

The Compassion of Jesus
Matthew 9:35-38
Gerry Andersen
Valley Bible Church Adult Sunday School

Matthew 9:35-38 is unique among the Gospel accounts. There are no parallels to this section in the other synoptic Gospels or in the Gospel of John. It is general in nature, lacking detail as to where the words that Jesus spoke were said or the context surrounding those words.

This passage serves as a hinge between the tenth and final miracle of the deliverance of the mute man in Matthew 9:32-34 and the sending of the disciples to the multitudes in the next chapter. We see a summary of the words and works of Jesus, along with His desire for the multitudes to be served by those sent to them.

As a transitional connector between the miracles of Jesus to various people and the ministry of Jesus to the disciples, this passage connects to its preceding context and to what follows. Matthew 9:35 summarizes the miracles and Matthew 9:36-38 prepares for the sending of the disciples. It moves from the focus on the physical problems that people suffer to the spiritual problems that people suffer.

Also, we see the involvement of the disciples in the ministry that Jesus began. They will face the same type of opposition that Jesus faced (Matthew 9:11, 14, 34) and will be taught how to righteously respond to the enemies as they are sent out in ministry. This ministry begins with Jesus' words to His disciples in Matthew 9:37-38 about the need of the multitudes.

The chronicle of the ministry of Jesus (9:35)

Matthew 9:35 summarizes the ministry of Jesus with practically the identical sentence as Matthew 4:23, with the only difference being “*throughout all Galilee*” being replaced with “*through all the cities and villages*” and eliminating the ending phrase “*among the people.*”

“Jesus was going throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every kind of disease and every kind of sickness among the people” (Matthew 4:23).

“Jesus was going through all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every kind of disease and every kind of sickness” (Matthew 9:35).

These two verses describe the ministry of Jesus by bookending the teaching and miracles of Jesus in chapters 5-9. Prior to Matthew 4:23 and after Matthew 9:35, the focus was on Jesus’ ministry to the disciples, rather than to the crowds. Because the focus was on the crowds in the section summarized, the geography for this ministry is *“all the cities and villages.”* The essence of Jesus’ ministry was threefold:

1. Teaching in the synagogues. These synagogues existed because of the dispersion of the Jews after the exile to Babylon. These were community centers in towns for religious worship and teaching and Jesus took advantage of them in order to teach the many who began to follow Him.
2. Proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom. This was Jesus’ message to those He would encounter as He had traveled in the cities and villages. This is the means by which the multitudes came to be His followers and then were taught in the synagogues. Proclamation of the gospel of the kingdom was obviously not meaning a formulistic of the death, burial and resurrection so early in Jesus’ ministry. It involved the teaching about the kingdom as “good news” to those hearing.
3. Healing every kind of disease and sickness. Jesus’ healing ministry served to validate Jesus’ teaching ministry. It also was the manifestation of His compassion (Matthew 9:36), which was the basis for Him sending the twelve out to also preach and heal in His name (Matthew 10).

The compassion of Jesus (9:36)

The object of Jesus’ compassion were the multitudes. These were the same crowds that had been following Him beginning in Matthew 4:25, heard His teaching (Matthew 7:29), and saw numerous miracles (Matthew 8:1; 9:8, 33). These crowds are distinct from other groups of religious leaders mentioned in this Gospel, namely, the scribes, Pharisees, Sadducees, elders and chief priests.

Compassion is central to God's character. It is how God described Himself in the Old Testament, "*The LORD, the LORD God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth*" (Exodus 34:6; cf. Psalm 103:8; 111:4; 116:5;). It is the basis for why the prophets exhort people to return to the Lord, "*Now return to the LORD your God, For He is gracious and compassionate*" (Joel 2:13). Because this is part of God's character, He will be faithful in His compassion, "*The LORD's lovingkindnesses indeed never cease, For His compassions never fail*" (Lamentations 3:22).

God's compassion in the Old Testament included compassion for the Israelites who strayed from God, "*I will strengthen the house of Judah, And I will save the house of Joseph, And I will bring them back, Because I have had compassion on them*" (Zechariah 10:6; cf. Isaiah 54:7). God's compassion in the Old Testament included compassion for the Gentiles, "*Should I not have compassion on Nineveh, the great city in which there are more than 120,000 persons*" (Jonah 4:11). He does this because it is His desire, "*Therefore the LORD longs to be gracious to you, And therefore He waits on high to have compassion on you. For the LORD is a God of justice; How blessed are all those who long for Him*" (Isaiah 30:18). Note that God's compassion is not at all inconsistent with His justice.

