

Prayer and Labor for the Gathering of the Great Harvest

by Charles Finney

The sermon emphasizes the importance of prayer and labor in gathering the great harvest, highlighting the need for a sense of personal responsibility, compassion for souls, and confidence in God's ability to push forward this work.

Scripture: Matthew 9:36

Topics: "Evangelism", "Prayer"

Description

Charles Finney emphasizes the urgent need for prayer and active labor in gathering souls for Christ, reflecting on Jesus' compassion for the lost and the call for believers to take personal responsibility in the harvest. He explains that the command to pray for laborers is not just a formality but requires a heartfelt commitment to the work of salvation, urging Christians to embody the same compassion that Jesus had. Finney stresses that true obedience to this command is essential for salvation, as it reflects a genuine love for souls and a willingness to sacrifice for the Gospel. He challenges the church to awaken to its duty, encouraging believers to prepare themselves and others for the work of the harvest, and to pray fervently for God to send forth laborers. Ultimately, he calls for a deep, personal commitment to the mission of Christ, asserting that every believer has a role to play in the great harvest of souls.

Transcript

"But when He saw the multitudes, He was moved with compassion on them, because they fainted, and were scattered abroad, as sheep having no shepherd. Then saith He unto His disciples, The harvest truly is plenteous, but the laborers are few. Pray ye, therefore, the Lord of the harvest, that He will send forth laborers into His harvest." -- Matthew. ix. 36-38.

IN discussing this subject, I propose --

I. To consider to whom this precept is addressed,

II. What it means;

III. What is implied in the prayer required;

IV. Show that the state of mind which constitutes obedience to this precept is an indispensable condition of salvation.

I. To whom this precept is addressed.

Beyond question, the precept is addressed to all who are under obligation to be benevolent; therefore, to all classes and all beings upon whom the law of love is imposed. Consequently, it is addressed to all human beings, for all who are human bear moral responsibility -- ought to care for the souls of their fellows, and of course fall under the broad sweep of this requisition.

Note the occasion of Christ's remark. He was traversing the cities and villages of His country, "teaching in their synagogues and preaching the Gospel of the kingdom, and healing every sickness and every disease among the people." He saw multitudes before Him, mostly in great ignorance of God and salvation; and His deeply compassionate heart was moved, "because He saw them fainting and scattered abroad as sheep without a shepherd." Alas! they were perishing for lack of the bread of heaven, and who should go and break it to their needy souls?

His feelings were the more affected because He saw that they felt hungry. They not only were famishing for the bread of life, but they seemed to have some consciousness of the fact. They were just then in the condition of a harvest-field, the white grain of which is ready for the sickle, and waits the coming of the reapers. So the multitudes were ready to be gathered into the granary of the great Lord of the harvest. No wonder this sight should touch the deepest compassions of His benevolent heart.

II. What is really intended in the precept, "Pray ye the Lord of the harvest, that He would send forth laborers into His harvest?"

Every precept relating to external conduct has its spirit and also its letter, the letter referring to the external, but the spirit to the internal; yet both involved in real obedience. In the present case, the letter of the precept requires prayer; but let no one suppose that merely using the words of prayer is real obedience. Besides the words there must be a praying state of mind. The precept does not require us to lie and play the hypocrite before God. No one can for a moment suppose this to be the case. Therefore, it must be admitted that the precept requires the spirit of prayer as well as the letter. It requires first in value a praying state of mind, and then also its due expression in the forms of prayer.

What, then, is the true spirit of this precept? answer, love for souls. Certainly it does not require us to pray for men without any heart in our prayer; but that we should pray with a sincere heart, full of real love for human welfare -- a love for immortal souls and a deep concern for their salvation. It doubtless requires the same compassion that Jesus Himself had for souls. His heart was gushing with real compassion for dying souls, and He was conscious that His own was a right state of mind. Therefore, He could not do less than require the same state of mind of all His people. Hence, He requires that we should have real and deep compassion for souls, such compassion as really moves the heart, for such most obviously was His.

