

The Compassion of a True Shepherd

Call to Worship: Psalm 23

1st Scripture: Ezekiel 34

2nd Scripture: Matthew 9:35-38

Introduction

We come now to the grand finale, as it were, of the lengthy section of self-authenticating signs and wonders that our Lord had performed, following the Sermon on the Mount. And as we will see at the end of our text, this will transition into the commissioning and sending out of the Lord's twelve Apostles, to begin reaping the great and ripe harvest that exists, among the lost sheep of Israel. And so, as we begin to tap into this transition, this morning, we will especially get a glorious glimpse of our Lord's heart of compassion toward lost sinners, which compels Him to lovingly strive to draw them into His precious fold.

I. A General, Summary Description of the Lord's Ministry (vs. 35)

“Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every sickness and every disease among the people” (vs. 35).

Here then, we are given a general description of the ministry of our Lord. Matthew's intent was never to give us a detailed account of every single miracle that our Lord had performed, which would have certainly eclipsed the primary purpose of His Gospel. His goal was to give us an essential sampling, revealing the profound power and authority which belonged to our Lord, over all manner and kinds of debilitating illnesses and diseases. To this end, he would be placing a very bright highlighter over the teachings of our Lord, which ought to be carefully observed and obeyed, by all who witness the power and authority that belonged to our Lord. In other words, Matthew's goal is not simply to amaze and trigger the curiosities of lost souls by exposing the miracles of Jesus to them, but rather, he aims to drive them to seek the One who performed the miracles, Himself, as the true Messiah of God, who is both able and

willing to save lost souls. And to do this, as we have seen, he must also expose the hypocrisy and lies of the religious leaders who had foolishly rejected Jesus.

And so, here, in seeking to transition to the commissioning and sending out of the Apostles, Matthew provides us with a summary statement, describing the whole of the Lord's ministry endeavors, additionally calling our attention to the fact that what we have already seen was only a small sampling of a far larger number of similar miraculous signs and wonders. As amazed as we ought to be by what Matthew has already detailed for us, he wants us to know that these were only the tip of the iceberg, as it were. And so, briefly, before we move on, let us just consider the general description of our Lord's ministry, given here by Matthew.

1) Jesus travelled about all the cities and villages. Not limited to, but especially among all of the villages and cities of Galilee, Jesus travelled to them, one after the other, in a circuit-like fashion.

2) "...Teaching in their synagogues." The Jews, though mostly misdirected by the teachings of the Pharisees, were a very religious people. That was part and parcel of the cultural life of the Jews. And so, Jesus went to where they would gather and amass in significant numbers, their synagogues (sort of like, their local church's, not being within reasonable reach of the temple itself) to teach them. His goal was to provide them with important, life giving and transforming truth. He was sent by God, to represent God, at a time when Greek philosophy, Roman paganism and corrupt Judaism had infiltrated the land.

3) "...Preaching the Gospel of the Kingdom." He would preach; that is, boldly proclaim the Gospel (the Good News) of the Kingdom of God, which was now upon them; indeed, which had arrived in the advent of the Lord Himself, the Messiah. It was a time of great darkness when the Jews, not only, having been plundered and conquered repeatedly (from all directions), and now under the authority and dominion of the Romans, but furthermore, had been subject to the harsh and impossible religious restraints of their corrupt religious leaders. Mercy and grace were virtually non-existent, barring the people from any hope of ever relating to, or gaining favor with their God. The temple worship and the religious atmosphere had become a giant political, money-making machine, and all sinners were cast aside as dejected outcasts, without any hope in this life or the next. It was utterly deplorable.

And so, Jesus entered into this dark and hopeless context, preaching the Kingdom of God, doing so, in such a way that welcomed anybody and everyone who truly desired to enter it, regardless of how sinful they had been. The Messiah had arrived, and He would conquer the curse which had barred sinners from fellowship with God. To this end, He preached Himself as the only door and gateway into this glorious Kingdom, which would be best known as a Kingdom of grace for unworthy sinners.