The reason that Jesus felt compassion was "*because they were distressed and dispirited like sheep without a shepherd.*" The word "distressed" is translated as "harassed" in the ESV and NIV, inferring that they were troubled and disturbed by others. The word "dispirited" literally means "cast down" and is used for one lying prostrate, either from drunkenness or a wound. The ESV and NIV translate this as "helpless," pointing to the resultant state of the one cast down.

The compassion of Jesus is in response to the helpless state the crowds were in. Their need was greater because of what others had brought upon them. Jesus later in Matthew's Gospel will specifically rebuke the religious leaders for the very reason of His compassion on those they were harming. "*But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you shut off the kingdom of heaven from people; for you do not enter in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you travel around on sea and land to make one proselyte; and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves*" (Matthew 23:13, 15). These same leaders will be the reason why the disciples will be opposed when they embark on the mission that Jesus sends them to (Matthew 10:14-42).

The religious leaders were guilty of this harassment because of what they failed to do. This is why Jesus describes the crowds as *"like sheep without a shepherd."* Their religious leaders, or shepherds, failed to help their state of distress.

This imagery of a sheep without a shepherd is also used in the Old Testament. *"I saw all Israel scattered on the mountains, like sheep which have no shepherd. And the LORD said, 'These have no master. Let each of them return to his house in peace'"* (1 Kings 22:17). *"Therefore the people wander like sheep oppressed for lack of a shepherd"* (Zechariah 10:2).

In Ezekiel 34 we see the description of the failure of the shepherds of Israel, whose sheep *"were scattered for lack of a shepherd, and they became food for every beast of the field"* (Ezekiel 34:5). The imagery of predators attacking the sheep implies the religious leaders bore responsibility for this. Ezekiel 34:22-24 points to the Messiah as the solution to this failure, *"Therefore, I will deliver My flock, and they will no longer be a prey; and I will judge between one sheep and another. Then I will set over them one shepherd, My servant David, and he will feed them; he will feed them himself and be their shepherd. And I, the LORD, will be their God, and My servant David will be prince among them; I the LORD have spoken."*

Matthew 2:6 previously revealed Jesus as the Messiah to shepherd Israel, *"AND YOU, BETHLEHEM, LAND OF JUDAH, ARE BY NO MEANS LEAST AMONG THE LEADERS OF JUDAH; FOR OUT OF YOU SHALL COME FORTH A RULER WHO WILL SHEPHERD MY PEOPLE ISRAEL."* Later in Matthew, Jesus will describe Himself as the Shepherd (Matthew 25:32; 26:31). The Messiah is the true Shepherd of His sheep.

Jesus felt compassion for the crowds because compassion is God's character. If we are following Jesus, we ought to have compassion for the multitudes as Jesus did. We ought to view them as Jesus viewed them, distressed and dispirited, harassed and helpless. The people of this world are in need of salvation from God, not the condemnation of Christians to add their distress. *"For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him"* (John 3:17).

As we grow in our understanding of God and our alignment with His will, our heart will likewise feel compassion for the people of this world. We will not view them as threats to our standard of living or those who may negatively affect our family. Our desire will be for their well being because we see them as harassed and helpless.

Conversely, those who are speaking against the people of the world in the name of Christianity are guilty of harassment. These are the modern day Pharisees, who “*shut off the kingdom of heaven from people*” by teaching their followers to avoid the crowds of sinners.

If our evangelistic endeavors require people to come to us and become like us, we make them disciples of us, not of Jesus. If our evangelistic endeavors are designed to simply recruit people to our church, we are seeking to make proselytes more than disciples of Jesus.

The call for workers (9:37-38)

While it is expected that the audience for His call to beseech the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into His harvest is the disciples, it is nevertheless noteworthy as the next chapter provides the message that Jesus gave in sending out these disciples (Matthew 10:5-42). They are to pray for workers and they themselves are sent out as workers. Praying for workers should lead to our participation in the work itself.

