

Matthew 9:35-10:8

³⁵Jesus traveled through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every disease and every sickness.

³⁶When he saw the crowds, he was moved with compassion for them, because they were troubled and downcast, like sheep without a shepherd. ³⁷Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. ³⁸Therefore pray that the Lord of the harvest will send out workers into his harvest.”

^{10:1}Jesus called his twelve disciples to himself and gave them authority to drive out unclean spirits and to heal every disease and every sickness. ²These are the names of the twelve apostles: first, Simon (who is called Peter) and his brother Andrew; James the son of Zebedee and his brother John; ³Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James the son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; ⁴Simon the Zealot and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him.

⁵Jesus sent these twelve out and commanded them, “Do not go among the Gentiles, and do not enter any town of the Samaritans. ⁶Go instead to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. ⁷As you go, preach this message: ‘The kingdom of heaven is near!’ ⁸Heal the sick. Raise the dead. Cleanse lepers. Drive out demons. Freely you have received; freely give.”

Compassion

I.

They are designed to tear at your heartstrings, to fill you with compassion. Maybe it's a commercial asking for your help to clothe the poor or feed the hungry—it could be to help people in our own community or another country. News stories bring images of far-away war-torn regions and all the suffering brought on by armed conflict. Other stories present the helpless looks of those whose lives have been upended by some natural disaster. It works. Many who have the means want to help people whose lives are filled with suffering.

“Jesus traveled through all the towns and villages... ³⁶When he saw the crowds, he was moved with compassion for them, because they were troubled and downcast” (Matthew 9:35-36, EHV).

The crowds Jesus saw were described as troubled. The word indicates something ongoing, not the irritation of a mere moment. There are many people with serious troubles. Financially, there can be the day-to-day challenge of making ends meet or worry about the balance in the retirement funds—will the numbers add up to enough to retire at the desired age, and will there be enough money in the accounts to last all through retirement? All kinds of other issues of life bring their own challenges: relationships, education of children, trouble in the workplace, medical issues.

The crowds were also described as downcast. This term was used to describe animals lying on the ground, unable to get back on their feet. People who can be described as downcast face problems they feel completely unable to fix. Those who have lost a job and cannot find work feel downcast. Parents dealing with a rebellious child feel downcast.

Jesus was moved with compassion. The people were troubled and downcast.

Of all the things in life that make a person feel troubled and downcast, serious illnesses make a person feel the most troubled and downcast. Even before Matthew describes Jesus as moved with compassion because the crowds were troubled and downcast, he says: “Jesus traveled through all the towns and villages...healing every disease and every sickness.” (Matthew 9:35, EHV).

Perhaps that was the compassion today's Gospel spoke of. Jesus demonstrated his compassion in healing people. There was no modern medicine back then. Surgery was undoubtedly limited to non-existent. Pain medications were rudimentary. Many diseases that people experience complete cures from these days were lethal back then.

Note that Matthew describes Jesus as healing *every* disease and *every* sickness. Not one medical issue was beyond Jesus; there were no limitations to his ability to heal.

II.

To be sure, alleviating human suffering shows compassion. Jesus showed compassion on the occasions when he fed those who had come out to listen to him teach. He didn't want them to go hungry. Here he healed diseases and sicknesses. All of this shows Jesus' compassion over human suffering, right?

Perhaps one might say so, but healing diseases doesn't *really* describe what Jesus was doing as he traveled around. "Jesus traveled through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every disease and every sickness" (Matthew 9:35, EHV). The real purpose for traveling to every little community was to present the gospel.

The message of the gospel wasn't something new; it's a message as old as time. God made the first gospel promise as soon as sin entered the world; he promised to send someone to deal with the devil and all his lies and deceptions; he promised to send a Savior from sin.

As Jesus traveled from village to village, there was a new twist. *Everyone* needed to know that God's promise was nearing completion. If the temple in Jerusalem were the only place the message was taught, some living in the countryside might be unaware how powerfully God's hand was moving to bring all his promises to conclusion. People needed to know. *Real* compassion was to bring this message to all the people.

So why mention healing every disease and every sickness? Why did Jesus spend so much time healing every disease and every sickness?

Earlier in this very chapter Jesus announced forgiveness to a paralyzed man. The buzz among the crowd was: "This fellow is blaspheming!" (Matthew 9:3, EHV). Only God has the authority to forgive sins. Jesus told them: "So that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins," he then said to the paralyzed man, "Get up, take your stretcher, and go home" (Matthew 9:6, EHV). The miracles Jesus did, even those which alleviated human suffering, were done to demonstrate to people that he is God; to show them that *nothing* is beyond his authority, even bringing forgiveness of sins. The real power of Jesus goes far beyond healing diseases and sicknesses.

