WITHIN REACH · WEEK 2

Eyes for the Lost

August 23, 2026 · Matthew 9:35–38 · Pastor Bart Denny

THE BIG IDEA

Jesus sees people with compassion and hope, and before He sends His disciples into the harvest, He teaches them to pray.

This guide works two ways. On your own, take one section a day through the week, or use the daily readings near the end. In a group, plan on about an hour: read the passage aloud, talk through the background, then choose the questions that fit your group. Nobody has to answer every one.

Read **Matthew 9:35–38** at least twice, once quietly and once aloud. If you have time, keep going into **Matthew 10:1–8**, because the chapter break hides how closely the two connect. This is the second week of Within Reach. Last week Jesus called us to follow Him, and we were asked to identify our ONE: one person within our reach who, as far as we know, doesn't yet know Jesus. This week slows down to look at something that has to come before any invitation or conversation: learning to see people the way Jesus does.

Where this passage sits

Matthew 9:35 sounds familiar because Matthew said nearly the same thing in 4:23: Jesus went through the towns and villages, teaching, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. Those two verses act like bookends. Between them, in chapters 5–7, Jesus teaches with authority in the Sermon on the Mount. In chapters 8–9 that authority reaches into people's lives. He heals, forgives sins, drives out demons, touches people others avoided and eats with people respectable leaders kept at a distance.

Earlier in chapter 9, Jesus calls a tax collector named Matthew and eats at his house with "tax collectors and sinners" (9:9–13). Just before our passage, the Pharisees watch Him free a man from a demon and conclude that He's working by the power of the prince of demons (9:32–34). They see the same crowds Jesus sees. They interpret them very differently.

Right after our passage, Jesus calls the Twelve, gives them authority and sends them out (10:1–5). The people He tells to pray for workers become the workers He sends.

A few words worth a closer look

"Compassion" (9:36)

The Greek word comes from the word for a person's inward parts. It describes being moved deeply, from the gut. What Jesus sees affects Him.

"Harassed and helpless" (9:36)

Worn down and thrown down: people who are troubled, exhausted and vulnerable.

"Sheep without a shepherd" (9:36)

An Old Testament phrase for God's people left without faithful leaders (Numbers 27:17; 1 Kings 22:17; Ezekiel 34:5). These crowds had plenty of religion around them. What they lacked was a shepherd.

"Harvest" (9:37)

In the Old Testament, harvest can picture God's judgment or the gathering of His people. Here it's a picture of abundant work and hope.

"Lord of the harvest" (9:38)

God owns the field, the crop and the workers.

"Send out" (9:38)

A strong verb, sometimes translated "thrust out." The same idea shows up a few verses later when Jesus sends the Twelve (10:5).

1 See people the way Jesus sees them

READ Matthew 9:35–36, Ezekiel 34:1–16, Ezekiel 34:23 and John 10:11

Pastor Bart began with an admission that pastoral ministry keeps teaching him: you can spend a fair amount of time around someone and still have no idea what's really going on in their life. People can seem fine, smiling and doing what they normally do, and then something comes out in conversation: trouble at home, fear, grief they haven't told anyone about. He's walked away from conversations thinking, *I had no idea. I'd seen them, but I didn't really see them.*

We all form impressions quickly. Friendly, difficult, successful, a mess. Sometimes we know enough about people to have an opinion long before we know enough to understand them. We can do that with people who don't know Jesus. We know some of their choices, we know what they seem to think of Christians, and social media may have told us more than we asked for. None of that means we know their story. It can happen at church too, when someone walks in wearing their "Sunday best," not their nicest clothes but the bravest face they can manage.

Everybody could see the crowds around Jesus. The disciples saw them. The Pharisees saw them. Jesus saw what was happening inside the people in the crowd, and He was moved with compassion, "because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd."

That phrase carries a lot of history. Near the end of his life, Moses asked God for a leader "so the LORD's people will not be like sheep without a shepherd" (Numbers 27:17). In Ezekiel 34, God condemns Israel's shepherds for caring for themselves instead of the flock: the weak weren't strengthened, the injured weren't bandaged, the strays weren't brought back. Then God makes two promises: "I myself will search for my sheep and look after them" (34:11), and "I will place over them one shepherd, my servant David" (34:23). David had been dead for centuries when Ezekiel wrote. This was a promise of the Messiah.