4) "...And healing every sickness and every disease among the people." By miraculously providing relief for the physical afflictions which had fallen upon the nation, the Lord also affirmed the authenticity of His Messianic Office, and the truthfulness of His preaching, concerning the Kingdom of God. Signs and wonders accompanied His preaching. And again, furthermore, He was able to show His power over every manner of bodily affliction, and even death itself, solidifying the fact that His Kingdom was an eternal Kingdom, where all things would be restored, and death would have no place.

And so, this was a general description of the Lord's ministry, from the time of His baptism until His death and resurrection, the latter of which, would seal the whole glorious package of God's decreed will, concerning sinners who are joined to His Son by faith.

II. The Compassion of a True Shepherd

Following this, we are told, that as our Lord viewed the multitudes of lost individuals, who followed Him around while He fulfilled His ministry, His heart was moved in a particular direction. Something about them tugged at His insides, creating a strong desire for them, within Him. And this is what provokes the transition into the next essential part of His overall ministry.

"But when He saw the multitudes, He was moved with compassion for them, because they were weary and scattered, like sheep having no shepherd" (vs. 36).

And so, here we find that our Lord was moved with compassion toward the multitudes that followed Him. He looked upon them, and saw a neglected, confused and lost people, and this compelled Him to want to reach out to help and rescue them. His heart was touched and moved by their condition, and this triggered emotions of sorrow and pity within Him, which drove Him to act toward them. You see, there is righteous machinery at work here, deep within

the Lord, which makes its way out, compelling His actions. He looks at them. He thinks about them with the mind. And as He processes their condition, His heart is deeply moved, producing the appropriate emotions which lead Him to “feel” for them, in accordance with His human nature. And then, this drives Him to lovingly exercise compassion toward them; an appropriate action of “doing good” toward them, so as, to answer their sad condition. And to this end, as we have seen last time, He will aim for the root of their problem, rather than simply deal with the visual symptoms. Now, we will get back to this, but notice for a few moments what it is that moves our Lord with such compassion toward these multitudes. We are here given insight into the Lord’s thoughts and heart, which have moved Him in this way.

Notice, we are given three important details which describe what our Lord had observed about the multitudes, and which provoked His compassion toward them.

1) They were weary. The multitudes were tired, worn out, and simply not properly cared for. In the spiritual sense, they were neglected, unfed and left without hope.

2) They were scattered. They were abandoned, confused and left to their own spiritual devices. They were not properly led by those who ought to have led them. Again, they were neglected and even abused.

3) Finally, to these ends, in summary, they were like sheep without a shepherd. Of all animals, sheep must be led and cared for. They are incapable of defending and caring for themselves. They are very vulnerable and simply cannot survive on their own.

And so, when our Lord describes the deplorable condition of the multitudes, the most appropriate analogy would involve Him walking through the wilderness and suddenly being approached by a large group of abandoned, malnourished, confused, weary, abused and desperately needy, flock of sheep.

Now again, His emphasis here is particularly on the *spiritual* condition of this multitude, which is confirmed by His comments to His disciples in the verses that follow, which we will come to, shortly. Translating the illustrative analogy into the reality that it is describing, the Lord is moved by the way, in which, these multitudes have been mistreated and utterly neglected by the religious leaders of Israel; the Scribes, the Pharisees and the Sadducees. They have completely worn out, and deprived them of so many of the blessings attached to truly knowing

and having fellowship with God, by exchanging the true path to God, with their rigorous, self-righteous and abusive Judaism. In short, they have barred sinners from God, leaving them without hope, desperately thirsty, longing for the life and fulfillment which can only come by knowing God. Jesus knew this, and He had seen how it had taken such a heavy toll upon the people. And it moved Him to desire to reach them with the truth; the truth of how to connect them with their God. And interestingly enough, as we know from John's Gospel (Chapter 6), most of the multitudes will ultimately reject and turn away from Jesus. And He knew this. This was no surprise to Him. And yet, that didn't stop Him from being moved by their lost condition, strongly desiring to provide them with the light that they so desperately needed. We might say it in this way. Jesus loved even those whom He knew would soon reject Him. There was a very real sense, in which, He longed to reach them, even though He knew, that ultimately, they would not be reached. That said, there were also those among them, who would be reached.

