

Lesson 6

Love for Souls

Introduction

There is much to learn as we examine Jesus' ministry. In Matthew 9, we find Him in Galilee, moving throughout the region, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness. Jesus was everywhere. From small obscure villages to large towns, coastal areas, to mountain villages, He met people where they were.

Matthew 9.35 identifies three aspects of his ministry. He was *teaching* in the synagogues. This was seen by the Jews as the place to be instructed about the word of God. On several days of the week there would be meetings, including every feast and holy day. Each gathering featured a reading from a portion of the law. Then a reading would come from the prophets, after which those gathered would listen to a sermon on one passage or both. Jesus seized the opportunity to teach large numbers of people across Galilee about the true meaning of Scripture. No one ever taught like He did.

Verse 35 also identifies Jesus' *preaching* the gospel of the kingdom. He did this wherever he could. We find him announcing the kingdom by preaching in houses, out by the sea, in the streets, or wherever else people would gather. He proclaimed that God's kingdom was coming and showed them how to get into it and what blessings they would receive by being in it.

Finally, Matthew 9.35 identifies the third aspect of Jesus' ministry: *healing* every sickness and disease among the people. We have a collection of nine miracles in Matthew 8-9. No doubt this is an extremely summary or sampling of what Jesus did. Jesus healed countless numbers among the estimated 3-million-person population of Galilee. Why the miracles?

Certainly, the miracles would have served as powerful testimony of who He was. He was not merely a carpenter's son from Bethlehem, *he was the Son of God!* His teaching and preaching were so different ... and many of the things he instructed them were the exact opposite of what they were being told by their religious leaders ... that they needed to understand the authority behind his message. The miracles helped convince people he was of God. Nicodemus sums up the general feeling many would have had: *we know that no man can do the things that you do except God be with him*, John 3.2.

But there is another reason why Jesus worked so many miracles and this may be the most important: He wanted to stress the loving, tender heart of God. Every miracle Jesus performed communicated God's compassion, sympathy, tender, kind, mercy. In everything we see with Jesus, He demonstrated a supreme love for souls.

Love for souls is an absolute essential and must be the foundation of all our efforts. We can teach the word, which we do well. We can proclaim the good news on how to find the salvation God provides ... which again, we do well. But we also need to have the kind of heart that will touch people where they hurt and be able to effectively express sympathy, kindness, care, and love. *If we miss this, we miss it all.* This is why Paul opens 1 Corinthians 13 in the way he does: *If I speak human or angelic tongues but do not*

have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal, 1 Corinthians 13.1 Do you see the principle here? Everything must be done in love. Jesus applied it perfectly. When you observe His ministry, it was focused on individuals. Working with them one by one, He purposely sought to identify with them, sharing his love and warmth. In other words, He touched them.

For us, it is imperative that we see with the eyes of Jesus ... committing to impact people with affection and care, exhibiting the kind of tenderness that manifests the heart of God.

Demonstrating our Love

Exhibiting Compassion

As you read Matthew 9.36, try to envision Jesus standing on a hillside with a line of hundreds or thousands of people coming to him for help. See masses of people who have overwhelming physical problems, diseases, etc. Notice how Matthew describes what was on Jesus' heart:

When he saw the crowds, he felt compassion for them, because they were distressed and dejected, like sheep without a shepherd.

Jesus was moved with compassion for the people. He suffered with them. He felt their pain. *He cared*. All of this is basic to who God is. Since Jesus is the perfect representation of God, it was His very nature to love.

In the original language, the expression we use today for "compassion" meant to "feel it in the bowels." And we understand this ... when we see something horrible or feel distress, we often feel it in our midsection. Our stomach may turn. This is the area of the body where our emotions can grip us. And Jesus was definitely moved. The creator has come to earth and see the ravaging effects of sin's curse. Sickness, debilitating disease, and death were not part of the original design. He was moved ... and had a desire to restore and relieve people of the emotional and physical pain they experienced.

His spirit of compassion was so different from what the people were used to. The Pharisees said that God was uncaring, uninterested, and indifferent. They certainly were that way ... many times assuming that a person's sin had led to God judging and punishing them with a disease or physical malady. The religious establishment avoided these people at all costs. And yet, here is Jesus bringing a completely different message. Compassion is what moved our Lord, and it is expected of us to follow in His footsteps:

Finally, all of you be like-minded and sympathetic, love one another, and be compassionate and humble, 1 Peter 3.8.

