

The Heart of Christ: Compassionate — Matthew 9:35-36, Hosea 11:7-9

Introduction

What depiction of Jesus stands out most clearly in your mind when you think of him? An astute listener from last week may answer, *gentle and lowly*. Others may think of Jesus' moral teachings. Still others of his miracles. The more combative among us may think of Jesus' rebukes to the Scribes and Pharisees. The more conscience-stricken may think of Jesus' rebukes against his disciples. I'll admit that the most prevailing depiction of Jesus in my own mind is often his holiness — that is, I tend to underplay the humanity and likeness of Christ against that of his deity. This means that at times, I unhelpfully think of Christ as a distant elder-brother, disapproving of my own sinful thoughts and actions, and displeased even with my feeble attempts to obey his word.

But “the dominant note left ringing in our ears after reading the Gospels, the most vivid and arresting element of the portrait, is the way the Holy Son of God moves toward, touches, heals, embraces, and forgives those who least deserve it yet truly desire it.” (*Ortlund*)

In other words, the Bible's clearest picture of Jesus presents as one who is *compassionate*. And the compassionate acts of Christ prove his heart, from humble and accessible, ready and able to serve, to actively working to meet the needs of his people.

Exposition

Our English word for compassion comes from the Latin, meaning to *suffer with*. The King James Version aptly phrases it *bowels of mercy*, which gets to the true sense of the verb — arising from the “guts” of a person, the animating inward core of our being. Beyond sympathy and pity (though not less), compassion *feels* the misery of the helpless and creates a deep yearning for their help.

When we speak of the heart of Christ as compassionate, what we really mean is that when he looks upon the condition of the human soul and the fallenness of our world, he experiences a deep and moving sorrow for us that compels him to want to meet our needs. And it is precisely Christ, and only Christ, who *can* meet our needs. And so we see, that when he experiences compassion for the crowds that gathered around him, his desire was to move toward them as their only source of true help — at first only physically, but ultimately intending to meet their greatest spiritual needs.

Consider the several instances of this in the Gospels. Christ is moved with compassion:

- Because they were ***lost***
 - (Matthew 9:35)
 - But Christ is our True Shepherd
- Because they were ***sick***
 - Matthew 14:14 - When he went ashore he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion on them and healed their sick.
 - Christ is our Great Physician
- Because they were ***hungry***
 - Matthew 15:32 - Then Jesus called his disciples to him and said, “I have compassion on the crowd because they have been with me now three days and have nothing to eat. And I am unwilling to send them away hungry, lest they faint on the way.”
 - Christ is our Living Bread
- Because they were ***sorrowful***

- Luke 7:13 - (referring to a weeping mother whose son had died), And when the Lord saw her, he had compassion on her and said to her, "Do not weep."
- Christ is our Comfort and Joy

This was demonstrated in all of Christ's dealings with men, and in his very incarnation, life, and death.

"Was he not moved with compassion when he entered into a covenant with his father on our behalf, even on behalf of all his chosen - a covenant in which he was to be the sufferer, and they the gainers - in which he was to bear the shame that he might bring them into his own glory?"

— C. H. Spurgeon, *The Compassion of Jesus*

Even as he watched the world descend into sin and decay, in rebellion against God.

"[His compassion] was no transient feeling. He continued still to pity men. He saw the fall of man; he marked the subtle serpent's mortal sting; he watched the trail as the slime of the serpent passed over the fair glades of Eden; he observed man in his evil progress, adding sin to sin through generation after generation, fouling every page of history until God's patience had been tried to the uttermost; and then, according as it was written in the volume of the Book that he must appear, Jesus Christ came himself into this stricken world."

— C. H. Spurgeon, *The Compassion of Jesus*

Nor did his compassion did not abate when he became the object of the scorn and hatred of the cross, for even then he says "Father, forgive them." **Indeed, the cross itself was Christ's ultimate act of compassion**, where he didn't allow his people to be deservedly crushed for their sins, but suffered death for them.

Who is Christ's Compassion For?

Compassion moves toward sinners, toward the helpless, toward the needy. Compassion moves in love. So when we say that the heart of Christ is compassionate, we mean that those who are burdened and crushed by their sin, those broken by the fall, and the inexcusable and undeserving are those to whom Christ most naturally gravitates.

