

LESSON FOUR

THE COMPASSION
OF CHRIST

*When he saw the crowds, he had compassion
on them, because they were harassed and
helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.*

MATTHEW 9:36



REFLECTION

In her memoir *Traveling Mercies*, author Anne Lamott describes the man who was instrumental in her conversion by saying, “He was about the first Christian I ever met whom I could stand to be in the same room with. Most Christians seemed almost hostile in their belief that they were saved and you weren’t.” Why do you think so many non-believers feel this way about the church and about Christians?

SITUATION

Having focused on Christ’s words in the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew now shines his spotlight on Christ’s works. He reveals how Jesus consistently displays his divine compassion by performing miracles and relentlessly ministering to empty and hurting people. Jesus’ acts of mercy only serve to accentuate the heartless indifference that Israel’s religious leaders are showing toward the plight of the people.

OBSERVATION

Read Matthew 9:18–38 from the New International Version or the New King James Version.

NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION

¹⁸ While he was saying this, a synagogue leader came and knelt before him and said, “My daughter has just died. But come and put your hand

on her, and she will live.” ¹⁹ Jesus got up and went with him, and so did his disciples.

²⁰ Just then a woman who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years came up behind him and touched the edge of his cloak. ²¹ She said to herself, “If I only touch his cloak, I will be healed.”

²² Jesus turned and saw her. “Take heart, daughter,” he said, “your faith has healed you.” And the woman was healed at that moment.

²³ When Jesus entered the synagogue leader’s house and saw the noisy crowd and people playing pipes, ²⁴ he said, “Go away. The girl is not dead but asleep.” But they laughed at him. ²⁵ After the crowd had been put outside, he went in and took the girl by the hand, and she got up. ²⁶ News of this spread through all that region.

²⁷ As Jesus went on from there, two blind men followed him, calling out, “Have mercy on us, Son of David!”

²⁸ When he had gone indoors, the blind men came to him, and he asked them, “Do you believe that I am able to do this?”

“Yes, Lord,” they replied.

²⁹ Then he touched their eyes and said, “According to your faith let it be done to you”; ³⁰ and their sight was restored. Jesus warned them sternly, “See that no one knows about this.” ³¹ But they went out and spread the news about him all over that region.

³² While they were going out, a man who was demon-possessed and could not talk was brought to Jesus. ³³ And when the demon was driven out, the man who had been mute spoke. The crowd was amazed and said, “Nothing like this has ever been seen in Israel.”

³⁴ But the Pharisees said, “It is by the prince of demons that he drives out demons.”

³⁵ Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. ³⁶ When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on 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 workers are few. ³⁸ Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.”

NEW KING JAMES VERSION

¹⁸ While He spoke these things to them, behold, a ruler came and worshiped Him, saying, "My daughter has just died, but come and lay Your hand on her and she will live." ¹⁹ So Jesus arose and followed him, and so did His disciples.

²⁰ And suddenly, a woman who had a flow of blood for twelve years came from behind and touched the hem of His garment. ²¹ For she said to herself, "If only I may touch His garment, I shall be made well." ²² But Jesus turned around, and when He saw her He said, "Be of good cheer, daughter; your faith has made you well." And the woman was made well from that hour.

²³ When Jesus came into the ruler's house, and saw the flute players and the noisy crowd wailing, ²⁴ He said to them, "Make room, for the girl is not dead, but sleeping." And they ridiculed Him. ²⁵ But when the crowd was put outside, He went in and took her by the hand, and the girl arose. ²⁶ And the report of this went out into all that land.

²⁷ When Jesus departed from there, two blind men followed Him, crying out and saying, "Son of David, have mercy on us!"

²⁸ And when He had come into the house, the blind men came to Him. And Jesus said to them, "Do you believe that I am able to do this?"

They said to Him, "Yes, Lord."

²⁹ Then He touched their eyes, saying, "According to your faith let it be to you." ³⁰ And their eyes were opened. And Jesus sternly warned them, saying, "See that no one knows it." ³¹ But when they had departed, they spread the news about Him in all that country.

³² As they went out, behold, they brought to Him a man, mute and demon-possessed. ³³ And when the demon was cast out, the mute spoke. And the multitudes marveled, saying, "It was never seen like this in Israel!"

³⁴ But the Pharisees said, "He casts out demons by the ruler of the demons."

