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All Scripture quotations are NIV, unless otherwise indicated.

### Matthew 9:35-10:8

#### Messengers

According to Census Bureau statistics and estimates, about 20% of the Greene County residents are below the poverty line. Included in that number are many single-parent families, struggling to make a living and raise children at the same time. Also included in that number are many two-parent families, facing the same struggle. In Greene County, and throughout East Tennessee, drug and alcohol use are huge problems. Domestic violence, incarceration, addiction, mental and physical illnesses, and a host of other destabilizing forces entrap adults and children in cycles of poverty and hopelessness.

What is true of Greene County in general is also true of the neighborhoods around Timber Ridge Church. The statistics at Glenwood Elementary School tell the tale. Poverty. Struggling two-parent families and single-parent families. Drugs, alcohol, domestic violence. Hunger and poor nutrition. All kinds of people, young and not so young, doing the best they can against tremendous odds. Harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.

It's overwhelming. The problems are too pervasive to isolate, too complex to unravel, too daunting to approach.

There are folks in the community who would like to help, but, well, most of us are simply ill-equipped. We don't know where to start. We don't know what to do. We feel distant and alienated. We're saddened, but we're also just a little bit afraid. And we have our own troubles and struggles and failures.

The problems are so entrenched. We are so few. Even if we had ideas, even if we had some resources, what difference would it make? It is obvious that we are insufficient for the task.

As Jesus traveled throughout the small towns and villages of Galilee, crowds gathered around him. These crowds were disproportionately filled with poor people and sick people. Matthew writes that Jesus had compassion on the crowds, because there were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. In the midst of these crowds, Jesus proclaimed the good news of the kingdom of God. He did this with words. And he did this with actions. He declared that the kingdom of God was at hand through teaching the people. And he demonstrated that the kingdom of God was at hand by healing the people.

Relatively early in his ministry, Jesus began to train his followers to do the same thing--to proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God through words and actions. He started with the Twelve. They were ordinary people: fishermen, laborers, farmers maybe, even a tax collector. They were overwhelmed. They were ill-equipped. They were obviously insufficient to the task.

Yet, as Jesus had compassion on the crowds, so he expected his followers to have compassion on the crowds. He sent the Twelve out with the following instructions:

“Proclaim this message: The kingdom of heaven has come near. Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you have received; freely give.”

The kingdom of heaven is synonymous with the kingdom of God.

The message was the kingdom of God. The message was to be delivered by a combination of words and actions. Words were not enough. Actions were not enough. The actions demonstrated the kingdom of God. The words taught the kingdom of God. The actions showed people that God was in their midst. The words helped people understand what God was doing in their midst. The actions let people know that something special was going on and caused people to ask questions. The words began to answer those questions. The actions made an immediate difference in the lives of people who were desperate for hope. The words pointed these people to the God who gives hope, not only for the present but for the future.

It did not matter that the Twelve were overwhelmed. The needs were not too much for God. It did not matter that the Twelve were ill-equipped. They were authorized and sent by Jesus himself. It did not matter that the Twelve were insufficient. They were simply the leading edge of a movement that would, by the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, change the world.

The Twelve were the first set of messengers. They were not the last. Now we too have been called to be messengers.

As Jesus had compassion on the crowds, so he expects us to have compassion on the crowds. As Jesus sent out the Twelve to be messengers, so he sends us out to be messengers.

The message is still the kingdom of God. The message must still be delivered by a combination of words and actions. Words are not enough. Actions are not enough. The actions demonstrate the kingdom of God--compassion, acceptance, love, generosity, time, service, listening, waiting, hoping. The words teach the kingdom of God--gospel, grace, forgiveness, repentance, healing, surrender, freedom, faith, discipleship. The actions show people that God is in their midst--not moralizing, condemning, and punishing, but inviting, claiming, and transforming. The words help people understand what God is doing in their midst--bringing people out of darkness into the kingdom of the Son that he loves. The actions let people know that something special is going on and cause people to ask questions. The words begin to answer those questions. The actions make an immediate difference in the lives of people who are desperate for hope. The words point people to the God who gives hope, not only for the present but for the future.

It does not matter that we are overwhelmed. The needs are not too much for God. It does not matter that we are ill-equipped. We are authorized and sent by Jesus himself. It does not matter that we are insufficient. We are simply swept up in a movement that is, by the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, changing the world.