

Jesus' Heart for You #2
He Had Compassion for Them
~ Matthew 9:35-38

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Last week, I was doing some groceries. I usually do them about the same time, on the same day each week. So I often see some of the same people who regularly shop in that time slot. One of the regulars is an older man who takes things slow and I mean slow. He walks about one quarter speed. So if you get behind him and his cart in an aisle way, you have a decision to make. Will you just stick it out behind? Or would it be faster to turn around go into the next aisle and come around the other end to get the item you seek? The man also has diminished hearing and a soft voice. So sometimes I will see the deli worker leaning over the counter to try to get his order. If you get in a checkout lane behind him, you can plan to read 50 emails while you wait or write an article because he will give you such an opportunity.

It's interesting watching people respond to him. Many are kind and just try to work their way around him. Some show annoyance and roll their eyes or shake their heads. Some show real compassion. You might see a cashier help him bag his groceries a little. Or some just show a lot of patience with him as he works his way down an aisle and struggles to reach something. It's beautiful to watch when people show compassion unless you're in a hurry. Then he ceases to be a person and instead becomes an obstacle. It becomes easier to treat him like that rather than a person struggling with some different limitations.

Yet when you or I have struggles, we sure appreciate those who help us don't we? If we're a little lost in a big store, we appreciate someone directing us to find our way. If we can't reach something, it helps if someone taller gets it for us. If we're driving and have to merge into one lane, it helps when another driver waves us in.

Then there are much bigger struggles in life. When they happen, it really helps when others show concern. Yet sometimes that doesn't happen. Or we can wonder if God is really paying attention. We may join the Psalmist in Psalm 10 who asks "Why, Lord do you stand far off?" When a bunch of bad

things happen in a short time frame, we can question God's concern for us. Or wonder about His heart. So what kind of heart does God have for struggling people?

Today we come to the same question we asked last week and that we will ask every week in this series. What kind of heart does Jesus have for us? Where is He at when we're really struggling or suffering? Last week, learned that Jesus is gentle and lowly in heart. He is understanding and accessible. This week, we will get another answer to the question. What kind of heart does Jesus have for us? How do we receive what He has for us? If you're struggling in some way or there's some major thing that troubles, I pray you will receive comfort as we explore Jesus' heart for us. Our text is Matthew 9:35-38.

Matthew 9:35-38 (ESV)

³⁵ And Jesus went throughout all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction. ³⁶ When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. ³⁷ Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; ³⁸ therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest."

This passage comes after a section with multiple examples of Jesus' interactions with people. He cleanses a leper; heals a centurion's servant from a distance; calms a storm; heals two men with demons; heals a paralytic, brings a dead girl back to life, heals a woman who suffered 12 years with a discharge of blood; heals two blind men and a mute man. Sprinkled throughout these encounters, Jesus teaches about the cost of following Him, the need to fellowship with society's outcasts and the reality of life in His kingdom.

Matthew then summarizes this ministry in verse 35. "And Jesus went throughout all the cities and villages." Jesus did three things. He taught in the synagogues. He proclaimed the gospel of the kingdom. He healed every disease and affliction. All of these brought hope and encouragement to the people. Yet Jesus paid careful attention to them. .

In verse 36, Matthew reveals Jesus' response to the reality of people's lives. "When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them. So here we see another aspect of Jesus' heart. Jesus has a compassionate heart.

What is compassion? Compassion is sympathetic pity and care for someone who suffers. It is empathy, concern, kindness and consideration. The word “passion” comes from the Latin “pati” which means suffer. So “passion” originally meant suffering - like the passion of the Christ. Passion has come to mean “strength of feeling,” “anger” and “strong romantic attraction.” But none of these carry over into the word compassion. There, passion still means “suffer” and the “com” prefix means “with.” So compassion is “to suffer with” another.

So Jesus feels this when He sees the crowds. Notice he had compassion *for* them. He felt a desire to suffer with them. The word used for compassion here in Matthew meant “to be moved in the inward parts.” Jesus had a gut reaction to the crowds. It was not like he casually observed “I perceive that these people experience suffering.” He felt deeply for them. Now what was it in the crowds that moved him to such compassion?