So Matthew 9:36 is more than a picture of a kind man. When Jesus looks at the crowds and sees shepherdless sheep, God's promise is being kept. God has come looking for His scattered flock, and the promised Shepherd is here. "I am

the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep" (John 10:11). From a distance, a flock can look like one moving mass. To the shepherd, one missing sheep matters (Matthew 18:12–14).

FOR DISCUSSION

1. Can you remember a time you learned something about a person that completely changed how you saw them?

2. What quick labels do you tend to put on people? Where do they come from?

3. The Pharisees and Jesus saw the same crowds. What made the difference in how they responded?

4. Read Ezekiel 34:1–16. What does God say is wrong with Israel's shepherds? What does He promise to do instead?

5. "They had religious leaders. What they needed was a Shepherd." What's the difference?

6. When have you been the one wearing your "Sunday best" when things weren't fine? What helped?

2 See the harvest, not just the hurt

READ Matthew 9:9–13, Matthew 9:37, 1 Corinthians 6:9–11 and Acts 9:1–19

In verse 36 the crowds are harassed and helpless sheep. In verse 37, without a pause, Jesus calls them a plentiful harvest. Same people. He isn't minimizing their condition; they really do need a shepherd. But their present condition isn't the only thing He sees. A harvest is something valuable, ready to be gathered, and there's plenty of work to do.

That doesn't mean everyone is secretly waiting to follow Jesus if Christians would just find the right approach. Matthew has already shown opposition to Jesus, and in chapter 10 He warns the disciples that some people will reject them. The point is that there's abundant kingdom work in front of them. The shortage isn't people worth reaching. It's workers.

Matthew knew that from experience. Earlier in this chapter Jesus walked up to him at his tax booth and said, "Follow me" (9:9). Tax collectors were Jews who collected taxes for Rome, and they were known for adding a little extra for themselves, sometimes a lot. Most people considered them turncoats. Matthew wasn't anybody's obvious candidate for discipleship. Then Jesus ate at his house, and the Pharisees asked, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" Jesus answered, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. . . . I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners" (9:11–13). Jesus compares Himself to a doctor precisely because something is wrong. Sin is still sin. But the diagnosis isn't the end of the story.

Paul says the same thing to the Corinthians. After listing lives marked by sin, he writes, "And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the

Spirit of our God" (1 Corinthians 6:11). Their past was real. So was God's grace.

Saul of Tarsus may be the clearest example in Scripture. When Acts 9 begins, he isn't curious about Jesus; he's "still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples" (9:1). If you were a believer in Jerusalem, you might have prayed for protection from Saul, not for his salvation. When the Lord sent Ananias to him, Ananias understandably hesitated. But the Lord said, "This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel" (9:15). Ananias saw a persecutor. God knew the man we call Paul. What we can see in someone right now isn't the limit of what God's grace can do.

FOR DISCUSSION

1. Why do you think Jesus moves so quickly from "sheep without a shepherd" to "the harvest is plentiful"?
2. Is it easier for you to see people's hurts or their potential in Christ? Why?
3. Matthew was nobody's obvious candidate. Who in your life seems like the least likely person to come to Christ?
4. Read 1 Corinthians 6:9–11. Why is the word "were" so hopeful?
5. If you had been Ananias, how would you have felt about going to Saul?
6. How does the story of Saul change the way you pray for your ONE?

3 Pray before you go

READ Matthew 9:38, Matthew 10:1–8, John 4:35–38, 1 Corinthians 3:5–9 and Colossians 4:2–4

If the harvest is that plentiful, we might expect Jesus to say, "Get moving." Instead He says, "Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field." His first command is "Ask."

Notice whom they ask. The harvest belongs to God, and so do the workers. That puts the disciples in the right place from the start. They'll take part in God's mission, but they don't own it, and they can't produce what only God can do in another person's heart.

Then comes the connection the chapter break can hide. The very next sentence says, "Jesus called his twelve disciples to him and gave them authority" (10:1), and a few verses later, "These twelve Jesus sent out," to "the lost sheep of Israel" (10:5–6). The sheep without a shepherd in 9:36 are now the lost sheep the disciples are sent to. The people Jesus tells to pray for workers become the workers. This seems to be one of those prayers where God may answer, "Yes. You." Prayer doesn't keep the disciples safely outside the harvest. It prepares them to enter it.

