

## MODELLING THE COMPASSION OF JESUS

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**Scripture:** Matthew 9

Our meditation for this morning is taken from the ninth chapter of Matthew's gospel, and I'm going to summarize things for us as we go along. I want to pull out some important things that I believe the Holy Spirit is placing upon our hearts.

The ninth chapter begins with them getting onto the boat, crossing over and coming to the city. Then everybody is bringing their sick to them, and they bring this paralytic. And Jesus says, "Take courage my son; your sins are forgiven." And of course, the scribes and the Pharisees claim this is blasphemy, and Jesus, divining their thoughts, says, "Why are you thinking evil in your hearts? Is it easier for Me to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Rise and walk?'" Then He says, "Rise, take up your bed and go," and the man gets up and goes home." That's the first eight verses.

Then we come to one verse. I love this verse because it reminds me (and maybe it's happened to you as well) that when you're involved in a story and it's a wonderful narrative, and you're just trying to minimize your part in it more out of humility maybe. You don't want to take any of the attention upon yourself because it should go on the narrative. We see this in the ninth verse because Matthew says, "And as Jesus passed on from there, He saw a man called Matthew sitting in the tax office and He said to him, 'Follow Me,' and he rose and followed Him." It's the same Matthew who's writing the gospel. He's writing in the third person, when in effect it would have read like this: "... and as Jesus passed on from there, He saw me, Matthew, sitting in the tax office and He said to me, 'Follow Me,' and I rose and followed Him." That would have been the way that this narrative would have flowed except that Matthew seems to want to not bring any attention to himself. Yet he placed himself there.

Mark and Luke tell us what happened after that – he invited all the tax gatherers as well as Jesus to come and dine with him. So we see in vs. 10 – they're all reclining and eating supper. The Pharisees see this and they say to the disciples, "Why is your teacher eating among the tax gatherers and sinners?" And again, Jesus says to them, "It's not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick. But go and learn what this means. I desire compassion and not sacrifice, for I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners."

Then we read about the fasting, how John's disciples come and say, "Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but Your disciples don't fast?" And Jesus responds to that. Then we have the account of the woman who came and touched Him and said, "If I can just touch the hem of Him garment, I'll be whole." The Jesus heals her saying, "Your faith has made you well." Then He goes to the house where the synagogue leader's daughter has just died and He brings her back to life.

Then in vs. 27 – and as Jesus passed on from there, we see two blind men following Him, crying out, "Have mercy on us, Son of David." Then Jesus enquires of them, "Do you believe that I'm able to do this?" and they said to Him, "Yes, Lord." He says to them, "Be it done to you according to your faith," and they were immediately healed.

Then we see in vvs. 32-34, as they were going on, behold, a dumb man who was demon-possessed, was brought to Him. And after the demon was cast out, the man spoke again. and again, the Pharisees were saying that He cast out the demons by the ruler of the demons.

Then vs. 35, “and Jesus was going about all the cities and the villages teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every kind of disease and every kind of sickness.” Vs. 36 says, “And seeing the multitudes, He felt compassion for them because they were distressed and downcast like sheep without a shepherd. And then He said to His disciples, ‘The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Therefore, beseech the Lord of the Harvest to send out workers into His harvest.

That’s the whole ninth chapter in a nutshell. But the reason I read it like that is I wanted to actually just focus on one word that occurs twice. I’ve always been fascinated by this word, and it’s the word ‘compassion’, and it appears twice in this particular passage – one telling the Pharisees about the fact that He prefers compassion to sacrifice, and the other where He was moved with compassion for the people. As He looked at the crowds, He saw them as sheep without a shepherd – despondent, dejected people.

I don’t know whether you have looked at the different times when this word comes in relationship to Jesus, but I’ve been curious about that. In Mark 1:41, He’s speaking to the leper, one who has taken the trouble to come out of a place where he ought to be, to a place where he shouldn’t be, that is with people because he is ceremonially unclean. He’s pleading with Jesus, saying, “If You will, You can heal me.” And Jesus says, “I will.” He’s moved with pity. He stretched out His hand and touched him. The word used here as well is compassion.

In Matthew 20:34, two blind men outside Jericho, and we saw that Jesus touched their eyes. Matthew 14, He had compassion on the crowds and He healed their sick.

Then we read in Luke 7:13 where Jesus also felt compassion for people who were suffering emotional distress. One day, while walking past a little village, Jesus saw a funeral procession in which a widow was going to bury her only son. When the Lord saw her, His heart broke, as The Message would put it, and He restored the woman’s son to life.

Matthew 9:35-36, “Jesus went through all the towns and villages teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness. When He saw the crowds, He had compassion on them because they were distressed and downcast, like sheep without a shepherd.” When He saw the crowds, because they were distressed and downcast, He had compassion on them.

