming; but, as they did not yield to the grace of God, he begat for himself a new Israel. If you look at the beginnings, it might appear ridiculous that Christ should bestow such honorable titles on persons who were mean and of no estimation: but their astonishing success, and the wide extension of the Church, make it evident that, in honorable rank and in numerous offspring, the apostles not only are not inferior to the patriarchs, but greatly excel them.

Gave them power The apostles had almost no rank among men, while the commission which Christ gave them was divine. Besides, they had neither ability nor eloquence, while the excellence and novelty of their office required more than human endowments, It was therefore necessary that they should derive authority from another source. By enabling them to perform miracles, Christ invests them with the badges of heavenly power, in order to secure the confidence and veneration of the people. And hence we may infer what is the proper use of miracles. As Christ gives to them at the same time, and in immediate connection, the appointment to be preachers of the gospel and ministers of miracles, it is plain that miracles are nothing else than seals of his doctrine, and therefore we are not at liberty to dissolve this close connection.

He calls them lost sheep, partly that the apostles, moved by compassion, may more readily and with warmer affection run to their assistance, and partly to inform them that there is at present abundant occasion for their labors. At the same time, under the figure of this nation, Christ taught what is the condition of the whole human race. The Jews, who were near to God, and in covenant with him, and therefore were the lawful heirs of eternal life, are nevertheless pronounced to be lost, till they regain salvation through Christ. What then remains for us who are inferior to them in honor? Again, the word sheep is applied even to the reprobate, who, properly speaking, did not belong to the flock of God, because the adoption extended to the whole nation; as those who deserved to be rejected, on account of their treachery, are elsewhere called the children of the kingdom, (Matthew 8:12.) In a word, by the term sheep, Christ recommends the Jews to the apostles, that they may dedicate their labors to them, because they could recognize as the flock of God none but those who had been gathered into the fold.

Remain there till you depart. This too has a reference to dispatch: for if they had made a longer stay in any place, it would have been necessary to change their lodging, that they might not be too burdensome to any individual. When, therefore, Christ enjoins them to remain in the house of the person who shall first receive them, till they depart to another city, he intimates that they must make haste, so that, after having published the Gospel in one city, they may immediately run to another.

To shake off the dust from the feet was probably a custom then prevalent in Judea, as a sign of execration; and was intended to declare that the inhabitants of the place were so polluted, that the very ground on which they trod was infected. That it was an ordinary custom I conjecture from our Lord's manner of speaking of it as a thing well known. This form of execration confirms still more what I lately mentioned, that no crime is more offensive to God than contempt of his word: for he does not enjoin them to make use of so solemn a mode in expressing their detestation of adulterers, or murderers, or any description of malefactors.