This involves a full committal of the soul to this object. Christ had committed His soul to the great labor of saving men; for this He labored and toiled; for this His heart agonized; for this His life was ready to be offered; therefore, He could do no less than require the same of His people.

Again, an honest offering of this prayer implies a willingness on our part that God should use us in His harvest-field in any capacity He pleases. When the farmer gathers his harvest, many things are to be

done, and often he needs many hands to do them. Some he sends in to cut the grain, others to bind it; some gather into the barn, and others glean the field, that nothing be lost. So Christ will have a variety of labors for His servants in the great harvest-field; and no men can be of real use to Him unless they are willing to work in any department of their Master's service, thankful for the privilege of doing the humblest service for such a Master and in such a cause.

Hence, it is implied in honest prayer for this object that we are really committed to the work, and that we have given ourselves up most sincerely and entirely to do all we can for Christ and His cause on earth. We are always on hand, ready for any labor or any suffering. For, plainly, if we have not this mind, we need not think to pray to any good purpose. It would be but a sorry and insulting prayer to say, "Lord, send somebody else to do all the hard work, and let me do little or nothing." Everybody knows that such a prayer would only affront God and curse the offerer.

Hence, sincere prayer for Christ's cause implies that you are willing to do anything you can do to promote its interests, in the actual and absolute devotion of all your powers and resources for this object. You may not withhold even your own children. Nothing shall be too dear for you to offer on God's altar.

Suppose a man should give nothing -- should withhold all his means and suppress all efforts, only he says he will pray. He professes indeed to pray. But do you suppose that his prayer has any heart in it? Does he mean what he says? Does he love the object more than all things else? Nay, verily. You never could say that a young man does all he can for Christ's harvest if he refuses to go into the field to work, nor that an aged, but wealthy, man is doing all he can if he refuses to give anything to help sustain the field-laborers.

III. What, then, is implied in really obeying this precept?

1. A sense of personal responsibility in respect to the salvation of the world. No man ever begins to obey this command who does not feel a personal responsibility in this thing which brings it home to his soul as his own work. He must really feel, "This is my work for life. For this I am to live and spend my strength." It matters not on this point whether you are young enough to go abroad into the foreign field, or whether you are qualified for the Gospel ministry; you must feel such a sense of responsibility that you will cheerfully and most heartily do all you can. You can do the hewing of the wood or the drawing of the water, even if you can not fill the more responsible trusts. An honest and consecrated heart is willing to do any sort of toil -- bear any sort of burden. Unless you are willing to do anything you can successfully and wisely do, you will not comply with the conditions of a prayerful state of mind.

Another element is a sense of the value of souls. You must see impressively that souls are precious -- that their guilt while in unpardoned sin is fearful and their danger most appalling. Without such a sense of the value of the interests at stake, you will not pray with fervent, strong desire; and without a just apprehension of their guilt, danger, and remedy, you will not pray in faith for God's interposing grace. Indeed, you must have so much of the love of God -- a love like God's love for sinners -- in, your soul, that you are ready for any sacrifice or any labor. You need to feel as God feels. He so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever should believe in Him might not perish. You need so to love the world that your love will draw you to make similar sacrifices and put forth similar labors. Love for souls, the same in kind as God had in giving up His Son to die, and as Christ had in coming cheerfully down to make Himself the offering, each servant of God must have, or his prayers for this object will have little heart and no power with God. This love for souls is always implied in acceptable prayer, that God would send forth laborers into His harvest. I have often thought that the reason why so many pray only in form

and not in heart for the salvation of souls, is that they lack this love, like God's love, for the souls of the perishing.

Acceptable prayer for this object implies confidence in the ability, wisdom, and willingness of God to push forward this work. No man can pray for what he supposes may be opposed to God's will, or beyond His ability or too complicated for His wisdom. If you ask God to send forth laborers, the very prayer assumes that you confide in His ability to do the work well, and in His willingness, in answer to prayer, to press it forward.

