

CHAPTER 11 THE AWAITING HARVEST

It came every year as faithful as the Spring rains. Like it or not, I had to take my place in the garden along with the other members of my family. The strong scent of tomatoes and cucumbers filled the air. The frustration of family members working in close proximity to one another, along with the pain of our cramping backs and aching knees, in conjunction with the scratches on our hands from gathering vegetables, only meant that tension hovered close by.

The bugs and insects carried out their typical ritual, torturing our exposed flesh. The sun cooked our backs, and our skin dripped with sweat. A narrow dirt ring served as an artificial collar around our necks. Occasionally I relieved the dislikes of garden work with the momentary pleasure of hitting my brother with a dirt clod, always being careful not to let our ever-suspicious parents see.

Memories of those times are fuzzy and fond now, however, I didn't enjoy them so much as a kid. For a youngster as myself, garden work, or work of any type, meant the cessation of pleasure and the infliction of discomfort. But for the more mature mind, the success of the garden came through a successful planting season, a reward for much labor and more money saved at the grocery store.

In Matthew 9:37-38 and John 4:35-38, Christ compared the work of the Christian life to a harvest field. Granted, he didn't have a small garden in mind. Rather, he compared the lost souls of men and women to a wheat field, ripe unto harvest.

There are as many attitudes about the work of harvesting souls as there are Christians in any given church. Some people look at it more positively and others consider it drudgery. Nonetheless, the work still remains. God wants all Christians to assist with the harvest (Matthew 9:37-38; 28:18-20; Acts 1:8). A key element in harvesting souls for the kingdom comes through loving other people.

Loving Others

Since God will hold all people accountable for the way they live, believers should love others. First Corinthians 13:1-8a says:

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing. Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails

Jesus said people would recognize His disciples as followers of Him by their love for one another.¹³⁸ Love will express itself through humility (1 Peter 5:6). Philippians 2:3 explains that loving one another means putting the needs of others first (also see Matthew 25:35-40; James 2:14-16). Love goes beyond mere nice words; it provokes you to assist people whenever possible (1 John 3:18).

In Mark 12, someone asked Jesus which commandment stood as most important. In verses 29-31, Jesus told His listeners to love God and to love their neighbors as themselves: "The most important one," answered Jesus, "is this: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength." The second is this: "Love your neighbor as yourself." There is no commandment greater than these."

By giving the Ten Commandments, God was calling His people to love Him supremely (see section above entitled "Making Sense of the Bible" in chapter 1, "The Heavenly Food"). And as a result of loving Him, they would love those around them (Deuteronomy 6:4-5; Leviticus 19:18). Jesus echoed this in Mark 12:29-31.

Spreading the Gospel

People who love God will go out of their way to meet the needs of others (1 John 3:16; James 2:14-17). Although the physical needs of others should not be overlooked, neither should the spiritual. God cares about both the physical and spiritual needs humans have (Matthew 10:42; 25:35-46). Feeding the homeless man on the corner and not sharing the gospel with him isn't ideal, but it's better than not feeding him at all. At least he has a chance of living another day where he might hear the gospel at a later time. Sharing the gospel with him and not feeding him isn't ideal either, but again, it's better than doing nothing for him. Given the wealth of many Christians in America, most believers can find a balance between the two extremes.¹³⁹

Without turning a blind eye to the physical needs of those around us, let's look more closely at communicating the gospel--good news--to others. In Acts 1:8, Jesus commands His followers to spread the gospel. "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

Jesus wanted His disciples to have a global perspective as well as a local and regional concern for the lost. Too many churches think they can't focus on the unreached peoples of the world until they first reach their city or county. But Jesus wants the church to do both local and international ministry.

He talked about *both* Jerusalem *and* the uttermost parts of the earth rather than *either* Jerusalem *or* the uttermost parts of the earth. I contend that typically churches will not do a good job of evangelizing locally until they have a biblical perspective for reaching all the peoples of the world.

¹³⁸ John 13:35; 15:12, 17; 1 John 3:15; 4:20-21.

¹³⁹ For a thought-provoking book that challenges American Christians to do more in this area, consult Ronald Sider's work, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*, Nashville: Word, 1997, 4th ed.

