

Compassion

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[0 : 00] We can turn now to the passage that we read together, the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 9, and we can read again at 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.

When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, 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. Amen.

This week, as many of you know well, this past week, the church was met in general assembly. The Free Church and the Church of Scotland and the other denominations, some of them anyway, were met in general assembly.

[1 : 17] And I was one of the commissioners to our own church's assembly. And as a consequence of my being there, I had to revise what I was going to be preaching on today.

I had a rough idea of what I was going to be preaching on, but I suspected that perhaps through exposure to being in assembly and hearing what others have to say and so on, that there may be obviously going to be something that you hear will affect your thinking or make your mind go in a different direction.

One thing that made me change my mind was on Monday evening, we had the retiring moderator's address, Reverend Derek Lamont.

And he based his talk or his sermon on the words that we have at the end of this passage.

I think it might have been another part of the gospel where the same passage is found. I was going to check up on that, but you can do that for yourselves.

[2 : 39] But these words of Christ were the focus of his attention and particularly the compassion of Christ. And I have to say that I thoroughly enjoyed the sermon.

And you'll understand that I'm not preaching from this text in order to correct anything that I heard. I'm not going to improve upon it.

I am not going to do anything other than say that it was part of the inspiration behind my own reflections. And the second thing that moved me to consider these words, because simply when I was at the beginning of my own Christian life, struggling with the call to the ministry or trying to see if there was such a thing or trying to suppress it, to be honest, one passage of the scripture that was at the heart of my thinking was the passage that we have at the end of the chapter here.

So the passage was important to me for that reason. And I found myself reflecting on what I heard and what we were encouraged to do and what I had previously considered in my own personal experience.

So that's behind this sermon, if you like. That's what's undergirding my thoughts upon these words. We know that Jesus is a great healer.

[4 : 31] From chapter 8 to chapter 10 of this passage, one thing you're encouraged to believe and to discover for yourself is how much Jesus was involved in the lives of those that he was with in the world.

He was ministering to them in every need that they could possibly present to them. He demonstrates his power and authority over all areas of life.

He, as we saw even in the passage that we read, he encounters the lame and the leprosy, encounters the blind and the broken.

He encounters those who are grieving and he heals them in their grief. And he even restores to life those who have succumbed to death.

And sometimes when present he did these things, at other times he did so remotely. Word would come to him and he was able, by virtue of his power and authority, to minister to the needs of those that he was distant from.

[5 : 54] Now, in all of these things, and despite of all of these things, his enemies hated him. His enemies accused him, as we saw here in our reading, to be in league with the devil.

His accusers were many. And Jesus, nevertheless, went ahead and did what he was in the world to do.

He came into the world to seek and to save the lost. And we read that he went through the villages and the towns and the cities, teaching and preaching and healing.

Healing those who were broken physically, mentally and spiritually. Many presented themselves to him who didn't know why they were doing so.

I mean, it's a nonsense to believe that every person who came seeking the Lord understood what the Lord could do for them. They came because others had come before them.

[7 : 01] They came because others had directed them to him. And their needs were presented to Christ. Now, there's no doubt that what was at the heart of their need needed to be brought home to them.

And they undoubtedly came to a knowledge of that. But even in our own context, in our own culture, we know that there are people in this world of ours.

And they are suffering. Suffering because of their brokenness. Be it physical, mental or spiritual. All told, they may have a vision of what their trouble is, what their problem is, what their need is.

And they may understand that somebody has directed them to Christ, that the Bible in some way has been introduced to them, and they know to go to Christ.

But to do what? Or to receive what? They know not. Until Christ ministers to them directly.

[8 : 10] They're crying for his attention. But they don't know what way he is going to attend to them. All the while, this is going on.

And it's difficult for us to imagine, to understand, the atmosphere in which Jesus worked. With all this going on around him.

Alongside with that was the enmity of the world. The enmity of those who were in the world supposedly to minister to the broken and the spiritually bankrupt.