It is this scene, which drives our Lord to turn toward His disciples, with a deep sigh, as it were. And we are told in verse 37, "Then He said to His disciples, "The harvest truly is plentiful, but the laborers are few." There are large multitudes of lost and hungry sheep, who are desperately in need of the truth. They have come to the point where all that they have been taught has left them empty, bankrupt and hopeless, and they are ready to hear the truth. They are itching for a cure. They are longing to be found, fulfilled and cared for by a true Shepherd. They need the Gospel!

The Lord shifts from a shepherding analogy to an agricultural analogy to get His point across here. He states that the harvest truly is plentiful. In other words, the crop is ripe and ready to be picked, and it's a very large, full crop. The season for reaping has come. However, the laborers are few. There are not enough laborers to go out and to reap the large harvest. What a sad state Israel was in. So barren and empty of truth was the great nation, that even though the setting was such that people's hearts were ready to hear and receive the Gospel, there were very few true-gospel laborers, who were capable of bringing in the harvest. The hundreds of years of subjugation to foreign nations has pressed a fervent sense of desperation upon the people, and yet, the religious atmosphere was so empty and vacuous of the truth, that there was a desperate need for true, God-sent laborers to go out and offer the people the true hope of the Gospel. Most

of all, the long-awaited Messiah has finally arrived, and yet, the people could not recognize Him, even though He was right under their very noses. So far gone was the nation; so far distanced from the heart of God, clinging to mere showy rituals and man-made traditions, that, they were unprepared to welcome the very Messiah, for whom they had so longed.

This being the case, the Lord then turns to His disciples and adds, “Therefore pray the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest” (vs. 28). Interestingly enough, recognizing the severity of the problem and the complete spiritual bankruptcy of the nation, the Lord doesn’t simply say, “Hey, go out and solicit harvesters.” Wouldn’t that seem to be the logical and most practical thing to do? But no. The Lord knows that only God can penetrate hearts with His truth; only God can overcome the hardness of the human heart, such that, true laborers would be made, who would be willing to sacrifice all, unto the service of building the Kingdom of God. And so, He commissions His disciples first, to pray. “Pray that the Lord of the harvest would send out laborers into His field, to reap souls unto eternal life. Pray that God would graciously break through the vale of darkness which presently rests over the land, impaling stony hearts with His Gospel light, so that, laborers would be made; lovers of God and His Son would be born, who would then, themselves, lay down their lives for the sake of His Kingdom.” “Pray, pray, pray!” And ironically, but not coincidentally, in the very next Chapter, the Lord commissions His twelve Apostles, to be the very ones who would first answer that call. In their praying for the Lord to send laborers into the harvest, they would actually first be praying unto their own ministry, as those who would set the tone, laying the foundation of Christ’s church, upon Christ, the Chief Cornerstone.

With that said, we have officially crossed the bridge, which will transition us into our Lord’s preparation for the sending out of His Apostles.

III. Closing Applications

1) Let me ask you, brethren, is there even a spark of the heart of Christ in us, this morning? None of us are perfect. None of us could possibly measure up to the pure and lovely heart of Christ. But, are we not being conformed to His image? Is that not the sanctifying mission, which is being worked out, inside of us, until we make it to glory?

To this end, do we have a true and sincere compassion for the lost? Are we moved by the spiritual bankruptcy that presently pervades our idolatrous and desperately lost nation? Are we moved, brethren? You see, sadly, even as Christians, the flame can begin to flicker a bit, as we get too caught up in this life, and lose sight of the prize. We can even lose sight of the fact that never-dying souls are on their way to the place of eternal, conscious suffering and torment.

