

The Compassion of Jesus

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[0 : 00] I encourage you to open again the Bibles at page 790. We're continuing a sermon series through Matthew chapters 8 to 12 over recent and future weeks.

We're up to the end of chapter 9 into chapter 10 today. And let's pray. God our Father, your word is powerful, sharper than a two-edged sword, able to make us wise for salvation in the Lord Jesus Christ.

So Lord God, we pray that your powerful word will pierce our hearts and lead us to costly discipleship of Jesus. For his glory we pray.

Amen. In the last few weeks we've seen in Melbourne the debate and discussion about the future of this city. Its urban growth.

It's growing faster than people had expected. The great transport needs. So we've seen the Eddington proposal for tunnels and super freeways and so on. Just in the last week there's been some discussion, a bit of tension, about the fact that with the Monash Freeway M1 upgrade over the Westgate Bridge, etc., there's now going to be more traffic chaos in South Melbourne as they close one of the entries to the freeway.

[1 : 14] We've seen, of course, the discussion about our public transport system and how crowded it is. The rejigged timetable just in the last couple of weeks to enable more peak hour services. Trains already full.

The cost of importing trams from France of all places to try and bolster our tram network. We live in a crowded world and, in a sense, a crowded city, although there are many more crowded cities in this world than Melbourne.

But virtually everywhere we go there are crowds of people. Our buses and trains are crowded. Our roads are crowded. Our supermarkets are crowded. Shopping Town's new car park is already overcrowded, it seems to me.

And it's not even properly open yet. There are people everywhere. And it's so easy to respond with a sort of selfish impatience and anger. Oh, why are all these people on the road just when I want to be on the road?

I'm going to be late to where I'm going. There's no car park spot for me. Why do I have to queue for so long in this queue at the shopping centre? Et cetera, et cetera. Well, confronted by crowds in today's passage, Jesus' reaction is markedly different.

[2 : 25] Rather than being filled with selfish impatience and anger, I wish these people would leave me alone. I just need a bit of space and quiet, which might be how we would respond. He responds to the crowds with compassion.

When Jesus saw the crowds that were gathering around him, because, of course, of all the healings that he'd done and the authoritative teaching that he'd not all that long ago preached on the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus, seeing the crowds, had compassion for them because they were harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd.

Where we might see an inconvenience, Jesus sees a mission field. Now, we might understand and relate to Jesus' reaction if we were in a place of huge need.

If we see pictures of Bangladeshi flood victims, of Indonesian earthquake victims, for example. It's easy to feel compassion on the streets of Burma or no doubt if we see pictures of the crowds in Tibet.

But the crowds around Jesus are normal people. Oh, admittedly, some are sick and some are demon-possessed and they're coming to Jesus or being brought to him for healing or exorcisms.

[3 : 39] But by and large, they are normal people. Everyday people. The sorts of crowds that we might see at a football game, on a bus or train or at the shopping centre.

An ordinary, everyday crowd of people. And Jesus responds with compassion. Indeed, the word for compassion is a very deep word. It means moved in his bowel or moved in his guts.

We might say a gut-wrenching compassion. And so it was. Now, we might have a gut-wrenching compassion when we see hundreds of victims in marketplaces in Gaza or Iraq or the victims of these earthquakes and so on.

But a gut-wrenching compassion when you see a normal, everyday crowd. I remember one of the most gut-wrenching times I've had was going through the Museum Twol Sleng in the centre of Phnom Penh.

It had been a school converted into Pol Pot's prison. And from there, hundreds if not thousands of people dying were taken off to what became later called the killing fields of Phnom Penh.

[4 : 50] And looking at photo after photo, teenagers, children, adults in the prime of life, and feeling almost that I wanted to vomit and be sick. Now, some of you may have had those experiences as you've seen film or been in places like that or the Holocaust Museum in Jerusalem or concentration camps or in Africa.

But Jesus' gut-wrenching compassion is at an ordinary, everyday crowd that's gathered around him. Why is he moved with compassion?

Not primarily because there are people who are sick. not primarily because there are people who are demon-possessed, though some of the crowd were, but because they are sheep without a shepherd.

Sheep without a shepherd. The language that is used in his reflection as he sees this crowd of people is Old Testament language. It's Old Testament language primarily from the prophet Ezekiel in the time of Israel's exile.

And Ezekiel there, because of Israel being sheep without a shepherd, God promises that he himself will come as the good shepherd, a descendant of David will come, and lead, guide, and feed the sheep.

[6 : 11] But the language of being a sheep without a shepherd is a language of stern rebuke for the leaders of the Jewish or Israelite people that has culminated in their exile away from the land, the destruction of Jerusalem, and the destruction of the temple of God in Jerusalem.