And they were hostile to the very one who was doing that thing which they were not doing. It exposed their skeletal ministry and embittered them further.

Now we need to understand that we live in a world that is the same kind of world that Christ was in. Don't let any person tell you different.

[9 : 21] We may think that when Christ was in the world it was a world unlike the one we're in.

Perhaps as far as the culture is concerned, perhaps as far as the development of society is concerned, but the needs that are presented to Christ in his day are the needs that are presented to Christians today in this world.

His world and our world are the same with the same kind of need and the same kind of desire and the same kind of desperate searching for answers to problems they don't know as to where they come from.

There are many people and they present to themselves to you perhaps as a Christian and they say, this is my problem. This is how I understand my problem.

And they work at a certain level and you have to try and unravel where they're at to discover where they're at really and to help them understand that their real problem is this, that they are out of step with God, that their life is not right with God.

And until that is right, whatever their problem is, it will not truly be understood. And the Christian is a person who has discovered that for themselves.

[10 : 59] And the Christian is someone who has been called to help others discover the same thing that they have discovered. Now I want us to look at this passage first of all to notice the compassion of Christ.

Secondly, to try and understand from this context the stimulus there is to that compassion.

And thirdly, to see if we can learn from the duty that Christ entrusted to the disciples as a result of what was presented to them and to him.

So three things, three things I'm sure you'll be able to pick up from this passage. First of all, the compassion of Christ.

I don't think any one of us can question the compassion of Christ. We know from a reading of the scripture that the life of Christ embodies compassion.

[12:11] What do we mean by the word compassion? Well, by its very nature. The word means that the person showing compassion is a person who has a sympathetic and a pitying heart.

We can pity somebody without being in sympathy with that person. But the person who has compassion is somebody who has a desire to resolve what causes the pity, the sense of pity. To help that person deal with the consequences of it in a practical way. Not just stand aloof but come alongside. Not just be someone who is able to interpret but respond positively to the circumstances that present themselves.

And that was the way Christ worked. Now, I know that Christ could do things that we cannot do. When it comes to his healing ministry, when it comes to the things that Christ was responsible for, we can't wake the dead.

we can't physically heal the broken bodies of those who are in the world to us, before us. But Christ, through his exemplary conduct, demonstrated compassion which he goes on to encourage others to follow.

[13:52] now, if we think about how each one of us perhaps has from time to time in the world in which we live seen people who through their conduct in the workplace, they show to us how what they are doing is exemplary and at times how it is far from exemplary.

For example, we can list any number of callings. We can think of a teacher. We can think of a doctor or a nurse.

We can think of a crafter. We can think of a preacher and teacher. a minister. And we can think of any one of these as someone who has a calling and who have responded to that calling by endeavouring to the best of their ability to fulfil their calling.

So that the teacher who teaches in our schools goes at times above and beyond the call of their duty.

They take their work seriously. There's all kinds of language that we use. The person, whoever the person is, the calling, whatever the calling is, we understand that that person can sometimes excel at what they're doing.

[15:38] And they do it to the best of their ability. and they explore ways in which they can fulfil what is expected of them. And there are others we know who don't.

There are others who pay lip service to it. There are others who do the very bare minimum to fulfil whatever it is, role that they are expected to live.

Now when we look at what Christ is doing and we look at the compassionate Christ, we are given an example of someone who as the redeemer of the lost came into the world to seek the lost, understood where they were and went to them where they were and spoke to them where they were and did his utmost to bring them to where he was.

Christ, the redeemer of lost souls, looked upon those to whom he was sent and his heart was knit with theirs. When they experienced sadness, I doubted if he was immune from their sadness.

He wept over the city of Jerusalem because he saw a city that was like so many others, oblivious to their eternal plight.

[17:10] And Christ is someone who demonstrates through his understanding of people what he is doing. Somebody has suggested that compassion can only be evoked when people are seen in a true state, when they are helpless and when they are weak and when they are needy.