The Bible stresses the urgency of spreading the good news.¹⁴⁰ Paul desired that people pray for him so the gospel would be spread abroad.¹⁴¹

Those ready for salvation, but not yet children of God, are comparable to wheat waiting to be harvested (Luke 10:2) and the harvest time is now (John 4:34-38). Don't make excuses for why you can't tell somebody what Jesus accomplished on the cross and in your life. Share with others what Christ did for you.

Tell them about your life before salvation, how you met Christ, and how He changed you. Remember, you can't save them, you can only present the gospel--Christ's death and resurrection (Acts 10:39-40). It alone has the power to change lives (Romans 1:16). You only need to help them get one step closer to Jesus.

Most Christians feel apprehensive when they share their faith, but don't let fear stop you. Some people like to carry gospel tracts to give strangers. If you prefer this style, be friendly, courteous, and tactful regardless of how people respond. Smile, try not to embarrass them, and share what Christ has done for you.

If you don't use tracts, your surroundings may give you an opportunity to engage them in casual conversation for a few moments before sharing your faith. You could ask about their past weekend. This might give you a chance to tell them of your past weekend (i.e., tell them about your church and then ask them if they worship anywhere). At this point, tell them about the reason you worship with other believers--to praise and adore Christ.¹⁴² Others like to build friendships, and then share their story with them. With either method you choose, evangelism is usually a process. Typically, people need to hear about Christ several times before believing in Him. Most often, our lives serve as the best gospel tracts, when we love non-Christians for who they are.

If you still feel ill-equipped to present the gospel, don't give up. Your skill develops the more you communicate your faith. Not only is dependence on God's help important in evangelism, but genuine care for the person you're talking to can't be overemphasized. Keep loving them.

If you need further assistance, ask your church leaders for training. But keep in mind, there are many ways to tell others about Christ. Secret-weapon methods do not exist. Sincere love and honesty usually work more effectively than mere methods.

If you can, go on a mission trip with folks from your church. Start exploring missions by trying to visit another country for 10 to 14 days. It's probably unreasonable to expect you to sign up as a career missionary if you've never left the U.S. This is usually a process, but get it started by leaving your comfortable surroundings for a couple of weeks.

¹⁴⁰ Matthew 9:35-38; Luke 10:1-24; John 4:35; and Ephesians 5:16.

¹⁴¹ Ephesians 6:19; Colossians 4:3; 2 Thessalonians 3:1.

¹⁴² Here are some other questions which may be valuable in shifting the conversation toward spiritual things: "What do you think will happen to you when you die?," "Do you ever think about spiritual things?," "What is the most important thing in your life?," "What are your spiritual beliefs?," and "Are you happy?"

Much of the world doesn't have the Bible available in their native language. And those who do have Scripture already, need other kinds of Christian help.

Romans 10:13-17 says:

...For, 'Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.' How, then, can they call on the One they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the One of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, 'How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!' But not all the Israelites accepted the good news. For Isaiah says, 'Lord, who has believed our message?' Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the Word of Christ.

You do not have to be a full-time preacher to be a missionary. You may be a mechanic, doctor, field-worker, student, housewife, lawyer, truck driver, janitor, unemployed, or retired. God can use whatever skills you possess. The work of ministry is for all believers, not just a few with seminary degrees. Why not see if your church, or another neighboring church, has an overseas trip planned?

Making Disciples

Loving others enough to help them mature in Christ is critical (Acts 18:26). I know the importance of discipleship, because no one disciplined me immediately after my conversion. Even though my dad encouraged me along the way, I didn't grow much.

I can't blame my lack of spiritual growth on anyone except myself, but I might have grown faster had someone, in addition to my dad, offered me some one-on-one guidance.

Eventually, God graciously led two men, Allen and Maston, to build a relationship with me to help me grow spiritually. They never told me that they wanted to disciple me. We simply spent time together doing different things (e.g., visiting someone in the hospital, running an errand, or simply hanging out for the fun of it). I will always be indebted to those two men.

Jesus wants Christians to multiply. Matthew 28:18-20 says, "All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth. 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, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

As you mature in your faith, help other people grow too. You may never preach or teach behind a pulpit or in a Bible class, but you can find new Christians, and spend time helping them understand the basic truths of the Christian life (i.e., what you're learning in *Growing Up in Christ*, for instance). Teach them to lead others through the same process. Imagine the difference it would make if every mature believer consistently helped immature believers grow. This could lead to church planting (starting new churches), which could result in a church planting movement.

