



Sermon Transcript October 15, 2017

Living Sent Lives Compassion for People Matthew 9:35-38

This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on October 15, 2017 at 511 Maple Street, Wethersfield, CT, 06109 by Dr. Scott W. Solberg. This is a transcription that bears the strength and weaknesses of oral delivery. It is not meant to be a polished essay. An audio copy of the sermon on CD is available by request at (860) 563-8286. An audio version of this sermon may also be found on the church website at www.wethefc.com.

Sermon Text
Matthew 9:35-38

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.”

Introduction

Compassion! That is what jumps out at me when I read this passage. Matthew says of Jesus in verse 36, “*When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them.*” This word “compassion” means, “to be moved in the inward parts.” Michael Wilkins says that it implies “deep feelings in the heart and affections.”¹ Jesus was moved when he saw the crowds. Jesus had deep feelings of affection for them. He was filled with compassion.

There is a difference between “empathy” and “compassion.” In fact, the title to an article about this topic says it all. It reads, “The Difference Between Empathy and Compassion is Everything.” In this article, Lori Chandler simply writes, “Compassion is empathy in action.”² That basically describes the difference between the two words. Compassion implies that it is more than just a feeling. Compassion implies that there is action taken. For example, Matthew says of Jesus in Matthew 14:14, “*When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion on them and healed their sick.*” His compassion was demonstrated by his action. The same thing is said of Jesus in Matthew 15:32, with the feeding of the 4,000. Here Jesus says, “*I have compassion on the crowd because they have been with me now three days and have nothing to eat. And I am unwilling to send them away hungry, lest they faint on the way.*” His compassion led him to feed the people. Compassion is demonstrated and made visible by our actions.

Now here is the challenge when it comes to the issue of compassion. How do you get it? Where does it come from? If it involves a feeling or an affection, you just can’t command it into existence. And yet, it is a critical component to us living as a people who are sent. It should be said of us, the church, that when we look at the crowds around us that we too are moved with compassion to the point that we do something. I am not so certain that is always true of us and I know I need to grow in this area as well. So how do we grow in our compassion for people to the point that it leads to action?

Now I know that Jesus is the perfect Son of God and that love has always been the driving motive behind what Jesus does and who Jesus is. Paul tells us in Romans 5:8 that “*God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*” So, behind this compassion of Jesus is this perfect love. And yet, we know that as a human, Jesus grew in wisdom and stature and I am not always sure how these virtues are developed and merged within the mystery of the God man, Jesus. But here is one thing I notice about the compassion of Jesus. It is demonstrated in that Jesus was constantly drawing near to people. At the very least, I observe that this compassion wells up within Jesus when he puts himself within close proximity to broken and needy people. Verse

36 says “*When he saw the crowds . . .*” Don’t miss that. This compassion welled up within him “*when he saw the crowds.*”

What this implies is that as we draw near to people, we put ourselves in a situation where compassion for people can grow. On one hand, it is out of compassion that we are sent and on the other hand, as we live sent lives and draw near to people, compassion is deepened within our hearts because we begin to see people . . . as people. If you want compassion to grow in your life, just start befriending people.

Scott Sauls wrote a book called *Befriend: Create Belonging in an age of Judgment, Isolation and Fear*. Near the beginning of the book he talks about a couple who joined their small group one night at the invitation of someone in the group. The husband was clearly drunk when he walked into the group. When it came time to pray, this man named Matthew, decided to pray as well. He went on for 10 minutes and prayed things like, “God, protect us from the Klingons. God I really want a Jolly Rancher right now, will you bring me some Jolly Ranchers?” Scott Sauls said that when they were done praying, everyone in the group looked at him because he was the pastor. They had the look in their eye that said, “What do we do with this?” But one of the women got up and lovingly gave Matthew a cookie. Several others in the group immediately turned to Matthew’s wife to see how they could help. In other words, by being in close proximity with this couple, friends of someone in the group, they were moved with compassion.