I don't know if you agree with that. When it comes to Christ, perhaps we hold him up before us as someone who we expect to be compassionate.

But when Christ calls people to himself, he calls them to be like himself. and in his compassion, he demonstrates to us the kind of heart that the Christian should have for others, the kind of interest that they should have in others, the kind of feeling that should stimulate their interest in the needs of others.

It's not something we can ignore, it's not something we can say, it's somebody else's duty. If we are Christians and we are supposed to be Christ-like, then in the compassion of Christ, we look to him to discover what that means.

And when we discover that means the roles that we are expected to follow conform to what he did. I want you to listen to what Bishop Ryle has written about this.

[18 : 55] Jesus saw them neglected by those who ought to care for them. The ignorant, the hopeless, the helpless, dying and unfit to die, it moved him to pity.

I'm sure you agree with that. It's a good analysis of what Christ was like. But I want you to listen to the next part of what Bishop Ryle said. more than this, the man who cares nothing for the souls of other people is not like Jesus Christ.

It may well be doubted whether he is converted himself. do you think he's being too severe? Do you think he's being too hard?

It may well be doubted if he has converted himself. Why is he saying that? Well, he is looking at the compassion of Christ, the Christ who is seeing the needs of those who are with him and about him in this world, crying out for somebody to help them in their need.

And because their greatest need is not the need that they present with, but the need of the soul, that if we are oblivious to the needs of the soul, then we're not getting to grip, grips with what is truly before us.

[20 : 36] Jesus, we are told, had compassion because they were like sheep without a shepherd. And it is difficult for us to imagine what Jesus saw, but we must notice the stimulus it gave to him to act on their behalf, to act in a way that took him ultimately to the cross, but en route to the cross, he dealt with them personally, he dealt with them where he met with them, dealing with their needs.

Vast crowds came to Jesus, and as I said, many perhaps didn't know why they came. They had a need, but they may not have understood what that need was.

Notice as Jesus went through all the cities, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, healing every disease, when he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them because they were harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd.

Like sheep without a shepherd. That's an interesting phrase. When I looked it up, you'll find it repeatedly in the Old Testament. It's descriptive of a people that are milling around as if with no purpose, with no exact point at which they're moving towards, no formulated agenda, no idea of what they expect to gain by their activity or by their progress.

Sheep without a shepherd. a chaotic lifestyle and it's hard, we are told, when doubt to them.

[22 : 37] Now you cannot teach a person to be, to be something that Jesus was. You can't teach a person to be, to be sympathetic in the way Jesus Christ was.

But you can remind and you can be reminded of a response that is appropriate. You cannot change a person's character, but you can mould the character so that the person understands, well, this is what a Christian is and this is what a Christian does and this is how a Christian is expected to behave and the reason for that behaviour is this, this and this.

Now some people will follow the example of Christ easily because naturally they have this inclination, but it is not simply something that can be left to those who are naturally inclined to be like that.

It is the default position of the Christian to be compassionate and to ensure that they understand to the best of their abilities what promotes that compassion and what promotes that sympathy in a positive way.

Perhaps it was being at the Assembly that brought this to mind. When I was a student and living in Edinburgh, I was there at an Assembly as a student and our minister at the time, the late Colin Matheson, was at the Assembly as a commissioner and I met with him several times because I don't need to say to those who knew him, he was a minister who had a pastor's heart and who had an interest in the people that were under his care and I was one.

[24 : 56] And we met for lunch one day and we went down the Royal Mile and when we were just stretching our legs, we were standing there and all of a sudden he was laughing and he's looking across the road to the other side of the road and he said, well, we've spoken in Gaelic, but he said, look at him, he said.

And he said, he was looking at a fellow minister. Now he wasn't laughing at him, he was just laughing at the irony of what he was saying. And this minister was a minister who belonged to a congregation in one of the hardest and the roughest congregations in the central belt.

