

“LIKE SHEEP WITHOUT A SHEPHERD”

Matthew 9:35–38

Key Verse: 9:36

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

How do you view people? Do you tend to be negative, positive, or indifferent? In these four verses Matthew highlights how Jesus saw people. His view of people was at the core of who he was. It made all the difference in his ministry. In fact, it was so impactful, it changed the world. In our shepherding series we first looked at the starting point: experiencing the great love of Jesus, as Peter did. As we experience and abide in his love we can start doing what he said, “Feed my lambs.” Now in this lesson we see in Jesus himself an essential trait of a shepherd: compassion for people. Without his compassion, the truth is, we’re not really interested in people. Though we may be serving them in some way, we’re mostly just going through the motions. But his compassion is a game changer. It opens our hearts to understand people more deeply and energizes us to do something for them. What is this compassion of Jesus? How can we have it, grow in it, and be renewed in it? How can God use his compassion to change our personal lives and our ministry? May God speak to us through his word.

Today’s passage is a turning point in Matthew’s Gospel. Chapters 4–8 describe how Jesus’ ministry started. He preached the good news of the kingdom, and healed every disease and affliction (4:23). He taught new kingdom values, ethics, and a new kingdom lifestyle for those who follow him (chapters 5–7). Then, with the power of God he touched and cleansed a leper, blessed the faith of a centurion, healed Peter’s mother-in-law, calmed a storm, and healed two men with demons (chapter 8).

Now the Pharisees begin opposing Jesus. They’re mentioned three times in chapter 9. First, when Jesus tells a man his sins are forgiven, the Pharisees think he’s blaspheming (9:3). Later, when Jesus eats and drinks with tax collectors and sinners at Matthew’s house, they question his disciples (9:11). Finally, when Jesus drives out a demon from a mute man, they even say he’s working by the power of the prince of demons (9:34). While the Pharisees focus on fasting and staying away from sinners, Jesus is bringing people amazing healing and restoration. Yet every move he makes, they criticize. The Pharisees began as a group that was seriously pursuing purity in this corrupt world. They memorized the Old Testament and really tried to obey it. But over the years they began adding extra-Biblical traditions. Eventually, they became hypocritical, judgmental, and condescending. They dominated the synagogues in Jesus’ time. They first appeared back in chapter 3, where John the Baptist rebuked them. Their main problem was they didn’t know how to repent (see also chapter 23). Now in chapter 9, Jesus tells them to go and learn God’s mercy towards those sick with sin (9:11–13). In their self-righteous legalism they are like old wineskins (17). They are jealous of Jesus’ popularity, which blinds them to see all the good God is doing through him and makes them too proud to learn from him.

Despite the Pharisees, what does Jesus do? Look at verse 35. Going in person to so many scattered places, traveling on foot, is a daunting task, and physically exhausting. But Jesus wants to be among the people. Why? At his birth the angel said Jesus would be “Immanuel”—God with us (1:23). He’s the ruler sent by God to be the shepherd of his people (2:6; Mic.5:2,4). Jesus knows God has sent him to be a doctor for the spiritually sick (9:12). So he avoids debates and power struggles with the Pharisees and goes among the people, “teaching in their synagogues,” where people actually gather. He’s sharing the life-giving word of God, “proclaiming the good news of the kingdom” (cf. 3:2; 4:17). This good news is that through sending Jesus to this world, God himself has broken into our human experience, bringing real salvation. God is redeeming this world full of sin, death and curse, all its misery and ugliness, and bringing it back to himself through Jesus. God is inviting us all to come out from under Satan’s oppression and injustice and under his own gracious reign. This good news of his kingdom is not for a select few; it’s still for anyone, regardless of race, income, or human circumstances.

This message of the kingdom gets at what our souls are longing for. It tells us all how to come back to our Creator God, to have our true “home,” our true “paradise,” in him. It’s what human beings lost at the beginning of creation, and what God promises us in the end. People in every generation try so hard to build a kingdom for themselves in this world. But it never works. Even the best earthly kingdoms don’t last. We all need the good news of the kingdom. It’s our only true and living hope. This hope is worth living for, and worth dying for. In the kingdom of Jesus, anyone can find their true worth, dignity, and place to belong.