The very idea of prayer implies that you understand this to be a part of the divine plan -- that Christians should pray for God's interposing power and wisdom to carry forward this great work. You do not pray till you see that God gives you the privilege, enjoins the duty, and encourages it by assuring you that it is an essential means, an indispensable condition of His interposing His power to give success. You remember it is said, "I will yet for this be inquired of by the House of Israel to do it for them."

Again, no one complies with the spirit of this condition who does not pray with his might -- fervently and with great perseverance and urgency for the blessing. He must feel the pressure of a great cause, and must feel, moreover, that it can not prosper without God's interposing power. Pressed by these considerations, He will pour out His soul with intensely, fervent supplications.

Unless the Church is filled with the spirit of prayer, God will not send forth the laborers into His harvest. Plainly the command to pray for such laborers implies that God expects prayer, and will wait until it be made. The prayer comes into His plan as one of the appointed agencies, and can by no means be dispensed with. Doubtless it was in answer to prayer that God sent out such a multitude of strong men after the ascension. How obviously did prayer and the special hand of God bring in a Saul of Tarsus and send him forth to call in whole tribes and nations of the Gentile world! And along with him were an host. "The Lord gave the word, great was the company that published it."

That this prayer should be in faith, reposing in assurance on God's everlasting promise, is too obvious to need proof or illustration.

Honest, sincere prayer implies that we lay ourselves and all we have upon His altar. We must feel that this is our business, and that our disposable strength and resources are to be appropriated to its prosecution. It is only, then, when we are given up to the work, that we can honestly ask God to raise up laborers and press the work forward. When a man's lips say, "Lord, send forth laborers;" but his life in an undertone proclaims, "I don't care whether a man goes or not; I'll not help on the work," you will, of course, know that he is only playing the hypocrite before God.

By this I do not imply that every honest servant of Christ must feel himself called to the ministry, and must enter it; by no means; for God does not call every pious man into this field, but has many other fields and labors which are essential parts of the great whole. The thing I have to say is that we must be ready for any part whatever which God's providence assigns us.

When we can go, and are in a situation to obtain the needful education, then the true spirit of the prayer in our text implies that we pray that God would send us. If we are in a condition to go, then, plainly, this prayer implies that we have the heart to beg the privilege for ourselves that God would put us into His missionary work. Then we shall say with the ancient prophet, "Lord, here am I, send me." Do you not suppose Christ expected His disciples to go, and to desire to go? Did He not assume that they would pray

for the privilege of being put into this precious trust? How can we be in real sympathy with Christ unless we love the work of laboring in this Gospel harvest, and long to be commissioned to go forth and put in our sickle with our own hand? Most certainly, if we were in Christ's spirit we should say -- I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how am I straitened till it be accomplished? We should cry out, Lord, let me go! let me go -- for dying millions are just now perishing in their sins. How can I pray God to send out others if I am in heart unwilling to go myself? I have heard many say -- O that I were young; how I should rejoice to go myself. This seems like a state of mind that can honestly pray for God to send forth laborers.

The spirit of this prayer implies that we are willing to make any personal sacrifices in order to go. Are not men always willing to make personal sacrifices in order to gain the great object of their heart's desire? Did ever a merchant, seeking goodly pearls, find one of great value but he was quite willing to go and sell all that he had and buy it?

Moreover, an honest heart before God in this prayer implies that you are willing to do all you can to prepare your selves to accomplish this work. Each young man or young woman should say God requires something of me in this work. It may be God wants you as a servant in some missionary family; if so, you are ready to go. No matter what the work may be no labor done for God or for man is degrading. In the spirit of this prayer, you will say -- If I may but wash the feet of my Lord's servants, I shall richly enjoy it. All young persons especially, feeling that life is before them, should say -- I must devote myself, in the most effective way possible, to the promotion of my Saviour's cause. Suppose a man bows his soul in earnest prayer before God, saying, "O Lord, send out hosts of men into this harvest-field," does not this imply that he girds himself up for this work with his might? Does it not imply that he is ready to do the utmost he can in any way whatever?