I don't doubt for one minute, I won't mention who it is because he's still living, but I don't doubt for one minute that he was called to that ministry.

And there was this minister and he was speaking face to face with a man I knew from the area who was a hopeless alcoholic.

We had met him numerous occasions and tried to help him I suppose, but he was really in the grip of alcoholism.

[26 : 21] And at times he was aggressive because of it and difficult to deal with. And what Mr. Matherson said to me, well look at him, he said, you would think that during assembly week he would take the privilege of having a break from these people or these kinds of people.

But he said he can't help himself. He can't help himself. This is what his heart is all about. And I don't think that Mr. Matherson meant that in any demeaning way.

I mean he was somebody that had a pastor's heart and I don't think he was looking down on this passion. But he was seeing this exemplified to him in the desire to minister to someone who clearly needed to be ministered to.

And not everyone can do that. Not everyone can go out of their way to do such a thing. And even ministers of the gospel they realize that there are certain aspects of their calling which they need to really work hard at.

They may find it difficult to be visitors. They might find it hard to be in one-to-one situations. They might find pulpit ministry difficult.

[27 : 44] Whatever it is. But the thing is this, that if you are following the calling of Christ, your calling will take you into situations that are outside your comfort zone.

and if you are aware of what Christ is calling you to, you solicit his help in order to do that. As Christians, not just as ministers, as Christians. The people lacked order, discipline, and leadership.

I think that's the way Sinclair Ferguson describes it. They needed someone to guide them. They were crying for spiritual nourishment.

Now, what does Jesus say to the disciples? I think this is one thing that I struggled with when I was struggling with this passage.

[28 : 46] When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them because they were harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, 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. What do you think that is saying?

Is it a challenge to the person who reads that to go out? Well, that's not what it say. Before they go to gather the lost sheep, one thing is needful.

It is God who must thrust out. Such a harvest was flying over the highlands there, coming through parts of Scotland that some of them are mountainous, some of them are rugged and wild, but some of them are clearly farmland.

And if you're on a clear day like this and you're looking down and you see the tapestry of different colours before you, you'll see fields there, especially at this time of year, you'll see some fields that are bright yellow with rapeseed oil, plants.

[30 : 25] And they're clearly marked out and that's the image that Christ presented. This world was ripe into harvest.

But he didn't say to the disciples, take your scythe, take your sickle and go out. But he told them, ask the Lord to send.

He's not saying to the disciples, don't you go, but go to God in order that he may send. Now that's important.

It's not a minor point. Go to God in order that he may send. Charles Price speaks about the sovereignty of God in this point, where he sees God bring together, for example, Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch.

In the sovereignty of God. God overrules. God controls. God sends. God equips. God is the one who it's his harvest.

[31 : 37] It's his harvest. Spurgeon says in his own inimitable way, too many men go out who cannot use the scythe. And that's something we need to recognize.

And you're in a situation just now where you are prayerfully, I hope, looking to God to prepare for you someone who is to go into the harvest.

The harvest of this congregation of Garbost. And what are you praying for? I sincerely hope that you're praying to God that he may send.

into your midst, someone who will act on his behalf. And that's what your prayer should be.

I'm acting as an intermoderator for my own former congregation. I have to speak to the people. I've asked them, what kind of minister do you want? And they'll tell you.

[32 : 45] And you get a cocktail of different gifts and gifts, different ideas and different possibilities and different ends. And what we need first of all is this desire for God to send.

And if it needs to be to send before your mind's eye, the one that God means you to have. love. And I'm not embarrassed about reminding you of that.

I'm not embarrassed about encouraging you to think about that because you read this passage and it tells you the harvest is plentiful and the laborers are few.

That's what the real scenario is. And there is only one minister that you can have. not many and not any, but God's.

And that's the one you need. And your prayer should be to come to this God who is the Lord of the harvest, that he may send to you the one who is his.

[34 : 02] Let us pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.