

Reapers and Sowers

An Encouragement to Missions: An Exposition on John 4:27-42 by Barry McWilliams

Now the reaper draws his wages, even now he harvests the crop for eternal life,
so that the sower and the reaper may be glad together. John 4:36

One of the Biblical texts frequently used for “missions” sermons is John 4:35. *I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest.* And for good reason. Set in its larger context, it nestles in a passage that stresses Jesus’ missions priorities, though interestingly it falls early in Jesus’ ministry, within the account of Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well of Sychar. This fact alone re-enforces the sense of the priority of world missions that lies in the heart of the Lord. And though focused on Jesus’ teaching his disciples, it is framed by the story of the woman and Jesus’ ministry to her fellow villagers. I want to suggest three aspects of missions that Jesus teaches us here in this text. First, the Priority of Missions; second the Missionary vision; and finally the Missionary tasks.

Jesus and his disciples are traveling from Jerusalem. They are taking the direct route usually avoided by Jews through Samaria, instead of the longer trans-Jordan route. Was there a sense of haste behind the choice of routes – motivated by the hostility of the Pharisees? Or is it a desire by Jesus to touch Samaria with his teachings as well? All we know is that *“he had to go through Samaria.”* Wearied, he and his disciples stopped at Jacob’s well near the town of Sychar, where Jesus sat while his disciples went into the village to buy food. There we have the familiar story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman – a passage frequently used in discussing evangelism and witnessing. Jesus gets her attention, avoids her several attempts to evade confronting her sin and need of forgiveness. How quickly Jesus moves from being “a Jew” (vs. 9) to “a prophet” (vs. 19) to “Messiah” (vs. 25) and finally the “Savior of the World” (vs. 42).

It is as this encounter is ending that the disciples return from their trip to the market. *Just then his disciples returned and were surprised to find him talking with a woman. But no one asked, “What do you want?” or “Why are you talking with her?”* (vs 27). It is interesting

to see that Scripture notes this. They were surprised to see him talking with a woman which was not considered proper behavior by a Rabbi. Furthermore, this was a Samaritan woman – one of those “half-breed pagans,” and possibly, actually in fact, one of questionable character as well. Their unexpressed thoughts recorded give us insight into their actual feelings both regarding the woman – What do you want? – implying that a Samaritan woman had no business interacting with them – and regarding Jesus – What are you talking about with her? – implying Jesus probably shouldn’t be in such a compromising situation with a despised pagan. These feelings remained unexpressed however Jesus clearly knew what was in their hearts, and this probably motivated Jesus’ teaching which follows.

Then, leaving her water jar, the woman went back to the town and said to the people, “Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Christ?” They came out of the town and made their way toward him. Meanwhile his disciples urged him, “Rabbi, eat something.” The contrast between the attitudes and actions of the disciples and the woman are significant. She left her water jar, which she had lugged from the village for a reason – she now had something more important to do – to bring people to Christ. The disciples, on the other hand, were caught up in the mundane matters of eating. Jesus’ teaching is perhaps a gentle admonition to them concerning the priorities of his own heart. They are focused on their own interests - trivial pursuits – satisfying their hunger – *I have food to eat that you know nothing about. His disciples said to each other, “Could someone have brought him food?”* – they can’t see beyond their own interests and concerns. They don’t understand. Samaria and beyond is in view. Jesus’ priority is “to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work.” This is his food – what satisfies his heart – his purpose for coming – the missionary task that completes his saving

work includes a gathering of the nations – a harvest of souls.

To what extent do we have the Lord's heart for world missions or to what extent are we caught up in our own parochial interests and concerns?

As he speaks, the Samaritans are coming across the grain fields towards them. The grain, sown and sprouted, is several months from harvest. It is here that Jesus tries to impart to his disciples a missionary vision. Do you not say, 'Four months more and then the harvest'? I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest.. It may be four months before the grain would be ripe, but the seeds sown in that woman's heart are already producing fruit. The harvest Jesus speaks of is people – like those even then approaching the well. I took a short missions trip with my wife in March, 2001. We went to Hungary where my daughter is doing missions work. We saw castles and statues and old churches. Then I went to Uganda for a week with a team to minister there. I saw crowded markets and the source of the Nile. The Old World and the Third World. Were we tourists or missionaries? Much of my time was spent in observing. Tourists go sightseeing – but in fact, so do missionaries. They need to take a good look at the needs of the peoples of the world. From Buda – I looked out over Pest – Budapest, so recently emerged from the Iron Curtain has 1.8 million people. I rode the crowded buses and subways and trains. In Kampala, I stayed in a guest house that looked out over a city of close to 1 million people. Everywhere the streets were crowded with humanity and a poverty that bludgeons. So many needs. So few churches. No wonder the Lord says in Luke 10:2 "The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field." Ironically, it was Uganda, so recently torn by civil war and decimated by tyrants, where the average income is \$600 a year, and where HIV/AIDS is ravaging the population (30 million Africans are expected to die of AIDS in the next ten years, and there are 12.1 million AIDS orphans in Sub-Saharan Africa already) that the Spirit seems to be moving most powerfully.

