

Jesus said, “The harvest is plentiful, but laborers are few; therefore, ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.” So Matthew introduces the first apostolic mission, the sending of the twelve apostles to proclaim that the kingdom of heaven has come near. There are some technical things in this Gospel passage that we need to look at briefly, if the passage is to have meaning for us today. The first thing is the meaning of “kingdom of heaven.” Matthew, alone, used the term “kingdom of heaven.” Luke and Mark used a different expression, “kingdom of God.” John referred to the “kingdom of God,” but mentioned it seldom. It was primarily a synoptic gospel thing. Kingdom of God and kingdom of heaven mean the same thing. We tend to think of the kingdom of God as the universe where God reigns supreme, but the way that Jesus used this term puts the focus on the people, the citizens of God’s kingdom. The kingdom of God, or the kingdom of heaven, is the central theme of our Lord’s teaching, and the expression occurs, in direct reference or linkage with Jesus, more than one hundred times in the New Testament. Jesus defined it only in parable, but from what scholars call the “parables of the kingdom” we learn that God’s kingdom is peopled by the righteous, and that you enter the kingdom through understanding the will of God and doing the will of God. When Jesus told his chosen twelve to proclaim that the kingdom of heaven has come near, he meant that by faith in him, righteousness was possible, and it was only through him, because he was the Messiah, that one could enter into the kingdom of God and stand in the presence of God.

There’s a second technical thing that we must know, if this passage is to have meaning, and that is the difference between the words “disciple” and “apostle.” We tend to use them interchangeably, but that is not quite correct. Today we heard Matthew refer to the Jesus calling his chosen twelve disciples to address them. Our Lord had many followers, many who believed that he was the Messiah, but the twelve were a select group. Those chosen twelve were the men selected by Jesus, himself, to learn directly from him, by going out with him on his missions, by studying daily at his feet, learning about God and the kingdom of God. Jesus was preparing them for a special mission: making him known, telling the world that the Messiah is in the world today and the kingdom of God is at hand. When Matthew named these disciples for us in the Gospel today, he referred to them not as “disciples” but as “apostles.” When Jesus called them over to talk to them Matthew called them “disciples.” When Jesus gave them their marching orders, Matthew used the term “apostles.” The reason is that Matthew was focusing on the mission that Jesus was about to give them. A disciple is one who studies the teachings of a particular master or guru; an apostle is one who is sent out on a mission by his master. To be effective apostles, our Lord’s chosen had first to be good disciples. Jesus sent them out to do what they had learned: lead people to righteousness by bringing them to faith in Jesus Christ. We can reduce this to a simple phrase that reveals what must be the mission of all those dwelling in the kingdom

of God. Our mission, as Christians is to “know Christ and make him known.” Discipleship lets us know Jesus Christ. Apostleship lets us proclaim Jesus to others. Because we are baptized into the death and resurrection of the Son of God, we dwell in the Kingdom. As citizens of the Kingdom, our duty is to know Christ and make him known. So, we are called to be disciples and apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ. Martin Luther once said that we are called to be “a little Christ to our neighbor.” Jesus said that we are to love others as he loves us. When you think about it, this all boils down, “knowing Christ and making him known,” because you make Christ known in this world by being his arms, his hands and his voice in this world and extending his love to others.

This brings us to the mission that Jesus gave his apostles when he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God. He sent them out to lead people to righteousness by bringing them to faith in Jesus Christ. To do this, he gave them the authority to do those things that he did: heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, and chase out demons. He warned them that they would be persecuted because Jesus himself was persecuted. They would not escape this; the reality is that there is evil in this world and evil persecutes the Son of God. His apostles could not escape it, because by persecuting them, evil persecutes the one who sent them. But they were not to worry, because the power of the Holy Spirit would be with them. They would not be alone.

It seems to me that this advice is good advice for us. If we are true to our calling of knowing Christ and making him known, the Holy Spirit will be our advocate and our guide. We have the Lord’s own word on this. But we are cautioned that making Christ known in this world will expose us to the evil intent of Satan. Being a disciple and an apostle is not easy. Discipleship comes with a cost. We recall that Jesus said, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross daily and follow me.” To be unwilling to bear the cross is to seek cheap grace, but grace comes at the price of our Lord’s Cross, and that never can be cheap. Our reward for following Jesus is eternal life in the kingdom of God. Any price we pay now, as a cost of our discipleship, is worth it. *Amen.*