Reflecting on this incident, Sauls said that the Jesus way of expressing compassion is no condemnation first and ethics after that.³ And if you reverse this order, not only do you lose Christianity, but you lose Jesus. In other words, the first impulse of compassion is to love the person. Sauls said that in eighteen years of pastoral ministry, he had never met a person who fell in love with Jesus because a Christian scolded them about their ethics. It reminds me of Romans 2:4 that says, “*that God’s kindness is meant to lead you to repentance.*” It is not repentance that leads to kindness.

Saul’s goes on to testify that little interaction at their small group meeting, that way of responding with love and no condemnation first, became one of the most transformative experiences he had ever witnessed. The kindhearted offer of a cookie led to a different kind of mob—a mob of grace coming around the couple and their two young boys, which led to a month in rehab, which led to sobriety, which led to a restored home and marriage, which led to Matthew becoming a follower of Jesus, which led to him later becoming an elder in the church.”⁴ That is the power of compassion. I like that phrase “mob of grace.” Those are the kinds of mobs we want scattered about our communities.

As we look at Matthew 9:35-38, I want you to observe two things. I want you to see how Jesus keeps coming around people. As he puts himself in close proximity to people, he is moved to compassion. But, secondly, there are certain things that form this compassion in us. Sometimes you are around a lot of people, and compassion is that last thing you are feeling. So what are those things that shape our hearts towards people and draw us to people and cause us to experience deep affection for people and move us to action. Plain and simple, how is compassion formed in our hearts?

Compassion: Born out of the Gospel

The first thing I notice is that our compassion for people is born out of the gospel, *“the good news of the kingdom.”* This is clearly what was driving Jesus to action. He is the answer to this broken world. He came with “good news.” So it says in verse 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.”*

Yesterday was the Hartford Marathon and of course, a marathon is a race that is 26.2 miles. Why 26.2 miles? In 490 BC there was a famous battle fought between Greece and Persia called The Battle of Marathon. Greece won a decisive victory at the Battle of Marathon and legend has it that a Greek soldier ran with the news of victory from Marathon to Athens, which was a distance of 26.2 miles. The Greek word for this good news of victory was *“euangelion,”* translated as “Gospel,” which means the good news of victory.⁵ So when Jesus went around *proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom* we was announcing that in his coming there was good news for people living in a broken world filled with darkness and death. In Jesus, a decisive victory has been won over sin and death. In Jesus, there is eternal safety and peace.

It is this *“euangelion,”* this “Gospel,” this “good news” that causes Jesus to live as one who is sent. This is what causes him to move into close proximity to people. Notice how the verse begins, *“And Jesus went throughout all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues.”* How do you see the words *“cities”* and *“villages”* and *“synagogues?”* Do you just see “places?” He went to the “city.” He went to the “village.” He went to the “synagogue.” These aren’t just words that define location and places. This is another way to say, “Jesus went where the people were.” Why? Because in Jesus, the promised Kingdom of God has broken into this world, and through the cross and the resurrection of Jesus, a decisive battle will be won over sin and death and a way to God has been opened up through Jesus. In other words, Jesus has come to forgive and heal and restore a broken world. And so with compassion he moves towards people with good news.

I want to show you something about this verse and how it fits into the Gospel of Matthew. In many ways, it is a summary verse. Our passage this morning is closing out a major section in the Gospel of Matthew and Matthew is summarizing the content of what he shared in Matthew 5-9. In fact, this section in Matthew begins with a verse that is exactly like the verse we just read in Matthew 9:35. This section begins in Matthew 4:23 where Matthew says of Jesus, “*And he went throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction among the people.*” In fact the only difference between Matthew 4:23 and Matthew 9:35 is that in Matthew 4 he defines the location where Jesus went from city to village. He did this in the northern region of Israel known as Galilee. These two verses serve as bookends to what you find between them. In summary fashion, these two verses describe the ministry of Jesus as he brings good news to people.