Jesus is also “healing every disease and every affliction” (35b; cf. 4:23; 10:1). His message of the kingdom is accompanied by God’s power and authority to cure “every disease and every affliction.” It proclaims still today that no one is too sick or damaged for God to redeem and restore through his Son, who can heal us all (12:15). Jesus used his God-given power and authority as king of the kingdom not to “dominate” or crush, but to tenderly heal (cf. 12:20). His beautiful healing ministry gives hope to all those who feel like damaged goods. It communicates the grace and reality of his kingdom. It draws all those who labor and are heavy laden to open their hearts and come to him (11:28). His message and his healing were like cold water on a parched desert ground. Many Christians emphasize morality, rules, or duties. But as followers of Jesus, we should be helping people receive this good news of his kingdom, and experience deep inner healing through really coming to Jesus.

Look at verse 36. The way Jesus sees people here is striking. Crowds of sick, broken, hungry people constantly coming wherever he goes might seem too needy, too demanding, too burdensome. Some might see them with critical eyes, as ignorant, corrupt, or even contaminating. Others might see them as a market, a chance to make a profit or gain a position. But when Jesus sees them, it says he has “compassion.” In Matthew’s Gospel Jesus has this same initial reaction to people three more times (14:14; 15:32; 20:34). It’s telling us something important about Jesus. He’s not some ultra-perfect, demanding person, far removed from our experience. Jesus was made like us in every way, except our sin, so that he could be merciful

and faithful to us and sympathize with our weaknesses (Heb. 2:17; 4:15). The Greek word for “compassion” literally means to experience pain in our abdomen. It’s like today’s words, “I feel your pain.” Compassion isn’t a carefully calculated response; it’s a gut reaction that comes from our nature. We’ve either got it or we don’t. Compassion for people is at the core of who Jesus is and what he’s doing. He’s also training his disciples to have *compassion* for people (14:14; 15:32). In a later parable he uses this Greek word to teach us how to respond to our debtors begging for patience and forgive them (18:26–27).

Why does Jesus have compassion? Look at verse 36b. Let’s think about each word here. The word for “harass” is literally “skin” or “lacerate.” It means to annoy or make anxious, to “rip off,” take advantage of, even to torment. It’s not coming from just one or two places; it’s from the political leaders, the business leaders, even the religious leaders. Everywhere they turn these people are being squeezed. It’s to the point it’s hard even to live or breathe. The word “helpless” literally means to be cast down. That happens to a sheep when it falls on its back; it’s helpless to get up on its own. It describes people so wounded, so weak, so tired, they have no power even to stand up. Without someone to help them, they’ll never make it. It’s true for some people humanly, but for all of us spiritually. Sin makes us that helpless. No one can get out of it on his own. Finally is the phrase, “like sheep without a shepherd.” These words originally came from Moses. At the end of his life he asked God to raise up his successor, “that the congregation of the LORD may not be as sheep that have no shepherd.”¹

What does it mean to be “like sheep without a shepherd”? Shepherds are present to lead their sheep to green grass and fresh water, to protect and take care of them. Sheep without a shepherd soon get dehydrated, malnourished, and sick. Without a shepherd, they’re totally vulnerable. Abandoned, they easily wander and fall into danger (cf. Eze.34:3–6). Children can be like sheep without a shepherd. But we usually think of adults as independent, self-sufficient, able to function on their own. In light of Jesus’ view here, that’s a superficial understanding of human beings. Without a personal relationship with God our Shepherd, all people are actually like sheep without a shepherd. Their souls are hungry, thirsty and dissatisfied. They suffer from fear. They don’t know who they are, what they should be doing, or where their lives are going. They easily get caught up in the wrong things and can become self-destructive. In our fallen nature we’re indifferent, thinking, “I’m glad that’s not my problem!” And we’re quick to be critical and judgmental, especially when we see people doing wrong. But Jesus would say, “If only that person had had a good shepherd, he or she would not have become like this.” His visceral reaction to sinful, anxious, helpless people is not to condemn or avoid them: it’s compassion—to understand what they’ve been through, to care, to get involved. Without his compassion, we can’t touch people where they’re hurting and bring the healing of Jesus. Jesus wants us to be shepherds who’ve internalized his compassion, who genuinely care and shepherd people to come to Him.