But brethren, if that is the case, let us arouse ourselves now. Let us shake the dust off of our souls and reorder our priorities. Let us begin, where our Lord began here, and oil the machinery of our own hearts, so that, we could bring ourselves back on track for the glory of God. And let us pray to this end. Where then does the Lord begin? With a look; with an observation; an observation which provokes thought and contemplation. He looked upon the multitudes, and then was moved. He took the time to look at them, and to meditate upon their desperate condition. And you see, brethren, the only way one can do this, is to get out of ourselves. We have to pull back from personal conveniences and selfish-ambition and securing all of our time for our own personal desires. We have to make room in our hearts for others, simply beginning by looking outside of ourselves. Our Lord was selfless. He put very little thought into His own condition. His mind was often, constantly, trained upon others; first upon His Father, and then others. Even on the cross, while suffering for our sins, He looks to the needs of His mother, and to the blind crowd which rejected Him, and to a thief who was rightly condemned and crucified next to Him. He was other, and outward focused. He looked upon and pondered and studied the plight of others. And so, we have to begin there, brethren. We have to be willing to entrust our own state to God, to some significant degree, and we have to take time and energy and material and financial risks, unto the consideration of our fellow man. And that will get the machinery going.

And once the cogs and the wheels start turning in our minds, and we begin to process the state and need of others, our hearts will be engaged, and this will produce emotions of concern and heartbreak for them. And if this has its proper work; if we don't brush this movement of the heart aside, it will drive us to exercise loving compassion toward them, reaching out to them, in very tangible ways, looking for ways to infiltrate their desperately hopeless lives, with the hope of the Gospel, which they so desperately need!

And so, I begin by asking, does the plight of our own nation, and the people who surround you daily, move you, at all? Does it generate compassion; compassion which looks for creative ways of reaching into the lives of others with the Gospel? If not, brethren, may we pray God to shake the cobwebs out of our dusty hearts, so that, we can get down to the business of things that matter eternally. Your fellow mankind is separated from, at enmity with, our loving Father and Creator. Your fellow brothers and sisters in Adam are perishing. And you have the truth, the only truth, that can rescue and deliver them forever!

2) Brethren, while we are called to personal ministry, no matter what the climate might be; no matter what season we are presently in, I ask you, is the harvest not ripe, right here in our own country and backyard? Has not COVID-19, at the very least, pulled us out of our Lazy Boy chairs, taken away our sports and entertainment, compelling us to realize that we are not as safe and secure as we might have thought? We are not unbreakable and beyond reach. Yes, God has blessed us immensely as a nation, perhaps more than any other nation throughout much of history, and yet, we have boasted in the comforts and advancements of our culture, while forgetting about and rejecting the God who has so provided for us. But now, we've seen a chink in the armor, within which, a crack of light has begun to pass through, as we see how quickly the Lord can shut us down, with but a blow of a microscopic virus. And the political divisions and race divisions, which have sadly, significantly increased, have only added more wood to the fire of our instability, confusion and impending downfall.

But brethren, you see, in all of this, might there not be a panging of the conscience in some (or even many), to stop, and to realize that life is so much more than amassing the American Dream? Are people not realizing that life, as we have defined it, is a sham; that riches and material possessions and the temporary fulfilling of lusts, are just not all that they are cracked up to be? Is not the heart-shaped void in every individual beginning to glow with a desire for something more, something eternal, something truly fulfilling, which only God can fill? Is not our country like the Samaritan woman by the well, wearily heaping up a bucket of water from the well which never ultimately satisfies, hungering for Christ to give them water which shall never leave them thirsty again?

And so, brethren, I believe that there is a harvest here. But, who will reap it? Who amongst the mass of fluffy, useless, lifeless, worldly, compromising churches and cults, will reach into the masses of the desperately lost, to give them a Gospel which actually, powerfully, brings life? [Note: the “hear and now” emphasis of so many churches - peddling “physical bread” and not the “Bread of Life/Heaven” ; my recent experience at the “religious leaders” COVID Zoom interview]

To this end, we begin by praying, don’t we? [i.e. the Prayer Meeting]. And then, we prepare and open ourselves up, to being the very answer to our prayers, leading us to lay hold of an evangelistic heart, in whatever context and setting God has set us. Brethren, hear me on this. Not everyone is called to be a pastor or a missionary or a deacon. But everyone is called to evangelize, looking for ways to promote the Gospel light of Christ, in both word and deed.

[The Gospel to the unsaved; to those who are still wrapped up in the unstable, frail, temporary and dying world that surrounds us...]

AMEN!!!

Benediction: Jude 1:24-25