

## ‘WORKING’ LUKE 10:1-24

### [St Mark’s Online Services – Sunday, July 19, 2020]

#### 1. The Kingdom and the Need to Work.

Amidst a range of other concerns people have at the moment, many are concerned about employment. People who’ve lost their jobs are trying hard to find a new one. People who’ve got jobs are in many cases anxious about whether they’ll keep them. And the government are certainly very anxious to keep unemployment figures low. As much as we enjoy holidays and rest, most of us have a strong sense of needing to work. And our country needs a workforce if it’s to function properly.

But it’s in that realm that our thoughts about work often start and finish. We don’t tend to think of ourselves as workers outside of the jobs we do, with the possible exception of thinking about the work we have to do around the home. But when it comes to our role within the kingdom of God, I’m not sure “worker” is a common way we tend to think of ourselves. Disciple- yes. Child of God- probably. Ambassador for Christ- hopefully. But worker? It’s probably not our first instinct when we describe our identity as Christians. I certainly don’t hear people using that language much in their conversations or in their prayers.

But it’s definitely a key word for Jesus here in Luke 10. In verse 2 he says the workers are few, and he encourages his disciples to ask God to send out more workers. At the same time, Jesus is sending these same disciples out on a mission of their own. He’s employing them in his workforce. And this is confirmed by the phrase Jesus uses in verse 7 to describe them on their mission. He says that the ‘worker’ deserves his wages. So Jesus says that the kingdom needs workers.

But what is the work? Well, the context of the work Jesus speaks about here is the harvest- the plentiful harvest as verse 2 says<sup>1</sup>. The workers are needed for the harvest field<sup>2</sup>. What does he mean? Back in chapter 3 of Luke’s gospel we heard John the Baptist say that when the Messiah came he would arrive with a winnowing fork to clear his threshing floor- gathering the wheat into his barn, but burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire<sup>3</sup>. So, from the very beginning of the gospel we’ve been invited to see the ministry of Jesus as a harvesting ministry- gathering his people into his kingdom, but pronouncing God’s judgement on those who reject him. And what we see here is Jesus recruiting labourers to help him with his harvesting<sup>4</sup>, inviting his disciples to join him in his work. So, verse 2 here is not primarily about the need for more full-time ministers or missionaries, even though I’ve often heard this verse reductionistically used in that way.

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<sup>1</sup> See also John 4:35.

<sup>2</sup> See also Matthew 9:37-38.

<sup>3</sup> Luke 3:17.

<sup>4</sup> See also the “farming” imagery used in the parable of 8:1-15.

No- verse 2 is primarily a verse about Jesus recruiting all his followers to share in his work. It's a verse about disciples learning to do what disciples are meant to do.

And that's what we're going to think together about this morning/evening. What does it mean for us to follow Jesus by working for him? And our passage falls fairly neatly into two sections: the sending out- verses 1-16, and then the coming back- verses 17-24. So let's consider each in turn.

## 2. The Sending Out (vv.1-16).

Verses 1-16 are all about Jesus sending out a large group of disciples- 72 it seems<sup>5</sup>. At the start of Luke 9 we hear about Jesus sending out the 12 apostles on a similar mission. But now Jesus employs a wider group of his disciples to help him. And, as verse 1 tells us, they were sent in pairs to the places Jesus himself was about to go. They were preparing the way for him- like little John the Baptists. It couldn't be clearer that they are working for Jesus in the ministry of Jesus. It's his harvest. He's sending them. They do what he needs them to do. And so they go to do what Jesus does, just like the 12 did in chapter 9- to heal the sick<sup>6</sup>, and to proclaim the kingdom<sup>7</sup>. They are to imitate Jesus' compassion, and they are to be heralds of Jesus' message<sup>8</sup>. And they are to engage in their work prayerfully- verse 2, asking the Lord of the harvest to multiply disciples as they play their part. They are also to engage in the work with undistracted focus- verse 4, not worrying about how God will provide for them. And in this way Jesus echoes the hard sayings Luke collected together at the end of chapter 9. To follow Christ is to leave lesser preoccupations behind and to give oneself heart and soul to the supremely important work of his kingdom<sup>9</sup>.