First of all, his ministry is a ministry of the Word of God that is proclaimed to the people. It says that he went throughout the region “*proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom.*” And so, between these two summary verses we have in Matthew 5-7 the Sermon on the Mount. It is a sermon that begins with the promise of blessing. “*Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*” He goes on to describe this kingdom that radically changes our lives and gives us the kind of world we long for. It is a world where you don’t need to worry about tomorrow because we know that if God takes care of the sparrow and the lily of the field, he will take care of us. It is a world where the love of God is demonstrated in our love for others, even our enemies. People in this kingdom will be found doing to others what they would want done to them. And so it is a kingdom where we are radically changed. But entrance into this kingdom requires a turning to Jesus. So he ends this message by saying you have one of two ways to live. You can build your house on the sand or you can build your house on the rock. Jesus is that rock and if you build your house on the rock, when the storms of life come—and they will come—you will be found standing, even in the valley of the shadow of death. In Jesus, the gospel of the kingdom, the good news from heaven, has broken into this world and so Jesus went about “*proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom.*” In Jesus you can have peace that comes with the forgiveness of sin.

But how do you know that Jesus actually could bring this kind of transformation in our lives? How do you really know that in Jesus the kingdom of God has come? If you notice in these summary verses, Jesus didn’t just come “*proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom.*” He didn’t just come with the ministry of the Word. His works also demonstrated that the kingdom of God has come in the person of Jesus. In these two summary verses it says that he also went about “*healing every disease and every*

affliction.” His miracles authenticated the fact that in Jesus, the kingdom of God has broken into this world and that there is healing and restoration found in Jesus.

Between these two summary verses, in Matthew 8-9 you have a laundry list of miracle after miracle to prove to us that the kingdom of God was breaking into this world through Jesus. Let me just list for you the miracles of Jesus that are recorded for us in Matthew 8-9. There is the healing of the leper. There is the centurion who comes to Jesus and tells Jesus of his daughter who is back home and is paralyzed. His faith in Jesus is of such that he believes Jesus didn't even have to show up at the home to heal his daughter and Jesus marveled at such faith. Jesus heals Peter's mother-in-law and then a bunch of people show up at her house and he heals many there. He calms the storm. He delivers two men possessed by demons. He heals a paralyzed man who was lowered through the roof by his friends. He restores a young girl to life and he heals a woman who reaches out with faith and touches the hem of his garment. He heals two blind men and a man who could not speak. The point of these miracles is to demonstrate with power that kingdom of God has broken into this world through Jesus. In fact, in Matthew 11, John the Baptist was in prison and he wanted to know for sure whether Jesus was the Messiah. So he sent his disciples to ask Jesus, *“Are you the one who is to come or shall we look for another.”* Jesus said to them, *“Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up and the poor have good news preached to them.”* The miracles validate the fact that the kingdom of God has come in the person of Jesus.

The miracles also point us to the kind of healing Jesus came to bring. One of the stories in Matthew 9 is the story of the paralytic who is lowered through the roof of a house so that his friends could get him right in front of Jesus. When Jesus saw him laying there, he said to the man, *“Take heart my son, your sins are forgiven.”* The religious leaders were up in arms when they heard Jesus say this. And they said among themselves *“This man is blaspheming.”* Only God can forgive sins and here Jesus is proclaiming that this man's sins are forgiven. And so Jesus says, *“That you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins” - he then said to the paralytic—“Rise, pick up your bed and go home.”* So these miracles tell us that in Jesus a greater healing has come. It is brought to us when Jesus goes to the cross and bears the penalty for our sin. But three days later . . . three days later . . . three days later the greatest miracle of all took place. Jesus rose from the dead and proved in this final miracle to be the Son of God and because of this work of God we too can proclaim *“your sins are forgiven.”* There is victory over sin and death. There is no greater “work” that demonstrates that Jesus has authority to forgive sins than the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

This is what gives birth to compassion in our hearts for people. After the story of the paralytic in Matthew 9, we have the story of Jesus calling Matthew to be his disciple. Matthew was a tax collector and for the religious elite of his day, he was associated with the worst kind of people, people who were called “sinners.” But these were the kinds of people Jesus was always hanging out with and the religious leaders said of Jesus, “*Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?*” To which Jesus said, “*I came, not to call the righteous, but sinners.*” It is the good news of the kingdom of God that gives birth to our compassion for people. In the gospel we have the power of God to change a life. If we really believe that, it should show up with who we eat with and who we hang out with . . . or, to put it another way, we will live as ones who are sent. Like the runner who ran from Marathon to Athens proclaiming that the victory has been won and there is now peace for the city, we too have good news to share.

