

**Commentary Resource**  
**Matthew 9:35-38**  
**The New American Commentary**  
**Craig L. Blomberg**

**9:35** Matthew rounds off this section of healing narratives with a statement that closely echoes 4:23 and thus frames this larger unit of Jesus' teaching and healing. Both aspects of Jesus' ministry have had a widespread impact.

## **B. Rising Opposition to Jesus' Mission**

The second paired discourse and narrative in Matthew feature Jesus' sermon on mission (9:36–10:42) and the beginnings of significant opposition to the ministry of Christ and his disciples (11:1–12:50). The sermon in chap. 10 points back to chaps. 5–9, as Jesus gives the disciples his authority to proclaim the gospel and heal people. But the sermon links even more closely with chaps. 11–12 by foreshadowing the increasingly hostile responses to Jesus and the disciples, which those chapters will stress. That hostility in turn stems largely from competing interpretations of the miracles Jesus has been performing and now commissions the disciples to continue (11:4–6, 21–24; cf. 12:24, 39–42).

### **1. Opposition Predicted for the Disciples' Mission**

Here begins the second of the five major discourses of Matthew's Gospel.<sup>1</sup> Jesus is commissioning the Twelve to go out two-by-two to continue his ministry of preaching/teaching and healing. The discourse is thus addressed exclusively to the disciples. After an introduction (9:36–10:4), which explains the need for mission (9:36–38) and formally lists the twelve apostles (10:1–4), the speech divides itself into two very different sections. Matthew 10:5–15 clearly addresses the immediate historical circumstances, while vv. 17–42 refer largely to future events that will not take place until after Jesus' death and resurrection. Verse 16 forms a hinge between the two sections but probably is best taken as the end of the first section. Unlike vv. 5–16, vv. 17–42 are not paralleled in this context in Mark or Luke, but various parallels do appear in Jesus' eschatological discourse (esp. Mark 13:9–13; Luke 21:12–17) and scattered about Luke elsewhere (e.g., 12:2–9, 51–53; 14:26–27), much as with Luke's parallels to the Sermon on the Mount. These features do not rule out the possibility that Matthew 10 reflects a unified discourse uttered on one occasion by Jesus and abbreviated by Matthew. But the vague wording of 11:1 makes a theory of composite origins more plausible here than with Matthew's other four major discourses of Jesus.<sup>2</sup>

#### a. INTRODUCTION

##### *(1) The Need for Mission (9:36–38)*

**9:36** Despite Jesus' extensive ministry, many in Israel, no doubt even in Galilee, remain unreached with his message. Jesus' human emotions reflect a deep, *gut-level* "compassion" (a reasonable, idiomatic English equivalent for a term [from Greek *splanchnos*] that could refer to bowels and kidneys) for this sea of humanity. His compassion increases because Israel lacks adequate leadership, despite the many who

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<sup>1</sup> For helpful literary-critical analysis, see D. J. Weaver, *Matthew's Missionary Discourse* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1990).

<sup>2</sup> D. A. Carson, "Matthew," in *EBC*, vol. 8, ed. F. E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 240–43. Cf. R. E. Morosco, "Matthew's Formation of a Commissioning Type-Scene out of the Story of Jesus' Commissioning of the Twelve," *JBL* 103 (1984): 539–56.

would claim to guide it. The Twelve begin to fill that vacuum, foreshadowing the institution of the church. The language of “sheep without a shepherd” echoes Num 27:17 and Ezek 34:5, in which the shepherd is most likely messianic (cf. Ezek 34:23). Similar sentiments will well up in Jesus again at the feeding of the five thousand (Mark 6:34). As in the days of the prophets, the rightful leadership of Israel had abdicated its responsibility, as demonstrated by its inability or unwillingness to recognize God’s true spokesmen. “Harassed and helpless” literally means *torn and thrown down* (cf. Berkeley, “mangled and thrown to the ground”). Predators, and possibly even unscrupulous shepherds (Zech 10:2–3; 11:16) have ravaged the sheep.<sup>3</sup> Verse 36 provides a stinging rebuke to the Pharisees, scribes, and Sadducees.

**9:37–38** Shifting the metaphor from flock to field, Jesus now envisions a vast crop of ripe grain in need of harvesters.<sup>4</sup> The unreached people of his world need more preachers and ministers of the gospel. Jesus can personally encounter only a small number, so he will commission his followers to begin to reach the rest. Even then many more will be needed (cf. his sending of the seventy-two in Luke 10:1–12). Verses 37–38 have rightfully led Christians in all ages to pray for, call, and send men and women into all kinds of ministries. The need remains as urgent as ever, with billions who have not heard the gospel or seen it implemented holistically. “Send out” (from *ekballō*—recall under 9:25) could also be translated *thrust out*, and it could even refer to workers already in the field who “need to have a fire lit under them to thrust them out of their comforts into the world of need.”<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> R. T. France, *The Gospel according to Matthew*, TNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 175.

<sup>4</sup> B. Charette (“A Harvest for the People: An Interpretation of Matthew 9.37f,” *JSNT* 38 [1990]: 29–35) argues that the Old Testament background points more to the subsequent blessings of the messianic age than to the actual ingathering of God’s people.

<sup>5</sup> F. D. Bruner, *The Christbook* (Waco: Word, 1987), 366.

<sup>1</sup> Craig Blomberg, [Matthew](#), vol. 22, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 164–167.