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## THE EMOTIONAL LIFE OF JESUS | COMPASSION

March 9, 2025

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In the past we have engaged in sermon series focused on the words of Jesus or the actions of Jesus. We've considered conversations with Christ, we've considered the parables of Jesus, the hard sayings of Jesus, but we've never taken up the emotions of Jesus... until now. And here are two good reasons why we should consider the emotions of Jesus.

First, it's possible that we have created a mental concept in our mind of Jesus that leaves no room for the emotions. We might assume that Jesus was some kind of stoic leader and unemotional ascetic type — someone who kept a stiff upper lip. But far from being placid or apathetic, Jesus was passionate. He expressed strong feelings. He chastised hypocrites in anger. He looked upon the rich young ruler in love. He felt joy in the Holy Spirit, and he felt agony in the Garden of Gethsemane. So if we really want to know and understand Jesus, we need to know and understand something of his emotions.

But here's the second reason why we should consider the emotions of Jesus. It's because it's also possible that if we underestimate the emotional life of Jesus, we might underestimate the emotional life of his followers. I wonder if you have ever met a “bobblehead Christian,” or what John Stott once referred to as a “tadpole Christian.” What do a bobblehead doll and a tadpole have in common? Well, they both have huge heads and not much else. And it's very possible that we as Christians could become bobblehead dolls or tadpoles. We could become people who have huge heads and very small hearts. Because it's possible that we could fill our heads with all kinds of knowledge — knowledge about the Bible, knowledge about theology — and yet leave no room for emotions. And if we do that, then we fail to reflect the fullness of Jesus.

So do you realize that God is seeking to bring everything — not just our words, not just our actions, not just our thoughts, but even our emotions — into conformity with Christ. And so if we underappreciate the emotional life of Jesus, we might underappreciate the emotional life of ourselves as his followers. So we're engaging in a series focused on the emotional life of Jesus, and Andrew Smith kicked off this series on Ash Wednesday with a sermon focused on lament. Today, I'd like us to turn our attention to Jesus' compassion.

The theologian B.B. Warfield, many, many years ago, wrote a little essay entitled “The Emotional Life of Our Lord,” which inspired this series. And in that little essay, he writes that compassion is the emotion that is most frequently attributed to Jesus. So there are at least seven different occurrences in the gospels where we read that Jesus was moved with compassion, and his compassion spurred him into action. Now, sometimes his compassion was sparked by the sight of an individual, or perhaps two people, who were in some kind of distress, like a man who was a leper and needed to

be cleansed in Mark 1 or a bereaved widow who had lost her one and only son in Luke 7. Two blind men once stopped Jesus on the street and asked if he might open up their eyes in Matthew 20. And a father pleaded with Jesus: “If you can do anything,” he said, “If you can do anything, could you please help my son who is suffering terribly from these convulsions?” in Mark 9.

On one occasion, Jesus’ compassion spurred him into action in order to relieve the hunger of a large crowd in Matthew 15. And on another, his compassion provoked him to begin healing all those who were sick in Matthew 14. And sometimes Jesus was moved by the mere sight of people in our common humanity. And it is to one such episode that I would like us to turn our attention. So as we focus on Matthew 9 this morning, let’s consider what this passage tells us about the compassion of Jesus. And as we consider the compassion of Jesus, it should change the way in which we view: 1) *Jesus*, 2) *ourselves*, and 3) *other people*.

<sup>35</sup>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. <sup>36</sup>When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. <sup>37</sup>Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; <sup>38</sup>therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.

*Matthew 9:35-38*

## **How We View Jesus**

Our opening verse reminds us that Jesus is on the move. Jesus is always at work. Verse 35 tells us that he was walking around all the cities and the villages, teaching in the synagogues, proclaiming the gospel of the Kingdom and healing every disease and affliction. So Jesus is never static. Jesus is never stationary. Jesus is always at work, and the reason why is because the human need is so great.

Jesus is on the move, and therefore Jesus provides us with a model for our own ministry. Once we become followers of Jesus, we’re called to be people on mission like him. Jesus never calls us into relationship with himself without immediately sending us out to participate in his mission in the world. The church is called to be missional, and a church that fails to be missional fails to be a church, because we’re failing to follow Jesus in his own footsteps. And what that means, therefore, is that we can’t rely on an attractional model of ministry. Do you know what I mean by that? We can’t simply rely on trying to attract people to our church. We can’t wait for them to come to us because of the quality of our sermons or the quality of our worship or the quality of our programs. No, rather than an attractional model of ministry, we have to embrace a missional model of ministry. We can’t just wait for people who do not yet know Jesus to cross through our doors and meet us here. Sometimes they may, but we need to be like Jesus, on the move. People who are sent out to go and meet people where they are, as they are, in all of their human need. See, Jesus met people where they were, not where they were not, and he addressed the needs as he saw them in order to draw them into relationship with himself. And so we too are called to be people who are sent, who meet people where they are, not where they are not.