But, given that Jesus' harvest involves both gathering wheat and burning chaff, it's unsurprising that he also teaches his disciples to expect varied and opposite reactions as they prepare the way for him. So, he says, they should expect some to welcome them, and others to reject them. And it seems to me that these contrasting responses are at the heart of these first sixteen verses, so I want to focus our attention here.

### - the expectation of welcome

To begin with, Jesus teaches his disciples to expect some to welcome them. To begin with, when he says in verse 2 that the harvest is plentiful it seems to imply that there's reason to expect the sowing of the kingdom seed to bear fruit<sup>10</sup>. And, as you may know,

<sup>5</sup> As the NIV footnote indicates there is a textual variant that suggests there were only 70- but very little hangs on the precise number.

<sup>6</sup> Verse 9.

<sup>7</sup> See also 9.

<sup>8</sup> In Wilcock's BST commentary (p.119) he helpfully describes four features of the ministry the 72 are called to: toil (v.2), danger (v.3), single-mindedness (v.4), and forthright proclamation (vv.5-12).

<sup>9</sup> See 9:57-62.

<sup>10</sup> There is a question to be asked here about whether Jesus' comments about the plentiful harvest should be understood to describe simply that historical moment he was in. I don't think that's impossible (notwithstanding that Christians/commentators/preachers rarely seem to consider that possibility). However, since I think the 'harvest' refers broadly to the whole work of Christ (rather than just the gathering of new believers- the 'wheat' as

Luke is very interested in how the message of the kingdom is for everyone. It's not just for the Jews, but for Gentiles too. It's not just for the religious, but for the irreligious. It's not just for the rich, but also for the poor. It's for 'all people'<sup>11</sup>.

And Jesus says that as they go ahead of him it will become plain to them where the fruitful soil lies because those inclined to receive Jesus' message will be those inclined to receive them. There is a link here between hospitality and salvation. Verses 5-6 talk about those who welcome the blessing of peace which the disciples will utter. Such people will welcome the disciples into their homes because they are themselves children of peace<sup>12</sup>.

And when they are welcomed like this, Jesus encourages his disciples to stay in that house, to eat what they're offered, to heal the sick, and to proclaim the message: the kingdom of God has come near to you.

### **- the expectation of rejection**

Jesus teaches his disciples to expect this kind of welcome from some quarters. But he also teaches them to expect rejection. And it's his tender kindness that causes him to do so. If you have to do a task for someone that's pretty straightforward then you're generally happy to jump into it without the need to read any fine-print as it were. But if you need to do something for someone and it's going to be difficult in some way then you always appreciate a heads-up, some prior warning. No-one likes to be caught by unpleasant surprise. It's kind of the task-giver to properly prepare the task-doer. And so it is here. Jesus loves his disciples enough tell it to them straight. Verse 3.

[Read 10:3]

It's not an encouraging picture at all, really. As one commentator plainly summarises it: 'the simile points to both danger and helplessness'<sup>13</sup>. And that's not a good combination is it? It's kind of manageable to be in danger if you can combat it in some way. It's also OK to be weak as long as you're not endangered. But to be both endangered and helpless can be terrifying. It means you're entirely dependent on someone else to help you. So it's good, isn't it, that those who work for Jesus have the Lord of the Harvest in their corner!

But, of course, it's not just in verse 3 that Jesus prepares his disciples for the risks of rejection. It's also in verse 10 and following. He says in verse 8 and 9 that some will welcome them and open their homes to them. Then verse 10.

[Read 10:10-11]

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it were), it seems most likely to me that it's a word primarily about the scope of the work. Clearly there is still much work to be done today, and it's in this sense that I think the harvest remains plentiful.

<sup>11</sup> See 3:6.

<sup>12</sup> The Greek of verse 6a reads: 'and if there is a son of peace there . . .'

<sup>13</sup> Leon Morris, *Luke* (Tyndale), p.199.

Do you notice that the message the disciples bring to those who reject them is very similar to the message they bring to those who welcome them? Verse 11 and verse 9 are almost identical. Except in verse 9 the message for those who receive the disciples is that the kingdom of God has come near 'to you'. In verse 11 it's just that the kingdom of God has come near. Fullstop. I suspect that difference is meant to be very significant. The Lordship of Jesus is the reality that all must contend with. Of course, for those who believe, the Lordship of Jesus is a reality to rest in- the kingdom of God has come near to you. But for those who don't believe, the Lordship of Jesus is a reality to be fear- the kingdom of God has come near!