So when Jesus sees the crowds and is moved with compassion because they are sheep without a shepherd, there is an implicit rebuke for the leaders of the Jewish people of his day, the scribes and the Pharisees, the leaders of the Sanhedrin and the teachers of the synagogue.

In the past few weeks, we've seen a sequence of miracles and exorcisms and healings that Jesus has performed. But we've also seen a growing undercurrent brewing against Jesus.

Back at the beginning of chapter 9, when he heals the man lowered through the roof and who's paralyzed, he turns to the scribes who are muttering to themselves and says, why do you think evil in your hearts?

A little bit later on, the crowds were complaining, or at least the leaders were complaining, that Jesus was eating with Matthew, the tax collector, and other tax collectors and sinners.

[7 : 28] And then last week, we saw the statement, an horrific statement, an awful statement, in the preceding verse to this passage, in verse 34. The Pharisees said, by the ruler of the demons, he casts out the demons.

An atrocious thing to say about the Son of God, that his power was actually diabolical. Well, of course it's not. It's the opposite. It's divine. Jesus is echoing the fact that nothing's changed centuries after Ezekiel's prophecy.

Indeed, Ezekiel's words, sheep without a shepherd, echo some words of Moses about the Israelites in the wilderness. And they're not that dissimilar from words of the prophet Isaiah, a bit before Ezekiel.

So that all throughout the history, from Moses to Isaiah to Ezekiel to Jesus, sheep without a shepherd. That is, people needing the good news of the kingdom of God.

That's their big need, as it is here described. And yes, the disciples are sent out, and part of their mission is to cure the sick, and cast out demons, given the authority from Jesus himself.

[8 : 39] But at the heart of it all is the proclamation that the kingdom of God is near in Jesus Christ. What a challenge to us to see people in the light with which Jesus sees them.

To see the queues at the cash register is not an inconvenience, but rather a mission field. To see happy partygoers who might keep us up because of the noise of their party over the road with compassion, not contempt.

To see the idle teenage punks or whoever at the bus stations or train stations milling around with little to do, with all their alco pops empty by their side.

To respond to them with compassion because they need the gospel rather than hatred or disgust. But to see classes of year 11, year 12 students desperate to try and pass their VCE as people who need more than a VCE, who need the gospel of Jesus Christ.

To see a thousand of Australia's so-called best and brightest gathering in Canberra a couple of weeks ago trying to put forward political policies for the next years of this country, the 2020 sort of stuff.

[9 : 58] But recognising what is needed by them and this country more than anything else is the gospel of Jesus Christ. To see the world as Jesus saw it and as he describes it in verse 6 as Tony reminded us in the children's talk, go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.

For by and large the crowds of our world are lost. Of course as we look at a crowd at a football game or in a bus or at a shopping centre, queue, we don't know which of them is believer or not but basically the probabilities will be that the vast majority are lost for they do not know the Lord Jesus Christ or his gospel.

Now of course Jesus in particular is rebuking spiritual leaders here as well. So at one level there are lost people throughout the world. The crowds of the world are by and large lost in need of the gospel and need of our compassion to bring the gospel to them.

But in particular there's a pointed application here for leaders of the church of God to this day. For Jesus' words about their sheep without a shepherd applying within the context of God's people a long train of a failure of leaders spiritual leaders of God's people continues to today where so much of the church of God is led by people who proclaim really in the end are no gospel.

The universalist pluralist humanist extreme liberal bad news rather than the biblical good news of Jesus Christ. And I sometimes wonder if Jesus would say anything different if he came to the church in the west today and sees people filled with compassion here being as sheep without a shepherd.

[11 : 53] For without Jesus the king of the kingdom there is no good news. Without Jesus people no matter how happy or wealthy or comfortable or complacent or enjoying life people are without Jesus they're lost.

They may not think they're lost but they are. But this challenges us to think about our friends our family our neighbours the people we work with the people we study with people over the road members of our own family who don't know Jesus Christ and don't respond to him with faith and repentance.

Do we have the same compassion and urgency towards them because they're lost? In June we are having this little series of fame fortune and faith as a way of concentrating and focusing our energies to go out and invite people who are lost share the good news with them encourage them to come.