Beyond looking at the need, we need to look for opportunities. Like Paul on Mars Hill gazing at the idol to the unknown God; or finding a prayer service beside the river at Philippi – we need to seek out opportunities for sharing the Gospel. What works in Hungary,

probably won't work in Uganda; and what works in Uganda will be different from what works in the United States -- though usually we are probably more painfully aware of what doesn't work than what does. We need to look for ways to adapt our message to its hearers and in cultural terms they can understand. We need to look for ways to adapt our methodology as well to other cultures or perhaps learn from them new ways to approach ours. We need to understand the cultures we are seeking to reach. We need to be aware of how easily we can also be misunderstood in our efforts to communicate the Good News.

The Samaritans were a Jewish cult of which we know little today that had originated in inter-testamental times, yet still they held to a hope in a Messiah. (vs 25; 29) She tries to distract Jesus from pressing in on her personal needs by bringing up controversial subjects such as on which mountain should they worship. But Jesus refuses to take the bait and zeroes in on what common ground there is between Samaritan beliefs and the Gospel. He knew and understood the issues. In a similar way, Paul used the altar to an unknown god in Athens – and God's common grace – to build a bridge to proclaim Salvation. (Acts 17:22-31) And it is on another sticky point with the Athenians – the resurrection – that things got bogged down. (Acts 17:32)

There is much looking to be done and much learning. Even just learning how to live in a foreign land – handling the mundane matters of day to day life consumes much more time in the Old and Third Worlds. Shopping. Laundry. Getting around. I learned that missionaries spend a lot time dealing with these things. And then there is communication – even with translators – it is a demanding process. Even Paul made his mistakes with this. (Acts 14:11-18) Even more so learning another tongue well enough to deal with spiritual matters.

How much are we aware of people and the world's needs? How hard do we look for opportunities and/or obstacles in our carrying out the mission?

And much work is there to do. Harvest time is a time when every one works. There is so much to do. Jesus continues to speak to his disciples. *Even now the reaper draws his wages, even now he harvests the crop for eternal life, so that the sower and the reaper may be glad together. Thus the saying 'One sows and*

another reaps' is true. I sent you to reap what you have not worked for. Others have done the hard work, and you have reaped the benefits of their labor." Jesus is teaching us here that while we all share one mission – we each have different tasks to do. (1 Cor 3:6-9; Eph 4:11) Some are senders, some goers. Some are sowers, some reapers. The different tasks are going on simultaneously. In Hungary, the grain crops are sown at one time and harvested at another; in Uganda on the equator, there is an ongoing process of sowing and harvesting. Jesus speaks of a harvest that proceeds right along side the sowing of seed.

The tasks of the missionary are the same anywhere -- opening doors through mercy ministry and doing good to all men (Gal 6:8) – sowing the seed of the Gospel (both through pre-evangelism and evangelism) – nurturing and discipling new believers and establishing churches – training pastors and lay workers – equipping them for ministry as well -- gathering the harvest even as these tasks continue. What strikes me in this passage is that it involves a teamwork in which both sowers and reapers are vitally important; and that they should rejoice together in the rewards of the harvest. He talks of building on the labors of others. Some see in this a reference to the Old Testament prophets who laid the foundation for the Gospel witness. As I gazed across Budapest's churches and cathedrals or saw the signs for schools started by missionaries in Kampala I was aware of those who had gone before – even as I was aware of so much still to be done, or even needing to be started over. The church which I ministered to in Kajjansi, Uganda, had been started by other missionary "evangelists" six months before, but now my task was coming along side pastor and elders as a teacher to buttress their work from Scripture. Those we send out into the field need all sorts of support and prayer.

The role of the sender is not to be taken lightly – beyond the reality that without them, there would be even fewer goers (Rom 10:15) – is the teaching that they should share in the rejoicing of the harvest. In 2 Corinthians 9:8-15 Paul speaks of those who sow sparingly and reap accordingly. He focuses our attention on God's supply of our needs, and says that "in all things at all times, having all you need, you will abound in every good work" He suggests that He will supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness. "You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every

occasion and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God...not only supplying the needs of God's people but is overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God.... Men will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the Gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in sharing with them and everyone else. In their prayers for you their hearts will go out to you because of the surpassing grace God has given to you." Has the work of missions become so detached from the senders that they lack the opportunities to rejoice together with the reapers as God brings His increase?

As Jesus finishes his teaching, the woman and her town's people draw near. You have to wonder what the woman said that had such an impact upon her community causing so many to respond by heading for the well to see *the man* – *Could this be the Christ?* Whatever had happened in her encounter with this man had clearly changed her – she acknowledged her sinful past – "He told me everything I ever did" – and urged them to come to Christ. In contrast to the disciples, her water jar had remained at the well – His mission had the priority. Here we see that Jesus has "teamed" with a national – a Samaritan woman – even a new convert -- in carrying on his ministry. If Jesus had sent his disciples two by two into that village, would they have produced such fruit? We find other examples of Jesus similarly sending those he ministers to bear witness to him, especially when ministering outside the house of Israel, but even when he tried to discourage them to avoid undue attention to himself, they still persisted. (Mark 4:19-20; 7:36-37)

What are our individual roles within the overall mission? Are we senders, goers, sowers, or reapers? How much do we share in each other's labors and rejoicing?

Many had believed because of the testimony of the woman. But as they draw close to Jesus, and as he spends two days with them on their urging, many more believe. They too experience the change the woman had in her heart. They declare *to the woman*, "We no longer believe just because of what you said; now we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this man really is the Savior of the world." We must not lose sight of His mission, its priority, its needs, and our part in the tasks of His mission.