Seeing Their Condition

What else can we learn about Jesus' love for souls? Let's see His distress over their condition. English translations have a hard time expressing the depth of the expression used here:

- *Distressed and dejected*, CSB
- *Harassed and helpless*, ESV
- *Distressed and downcast*, NASB2020

- *Weary and scattered*, NKJV

The first word, *distressed* (CSB), can mean to be “worn out,” or “exhausted.” But it can also go deeper, describing an even worse condition. It can describe someone who is “beaten up, battered, ripped, torn, or even skinned alive.”¹⁷ So, what we should picture here is someone who has been devastated, exhausted, and beaten down.

The second word, *dejected* (CSB), means to be “thrown down, lying on the ground, totally helpless, etc.” Can you see the powerful imagery here? We all have a picture in our mind when we picture someone who has been thrown down and is lying motionless on the ground. Here we see people who spiritually (and even physically) were near death. Their sin had rendered them helpless. They needed a deliverer or Savior!

Next, Matthew adds that they *were like sheep without a shepherd*. This is no doubt an indictment on the religious establishment of Jesus’ day. Their leaders refused to care about their problems, refusing to feed them spiritually, bind the wounds created by sin, or even care about their hurts. They were actually bringing harm to the people through their indifference, rendering the people mangled and helpless. Having this in mind might help us better understand the background *and power* of Jesus’ invitation in Matthew 11.28-30:

“Come to me, all of you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take up my yoke and learn from me, because I am lowly and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

What the Pharisees and religious leaders were binding on the people was hard and painful. They were literally killing souls. Jesus offers help, saying his burden is *easy* and *light*. The people needed a shepherd and He longed to guide and lead them.

Today as we survey our world and see many of our friends and people in our communities fraught with sin, our realization of their spiritual *condition* should move our heart. Sin destroys lives through selfishness and narcissism; addiction; and uncontrolled passions. Its effects are everywhere. We see it in devastated lives, families in pieces, and burdensome consequences – some of which may never go away. Sin is life-altering and never in a good way. It always brings harm and hurt.

Remembering What is to Come

As Jesus looked at the massive crowds, heartbroken and moved with deep emotion, he speaks to His disciples saying,

“The harvest is abundant, but the workers are few,” Matthew 9.37.

What is the “harvest?” May I suggest in this context it is not the lost? The imagery we see in John 4.35 is not present here. There is a completely different picture here in Matthew 9. Many times, this may be lost and we tie *harvest* into the need for evangelism. I think this misses Jesus’ intent. “Harvest” can also refer to *judgment*.

¹⁷ Abbott-Smith, G. *A Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament*. New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1922.

Isaiah 17.10-11 and Joel 3.9-14 both speak of a “harvest” in that sense. There is a time coming when souls will be harvested and sent off to their eternal destination. The harvest is not just a mission field, the harvest is also the end of the age ... the final judgment. And for many, that will be a day of grief. Revelation 14.14-15 speaks of the great harvest at the end of time:

Then I looked, and there was a white cloud, and one like the Son of Man was seated on the cloud, with a golden crown on his head and a sharp sickle in his hand. Another angel came out of the temple, crying out in a loud voice to the one who was seated on the cloud, “Use your sickle and reap, for the time to reap has come, since the harvest of the earth is ripe.”

So, not only did Jesus minister to people because of His great compassion and out of sympathy for their condition – he also ministered to them because of the coming judgment and the reality of being lost.

One day God will:

when he takes vengeance with flaming fire on those who don't know God and on those who don't obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus, 2 Thessalonians 1.8.

We must never lose sight of this. There is no way to describe how awful it will be to be lost ... and I think knowing this is what moved our Lord to urgently reach out to people. So it must be with us!

Conclusion

How do you see the world? How do you see your fellow Christians who suffer? Will you be moved by your compassion, sympathy, and care? Will you allow yourself to feel their hurts and take their pain? Will you go out of your way to serve?

We each have been called to ministry ... using our talents to serve, bind up wounds, and restore. Satan is relentless, working through every possible avenue to rob us of our spiritual vitality. We will succeed every time when we come to appreciate how God is knitting us together – to give us strength and support through one another to stand. Praise be to Him for His help and care for us!

For Thought and Reflection

1. Why did Jesus work miracles? What do you think the main reason was?
2. Write down your description of the loving, tender heart of God. Why is it important to see God in this way?
3. What happens if we engage in a ministry that is void of love and compassion?
4. What is meant by Matthew's description of the people coming to Christ in Matthew 9.36? How had they been wearied or distressed?
5. What is the coming harvest of Matthew 9.37?