What moved Jesus to compassion? They were harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd. What does it mean to be harassed? You experience harassment when subject to “aggressive pressure or intimidation.” It can also involve repeated small scale attacks. So someone constantly bugs you or torments you whenever they see you or whenever opportunity presents itself. When you look at the people Jesus’ helped throughout chapters 8 and 9, you see some harassed people. The two men oppressed by demons experienced the constant harassment of those forces. We talked last week about the harassment of the religious leaders upon the common people. The leaders constantly harassed them about their failure to obey some interpretation or oral tradition. They also lived under the harassment of a military occupation by the Romans; an oppressive tax system and the basic hardships of life that regularly threatened their survival. We can experience harassment just by living in a fallen world. We certainly face the harassment by the enemy. Sometimes life itself can seem like one headache after another. Jesus had compassion for those who were harassed.

He also had compassion for helpless people. Think about the people Jesus encountered prior to these verses. Most of them had incurable diseases like leprosy or permanent conditions like paralysis, blindness, muteness and death. We can experience situations of helplessness. Think of the death of a

loved one. We are helpless to change that after it happens. Or when we or a loved one gets an untreatable illness or condition. Maybe there is strife or trouble with someone close to your or in your own house. You can't go and live somewhere else. You have to somehow live in this situation. You can't seem to change it. Or maybe you have an obstinate manager, difficult employee, angry owner, unfair professor. Maybe you're trying to deal with a difficult organization or bureaucracy. You feel and in many case are helpless.

But Jesus does not sit back and purposefully ignore us in these situations Jesus does not dispassionately look at people with long term conditions or challenges. He cares and gets involved. I love Matthew 8:16-17 in the previous chapter – “That evening they brought to him many who were oppressed by demons, and he cast out the spirits with a word and healed all who were sick. This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah: “He took our illnesses and bore our diseases.”

Jesus had compassion for the helpless. Notice the image Matthew uses to help portray the condition of the crowds. They were “like sheep without a shepherd.” Sheep get lost, hungry and thirsty when they don't have a shepherd. They become more vulnerable to predators. Though real life for these people involved times of harassment and helplessness, good shepherds could help the people through them. Yet they apparently had no good shepherds. So they had to try to survive without them.

Yet Jesus had compassion for them. In thinking about this, a question came to my mind that I thought worth exploring. **What good is compassion?** If compassion is “sympathetic pity” or “to suffer with” someone, does it really help the suffering person?

I could think of several ways compassion helps one who suffers.

Compassion helps a sufferer know they are not alone. Pain or difficult circumstances bring their own trouble. They can isolate us. But that trouble worsens if no one shares or sympathizes with us through it. That's why we have funerals, memorial services. Though painful, they can also bring healing. The sufferer can show their grief and let others comfort them in it. Somehow that helps.

Compassion helps bring fuller perspective to the sufferer. If a loved one dies, we can focus only on our loss. This loss is real and painful. But say someone sympathizes with us and remembers our

loved one. They share how our loved touched their life. It can, in a way, show us that our loved one lives on in the lives of others they influenced in some way. Giving us a greater perspective about our loss.

Compassion helps us keep going. Sometimes, we physically and mentally feel like collapsing in times of great loss or grief. We don't know if we can go on. But then someone calls, or brings a meal or writes a card. It somehow gives us a little strength or encouragement to get up and do the next thing.

Compassion can lead to helpful action on behalf of the one suffering. Notice this passage doesn't end with Jesus having compassion for the people. He acts on His compassion. He recommends the disciples to something. Verse 37 – "Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful and the laborers are few; therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest field." So Jesus' compassionate response led to action to help those suffering. The disciples need to pray and ask the Lord to send out workers to this harvest field of needy people.