Again, this prayer, made honestly, implies that we do all we can to prepare others to go out. Our prayer, will be, "Lord, give us hearts to prepare others, and get as many ready as possible and as well prepared as possible for the gathering in of this great harvest."

Of course it is also implied that we abstain from whatever would hinder us, and make no arrangements that would tie our hands. Many young Christians do this, sometimes heedlessly, often in a way which shows that they are by no means fully set to do God's work, first of all.

When we honestly pray God to send out laborers, and our own circumstances allow us to go, we are to expect that He will send us. What! does God need laborers of every description, and will He not send us? Depend on it, He will send out the man who prays right, and whose heart is deeply and fully with God. And we need not be suspicious lest God should lack the needful wisdom to manage His matters well. He will put all His men where they should be, into the fields they are best qualified to fill. The good reaper will be put into his post, sickle in hand; and if there are feeble ones who can only glean, He puts them there.

When youth have health and the means for obtaining an education, they must assume that God calls them to this work. They should assume that God expects them to enter the field. They will fix their eye upon this work as their own. Thinking of the masses of God's true children who are lifting up this prayer, "Lord, send forth laborers to gather in the nations to Thy Son," they will assuredly infer that the Lord will answer these prayers and send out all His faithful, fit, and true men into this field. Most assuredly, if God has given you the mind, the training, the tact, the heart, and the opportunity to get all needful preparation, you may know He will send you forth. What! is it possible that I am prepared, ready, waiting, and the hosts of the Church praying that God would send laborers forth, and yet He will not send me! Impossible!

One indispensable part of this preparation is a heart for it. Most plainly so, for God wants no men in His harvest-field whose hearts are not there. You would not want workmen in your field who have no heart for their work. Neither does God. But He expects us to have this preparation. And He will accept of no man's excuse from service, that he has no heart to engage in it. The want of a heart for this work is not your misfortune, but your fault, your great and damning sin.

This brings me to my next general proposition,

IV. That this state of mind is an indispensable condition of salvation.

The Church are many of them dreadfully in the dark about the conditions of salvation. I was once preaching on this subject, and urging that holiness is one condition of salvation, "without which no man can see the Lord," when I was confronted and strenuously opposed by a Doctor of Divinity. He said, The Bible makes faith the sole and only condition of salvation. Paul, said he, preached that faith is the condition, and plainly meant to exclude every other condition. But I answered, Why did Paul press so earnestly and hold up so prominently the doctrine of salvation by faith? Because he had to oppose the great Jewish error of salvation by works. Such preaching was greatly and specially needed then, and Paul pressed into the field to meet the emergency. But when Antinomianism developed itself, James was called out to uphold with equal decision the doctrine that faith without works is dead, and that good works are the legitimate fruit of living faith, and are essential to evince its life and genuineness. This at once raised a new question about the nature of Gospel faith. James held that all true Gospel faith must work by love. It must be an affectionate filial confidence, such as draws the soul into sympathy with Christ, and leads it forward powerfully to do all His will.

Many professed Christians hold that nothing is needful but simply faith and repentance, and that faith may exist without real benevolence, and consequently without good works. No mistake can be greater than this. The grand requisition which God makes upon man is that he become truly benevolent. This is the essence of all true religion, a state of mind that has compassion like God's compassion for human souls; that cries out in earnest prayer for their salvation, and that shrinks from no labor to effect this object. If, therefore, true religion be a condition of salvation, then is the state of mind developed in our text also a condition.

REMARKS.

1. This state of mind is as obligatory upon sinners as upon saints. All men ought to feel this compassion for souls. Why not? Can any reason be named why a sinner should not feel as much compassion for souls as a Christian? Or why he ought not to love God and man as ardently?