There are three aspects involved in Jesus’ agricultural analogy:

1. The measure of the harvest

Jesus states that the harvest is plentiful. This analogy of the harvest certainly refers to those people whom He felt compassion for in Matthew 9:36. The number of these people are numerous. Because the harvest is plentiful, we can expect that there is an abundance of people who will be responsive to the good news of Jesus Christ. Jesus has told us the nature of the harvest, and therefore, we must anticipate some degree of interest among at least a few of those with whom we speak about Jesus Christ.

Since the harvest refers to those Jesus felt compassion for, and since those people were “*like sheep without a shepherd*,” there is a sense of urgency involved. Much like a harvest that is ripe for the picking, there is a time-limited season for the harvest. All people exist on earth with a brief opportunity for faith that will pass away. “*Yet you do not know what your life will be like tomorrow. You are just a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away*” (James 4:14). Understanding the need of the lost includes an understanding that the time is limited for the harvest to be worked, both individually and generationally.

2. The minimal number of workers

The workers are those sent out into the harvest, or those people for whom Jesus felt compassion. They obviously are disciples of Jesus since those who are not following Jesus are not able to serve in the harvest. These workers are described as few, implying that there is a significant amount of work for the workers to do.

That those sent are described as workers communicates the essence of labor involved in the harvest. Since there are not enough workers to do the labor of the harvest, the owner of the harvest must be requested to produce additional laborers for this great task.

3. The means of sending out workers

The plentiful harvest with few workers requires additional laborers to serve this harvest. The owner of the harvest is the Lord. His concern for "*His Harvest*" is greater than any laborer. This adds to the feeling of compassion that Jesus felt for those who were harassed and helpless.

The means by which these additional workers are added to the harvest is by the request of the disciples to the Lord of the harvest. This describes God's sovereignty in the missionary endeavor. The Lord is the means of the provision, not the disciples.

The implication that results from this statement by Jesus is that our role is to make our request of the Lord and trust His provision. There are no goals or quotas for us to meet for doing His work. If the Lord does not send out the workers, they are best not to be sent out at all. The harvest is His and the workers are His. We are misguided when we seek responsibility and authority over what is God's alone.

The Lord of the harvest providentially guides His workers into His harvest in His time and in His way. Those with genuine faith are called by the Lord to go and make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:19) and thus, the fundamental aspect of the Lord's sending our workers is faith. Beyond saving faith is the person's responsiveness to the Holy Spirit in their personal obedience to the Lord. If we do not have an eagerness to obey Jesus by reaching those who are distressed and dispirited, there is no amount of exhortation that we can provide to produce enthusiasm for serving the people who do not know Christ. We can instruct our fellow believers in the teaching of the word of God but we cannot produce spirituality regardless of our methodology.

Conclusion

Because Jesus was holy and one with the Father (John 10:30), His heart felt compassion for the people, for this was that characteristic of God the Father. Jesus viewed the crowds as suffering helplessly under the leadership of their corrupt religious leaders. The people were “slaves to sin” (Romans 6:20) and “walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the son of disobedience” (Ephesians 2:2).

If we have the “mind of Christ” (1 Corinthians 2:16), we will share His compassion for the multitudes. We will increasingly see people accurately, as God Himself sees them, as sheep without a shepherd. Our opposition should be reserved for those who represent themselves as God’s leaders, but who are failing to care for people according to the Scripture and instead are harassing and distressing them.

Our flesh wants us to limit our love to those who love us. *“For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? If you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?”* (Matthew 5:46-47). With disdain for the unrighteous, far too many Christian leaders advocate for their followers to withdraw from the crowds, rather than seek to serve them.

The greater our compassion is for those who are lost, the greater our desire will be to help them know the Savior who came to deliver them from their distressed and helpless state. Because the Lord of the harvest loves man more than we ever could, we ought to beseech Him to send out workers to bring the gospel of the kingdom to the many people who are dispirited. We can be confident that God is at work in those whom He is calling and can expect responsiveness on the part of some.

We know God has people for us to serve, just as Paul was told by Jesus in the city of Corinth, *“And the Lord said to Paul in the night by a vision, ‘Do not be afraid any longer, but go on speaking and do not be silent; for I am with you, and no man will attack you in order to harm you, for I have many people in this city’”* (Acts 18:9-10). We do not know who they may be, but we know that the harvest is plentiful, with God having many people who have yet to be reached for Christ. We can therefore trust God’s sovereign plan to use His people toward this end, according to His power (Ephesians 2:8-10).