And from verses 12-15, Jesus underlines this very point. Sodom was absolutely decimated by God's judgement. But it will be far worse for those who reject Jesus when their day of judgement comes. The people of Tyre and Sidon were stubborn and unrepentant but even they, says Jesus, would have bent their knee when they saw the incredible miracles Jesus and his disciples performed. But not so the people of Chorazin or Bethsaida. So the judgement on Jesus' contemporaries will be worse than that which even Tyre and Sidon faced<sup>14</sup>. Their destiny, verse 17, is not the heavens, but Hades.

And that's because, by rejecting the harvest workers, they reject the harvest Lord. By rejecting Jesus' messengers, they reject Jesus. And if they reject Jesus, they likewise reject the one who sent him. Verse 16.

[Read 10:16]<sup>15</sup>

On the day Jesus sent out the 72 with a job to do, he wanted to make sure they expected both welcome and rejection. And even now Jesus wants his disciples to be armed with these twin expectations. All who do the work of Christ will encounter these polar opposites in how people respond to Christ. So Jesus helps us with these words. Do we expect rejection and suffering as we labour in the harvest? But do we also expect welcome? I suspect at different times in history it's easier to expect one of those than the other. No doubt there have been times through the centuries, and even now in some places, where the gospel seems to be welcomed more often than it's rejected. And in days like those it's vital God's people remember that it will not always be so. But at this point in history in our part of the world I suspect it's easier to believe in rejection than in welcome. And in days like these we need the words of Jesus to remind us that the Good Shepherd has sheep out there who are yet to come into the fold<sup>16</sup>. There is wheat still in the field waiting to be gathered. Some will welcome us when we come with the message of Christ's kingdom. And we ought to expect no less.

### 3. The Coming Back (vv.17-24).

So, that's what Jesus says when the disciples are sent out. What about the words of Jesus when they all come back? Well, if the focus of verses 1-16 was a contrast

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, Isaiah 23, Ezekiel 26-28.

<sup>15</sup> See also Matthew 10:40, John 13:20.

<sup>16</sup> See John 10:16.

between two different kinds of responses, the focus of verses 17-24 is a contrast between two different kinds of joy<sup>17</sup>.

### **- joy in serving**

First there's the joy of the 72 disciples when they come back from their mission. It's a joy many of us would be familiar with. I can remember coming back from many a mission trip over the years and feeling elated at what God had done and how he'd used our mission team. I can also remember walking away from a night at youth group or a particularly good evening of Home Group feeling the same. It's the joy of serving Christ and knowing you're contributing to the work of the kingdom. And, again, it's very kind of God to make it so, is it not? To be sent out as lambs among wolves and to return with a bursting heart is really quite something. Given how hard it can be, it's a wonderful thing that God has made ministry so richly enjoyable! And so it was with the disciples on this occasion. Verse 17.

[Read 10:17]

As they proclaimed the gospel and healed the sick, they had also been casting out demons. And they were amazed that they'd been able to help people in that way. Perhaps they even felt empowered by the authority Jesus had given them.

And Jesus doesn't rain on their parade. His first instinct is to acknowledge the authority they did have, although he also carefully reminds them in verse 19 that it was an authority given to them by his power and grace. But he affirms that as they were out doing his work, the harvest was advanced. And Satan's work was being unwound. I think this is the point in verse 18. As they were casting out demons Jesus could see into the heavens, and it was as if Satan was falling before his very eyes. So Jesus affirms here that he'd not only granted them power but also protection while they were doing his work<sup>18</sup>. And so he welcomes their joy.

### **- joy in seeing**

But in verses 20-24 he suggests to them another joy as well. A better joy. I don't think Jesus is really rebuking them in verse 20. It's more as if he wants to tease them into an even richer rejoicing. Perhaps if you imagine a father who hears his young daughter praying on Christmas Eve, and the girl beseeches God for lots of lollies to come her way the next day, and imagine the father smiles graciously and suggests that she might also like to pray that other family members would enjoy Christmas, and to pray with thanks for the birth of Jesus. That father is not admonishing his daughter for praying for something she's perfectly entitled to ask for. Rather, he's coaxing her to pray in a way that is more deeply attuned to the perspective of her Father in Heaven. I think this is what Jesus does here. The disciples are perfectly entitled to rejoice in their ministry and its effectiveness. But Jesus coaxes them into a joy that is more attuned to their

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<sup>17</sup> Joy is undoubtedly the key theme of these verses. It's mentioned in v.17, twice in v.20, and again in v.21.