³⁵ Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every sickness and every disease among the people. ³⁶ But when He saw the multitudes, He

was moved with compassion for them, because they were weary and scattered, like sheep having no shepherd. ³⁷ Then He said to His disciples, "The harvest truly is plentiful, but the laborers are few. ³⁸ Therefore pray the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest."

EXPLORATION

1. What were the miracles in this passage that Jesus performed in rapid-fire succession?

2. What role did faith play in these people's experiences of Christ's power?

3. What unusual or surprising command did Jesus give to the blind men whom he healed? Why did they disobey?

4. How does the "official" response of Israel's religious leaders to Christ's healing ministry compare to the response of the masses?

5. What specific factors does Matthew say elicited Christ's compassion?

6. What did Jesus mean when he said to the disciples, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few" (verse 37)? What was he instructing them to do?

INSPIRATION

"When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So he began teaching them many things" (Mark 6:34). "When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them and healed their sick" (Matthew 14:14). It's a good thing those verses weren't written about me.

It's a good thing thousands of people weren't depending on Max for their teaching and nourishment. Especially on a day when I'd just heard of the death of a dear friend . . . especially after I'd gotten into a boat to escape the crowds. Had that been me in Jesus' sandals on that Bethsaida beach, the verses would read something like:

"They were like sheep without a shepherd. So Max told them to quit grazing on his pasture and to head back to their pens." "When Max landed and saw a large crowd, he mumbled something about how hard it was to get a day off and radioed for the helicopter. Then he and the disciples escaped to a private retreat."

It's a good thing I wasn't responsible for those people. I would have been in no mood to teach them, no mood to help them. I would have had no desire even to be with them. But, as I think about it, Jesus had no desire to be with them either. . . .

What made him change his mind and spend the day with the people he was trying to avoid? Answer? Take a look at five words in Matthew 14:14: "He had compassion on them."

The Greek word used for compassion in this passage is *splanchnizomai*, which won't mean much to you unless you are in the health professions and studied "splanchnology" in school. If so, you remember that "splanchnology" is a study of the visceral parts. Or, in contemporary jargon, a study of the gut.

When Matthew writes that Jesus had compassion on the people, he is not saying that Jesus felt casual pity for them. No, the term is far more graphic. Matthew is saying that Jesus felt their hurt in his gut:

- He felt the limp of the crippled.
- He felt the hurt of the diseased.
- He felt the loneliness of the leper.
- He felt the embarrassment of the sinful.

And once he felt their hurts, he couldn't help but heal their hurts. He was moved in the stomach by their needs. He was so touched by their needs that he forgot his own needs. (From *In the Eye of the Storm* by Max Lucado.)

REACTION

7. How would you define *compassion* in your own words?

8. What does the series of incidents in Matthew 9:18-38 reveal about the heart of Jesus?

9. The picture all of the Gospels paint of the Pharisees, scribes, and teachers of the law is of a dour and disapproving bunch. What do you think prompts such a petty response in the face of God's mercy and grace?

10. What are some specific things the Church could do to correct its reputation for being harsh and hostile?

11. When was the last time you felt torn up inside over the plight of someone else? What did you do?

12. How does a Christian become more compassionate? Is it actually possible to develop this quality—or is this more an issue of one's temperament? Explain.

LIFE LESSONS

The clear testimony of Scripture, both Old and New Testaments, is that God aches when his people hurt (see Exodus 2:23–25). He enters into our suffering and identifies fully with us in our pain. But more than just experiencing emotions of pity and sorrow, God is compelled by his compassion and acts (see Exodus 3:1–10). There is no better demonstration of this than

Christ. His whole ministry reveals this deep concern in the heart of God that relentlessly goes to any length to bring comfort. As followers of Jesus, as those engaged in the lifelong process of becoming like him, we must demonstrate this same kind of active compassion in an ever-increasing way.

DEVOTION

Lord Jesus, your heart overflows with an aching desire to help those who hurt. Thank you for loving me with such deep tenderness. Show me how to be more caring and compassionate in my daily life. May your gentle concern flow through me. May I be a healing presence to those around me.

JOURNALING

Who are the top candidates in your life for God's compassion today? List them and, while listening to the Spirit, brainstorm some specific steps you could take to show Christlike concern.

FOR FURTHER READING

To complete the book of Matthew during this twelve-part study, read Matthew 8:1–9:38. For more Bible passages on compassion, read Psalm 103; Psalm 116:5; Isaiah 49:13; Luke 15:20; and Colossians 3:12.