Do you see people that you know through the eyes of compassion and see them as lost in need of the gospel of Jesus Christ? Jesus moves from the image of the flock sheep without a shepherd to the image of a field a harvest that is plentiful famous words well known words indeed Jesus turns to his disciples and says the harvest is plentiful but the labourers are few the harvest is plentiful speaking about the crowds the lost crowds as being like a harvest ready to come in faithful repentance to the king of kings and lord of lords the response then when the harvest is plentiful and the labourers are few firstly pray so often we dismiss prayer as though it's a nothing we've got to do more than pray well yes we do more than pray but pray we must and do nothing without praying pray pray pray specifically to the lord of the harvest to god the father to send out labourers into the harvest a specific focused and deliberate prayer when I preached on this passage a few years ago it's provoked me more and more to be praying for god to raise up labourers into his harvest when did you last pray that it ought to be a regular systematic part of our daily and corporate prayer life to pray for labourers and our may monthly prayer meeting on may the 20th that will be our focus to pray that god will raise up labourers into the harvest and I urge you to be provoked by this passage to come and pray that night may 20 for god to raise up labourers into the harvest of this lost world well this verse is famous for being used in various missionary conventions and missionary meetings often with the context of thinking about sending labourers into deepest darkest jungles of

Africa that's part of it but not just there either throughout our world there is no place that has sufficient or an abundance of labourers into god's harvest deepest darkest africa in desperate need of more labourers the jungles of asia the same the urban cities of asia and south america the same the same the same in the west the universities of paris and berlin the same sort of thing desperately in need of the labourers to go into the harvest but it's the same here in australia in the outback and rural communities in the cities in our own city in our western and poorer suburbs of melbourne but even in this wealthy east we don't have an abundance of labourers into god's harvest we ought to be praying as jesus exhorts his disciples to pray that god will raise up labourers to go into the harvest to go into the harvest of our schools teaching re to run our youth and children's groups at church and in other places to go to our nursing homes or to our retirement groups with the good news of jesus christ to go to other suburbs needier than our own to go overseas to places needier than our own the labourers are few here there everywhere pray to the lord of the harvest and yet i think prayer is one of our big deficiencies in the western church may 20 will you be here to pray that god will raise up labourers may 20 will you come and pray for the lost but not just that one day that's our monthly prayer meeting for may make it a consistent persistent regular part of your daily or small group and church life prayers that god will raise up labourers it's why in june where some of us on the staff we're organising a lunch to provoke people to think about mission and ministry service we're inviting 30 to 40 people to come to that because we're praying that god will raise up labourers from within our own church it's part of our church's vision statement that we had at the

[17:17] AGM last year that we be a church that God uses to raise up labourers to send out into all sorts of places as ministers and ambassadors of the gospel of the King of Kings having urged them to pray Jesus then sends his 12 disciples whom he calls in that passage apostles the only time I think in Matthew they're called apostles in verse 2 apostles literally means the sent ones they're named there in verses 2 to 4 but Jesus summons them after urging them to pray and he gave them authority so the authority that's been such a key theme in the last couple of chapters the authority of Jesus teaching healing and casting out demons his authority over the wind and the waves of the sea of Galilee he transfers or passes on to those whom he calls and sends what an encouragement that is because if God is raising up labourers and it may be us then we can be assured if God is doing the raising up the authority of Jesus is passed to them

Jesus summoned his 12 disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits to cast them out and to cure every disease and every sickness with his authority the authority of the King of Kings an authority that we see passed on again at the end of this gospel when then the disciples and followers of Jesus are sent to the ends of the earth here the little mission that's entrusted to these 12 apostles in verses 5 onwards is very restricted and very limited they're to go only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel not to the Gentiles and not to the Samaritans the Samaritans were sort of the cousins of the Jews despised by the Jews they're a bit like New Zealanders in our view of thinking in Australia or Tasmanians I suppose if you want to bring it closer to home but there was actually a greater hostility and hatred really between the Jews and the Samaritans and though there are just occasional glimpses of Jesus interacting with a Syrophenician woman the Samaritan woman in John 4 the centurion's servant we saw a couple of weeks ago in Matthew 8 and so on by and large

Jesus' own mission was restricted within the house of Israel and that's to be the first mission of his disciples and apostles not because he doesn't care for the Gentiles and the non-Jews that's part of God's grand plan indeed but in particular part of his plan after the resurrection but for now it's primarily focused on Jews although as I said we saw a couple of chapters ago in Matthew 8 the healing of the Gentile centurion's servant and Jesus commenting about that man's faith and saying how at the feast with Abram, Isaac and Jacob they will come from east and west Gentiles will come and join with Jews at the time in the heavenly banquet so we know the gospel is open to all people and all kinds of people but for now this is a limited mission not one that becomes a paradigm for Christian mission today because it's so limited in geography but it's a sort of prototype for the disciples before they're finally called to mission after the resurrection in Matthew chapter 28 Jesus tells them to do what he's been doing in effect with his authority so in verse 7 proclaim the good news the kingdom of heaven has come near that is basically proclaiming