And here we see that Jesus actually reveals a rather important principle. He shows us that all human pain, no matter what form it takes, wherever we may find it, provides a starting point for ministering to them. It doesn't matter what their condition may be. It doesn't matter what they might be going through. Jesus here seeks not only to herald the gospel, but to heal, not only to teach, but to touch.

And as it was for Jesus, so it is for us as his followers. And so what that shows us is that the spiritual and the material go together. We have to address both spiritual and material needs, just as Jesus did. We can't drive a wedge between the two. So evangelism (sharing the gospel) and social responsibility go together. Ministries of word and ministries of action go together. We can't drive a wedge between these two. Why? Because we as human beings are integrated wholes. We can't easily separate out the spiritual from the material. We're whole persons. And just as Jesus seeks to address the whole person, so should we.

So both spiritual and material needs provide us with a starting point in terms of how we begin to minister to others, perhaps depending on what is most urgent at the moment. And yet at the same time, we have to remember that there is an ultimacy to our spiritual need. And what do I mean by that? Well perhaps I could put it like this. Let's say that you have everything you could possibly want in this life. Let's assume that you're rich, happy, and free rather than poor, depressed, and enslaved. Let's say you're rich, happy, and free, but your relationship with God is still off. Well then guess what? You're lost. See, even if you're rich, happy, and free, but your relationship with God is off, you're lost. So there is an ultimacy to our spiritual need, even though both the spiritual and the material are important, and either one can be the first thing that we address within the circle of human need that confronts us.

That's why Christopher Wright, the author of the book "The Mission of God," suggests that he prefers to use the word "ultimacy" rather than "priority" when describing our spiritual need. And here's what he means by that. He says,

Priority means it is the most important, most urgent, thing to be done first, and everything else must take second, third or fourth place. But the difficulty with this is that (1) it is not always possible or desirable in the immediate situation, and (2) it does not even reflect the actual practice of Jesus.

Rather, almost any starting point can be appropriate, depending possibly on what is the most pressing or obvious need. We can enter the circle of missional response at any point on the circle of human need. But ultimately we must not rest content until we have included within our own missional response the wholeness of God's mission response to the human predicament – and that of course includes the good news of Christ, the cross and resurrection, the forgiveness of sin, the gift of eternal life that is offered to men and women through our witness to the gospel and the hope of God's new creation.

That is why I speak of ultimacy rather than primacy. Mission may not always begin with evangelism. But mission that does not ultimately include declaring the Word and the name of Christ, the call to repentance, and faith and obedience has not completed its task. It is defective mission, not holistic mission.

So we're called to emulate Jesus in the way in which we respond to the people around us. We're supposed to have a missional response like his. But why? Why should we participate in Jesus' mission to the world? Why play a role in ministry? Why should we get involved? Why should we care? And the answer is easy: It's because of the heart of Jesus.

So in verse 36, Matthew tells us that when Jesus saw the crowds, he had compassion. Now this is more striking than you would realize at first. B.B. Warfield, in that essay from all those years ago, noted that the word compassion, as well as the concept, was completely unknown to the ancient Greeks. And it's true, the ancient Greeks didn't even have a word for compassion. Now my son, Luke, started taking classical Greek this year, and when he started taking Greek, I realized something interesting. When you're learning a new ancient language, when you're learning the vocabulary, usually they give you a list of words that appear most frequently within the literature. So you start with the words that appear most often in the classic texts. Now, when you're learning Biblical Greek, what are the first words that you learn? Well, you learn words like God, Savior, salvation, faith, hope, love. But when Luke started learning classical Greek, do you know what the first words were that he was taught? Harm, injure, march, wage war, destroy.

You see, we might think that the western world is the product of Ancient Greece, but I'm not so sure. Because the ancient Greeks had words for death and destruction. They didn't even have a word for compassion. They didn't have a concept for it. So where did this word come from? Well, it had Jewish roots, not Greek roots, and the root of the word for compassion in Greek actually means "guts." It's the Greek word *splankna*, which was the way of referring to your guts, to your entrails. And so here's the question: Have you ever had an experience where you were so overcome by emotion that it gave you the feeling of a pit in your stomach? You felt tightening in your chest, you couldn't breathe, your heart rate went up. It felt like your stomach dropped inside you. That's what it means to have compassion. It means to feel something deep in your guts. It's a visceral word. So it's translated in English here as com-passion — to suffer with. But literally it means gut-wrenching. It means to feel something moving in your guts. It means to be gutted.