2. Professors of religion who do not obey the true spirit of these precepts are hypocrites, without one exception. They profess to be truly religious, but are they? Certainly not, unless they are on the altar, devoted to God's work and in heart sincerely sympathizing in it. Without this, every one of them is a hypocrite. You profess to have the spirit of Christ; but when you see the multitudes as He saw them, perishing for lack of Gospel light, do you cry out in mighty prayer with compassion for their souls? If you have not this spirit, write yourself down a hypocrite.

3. Many do not pray that God would send forth laborers because they are afraid He will send them. I can recollect when religion was repulsive to me because I feared that if I should be converted, God would send me to preach the Gospel. But I thought further on this subject. God, said I, has a right to dispose of me as

He pleases, and I have no right to resist. If I do resist, He will put me in hell. If God wants me to be a minister of His Gospel and I resist and rebel, He surely ought to put me in hell, and doubtless He will.

But there are many young men in this college who never give themselves to prayer for the conversion of the world, lest God should send them into this work. You would blush to pray, "Lord, send forth laborers, but don't send me." If the reason you don't want to go is that you have no heart for it, you may write yourself down a hypocrite, and no mistake.

If you say, "I have a heart for the work, but I am not qualified to go," then you may consider that God will not call you unless you are or can be qualified. He does not want unfit men in the service.

4. The ministry for the last quarter of a century has fallen into disgrace for this reason; many young men have entered it who never should have entered. Their hearts are not fixed, and they shrink from making sacrifices for Christ and His cause. Hence, they do not go straight forward, true to the right, firm for the oppressed, and strong for every good word and work. By whole platoons, they back out from the position which they have sworn to maintain. The hearts of multitudes of lay brethren and sisters are in great distress, crying out over this fearful defection. To a minister who was complaining of the public reproach cast on his order, a layman of Boston replied, "I am sorry there is so much occasion for it; God means to rebuke the ministry, and He ought to rebuke them since they so richly deserve it." Do not understand me to say that this vacillation of the ministry is universal; no, indeed; I am glad to know there are exceptions; but still the painful fact is that many have relapsed, and, consequently, as a class, they have lost character, and this has discouraged many young men from entering the ministry.

Let this be so no longer. Let the young men now preparing for the ministry come up to the spirit of their Master and rush to the front rank of the battle. Let them toil for the good of souls, and love this toil as their great Lord has done before them. Thus by their fidelity let them redeem the character of this class of men from the reproach under which it now lies. Let them rally in their strength and lay themselves with one heart on the altar of God. So doing, not one generation should pass away ere it will be said -- Mark the faithful men; note the men whose heart is in and on their work; the ministry is redeemed!

5. With sorrow I am compelled to say -- Many don't care whether the work is done or not. They are all swallowed up with ambitious aspirations. Who does not know that they do not sympathize with Jesus Christ?

Beloved, let me ask you if you are honestly conscious of sympathizing with your great Leader? I never can read the passage before us without being affected by the manifestation it makes of Christ's tenderness and love. There were the thronging multitudes before Him. To the merely external eye, all might have been fair; but to one who thought of their spiritual state, there was enough to move the deep fountains of compassion. Christ saw them scattered abroad as sheep who have no shepherd. They had no teachers or guides in whom they could repose confidence. They were in darkness and moral death. Christ wept over them, and called on His disciples to sympathize in their case, and unite with Him in mighty prayer to the Lord of the harvest that He would send forth laborers. Such was His spirit. And now, dear young men, do you care whether or not this work is done?

6. Many seem determined to shirk this labor and leave it all for others to do. Indeed, they will hardly entertain the question what part God wants them to take and perform.

Now let me ask you -- Will such as they be welcomed and applauded at last by the herald of judgment destiny, crying out, "Well done, good and faithful servants, enter ye into the joy of your Lord?" Never; no never!

7. Many say -- I am not called, but really they are not devoted to this work so as to whether they are called or not. They do not want to be called -- not they!