<sup>18</sup> Verse 19 seems to suggest that they were (and would continue to be) protected from being harmed by the Enemy while they were doing the work to which they were sent. See Leon Morris' Tyndale commentary- p. 203.

Heavenly Father's perspective. He sees their good joy, but also invites them into a better one. He wants them not so much to rejoice in servicing, as to rejoice in seeing.

Seeing is the way Jesus describes it in verses 23-24.

[Read 10:23-24]

Think of that! The Old Testament is full of rulers who saw God do remarkable things, and it's full of prophets who heard the voice of God unmistakably in their ears. And yet every one of them would gladly trade places with the littlest person in Jesus' kingdom. What a thing to say! Jesus' disciples, then and now, are the envy of prophets and kings! Why? Because of what they see. Jesus. God's Messiah. The prophet of prophets and the king of kings. These disciples saw him. They heard him<sup>19</sup>. And, though differently, we still see him and hear him today.

But the seeing of verses 23-24 is equivalent to the knowing of verse 22.

[Read 10:22]

No one knows the Son like the Father does. And no one knows the Father like the Son<sup>20</sup> does. Oh- except for those to whom the Son reveals the Father. They know him. Just like the Son does. Again, this is an astonishing thing for Jesus to say. The Son shares his intimate knowledge of the Father with his disciples. Then and now. Because we see the Son, we know the Father. And we know him because Jesus has revealed him. So says verse 22. But also verse 21.

[Read 10:21]

Notice that both the Father and the Son are described as the "revealers" here. They work in unison to open the eyes of Jesus' followers so they can see his kingdom clearly. The wise and learned don't necessarily know the things of the kingdom, because they are not acquired or learnt. Rather they are revealed. Which is why even babes can have this blessing. It's a gift from God. With these words, Jesus makes grace bright. As he loves to do.

And if seeing is equivalent to knowing, and if knowing is a gift of divine initiative and grace, then it all adds up to your name being written in heaven<sup>21</sup>. Verse 20.

[Read 10:20]

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<sup>19</sup> Notice that verse 24 picks up on the theme of 'listening' from verse 16. This only builds on the theme which has been highlighted throughout the gospel (especially in 8:1-15) and which will be powerfully reprised in 10:38-42.

<sup>20</sup> Note that Jesus referring to himself as the 'Son' is very rare in the synoptic gospels. See the discussion of Leon Morris in his Tyndale commentary- p.204.

<sup>21</sup> Notice the repeated reference to the heavens here. There is the prospect of being lifted to the heavens in verse 17 which is why your name would be written in (literally) 'the heavens'- verse 20. But Satan also falls from heaven in verse 18, and God is the Lord of heaven in verse 20.

Jesus is saying- there's something to rejoice in! Rejoice in your serving by all means. But there is a greater joy to be had, and Jesus wants to tease us into it- the joy of seeing, of knowing, of being the recipient of divine revelation, of having your name written in God's book and your place in heaven guaranteed. How easily confused we are about this! I've so often driven home from my mission week elated because of what God has done and how he has used us. But did not my heart have a million reasons to burst before the mission had even begun? And does it not have a million reasons to swell with joy every single hour of every single day? Jesus says it does. And he coaxes us to see that there really is no greater joy than that.

#### 4. Who Am I?

So, let me draw the threads together here. And I want to do that in each of the talks in this series by asking a question about how Jesus sees who we are. Back in Luke 9 Jesus asked his disciples: who do people say I am? Who do you say I am?<sup>22</sup> And I want to take that same question but turn it around. As we reflect on these three passages from Luke 10 I want us to turn to Jesus and ask him- who do you say I am? So that's where I want to finish today/tonight. According to Jesus, who am I? And I think the passage we've looked at this morning/evening yields two answers to that question.