So it's one thing to feel gut-wrenching pain if something terrible happens to you. But what's so remarkable here is that what we're being told about Jesus is that Jesus felt gutted, he felt gut-wrenching pain, just by looking at us. Just by looking at us human beings in our common condition, he's just filled with compassion. His heart goes out to us. And so what that shows us is that Jesus had off-the-charts empathy. Sympathy means to feel pity or sorrow over another person's distress, but empathy means to feel what another person is feeling. You feel it yourself. You feel their pain. You feel it in your gut. And that's what Jesus has for us. He has nothing but compassion.

So just think about what that tells us about the heart of Jesus. Hansol Kang, our pastoral resident, has been leading a class on Sunday mornings on the Gospel-Centered Life, and in this class recently, they considered the question: What do you imagine God's face is like when he looks at you? It's a great question. When you consider God's face looking at you, what kind of expression does he bear? Is God frowning in disappointment when he looks at you? Is he scowling in anger? Is he

smirking with contempt? No, what this passage shows us is that when God looks at us, his face is filled with compassion. That's his first instinct. That's his gut reaction. His heart goes out to us with compassion. It literally makes his heart hurt.

So Jesus doesn't just sympathize with us in our weakness. No, he empathizes with us. He feels what you feel. And that's not all. What makes Jesus' compassion so unique is that Jesus doesn't just feel for you, but actually it propels him into action. Go back and look at all those seven occurrences where the emotion of compassion is attributed to Jesus in the gospels, and you'll see every time, he doesn't just feel compassion, he does something about it. He heals the leper, he heals the two men who are blind, he heals the father's son who's suffering from these convulsions. His compassion is so deep, so powerful, so passionate, he can't rest until he does something about it. It provokes him into action.

So when we consider the compassion of Jesus, the first thing that it should do is it should change the way in which we view him. We should see God in an entirely different light. He's not frowning, he's not scowling, he's not smirking; he's smiling. He's smiling on you, and he is concerned about you. He is filled with compassion.

### **How We View Ourselves**

But when we consider that, we should also consider how Jesus' compassion changes the way in which we view ourselves. See, we should view ourselves the same way that Jesus does. And so Jesus' view of us, notice, is not unloving, but neither is it unthinking. See, Jesus is evaluating our situation. It's not as if he's uncritical. He's not unloving, but nor is he unthinking. And that shows us that we should never drive a wedge between our minds and our emotions. If we want to be integrated followers of Jesus, we have to allow our emotions to inform our minds, but we also have to allow our minds to regulate our emotions, and that's how God is seeking to bring everything — words, thoughts, actions, and emotions — into conformity with his Son, Jesus.

So though Jesus is filled with compassion when he looks at us, he's not telling us that we can play the victim card. No, we do have to take responsibility for our actions, and we need to see ourselves clearly as he does. So what do we learn about ourselves from this passage? Well, when Jesus looks at us, his heart goes out to us, and why? Verse 36 says it's because he sees that we are harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Now that is not the most flattering description of us, but it is certainly the most honest. Jesus sees that we are harassed and helpless, and these words in Greek suggest that Jesus sees us as being beaten down, harassed, oppressed, and helpless, barely making it through life on our own. We need help. We're like sheep without a shepherd. We need to be led. We need to be guided. We need to be cared for.

Now, this image of sheep without a shepherd, it might be a little bit lost on us as people living in one of the largest cities in the history of the world, right? We're not exactly all that familiar with livestock. But Jesus typically likens us in the Scriptures to lost sheep. And why is it that sheep need shepherds and sheep dogs? Do you know? The reason is because sheep just have a natural tendency to wander off, to just leave the flock. And sometimes, if one sheep sees another one going the wrong way, it'll



just follow without even thinking about it. But when sheep wander off away from the rest of the flock, they open themselves up. They're exposed. They're exposed to predators. They're exposed to thieves. And Jesus is saying that this is what we're like as human beings. We have a tendency to wander. We don't know what we're doing. And when we do that, we open ourselves up to all kinds of dangers.

Now I'm a city kid. I don't have a personal story about sheep, but I do have a personal story about pigs, so maybe that'll work. Now, I can't give you the background. I can't go into all the details, but suffice it to say that when I was a very, very young kid, our family used to spend time on an Amish farm in Indiana. I can't explain why. It's too long of a story. But when I'm a young kid, we're staying on this Amish farm in Indiana. And we were a suburban family. We were thoroughly suburbanites. But on this one particular Sunday morning, the Amish family that we were staying with had hitched up their horses to their buggies and had gone off to church. Their church was in German, so we didn't join them. So we're by ourselves on their farm.