That dependence on God runs through the New Testament. In John 4, Jesus tells the disciples the fields are ripe, and then reminds them, “Others have done the hard work, and you have reaped the benefits of their labor” (4:38). They’re stepping into something God was already doing. Paul says, “I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow” (1 Corinthians 3:6). And he asks the Colossians to pray “that God may open a door for our message” and “that I may proclaim it clearly” (Colossians 4:3–4). God opens the door. We walk through it and speak clearly. That’s biblical mission: dependence on God joined to faithful obedience.

Anyone who has planted a garden understands. You can prepare the soil, plant, water and pull weeds, but some things happen under that soil that you can’t make happen. You can pull on a plant to make it grow faster. Once.

FOR DISCUSSION

1. Why do you think Jesus tells the disciples to pray before He sends them?

2. What changes when you remember that the harvest belongs to God and not to you?

3. Read Matthew 9:38 and 10:1–5 together. Have you ever prayed for something and found that God’s answer involved you?

4. In John 4:38, Jesus says others have already done hard work. Who might have been working in your ONE’s life before you?

5. Paul asked for two things in Colossians 4:3–4. Which one do you need more right now: an open door, or clarity and courage to speak?

6. Where are you tempted to “pull on the plant” in someone’s spiritual life?

Pray for your ONE

READ Matthew 9:36–38 and 1 Timothy 2:1–4

“The lost” can stay pretty abstract. A name can’t. A name has a face and a story attached to it. And when you begin praying regularly for a specific person, one of the first things God may change is how you see them. You may listen more carefully. You may become less sure you already know why they think what they think. You may notice the question underneath an objection, the hurt behind some anger, or simply an opportunity to be present without trying to fix anything.

Pastor Bart was honest about wanting to see Pathway’s seats filled with people hearing the gospel and coming to know Jesus. But people aren’t the solution to empty seats. Your ONE isn’t a project for Pathway. Your ONE is a person Jesus already sees and knows completely. So we don’t start by asking, *How do I get this person to do what I want?* We start by praying, *Jesus, help me see this person the way You do.*

That's the assignment for this week: pray for your ONE every day. If you haven't identified that person yet, begin with, "Lord, who have You already placed within my reach?" Once you have a name, the prayer can be simple: *Jesus, help me see this person the way You do. Be at work in their life, even in places I can't see. And make me available to You.* You don't have to force a conversation. Maybe God opens one this week; maybe He doesn't. We're not responsible for engineering the outcome. We are responsible for loving people faithfully and being available when He gives us the opportunity.

FOR DISCUSSION

1. What's the difference between praying for "the lost" and praying for a person by name?

2. What might God want to change in you as you pray for your ONE?

3. Pastor Bart said prayer gives us freedom because we're not responsible for engineering the outcome. Does that feel freeing to you? Why or why not?

Through the week

☐	**Monday**	Matthew 9:9–13. Thank God that Jesus came for sinners, including you.
☐	**Tuesday**	Ezekiel 34:11–16 and Psalm 23. Thank God that He is the Shepherd who comes looking.
☐	**Wednesday**	Matthew 9:35–38. Ask Jesus to help you see your ONE the way He does.
☐	**Thursday**	Acts 9:1–19. Pray for someone who seems far from God, and ask God to do what only He can do.
☐	**Friday**	1 Corinthians 3:5–9 and Colossians 4:2–6. Pray for an open door, and for courage and clarity if He opens one.

Try this

Set a daily reminder on your phone at a time you'll see it, and label it with your ONE's name. When it goes off, pray the three-line prayer from this week: *Jesus, help me see them the way You do. Be at work in their life. Make me available to You.*

Close in prayer

Father, thank You that You see us completely and still come looking for us. Thank You for Jesus, the Good Shepherd who gives Himself for wandering sheep. Forgive us when we look at people too quickly or decide we already know their story. Give us the eyes of Jesus, and help us see the people around us with His compassion. As we pray for our ONE, remind us that You know their questions and the places in their life we can't see. Lord of the harvest, be at work. Open doors we can't open, and if You choose to use us, make us ready. Help us listen well, love faithfully and speak with courage. We trust You with the harvest. In Jesus' name, amen.

Notes

Watch the sermon online

Scan the code or visit **pathwaywes.com/sermons/eyes-for-the-lost** for the video and this guide.

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