As Jesus traveled through all those towns and villages, he noticed similar characteristics everywhere. "When he saw the crowds, he was moved with compassion for them, because they were troubled and downcast, like sheep without a shepherd" (Matthew 9:36, EHV).

Certainly people are troubled and downcast about the affairs of this life, but that's not what moved Jesus to compassion. Something far more troublesome was at play. These poor people were like sheep without a shepherd.

All through the Bible, even in the Old Testament, leaders of God's people were sometimes called shepherds. Some of those didn't do a very good job of leading. There were many kings of whom it was said: "he did evil in the eyes of God." There were prophets whom God identified as false prophets. There were priests who violated the stipulations God gave to them.

At the time Jesus preached and taught the religious leaders were really more interested

in political things than in what God said to his people or what God wanted for his people. They saw their “leadership” as a means to power. They made demands of the people, but offered no comfort. They did not point the people to God, or lead them to God. They did not tell what God had done and was doing for his people. They certainly did not identify Jesus as the One God had finally sent in fulfillment of the promise. Pointing people to God was their whole job. They completely failed at it.

The people were like sheep without a shepherd. How could they be anything else, with these feckless leaders failing to lead them?

There are certainly millions today who are sheep without a shepherd—millions who don’t know Jesus. How comfortable are you with that? When you see the commercials and news stories about poverty, are you concerned only about their need for food and clothing? When the news bombards you with war-torn images and disaster-area images, is your first and only thought to wonder how aid for their physical needs might be met? Jesus’ compassion didn’t begin and end with physical needs.

Bring things a little more close to home. Are you filled with compassion for the spiritual needs of those you are close to?

Religion is one of those so-called taboo subjects. Is it really compassion to avoid that subject with close personal friends if they are unbelievers? That unbelieving friend is a sheep without a shepherd. Your desire for a good earthly friendship may have eternal consequences for your friend.

Through the years I have known several sets of parents who had children who declared they were atheists. As a parent, do you stop talking about Jesus because you want to still be a part of their lives? One mother I know told her son, “That doesn’t mean I’m going to stop talking to you about Jesus. I’m still going to send you Bible passages and talk about what God wants from you and for you.”

Have compassion. Eternal compassion.

IV.

“Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few.³⁸Therefore pray that the Lord of the harvest will send out workers into his harvest” (Matthew 9:37-38, EHV).

The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Very few in Israel in Jesus’ day knew that their Savior had finally come. So many thought he was just a great Teacher. So many thought the most important aspects of Jesus were his ability to feed them and to heal them. They didn’t know the *real* issues that so moved Jesus to compassion. They didn’t know how lost they were and how much they needed Jesus *spiritually*.

The traditional shepherds of the people had failed. New workers were needed in the harvest field. New workers who could identify Jesus as the promised Messiah and lead people to him.

The world population clock has topped 8 billion. How many of the 8 billion are troubled and downcast, like sheep without a shepherd? The harvest is, indeed, plentiful. “Pray,” says Jesus, “that the Lord of the harvest will send out workers.”

Our church body is experiencing the retirement of the Baby Boomer classes of pastors and teachers—relatively large classes. The number of congregations and schools in our Wisconsin Synod has grown at the same time. Pastor and teacher vacancies are a topic of conversation at every Pastors’ Conference, and probably every Teachers’ Conference, too. Pray the Lord of the harvest to send workers.

You have another task. Encourage those who have spiritual compassion to consider being a worker in the harvest field and to begin their preparations to be a harvester.

“Jesus called his twelve disciples to himself and gave them authority to drive out unclean spirits and to heal every disease and every sickness...⁷As you go, preach this message: “The kingdom of heaven is near!” (Matthew 10:7, EHV). Jesus followed his prayer for workers by calling workers into the harvest field.

The main purpose of those Jesus called was to preach the gospel. They were to tell the same good news he had been spreading through all the towns and villages.

Jesus gave the Twelve power over disease and sickness. In his power and authority Jesus gave them the same power over sickness and disease he had used to show he was from God. They were to use these gifts for the same purposes.

“Freely you have received; freely give” (Matthew 10:8, EHV). The grace of salvation is always a free gift from God. God wants his spokespeople to share the gospel with others as freely as he has shared it with us.

You may have noticed that ministers of the gospel these days don’t have special power over every disease and sickness. Jesus didn’t promise that such gifts would continue—they had the special purpose of identifying his early spokesmen.

God gives different gifts to ministers of the gospel—both pastors and teachers—today. They are no less powerful than what Jesus gave his disciples. After all, the greatest power is the power of the gospel to bring souls to Christ.

Look around at the world. Notice how ripe it is for harvest. Have compassion on those souls who don’t know the Savior. Pray the Lord of the harvest to send out workers. Encourage many to work the harvest fields of Jesus because of your compassion for souls. Amen.