Beloved, when you think about the crowds that Jesus saw – depressed, despondent, dejected, and poor, people who may not have had jobs, who are struggling to make two ends meet – to these people, He felt compassion. Think about that and try and transport that image into our world. We too have people around us who are depressed and despondent and dejected, poor, weary – ones who must be feeling the compassion of the Almighty God, whose eyes must be on them, filled with compassion.

I was reminded of a song sung by Steve Green, but written by Greg Nelson and Phil McHugh, way back in 1983. It said this:

Every day they pass me by  
I can see it in their eyes  
Empty people filled with care  
Headed who knows where.

On they go through private pain

Living fear to fear.  
Laughter hides their silent cries;  
Only Jesus hears.

People need the Lord, people need the Lord  
At the end of broken dreams, He's the open door.  
People need the Lord, people need the Lord,  
When will we realize people need the Lord?

When He saw the crowds, He had compassion on them because they were distressed and downcast like sheep without a shepherd. One word, beloved, that appears twice in this chapter, one telling the Pharisees that they've got it all wrong, that compassion needs to be at the heart of the way they look at people and not the way they were looking at Matthew and the tax gatherers and saying, "What's He doing?" Jesus says, "You lack compassion." His motivation to help was compassion.

### **WHAT IS COMPASSION?**

It literally means to suffer together. Among emotion researchers, it is defined as the feeling that arises when you are confronted with another's suffering and feel motivated to relieve that suffering. But we use these words almost synonymously. We talk about compassion and empathy and altruism, and we think they are the same. Yet researchers say that there is a difference.

**Empathy:** The visceral or emotional experience of another person's feelings. It is, in a sense, an automatic mirroring of another's emotion – like tearing up at a friend's sadness.

**Altruism:** An action that benefits someone else. It may or may not be accompanied with empathy or compassion. For example, in the case of making a donation for tax purposes, or when you get your license, you say that so much money will go towards a particular cause. That's altruism!

Although these terms are related to compassion, they are not identical. Compassion often does involve an empathetic response and an altruistic behavior. However, compassion is defined as the emotional response when perceiving suffering, and involves an authentic desire to help. Not only do we see suffering – and that in itself, is something that we need to ponder on. For we have gotten so used to things around us, that we are able to filter them out of our perceptions. If we are thinking about compassion, then we need to make sure that we perceive the things that are around us. And beyond that, we need to have an authentic desire to help, not just feel for them or for a particular situation or circumstance that people are going through, but want to do something about it.

But, there's also another component to a compassionate response that I want to bring up. Recent research by David Rand at Harvard University shows that the first impulse of adults and children is to help others. We have an intrinsic desire to help. But they say that it is more spontaneous in children, that children will automatically move towards that place, but adults worry that others will think they are acting out of self-interest and it can stop them from this impulse to help. The older we get, the more we are bothered about how other people may react to us responding compassionately to people or a situation. Interesting! You then realize why Jesus looked at the little children and said, "Let the children come to me, for to them belong the kingdom of God." I love their spontaneity, not thinking too much like adults do, but being able to come immediately and help.

Thinking about this, my mind went back to a couple of Christmases ago, and I remember we had decided to make little packages of a blanket, a stainless-steel plate, a mug and some toiletries and hand it out to people living on the streets. I know that many of you had incredible experiences with that. We went to the Tata Cancer Hospital and I remember being shocked at what I saw. As we went

around the block of the hospital, we saw people on the pavements just lying next to each other – little families huddled together. When we started talking to them, we realized that they were patients who had come for treatment from places outside of Mumbai. As outpatients, they had no place to live, and were just lying on the street. Some of them had been there for 2 or 3 weeks. We were handing out these little packages and how insufficient they seemed for this tremendous need. As we were driving off, one woman followed us, running behind the car. I don't know what the situation was, whether we had already given her one, or she wasn't a patient, but she seemed to have a need. She followed the car for almost a kilometer until we stopped at a signal. We pulled over and gave her one of the packages just because of her desperation; she took it and walked back. I'll never forget that scene. When I close my eyes, I can still see her running behind the car in desperation. I have no idea whether she needed that blanket or whether she thought that she could take it and see it and maybe feed a child or buy milk. But she needed it and she was willing to run behind the car to get help.

When I think about people who are depressed, and the people whom Jesus looked at with compassion, I think of this woman, and I've often asked myself: If Jesus was there, what would He have done? We drove away. I wonder what Jesus would have done in that situation, because when we look at vs. 13, Jesus is sitting with tax collectors, people who need Him and He's trying to build a relationship with them to help them. The Pharisees are looking on Him with contempt, asking what is He doing sitting there with sinners. And Jesus says to them, "Go and learn what this means. I desire compassion and not sacrifice."