Now I've got five siblings. One of my siblings — I'm not going to name names — one of my siblings opened up the gate to the pig pen and let all the pigs out. And so here we are, guests on this Amish farm, and suddenly all their pigs are just trampling all over their property. What are we going to do? This is one of those days that was just forever burned into my memory, because here's the whole family — my mom, my dad, all the kids — and we're out there trying to herd pigs. Now, my dad worked at Citibank his whole career, okay. Herding pigs was not on his resume. But we're out there, you know, trying to get all the pigs back into the pen. And somehow we did it! We did it. I don't know how, and I don't think we ever told the Amish family that the pigs had actually gotten out of the pen.

But see, this gives you a little bit of an idea of how Jesus sees us. We're like scared barnyard animals running around. We don't have a clue what we're doing. We don't know where we're going, and when we run outside of the pen, we're opening ourselves up to all kinds of dangers, but we don't even know what they are. We're exposing ourselves to spiritual threats that we can do nothing to prevent or to protect ourselves from, because we don't even know what's good for us. And so what Jesus is suggesting is that we're harassed and helpless. We're beaten down. We're barely making it through life, and what we really need is a good shepherd. What we really need is good spiritual leadership. And the question is, will we allow Jesus to provide it? Will we allow Jesus to provide us with that good spiritual leadership that we all need?

### **How We View Others**

So Jesus' compassion for us should change the way in which we view him, it should change the way in which we view ourselves, but it should also change the way in which we view other people. See Jesus assumes that everyone around us is in the exact same spot. None of us is in a better position than another. We're all harassed and helpless, sheep without a shepherd. But interestingly, Jesus, rather than seeing this as an obstacle, sees this as an opportunity. So in verse 37, Jesus tells his disciples, he tells his followers, he tells us by extension, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few." The task is huge, but there are hardly any workers.

So he switches metaphors here. He says that we human beings are scattered and running loose, like sheep or like pigs that have been let out of a pen. But Jesus doesn't see this as a problem, because he thinks that all of us, as lost as we may be, are primed and ready to be gathered back in, if we would just let him. And the problem is that there just aren't enough workers. There just aren't enough people who are looking at the world through Jesus' eyes.

So let me ask you: When you look at the people that God has placed in your life — at home, at work, at school, in your apartment building, in your neighborhood, within your community — are you looking at them through the eyes of Jesus? Are you seeing them the way that Jesus sees them? Or better yet, this says that when Jesus saw the crowds, he had compassion on them. So how about when you're in a huge crowd? In Times Square, on the subway, are you looking at people the way that Jesus does? Are you looking at them through the eyes of compassion, or are you scowling at them, frowning at them, or smirking at them? See, Jesus wants us to have a heart like his. He wants us to feel what he feels. He wants to allow our hearts to be broken by the same things that break his.

So if we're going to cultivate a heart like Jesus, what are we supposed to do? How should we respond? Well it's interesting, Jesus tells us to pray. The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few. The task is huge, but there are hardly any workers. Therefore, pray. Therefore, pray earnestly that the Lord of the harvest will send out laborers into his harvest. So don't just pray, but pray earnestly for Christian workers, and see what God will do.

Now it's interesting, there are not too many places — aside from perhaps where Jesus introduces the Lord's Prayer — there are not too many places where Jesus specifically tells us what we should pray for. But here he does. Here he tells us what we should pray for. Here's what you should pray for: Pray that God would send out more laborers into the harvest. Now here's what's interesting. It's as we offer this prayer that we discover that we are the answer to our own prayer. As we offer this prayer, we are the answer. We're supposed to respond to this prayer the same way that Isaiah does in Isaiah 6. God asked, well, whom shall I send? Who will go for me? And Isaiah says, here I am; I'm here. And that is all that is necessary. Here I am; I'm here. And so that may be what Jesus is asking you this morning: Whom shall I send? And who will go for me?

So as we close, let's briefly consider *the who*, *the what*, and *the where* of this prayer.

### **The Who: Workers**

See, first of all, who are we supposed to pray for? Well Jesus tells us to pray for laborers, workers, day laborers. I mean, it's hard to imagine a term that is more simple, more straightforward, more unpretentious than "worker." That's all Jesus is looking for. He's not looking for saints. You don't have to be perfect. And Jesus is not looking for experts. You don't have to know it all. He's just looking for a worker. He's just looking for somebody who is willing and able, who's willing to lift their hand and say, "Sure, I'm here. Send me. I'll do whatever you want. What do you need?" So first of all, we're supposed to pray for workers, anyone who's willing to be put to work.