Compassion: Sees the Person and the Need

It is with this in mind that we come to verse 36 and we see the heart of Jesus. Remember, compassion conveys “deep feelings in the heart and deep affection.” And so it says of Jesus, “*When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.*” Let me put it this way. Compassion is born in the heart of Jesus for people because he sees how they have been deceived. They have been led astray. They are not the enemy, but they are victims of the enemy. And so he has compassion for them. If they only knew what Jesus had to offer them they could find peace.

He says they are “*like sheep without a shepherd.*” Throughout the Scriptures, a shepherd is a picture of a religious leader. In 1 Peter 5, elders in the church are called to “*shepherd the flock of God that is among you.*” In the Old Testament, the religious leaders of Israel were called shepherds as well and God found fault with them for not shepherding his people the way they should. In Ezekiel 34 the prophet says, “*Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel.*” Why? They have failed to “feed the sheep” and consequently, the sheep have strayed. And so in Ezekiel 37:24, the prophet promises to raise up a shepherd who will truly care for God’s people. He says, “*My servant, David, shall be king over them, and they shall all have one shepherd.*” He is speaking prophetically here of Jesus, who truly loves the sheep. Jesus says of himself in John 10, “*I am the good shepherd of the sheep . . . I lay down my life for the sheep.*” In Hebrews 13, Jesus, who was crucified and risen, is described as “*the great shepherd of the sheep.*” So with Jesus in mind, we say, “*The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.*” It is with great compassion that Jesus, the Good Shepherd, looks upon those wandering through life.

The religious leaders during the time of Christ were no different. In Matthew 23 Jesus pronounces seven woes of judgment against the religious leaders of his day. This is what I find most sobering about his judgment against these religious shepherds. It was because of them others were led astray. He says in Matthew 23:13 that because of them *“For you shut the kingdom of heaven in people’s faces. For you neither enter yourselves nor allow those who would enter to go in.”* In fact in verse 15 he says that those who follow these shepherds are *“twice as much a child of hell as yourselves.”* As a “shepherd” of the flock of God, I find that sobering. And so in Matthew 23:37 we find Jesus standing outside of Jerusalem and he is weeping for the city.

When I look at our culture today, I think of the false shepherd of secularism. There is a whole generation now growing up in our culture that has no God orientation at all. So quite naturally, the moral and the ethic of our culture is quite different than the moral and the ethics we find in Scripture. But how are we going to respond to this as a church? On one hand, we find ourselves engaging in a “culture war” where these two versions of morality are colliding. But one of the consequences of that is that the culture becomes the enemy. And yet when secularism removes the restraining presence of God in a culture, it is only natural that a culture would emerge where there is no restraint in our morals. We all do what is right in our own eyes.

I think of the story that has unfolded this week with Harvey Weinstein and his abuse of power in forcing himself sexually on women who were trying to make it in Hollywood. This whole story has opened up a window to the culture of Hollywood. You could take the words of Matthew 9:36 and impose them on this story, *“they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.”* The shepherd of secularism has given rise to this kind of abuse. But when is the last time you have looked in on this crowd and like Jesus *“had compassion for them?”*

Like the woman who offered a cookie to the man who came into the small group, we need to see with compassion that our world is like *“sheep without a shepherd.”* Instead of keeping people at an arm’s distance and instead of pointing a boney finger of judgment, we need to be moved with compassion. Out of love we need to extend mercy to the one in need and proclaim the hope there is in Jesus. I think we are living in fear because we are afraid of losing the culture war. We may have already lost it. But may I suggest to you, we have bigger fish to fry than the culture war. We have the kingdom of God that has come into this world through Jesus and the presence of the church. To be honest with you, I find the church is at its best when it is on the outside of culture looking in. But when we look in, we must look in with eyes of compassion.