So what does the compassionate heart of Christ really tell us about who he is? It teaches us that greatest disposition Christ has for his people is love. He has very real and unmovable affections for us, and these affections stream from his innermost heart as rays from the sun.

His tender heart pities all the griefs of his dear people. There is not a pang they have but the head feels it, feels it for all the members. Still doth he look upon their imperfections and their infirmities, yet not with anger, not with loss of patience, but with gentleness and sympathy, "He is moved with compassion."

— C. H. Spurgeon, *The Compassion of Jesus*

It is Christ's loving compassion that drives him to suffer for sinners. It is fair to say that Christ is compelled by his own love and compassion to save us. Jesus' heart refuses to let him sit by. /He does

will not sleep. Indeed the purest heart of the purest man can not do otherwise. Christ's very compassion is drawn out by our sins (Romans 5:20)

The sins of those who belong to God open the floodgates of his heart of compassion for us. The dam breaks. It is not our loveliness that wins his love. It is our unloveliness.

—Dane C. Ortlund. *Gentle and Lowly*

A Holy God's Compassion for Sinners

Consider Hosea 11:7-9

My people are bent on turning away from me,
and though they call out to the Most High,
he shall not raise them up at all.

How can I give you up, O Ephraim?
How can I hand you over, O Israel?
How can I make you like Admah?
How can I treat you like Zeboiim?
My heart recoils within me;
my compassion grows warm and tender.
I will not execute my burning anger;
I will not again destroy Ephraim;
for I am God and not a man,
the Holy One in your midst,
and I will not come in wrath.

Despite the sins that cause God's heart to recoil within him, nevertheless his "compassion grows warm and tender." And what is the result of God's growing compassion for his own people amid their sinfulness? A steady stream of unmovable and unshakable love and grace. He does not give up on his people, even when his people have given up on him. And it is his holiness that leads to his refusal to come in wrath. His holiness is bound up with his compassion.

How is this possible? How is it that a holy God who can not keep company with sin somehow manages to keep company with sinners? How is it that he not compelled by his holiness to give us up to his necessary and just wrath? It is only possible because compassion led Christ to give himself up to God's wrath on the cross. It was there that he endured, for all his people, for all time, the holy wrath of a holy God against an unholy people. The father gave up his Son, and the Son gave up his life, in order that you and I would not be given up to the full veracity of God's judgement against sin — that judgment that we deserve, and that Christ did not. How was this possible, we wonder? Compassion.

Compassion-Fueled Life

This same compassion is for us even now:

The same Christ who wept at the tomb of Lazarus weeps with us in our lonely despair. The same one who reached out and touched lepers puts his arm around us today when we feel misunderstood and sidelined. The Jesus who reached out and cleansed messy sinners reaches into our souls and answers our half-hearted plea for mercy with the mighty invincible

cleansing of one who cannot bear to do otherwise. In other words, Christ's heart is not far off despite his presence now in heaven, for he does all this by his own Spirit.

— Dane C. Ortlund, *Gentle and Lowly*

We are comforted by Christ's compassion through the indwelling of his Spirit in our hearts. Daily, we are reminded, and often confronted, of his earnest desire for our good through the Spirit's faithful ministry to believers. All graces of assurance, comfort, peace, and faith are granted to us through his Spirit's work. All the wants of our hearts are met by the compassion of Jesus's heart, flowing out for us in his Spirit.

Application

1. We must move with compassion like our savior.

“The patient watcher by the bedside may be serving the Lord, and following his example, as well as the most dilligent teacher or the most earnest preacher of the glorious gospel. All means that can be used to mitigate human suffering are Christlike, and they ought to be carried out in his name, and carried to the utmost perfection possible.

— C. H. Spurgeon, *The Compassion of Jesus*

2. *Do not allow the despair of your sin to blind you to the compassion of Christ.* Christian, if you are in Christ, it may be tempting to view Christ as severely displeased with us. But his heart never against you. While he may at times discipline his people whom he loves, he does not ultimately turn them away. It is a great deception if we convince ourselves that Jesus would not want us because he is too holy to love a sinner. Rather, his compassion secures our acceptance into his embrace for all time.
 - a. This is not so for those outside of Christ's love. Though his compassion and sacrifice are sufficient to save you, your continued rejection of his grace will prove only to usher in his very real and present anger against sin. Unless you count your lot with his, he will count your lot with your sins.
3. Rejoice in this great love!