## **The What: Send Out**

And then second, what exactly are we supposed to ask Jesus for? Well, we're supposed to ask Jesus that he would send workers out. And the verb that Matthew uses here literally means to cast out or to thrust out. It makes me think that the Christian workers that Jesus needs are already right here. The Christian workers that Jesus needs are already right here in his Church. They don't need to come from somewhere else. They're right here. And all that needs to happen is that we might need to just be thrust out. We might need to be pushed out of the nest in order to learn how to fly. Because he'll take any one of us and put us to work within his purposes in the world.

And so you could think of a firework or a rocket. All you need to do is strike a match and light the fuse and BOOM. And maybe all that God needs to do is strike a match and light a little fire in your heart. Or maybe light a little fire underneath your feet, and off you go. Because here's the thing: God doesn't need us. He's fully capable of carrying out his work in the world without us, but he gives us the privilege, he gives us the honor of joining him in his work in the world of recovering lost people and bringing them back into relationship with himself.

## **The Where: The Harvest**

So if that's who we're supposed to pray for and what we're supposed to ask Jesus to do, the final question is, where does Jesus want to send us? And the answer is into his harvest. Now first notice that it is Jesus' harvest. This work does not belong to us; it's his. He's going to carry it out; we just have a supporting role to play. But then secondly, notice that it's a harvest. Have you ever stopped to consider the use of that word? Jesus isn't telling us to go out there and till the soil or plant the seeds. He's telling us to go out into his harvest, meaning most of the work has already been done. It's within our grasp. You know why? Because the hard part, the hardest part, has already been done. Jesus has already done it all. And people, therefore, are primed and ready to be gathered back in if we would just be willing to go, to have that conversation, to speak up, to say that word, to make that invitation. And so pray that God would send out workers into his harvest, because the work is already almost all done; we're just here for the final act.

Now, I said earlier that every other place in the Gospels where we're told that Jesus was moved with compassion, he was immediately spurred into action. He did something about it. He healed the leper, he healed the blind people, he healed that father's son. But you might say, well, no, not here. Here, he's not spurred into action. He's moved with compassion, but then he just tells us to pray. But no, I would suggest that when we read here of the compassion of Jesus, it is pointing us to the ultimate act of compassion. Jesus was spurred into the ultimate act of compassion.

See, what is Jesus telling us here? He's saying that we're harassed and helpless. We're beaten down. We're barely making it because we're like sheep without a shepherd. Well in John 10, there's a place where Jesus refers to three different kinds of people who interact with sheep. On the one hand, there's the thief. And he says that the thief just comes to steal, to kill, and to destroy. And then on the other hand, there's the hired hand. The hired hand doesn't have a relationship with the sheep. The sheep don't belong to him. He doesn't have a sense of ownership. This is just a job for him. So as soon as there's the first sign of trouble, that hired hand is gone. First sign of a predator, the hired hand abandons the sheep, because the hired hand doesn't really care about the sheep.



But then on the other hand, there's the shepherd. And unlike the thief or the hired hand, the shepherd knows his sheep. He calls his sheep by name, and he's invested. He's so committed that the shepherd is actually willing to risk his own life in order to protect the flock. And Jesus is that good shepherd who willingly lays down his life for us. He says that no one takes my life for me; I willingly lay it down. And because I've laid down my life and taken it up again, no one, no thing can ever snatch you out of my hand. Talk about compassion. By going to the cross Jesus doesn't merely suffer with us; Jesus suffers for us. And that's how he takes harassed and helpless sheep like us and brings us home.

And that's why the hard part, the hardest part, has already been done. It's just a matter now of going out and bringing in the harvest, letting people know what Jesus has already done, so that we might be led, fed, protected, and cared for with really good spiritual leadership — the kind that we can only find in Jesus.

*Let me pray for us.*

*Father, we thank you for this passage and all those other passages in the Gospels that give us a window into the heart of Jesus, that show us his compassion — that he is moved in his guts because of his love for us. And Lord, we pray that you would help us to consider his compassion so much so that as we get a sense of it in our hearts, it might change the way in which we view you and our relationship with you, that it might change our view of ourselves, and that it might change our view of others, so that you might thrust us out of the nest to join you in your work. Lord, we pray that you would send more workers into the field, because the hard part has already been completed, and the best is yet to come. We ask all this in Jesus' name. Amen.*