Jesus is talking from Hosea ch. 6, who centuries earlier had condemned the Jews for attempting to excuse their idolatry and their oppression of the poor by offering the prescribed animal sacrifices. It seems like Jesus is saying, "God always values mercy and compassion over sacrifice." What exactly does that mean?

I came across this blog by Denise Luke, and she talks about an experience she had. I'm going to read this verbatim as I don't want to lose the essence of what she says.

*"As Thanksgiving and Christmas approach, many of us seek opportunities to engage in what we consider acts of mercy. We may help to prepare and serve a turkey dinner at a soup kitchen, or we may participate in a coat drive for the homeless, fill a shoebox with gifts, or build a wheelchair ramp for a disabled person. But are these acts of kindness what Jesus truly meant when He challenged us to learn the difference between compassion and sacrifice, or mercy and sacrifice. I don't think so!"*

*"When my husband and I moved to North Carolina, a friend invited me to join her cook team at the local soup kitchen. Initially I went because I thought the experience would be good for me, make me more aware of my blessings, and increase my compassion for those less fortunate. Wrong attitude! Why? Notice the prominence of **me, my** and **I** in the above sentence. My acts of sacrifice were all about me."*

*"As the months passed, my attitude changed. Seeing some of the same folks in the serving line twice a month led to conversations. 'How are you feeling this week, Marie? Is your cold gone? Have your new meds made it easier for you to sleep at night, Raymond? When are they going to do that surgery on your finger, buddy?'"*

*"A few months later, I started giving the pre-lunch devotion once a month. Before I blessed the food, I asked for prayer requests. Listening to what was on people's hearts drew me closer to them. Praying for them planted their needs and concerns in my heart. I made sure Billy got a can of the Mountain Dew he preferred, and I reminisced with Bob Ryan who grew up in my hometown. I chatted with*

*Donnie when I cut his meat because he couldn't do it with his misshapen right hand. So glad the see you's and the hugs multiplied. What happened? I developed relationships. These folks became dear to me. Going to the soup kitchen wasn't an act of sacrifice; it was a place where I hung out with people I cared about."*

In Matthew 9, the Pharisees looked around Matthew's house and saw nameless tax collectors and sinners. Jesus saw people He cared about, people He wanted to hang out with. He knew their names. When we view what we do in Jesus' name as faceless sacrifices, we've missed the whole concept of 'Love as I have loved you' as John 13:34 says. It's all personal with Jesus. It's all about relationships. Compassion is what moves us from being just indifferent watchers of a passing world to a compassionate people who want to get in and help and make a difference.

What about you, beloved? Do you see yourself as a compassionate person, empathically reaching out to help, to build, to comfort, to raise up, to uphold, to care for? Is the Lord challenging you today? Maybe you don't know how. Well, ask the Lord. tell Him, "Lord I hear You. I'm challenged by the fact that I need to be more compassionate. I want to be filled with compassion like You are, and the way that You modelled it when You were here. I want to respond to the needs around me like You did, and I want to do it with a heart of compassion." Tell Him that. He's here; He's listening; He's watching, waiting to touch us in ways we want Him to touch us and help us to be more like Him, to walk as His disciples.

The song I read to you earlier has its ending verses go like this:

We are called to take His light  
To a world where wrong seems right.  
What would be too great a cost  
For sharing life with one who's list?  
Through His love our hearts can feel  
All the grief they bear.  
They must hear the words of life  
Only we can share.

People need the Lord, people need the Lord.  
At the end of broken dreams, He's the open door.  
People need the Lord, people need the Lord.

And then the final chorus goes like this:

When will we realize that we must give our lives?  
For people need the Lord. people need the Lord.

When will we realize that we must give our lives to make a difference to the people around us who desperately need the Lord? and the only way that we can is that we begin to see once again with eyes of compassion. We begin to act once again through compassionate ways so that people will then see our good works and glorify our Father in heaven. Be drawn to Him so that he can make a difference in their lives. Compassion – Jesus had it, modelled it, and His behavior exhibited it. And we, as ones who bear His name, need to show it to the world around us as well. People need the Lord. when will we realize that we must give our lives in compassionate ways, because people need the Lord.

Shall we pray?

Lord Jesus, as we look at the way in which You lived Your life on earth, we are inspired Lord, by how much compassion You had for people. Lord, we have heard Your voice today, we have seen images of You on earth, dealing with compassion, with people – the leper, the blind person, the demon-possessed, the widow, and the crowds. Humbly we come to You today and ask Lord, would You fill us with compassion, with more compassion. And Lord, when we look around and wonder whether these are appropriate behaviors for an adult, Lord, help us to act like children and allow Your compassion to flow through us in compassionate ways, so that a hurting world gets to see You and know You and trust You. We ask all of this Lord Jesus, in Your holy and precious name. Amen.