Now I grew up learning that this passage primarily referred to bringing the good news to people. Harvest meant getting people to become Christians. That's certainly part of it. But notice Jesus proclaimed the Gospel *of the kingdom* in verse 35. The gospel is not only salvation from hell when we die. The Gospel brings good news for today. The Gospel brings hope today that God is for us and cares for us. So yes laborers for the harvest need to proclaim the good news of the kingdom. But they also need to minister to the needs of the harassed and helpless.

So we see that Biblical compassion involves more than suffering with with the sufferer. It also involves action on behalf of the one suffering. God has demonstrated compassionate active heart for people throughout history.

You may have heard or believe that the God of the Old Testament is angry and wrathful and the God of the New Testament is loving and forgiving. Certainly we have to deal with God's wrath and anger in both Old and New Testament. But we also need to discover the love and compassion of God throughout the Bible.

Listen to these Old Testament verses about God. Psalm 103:13 – "As a father shows compassion to his children, so the Lord shows compassion to those who fear him." Isaiah 49:15 - "Can a woman

forget her nursing child, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you” says the Lord.” Isaiah 54:8 – “in overflowing anger for a moment, I hid my face from you, but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you,” says the Lord, your Redeemer.

Jesus’ heart of compassion shows up again and again in His ministry. Dane Ortlund, who wrote the book *Gentle and Lowly*, writes this about Jesus’ compassion. “When the leper says, “Lord, if you will, you can make me clean,” Jesus immediately stretches out his hand and touches him, with the words, “I will; be clean” (Matt. 8:2–3). The word “will” in both the leper’s request and in Jesus’s answer is the Greek word for wish or desire. The leper was asked about Jesus’s deepest desire. And Jesus revealed his deepest desire by healing him.

When a group of men brings their paralyzed friend to Jesus, He cannot even wait for them to ask him for what they want—“When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, ‘Take heart, my son; your sins are forgiven’” (Matt. 9:2). Before they could open their mouths to ask for help, Jesus couldn’t stop himself—words of reassurance and calm tumbled out.

This compassion comes in waves over and over again in Christ’s ministry, driving him to heal the sick (“and he had compassion on them and healed their sick,” Matt. 14:14), feed the hungry (“I have compassion on the crowd because they have been with me now three days and have nothing to eat,” Matt. 15:32), teach the crowds (“and he had compassion on them . . . and he began to teach them many things,” Mark 6:34), and wipe away the tears of the bereaved (“and he had compassion on her and said to her, ‘Do not weep,’” Luke 7:13) Ortlund. If compassion clothed itself in a human body and went walking around this earth, what would it look like? We don’t have to wonder.¹

Yet you might say, “Well that’s great for the people living when Jesus walked the earth. What about when my life sucks today? Jesus doesn’t come along and pat me on the back.” True. But we need to remember this reality from Hebrews 13:8 - “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever” (Heb. 13:8). “The same Christ who wept at the tomb of Lazarus weeps with us in our lonely despair. The

¹ Ortlund, Dane C. *Gentle and Lowly* (pp. 25-26). Crossway. Kindle Edition.

same one who reached out and touched lepers puts his arm around us today when we feel misunderstood and sidelined. The Jesus who reached out and cleansed messy sinners reaches into our souls and answers our half-hearted plea for mercy with the mighty invincible cleansing of one who cannot bear to do otherwise.”²

I have seen tangible examples of Jesus’ compassion in my own life. Sometimes He shows compassion through a worship song or hymn reminding me of His love. Sometimes He touches our spirit with a sense of His presence or love or understanding. Sometimes He shows compassion through the devotional work of someone else. I remember one year around Christmas I was going through a rough time ministry wise. I think I was struggling with my place in ministry and whether or not God really knew about the troubled state of my heart. The reading that day included Psalm 147:4 – “He determines the number of stars; he gives to all of them their names.” Think about that. God names every star. How many stars are there? The Milky Way – our galaxy has about 100 billion stars. God names every one of them. God knows every star by name. Yet we are of infinitely greater worth to the Lord than a star. If he has the capacity to know 100 billion stars by name, He certainly knows about my situation and challenges. That brought me great comfort.