But how? How can we have his compassion? Philippians 2:1 says, “So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and

¹ Num.27:17b; cf. 1 Kings 22:17; 2 Chron.18:16; Eze.34:8.

sympathy...” The only way to have his compassion is to live *in Christ*, to be in his presence each day through the Holy Spirit and learn to walk with him, to depend on him throughout each day. Then, whether we’re at school, at work, with our little ones, or with church members, we’re encouraged by Jesus, comforted by his love, participate in his Spirit, and keep growing in his affection and sympathy. This spiritual union with Jesus is our access to his compassion. And we have to “put it on,” or practice it, every day with people in our lives, having “compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience...” (Col.3:12). We also need to get close to people, to listen to their agonies, to even let our hearts be broken. If we’re going to see people with his compassion, we can’t protect ourselves from their pain. There’s no “safe way.”

As “University Bible Fellowship” we pray for the young people of America to come to Christ. Currently there are about sixty million teenagers and college students in the US. Maybe a tenth are committed Christians. Many come from dysfunctional families, and for about a third of them their parents have divorced. At a young age they’re all facing the challenges of mental health, social stigma, and anxieties about social issues, academic burnout, isolation, job insecurity, climate change, and global instability. Social media influencers try to manipulate our youth with unrealistic ideas about beauty, to market all their latest products. Businesses heavily target them to sell their fashions, entertainment, fast food, credit cards, alcohol and other unhealthy lifestyle choices. Political parties and ideological groups actively recruit them to their polarized advocacy agendas. Religions target them, some using high pressure, manipulative tactics, to lure and indoctrinate them into unorthodox and unhealthy belief systems. Online communities and subcultures entice them with a sense of belonging, exposing them to hate speech, cyber bullying, and extremist ideologies, and isolating them from the real world. Even seemingly safe elite educational institutions promote non-Biblical worldviews, values and beliefs through biases in the way they teach history or social issues, and create a campus culture hostile to a gospel lifestyle and intolerant of free speech. Sadly, some immature and unhealthy believers try to reach young people not purely, to lead them to Christ, but for personal gain and self-promotion. It’s why we all need to be changed by the compassion of Jesus, to lead our young people to Jesus, our Good Shepherd and Spiritual King, and to his spiritual kingdom, not ours. It’s why we need to fight spiritually and get fully engaged in healthy, Christ-like discipleship ministry. And it needs to start in all our homes, so that the Holy Spirit can really work in and among us to raise shepherds and spiritual leaders for the world.

Can we “see” the millions of young people in our nation and all the dangers they’re facing? Do we care about what they’re going through or their future? Let’s ask Jesus to open our eyes and our hearts to all the young people in our high schools and colleges who are “like sheep without a shepherd.” Honestly, sometimes they’re hard to embrace. But our Lord Jesus isn’t negative; he has great compassion for them. Even if we can’t do much, he wants us not to be indifferent, but to care and to pray. Whether they’re our fellow students or we’re far removed from campus, whether we’re born in this country or from another place, Jesus wants us to learn his compassion for all American teenagers and college students who really are like sheep without a shepherd. Let’s start by showing his compassion for our own spouse and children, for our own siblings, roommates and coworkers. From there, let’s also broaden it out for all the

others we don't know. Learning the compassion of Jesus for people will change us, our families, our schools, campuses and workplaces, and our church.

Read verses 37–38. In light of the great need before him, Jesus not only has compassion but also asks his disciples to join him in looking up to God and praying. It shows his humble reliance on God and his simple faith in God, even as he faces overwhelming needs around him. He wasn't discouraged by the criticisms or by the lack of shepherds. He believes that raising and sending out compassionate shepherds can certainly be done by the living God. He's still urging us, most of all, to ask God to raise compassionate shepherds like him.

So, how do you view people? Are you negative, positive, or indifferent? Or do you actually care? Let's read verse 36 again. May God fill our hearts with the compassion of Jesus to see all the people around us, especially the young people of these times, like sheep without a shepherd.