Now the very fact that you have the requisite qualifications, means, and facilities for preparation, indicates God's call. These constitute the voice of His providence, saying, Go forth, and prepare for labor in my vineyard! There is your scholarship; use it: there the classes for you to enter; go in and occupy till you are ready to enter the great white fields of the Saviour's harvest. If providential indications favor, you must strive to keep up with their summons; pray for the baptisms of the Holy Ghost; seek the divine anointing, and give yourself no rest till you are in all things furnished for the work God assigns you.

It is painful to see that many are committing themselves in some way or other against the work. They are putting themselves in a position which of itself forbids their engaging in it. But do let me ask you, young men, can you expect ever to be saved if, when you have the power and the means to engage in this work, you have no heart for it? No, indeed! You knock in vain at the gate of the blessed! You may go there and knock, but what will be the answer? Are ye my faithful servants? Were ye among the few, faithful among the faithless -- quick and ready at your Master's call? O no, no; you studied how you could shun the labor and shirk the self-denial! I know you not! Your portion lies without the city walls!

Let no one excuse himself, as not called, for God calls all to some sort of labor in the great harvest field. You never need, therefore, to excuse yourself as one not called to some service for your Lord and Master. And let no one excuse himself from the ministry unless his heart is on the altar and he himself praying and longing to go, and only held back by an obvious call of God, through His providence, to some other part of the great labor.

Many will be sent to hell at last for treating this subject as they have, with so much selfishness at heart! I know the young man who for a long time struggled between a strong conviction that God called him to the ministry and a great repulency against engaging in this work. I know what this feeling is, for I felt it a long time myself. A long time I had a secret conviction that I should be a minister, though my heart repelled it. In fact, my conversion turned very much upon my giving up this contest with God, and subduing this repulency of feeling against God's call.

8. You can see what it is to be a Christian, and what God demands of men at conversion. The turning point is -- Will you really and honestly serve God? With students especially the question is wont to be -- Will you abandon all your ambitious schemes and devote yourself to the humble, unambitious toil of preaching Christ's Gospel to the poor? Most of this class are ambitious and aspiring; they have schemes of self-elevation, which it were a trial to renounce altogether. Hence with you, your being a Christian and being saved at last will turn much, perhaps altogether, on your giving yourself up to this work in the true self-denial of the Gospel spirit.

9. Many have been called to this work, who afterwards backslide and abandon it. They begin well, but backslide; get into a state of great perplexity about their duty; perhaps, like Balaam, they are so unwilling to see their duty and so anxious to evade it, that God will not struggle with them any longer, but gives them up to their covetousness, or their ambition.

Young man, are you earnestly crying out, "Lord, what wilt Thou have me do?" Be assured, God wants you in His field somewhere; He has not abandoned His harvest to perish; He wants you in it, but He wants you first to repent and prepare your heart for the Gospel ministry. You need not enter it till you have done this.

Many are waiting for a miraculous call. This is a great mistake. God does not call men in any miraculous way. The finger of His providence points out the path, and the fitness He gives you indicates the work for you to do. You need not fear that God will call you wrong. He will point out the work He would have you do. Therefore, ask Him to guide you to the right spot in the great field. He will surely do it.

Young men, will you deal kindly and truly with my Master in this matter? Do you say, "O my God, I am on hand, ready for any part of the work Thou hast for me to do?"

What say you? Are you prepared to take this ground? Will you consecrate your education to this work? Are you ready and panting to consecrate your all to the work of your Lord? Do you say, "Yes, God shall have all my powers, entirely and forever?" "I do beseech you, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service." The altar of God is before you. A whole sacrifice is the thing required. Are you ready to forego all your selfish schemes? Ye who have talents fitting you for the ministry, will you devote them with all your soul to this work? Say, will you deal honestly and truly with my Master? Say, do you love His cause, and count it your highest glory to be a laborer together with God, in gathering in the nations of lost men to the fold of your Redeemer?

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