Jesus the King cure the sick raise the dead cleanse the lepers cast out demons all the things that we've seen Jesus do over the last three or four weeks but then in particular for this mission you received without payment give without payment you're not going to do it in order to make money take no gold silver or copper in your belts no bag for your journey or two tunics or sandals or a staff for laborers deserve their food that is don't take things be reliant upon being provided for whatever town or village you enter find out who in it is worthy that is who responds to the gospel with faith and stay there until you leave as you enter the house greet it if the house is worthy let your peace come upon it that is give it your blessing but if it's not worthy well don't give it your blessing but depart and leave from it Jesus had warned that the followers of him like him may not have a place to lay their head

Jesus had warned back in the early couple of chapters ago foxes have holes and foxes have homes birds of the air have nests but the son of man has nowhere to lay his head and we saw then the challenge of Jesus that people would who follow him may well indeed be the same we ought not to be surprised by this as I said before we've seen opposition to Jesus brewing in these chapters to the extent that the Pharisees called him demonic for casting out demons those who go in Jesus name should be prepared that it will be costly and uncomfortable to be a labourer in the harvest Jesus says in verse 14 that if anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words shake off the dust from your feet that is expect opposition Jesus himself received opposition ultimately culminating in his death and for anyone else following him being a labourer into his harvest expect the same of course

[23 : 11] Jesus had already warned his followers that back in the sermon on the mount at the end of the part called the beatitudes the blessings blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account rejoice and be glad for your reward is great in heaven for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you you are the salt of the earth you are the light of the world being salt and light comes with a cost of being reviled so when you invite someone to our church dinner or to our fame fortune faith series in June be prepared that they might laugh at you they might tear up the invitation or snub the invitation but so what be prepared for the cost of being an ambassador for Jesus a labourer in the harvest teaching RE in a school or leading a youth or children's group is not an easy job be prepared for that cost

Jesus says if you follow me you will be reviled for my name be prepared for it be prepared it's an interesting thing here that as Jesus has exhorted the disciples to pray for labourers the very next verses he sends his own disciples I think deliberately we're meant to see that the answer to prayer may indeed be us see at one level it's comfortable to pray if indeed we ever do that God will raise up labourers and we think of people somewhere else but maybe it's us whom God is leading calling us who knows where to Cairo perhaps to Burma to outback Australia the western suburbs or to serve as a labourer even in this area here finally Jesus reminds us of the seriousness of being lost go to the lost house of Israel he has said but then he culminates in verse 15 truly I tell you about those who do not listen to your words it will be more tolerable for the land of

Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for that town they're serious words Sodom and Gomorrah were almost completely obliterated by God's judgment back in the book of Genesis towns that lay south of Israel not far from the Dead Sea they were destroyed because of their general wickedness and immorality before God and frequently through the Old Testament they are used by the prophets and elsewhere as warnings of judgment that will come upon even God's people if they shun God and do not obey his laws and Jesus uses them in the same way here as a warning they've become paradigms of God's judgment Sodom and Gomorrah hard to think of a worse outcome but Jesus says if the people to whom you go refuse to hear your words it will be worse for them than it would be for Sodom and Gomorrah

I take it it would be worse because Sodom and Gomorrah didn't respond in a sense in general terms to God and they practiced immorality but for the people to whom the labourers go with the good news of the king of kings specifically about Jesus that is deliberate rejection of Jesus puts them in an even worse situation than for Sodom and Gomorrah it is serious business when we look at our world do we see them as people who are lost are we filled with compassion knowing that if they refuse the gospel of Jesus then their outcome will be worse than for Sodom and Gomorrah of all the writers or speakers in the scriptures the one who warned the most against hell and judgment was Jesus Christ and we cannot emasculate him by putting aside those warnings our world is lost without

Jesus Christ do we respond with compassion or complacency if you're lost without Jesus the outcome is serious indeed brothers and sisters there are serious challenges here for us to see our world with the compassion that Jesus sees the world with knowing that without him they face a hellish destiny a challenge here for us to pray pray and pray and to keep on praying pray that God will raise up laborers even you a challenge to us to be prepared to be a laborer and to go never too old and finally be prepared for the cost for being reviled for being without a place to lay down your head for being snubbed or ridiculed when

[28 : 41] Jesus 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 ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest let's pray oh God our heavenly father we beseech you to raise up laborers to go to the harvest of this lost world to bring this world the news the good news that the kingdom of God is at hand in Jesus Christ your son give us compassion for our world and courage to be laborers and by your mercy Lord God draw men and women and children to know and love and serve you and to serve your son the

Lord Jesus Christ Amen