Starting a church doesn't require money, a piano, a pastor, or an official church building. A couple of believers and a Bible will do. When each believer realizes his role as a minister, then he will realize his responsibility to reach someone else.

What would happen to our communities if church leaders enabled the people on their pews to start home Bible study groups with their lost neighbors? Before long, those groups would be churches because many of those lost people would become believers. And they could become a church that sends out others to start churches, that sends out others to start churches, and so on.

Hebrews 10:24 says, "Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds." One does not become a disciple by reading a book on discipleship, but by receiving encouragement from other believers and by obeying Jesus--the Master. And the Master said go and make disciples, so that's what we must busy ourselves with as we worship His greatness!

Delighting in God

A great scholar and pastor of the 1700s wrote, "God is the highest good of the reasonable creature; and the enjoyment of Him is the only happiness with which our souls can be satisfied. . . . Fathers and mothers, husbands, wives, or children, or the company of earthly friends, are but shadows; but the enjoyment of God is the substance."¹⁴³

Another pastor and scholar, John Piper, loves to preach on the glory of God. According to him, believers can only know real satisfaction when they delight themselves wholeheartedly in God, as a thirsty jogger might lap up the cool waters of a bubbling mountain spring. Piper fondly says that God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in Him.¹⁴⁴ The famous pastor popularized the idea of Christian hedonism in his book *Desiring God*. Rightfully, he points out that believers can only discover why God created them when they enjoy Him, because God created humans to enjoy Him.

Several years ago, Piper wrote a few lines that remain noteworthy for us to ponder here:

*Missions is not the ultimate goal of the church. Worship is. Missions exists because worship doesn't. Worship is ultimate, not missions, because God is ultimate, not man. When this age is over, and the countless millions of the redeemed fall on their faces before the throne of God, missions will be no more. It is a temporary necessity. But worship abides forever.*¹⁴⁵

These words explode with brilliance when you realize John Piper's deep commitment to missions. Christ is our focus, not missions, evangelism, church-planting, or disciple-making. While these are important issues, worship is more basic. We do

¹⁴³ Edwards, Jonathan, "The Christian Pilgrim," in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. Sereno Dwight (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1974 reprint [1834]), 2:244.

¹⁴⁴ See *Future Grace*, 7, 386-87 for a few places to start.

¹⁴⁵ *Let the Nations be Glad: The Supremacy of God in Missions* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 11.

missions, evangelism, and discipleship for the fame and glory of Christ. If we delight in God, then our hearts will overflow in obedience for these three things.

So now, I encourage you, delight yourself in God, and let that joy overflow into a life of obedience. ". . . God is supreme not where He is simply served with duty, but where He is savored with delight."¹⁴⁶

Summary

Since all people will be held accountable for the way they live, believers should love others. One way believers can express their love to other people is through proclaiming the gospel to unbelievers and discipling believers. Scripture instructs all believers to share their faith and make disciples. We share best with others when our hearts delight in God.

Assignments

1. Memorize Matthew 9:37-38, "Then He said to his disciples, 'The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into His harvest field.'"
2. Look up Acts 1:8 to see what Jesus told His followers about multiplying.
3. List the names of at least three people with whom you will share Christ with before next week: _____, _____, _____.
4. As I am maturing in my Christian faith and gaining a better grasp of biblical doctrine, I promise that I, _____, will seek out someone of the same sex and will help him or her grow spiritually.

Discussion Questions

1. How will people know that you follow Christ? (Hint: a word beginning with the letter "L".)
2. What is the biblical criterion for being disciples of Christ?
3. How can you best demonstrate your love to someone else?
4. Should all believers help other believers grow spiritually?

¹⁴⁶ *Future Grace*, 399.

Answers to Chapter 11 Discussion Questions

1. How will people know that you follow Christ? *There may be several facets to this answer, but love for other believers is certainly a key part of the answer.*
2. What is the biblical criterion for being disciples of Christ? *Again, there may be more than one short answer to this question, but at the heart of it, something must be said about salvation and obedience. Being a disciple means you have actually trusted Christ to save you, and you are obeying Him now. You have committed to take up your cross, to deny yourself, and to follow Him (Luke 9:1-62).*
3. How can you best demonstrate your love to someone else? *Once again, there are several components to this answer. But, you can serve others when they are in need. And, you can share with non-Christians what Christ has done in your life.*
4. Should all believers help other believers grow spiritually? *Yes. All believers need to be making other disciples (Matthew 28:18-20).*