##### - a worker

Firstly, I'm a worker. And this is as much true for you as it is for me. I'm not a worker for Jesus because I'm a full-time pastor. I'm a worker for Jesus because I'm a disciple of Jesus. To become a disciple is to embrace the master's disciple-making work. We fish for people because Jesus fishes for people. We help in the work of the harvest because harvesting is what Jesus does. Jesus calls all his disciples to share in the work of the Lord- the work, which the apostle Paul says, is never in vain<sup>23</sup>.

And what does this look like? Well, I share in the compassion of Jesus as I care for the people I meet and interact with each day. And I'm serious about the message of Jesus too so I look for opportunities to share the message with those same people. I love because Jesus loves. And I am a herald of the news about Jesus' kingdom.

But being a worker for Jesus doesn't just have implications for how I live and speak in the world. It also has implications for the way I conduct myself behind closed doors. Being a worker for Jesus means being a pray-er for Jesus' work. In fact this is the first thing Jesus says. The harvest is plentiful so get out there and share the message? No. That's not the first thing Jesus says. He says- the harvest is plentiful so pray. Ask. Ask the Lord of the harvest to multiply the workers. This will happen as more people become disciples and so join the disciple-making work. And this will happen the more Christ's people see the world as he does. If I'm worker, I'm also a pray-er. And I will pray specifically for more workers.

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<sup>22</sup> Luke 9:18 + 20.

<sup>23</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:58.

But being a worker for Jesus also means loving, speaking, and praying with clear expectations. I will expect some to reject me. I will expect my prayers for some will not lead to their salvation. This is a painful thing to have to acknowledge. But Jesus teaches us to acknowledge it. And yet, I will also expect some to welcome me as I share the message of Christ's kingdom. I will expect that my prayers for some will lead to them becoming Christians. In our day, we don't find it easy to love, speak, and pray with this expectation. We see so much rejection that we are lulled into believing that's all there is. But we mustn't be. Rather, we should share the message of Jesus anticipating that some will believe it. And our prayers should be full of real hope for changed lives. We expect some to welcome us, and so to welcome Christ.

This is what it means to be a worker. And this is who I am. And if you're a disciple of Jesus then this is who you are too.

### **- a little child**

But there's something else Jesus says about our identity in these verses too. And it's something we must not miss. I am a worker in Jesus' kingdom. But I'm also a little child. This is how Jesus refers to his disciples in verse 21, did you notice?

[Read 10:21]

I'm like a little child in Christ's kingdom because everything I have has been given to me. I'm not part of the kingdom because I'm wise. I'm not part of the kingdom because I'm learned. I'm certainly not part of the kingdom because I'm a worker in it. First and foremost I'm part of the kingdom and my name is written in heaven because the Father and the Son have revealed themselves to me. I'm part of the kingdom because grace is bright in my life.

I'm blessed. I'm the envy of prophets and kings. And so, like Jesus did in verse 21, I praise God. I praise God because it's his grace that's won this blessing for me. I praise God now and forever. I praise God, like Jesus did, with a heart full of joy through the Holy Spirit.

And this, and chiefly this, is the source of my joy. I may have days of joy because the spirits submit to me, because the mission goes well, because it's genuinely a thrilling thing to be a worker in Christ's kingdom. But I have a joy that surpasses even the most elated day as Christ's servant. It's the joy not of servicing but of seeing- of seeing Jesus' glory and hearing Jesus' voice and knowing Jesus' father, and believing with assurance that my name is written in his book, and I will one day be in heaven with him. More precious to me than all the ministry I can exercise as a worker is this. That I am a little child in his kingdom.

And my personal testimony is that there has been no passage of Scripture that has shaped my sense of self more than this one. This is now my 20<sup>th</sup> year of full-time ministry and this passage has made a huge difference to me over those twenty years. These words of Jesus have taught me not to find my identity in my ministry for Jesus but in who I am before God because of Jesus. I am defined not by what I do for him, but by

what he's done for me. These words have profoundly re-shaped how I see myself- not first and foremost as a pastor, a worker, but first and foremost as a disciple- a little child.

And it's with these words that Jesus calls all of us to be workers for him whose work is radically humble. In fact, this will be our central theme on this journey through Luke 10. Humility. To follow Jesus, to be his disciple, is at its core a life of humility. As we've seen today- humble working. Because I am not only a worker, but also a little child. His little child.

[Read 10:20-21]