Compassion: Embraces the Call

Finally, after being moved with compassion, Jesus turns to his disciples and says in verses 37-38, *“The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.”* Do you see the focus of the prayer? It is to not only raise up laborers. But it is that the laborers would go into the harvest. It is not a prayer that people will come to us. It is a prayer that we would go to people, like Jesus did.

When you read that we should pray that God would raise up laborers, do you think of someone else? Do you think of the missionary who would be raised up to go? Do you know what I find interesting about this prayer? It is what comes after it in Matthew 10. He just asked the disciples to pray that God would raise up laborers. In Matthew 10, they discover that they are the laborers and Jesus sends them out in twos. In other words, they are the answer to their prayers. We will look at that next week. We need to pray earnestly that God would move us to live as people who are sent. We need to embrace the call. God has given us the privilege to be carriers of his kingdom—a mob of grace—and in doing so, he uses us to bring others to himself.

I read a quote this week that I found to be encouraging. “A Christian’s greatest ability is availability. When God’s people are willing to take a step of faith and speak the truth in love, lives are transformed and God is glorified.”⁶ That is what we are praying for when we pray that laborers would be sent into the harvest. We are praying that God’s people would be available to be used by God wherever they are sent. Like Jesus, in word and in deed, we proclaim the love of God and the good news of Jesus. When you get in close proximity to people and become available to God to be used by him, your compassion for people will grow.

I received an email this Thursday that went like this: “Yesterday, as I was visiting a person I see regularly, he asked me to go down the hall and share the gospel with a man who was dying of cancer. He is 59 years old. It was so obvious that the Holy Spirit had prepared his heart and as I shared he understood his need for salvation and he prayed to receive Christ and trust Christ's finished work on the cross and his resurrection, instead of trusting in his own good works. I gave him the gospel of John and asked him to read a chapter a day in order understand even better how much Jesus loves him. I will be returning next week to follow up with him so please pray he will begin to grow in his new faith in Christ and begin to live in his love and grace, even though his time here is short.

As a result of your messages on "being sent", I have been praying more fervently to be used of God and to have the opportunity to love others and point them to Christ, should the Spirit move in that way. I am so flawed and sin so often that I'm blown away that the Holy Spirit would use me. God's grace at work! So we light the candle!" Our greatest ability is our availability.

Conclusion

May God grant us a growing compassion for people. Draw near to people, and your compassion will grow. Let the gospel take root in your heart. See people as those without a shepherd and consequently wandering in life and in need of a Savior. Pray that God would send out laborers and then know that you are the answer to your prayers. So be available and look for ways to be used of God. This is how compassion for people is formed in us.

¹Michael J. Wilkins *Matthew: The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004) 374

²Lori Chandler "The Difference Between Empathy and Compassion is Everything" bigthink.com

³Scott Sauls *Befriend: Create Belonging in an age of Judgment, Isolation and Fear* (Carol Stream: Tyndale House, 2016) 18

⁴Ibid., 19

⁵Tom Johnston and Mike Perkins *Organic Reformation* (Manchester: Praxis Media, 2009) 48

⁶Costi Hinn "Riches I Heed Not" in *Christianity Today* October 2017, 103

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COMMUNITY GROUPS

Getting To Know Me Questions

1. Share with the group something you are looking forward to or something you are dreading. Use this as an opportunity to pray for each other.
2. As you think of your “next step of obedience,” what are you learning about yourself as you are taking this next step?
3. What did you take from the sermon this past Sunday?

Diving Into The Word

4. Read Matthew 4:23 and 9:35. How do these verses summarize the ministry of Jesus? How do they help us understand what we are called to do?
5. Read Matthew 9:1-8. What do the miracles of Jesus tell us about Jesus?
6. Read Matthew 9:9-13. Where is the most natural place for you to live as one who is sent? Why do you think the Pharisees struggles with Jesus in this passage?
7. Read Matthew 9:36. What do you need to do to see the crowds they way Jesus sees them? What do you tend to see when you see the crowds? Why is that?
8. Read Matthew 9:37-38. How would you like to apply this verse to your life?

Taking It Home

9. If your best ability is availability, what steps can you take to make yourself available this week to God?
10. What has God put on your heart with regards to having compassion for people?