Sometimes He sends other Christians who show compassion. He draws my attention to resources that will help me - Trusted Counselors; Helpful Books; Wise Podcasts; Insightful People. Sometimes He places people in our lives that serve as constant sources of compassion. My wife does this for me. She gives me great perspective. But she also listens and prays. It’s like that old saying “A burden shared is a burden halved.”

I don’t want this to come across like Jesus delegates His compassion so that He doesn’t have to do it. It’s more like He has a multi-phase compassion plan for us that includes all of these. So when we go through times feeling harassed and helpless, Jesus does not sit back with his arms folded with a

² Ortlund, Dane C. Gentle and Lowly (pp. 32-34). Crossway. Kindle Edition.

look of general disinterest. He steps forward with an outstretched hand and patient eyes to get involved in our suffering.

So how can we go about receiving Jesus' compassion? By this question, I don't mean that Jesus is not compassionate unless we do something to initiate it. He is compassionate. Yet we need to be willing to receive it. Sometimes we need compassion but we refuse it because of our pride, independence or refusal to admit need.

So Jesus is compassionate. We can receive Jesus' compassion by following this pathway.

Admit you are harassed and helpless. If we don't do that, it is unlikely we will seek the Lord's compassion. Maybe we will reject it when He comes to help.

In prayer, lay before the Lord your harassed or helpless situation. We see this in the Psalms. The authors describe a tough situation and their feelings about it. Then they appeal to the Lord for help. This stops negative thoughts from swirling around in our minds. We grab onto them and itemize them before the Lord. If you feel harassed, you can pray the Psalms listed on the outline. If you feel helpless, pray the other Psalms listed beside the phrase "For the helpless."

Receive His compassion and help. Don't just read or pray the prayer and then get on with your day. Read. Pray. Stop. Wait. Listen. Receive from the Lord what He has for you. That happened to me Friday. I woke up troubled in mind with many things. I laid this before the Lord. My reading including Psalm 9. Then came verse 18 – "But God will never forget the needy. The hope of the afflicted will never perish." God impressed upon me that though feeding afflicted, I have a hope that will never perish. It is a living hope in a living Savior who will see me through.

So we receive the Lord's compassion and help. But we also need to join the Lord in His compassionate help for others. Jesus immediately involved the disciples in His compassionate response to the people. Remember, "Then he said to his disciples – pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest. **Respond to His prompts to have compassion for others and help them.** Colossians 3:12 – Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and

beloved, **compassionate heart**. As we grow in Christlikeness, He will grow in us His compassionate heart for others.

Jesus' compassion for the harassed and helpless brings hope and help to those who will receive it. What kind of heart does Jesus have for you? He has a compassionate heart that helps in your suffering will you receive His compassion today? During our time together, God may have spoken to you. He may have revealed to you your harassed and helpless reality. Yet He is willing to come and shepherd you through this. But we can't treat Him like a life coach or mentor that we turn to only when we get stuck. We instead need to turn to Him for His saving and shepherding work in our lives.

We need this because a lot of our problems arise from the reality of our sinfulness. We are sinners. We believe lies. We live lies. We think we are free if we live independently from God. But everyone serves something or someone whether it be themselves, the pursuit of money, success or fame, some worldview, political movement or finding their true identity. The real question then is "will serving myself, or this lifestyle or this movement or this identity give me compassion when I am harassed and helpless? Will it bring me hope that goes beyond external circumstances getting better? The difference with Jesus is that He not only shows compassion for our suffering. He's already shown His deep love for us by enduring the suffering of the cross. This purchased forgiveness for us. This brings cleansing to us. This great ministry of Christ reaches deep down into our souls to bring transformation and wholeness.

So if Jesus has spoken to you in this way today and you sense His call on your heart, you can receive Him. You admit your harassed and helpless situation. You also admit following someone or something other than Him. Then you turn to Him. You need to receive Him and You will immediately be adopted into God's family as one of His kids. You will begin to experience the loving and compassionate shepherding of the Lord. If you already know Jesus, let us join together now to follow the pathway we just learned with anything troubling us today.