

## **Introduction**

Heavy rains saturated the ground in Wales in the fall of 1966 turning a mountain of coal waste into a black avalanche. Catastrophically, it cascaded downward and descended upon the small town of Aberfan below. Most of the 144 who were killed were children whose school building was crushed by the black slurry. All of England was stricken with grief. Queen Elizabeth visited the town in the aftermath of the disaster. Normally stoic, on this occasion she was visibly grieved. The town was impacted by her compassion. One mother who lost her child said that the queen's visit showed the town they were not forgotten by the world. Another was impressed by the fact that the queen had walked in their mud and it felt like she was right there with them.

In our continued study of Matthew this morning, we turn our attention to heaven's royalty, King Jesus. He has visited his people in the aftermath of grave disaster. The disaster is the catastrophe of sin and its far reaching consequences. And while Jesus came to do far more than show us he identifies with our misery, his compassion is very real and it does demonstrate that he is the king like no other.

[Read Text and Pray]

In the very first verse of his account of the gospel, Matthew announces Jesus as the Christ, the Messiah, the son of David. Matthew's purpose in writing was to demonstrate that Jesus is the promised descendant of King David who would rescue God's people and reign over them in peace and blessing. Matthew records how Jesus fulfills Old Testament scripture. Matthew accounts how Jesus performed the works of the coming Messiah and how he was going to establish his kingdom. He reports the preaching of Jesus, how he explains the nature of the kingdom of heaven, who gets in the kingdom, and who is great in the kingdom. In our selection of verses this morning, Matthew demonstrates again that Jesus is Messiah, and he shows us a distinction of his kingship. The main idea before us in this text is that King Jesus rules with compassion. His compassion sets him apart as a king like no other. Matthew highlights the compassion of Jesus by recalling him in a scene involving two blind men and a crowd. We will look first at the blind men then at the crowd, and finally we focus our attention on Jesus.

## **I. The Sight of the Blind**

These two blind men were sitting by the roadside outside the city of Jericho. There were actually two "Jericho"s located in close proximity to one another. One was the ruins of the city whose walls were obliterated when Joshua led the Israelites into the promised land. The other was a majestic oasis in the desert and the location of Herod's winter palace. The fact of two "Jericho"s may explain why Matthew says Jesus and the crowd were GOING OUT from Jericho while Mark and Luke indicate that Jesus was GOING INTO Jericho. It may also be that he was coming and going.

An unusual balsam bush was unique to the area around Jericho. The plant was used to make a medicine to treat blindness. Not a few blind people came to Jericho in hopes of regaining their sight by the application of that medicine. As a result the population of the blind was larger in Jericho than in other cities. Blindness was far more common then than now, and its effect was debilitating. If a person was unable to see, they were pretty much reduced to begging. The men in the account were two of a host of other blind persons in Jericho. Most likely they had tried the ointment without

success, and here they sat along the roadside in a shroud of darkness. Physically-speaking, they could not see.

When you think of the ruins of Jericho and the walls that fell down, a couple names should come to your mind. One of those, of course, is Joshua. But you should also think of a woman. Rahab is one of only two women mentioned in the genealogy of Jesus. She was a citizen of the walled city living among a people of spiritual darkness and blindness, a people who worshiped idols. They exchanged the glory of God for images. But Rahab's spiritual eyes had been opened. When Israelites came to spy out the city she took them into her house and protected them. She confessed to them that the Lord, the God of the Israelites, is the God of heaven and earth, and she knew the Lord had given the Israelites the land. Before letting the spies down out of her window, she asked them to deal kindly with her and her family and deliver them from death when the Lord gave them the city.

What is remarkable about the two men on the roadside near Jericho is that although they lacked sight physically, the eyes of their hearts, like those of Rahab had been opened. She knew the Lord of Israel is the God of heaven, and these men knew that Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah King. They recognized the identity of Jesus. They cried out, "Lord, have mercy on us, Son of David." You could argue that the word LORD is simply a polite address to a man, but put it beside the messianic title Son of David, and the cries of these men for mercy, and you realize that though they were blind physically, the eyes of their hearts had been opened to see who Jesus really is. He is Lord. And he is king.

Their opened spiritual eyes recognized Jesus' power to heal. Restoring blindness would require divine power. These men had confidence that Jesus had divine power. They believed he could open their eyes.

And not only did they recognize Jesus as Lord and king and possessing the ability to heal, they also recognized their complete helplessness apart from him. These two men were crying out in utter desperation. The word used to articulate their cry speaks of a loud wail of anguish. Last Sunday, when most were gone I learned after all that GCA did want the chairs taken up and moved to the wall, and I didn't know what to do, so I just cried out "HELP!" I must have sounded desperate because the troops that were here got engaged, and we got the chairs moved. But with these two fella's we are not talking chairs that need to be moved; we are talking eyes that won't open. Their cry for help was as loud and desperate as it could be. And when the crowd told them to be quiet, they cried out all the more. Jesus was their one hope, and they would not be ignored for lack of trying.

But the men also recognized that Jesus is merciful. "Have mercy on us!" was their cry. They recognized that they were pitiful and miserable and unable to help themselves. If they got the help they needed from Jesus, it would not be because they deserved it; it would not be because of some work they did. It would only be because Jesus is the Great I Am who in the Old Testament declares, "The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious and slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin." They realized that any hope for healing lay in the person of Jesus who is making his way down the street.

I want you to know this morning that what these blind men saw is what each of us need to see today whether or not we can see with our physical eyes—the light of the gospel of the glory of Messiah. Spiritual sight is far more important than physical. The god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ.

What Jesus did physically when he healed the two beggars he had already done spiritually. God had opened Rahab's eyes to turn from idols to serve the living and true God. And in the hearts of these two men, "God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' shone in their hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." If you see that Jesus is Messiah and Lord and King and savior and deliverer and healer, it is by a miraculous work of mercy in your heart. By divine work, your blindness has become sight and your darkness has turned to light. God has done it and he must be praised.

If you have even the inkling of desire for that work of God in you, then you should cry out as did these men putting all your hope in the one in whom they put their hope—King Jesus, Lord, Son of David. There is no medicine out there that can cure your spiritual blindness and bring you deliverance. There is no work you can do to make yourself right with God. But he is able and he is merciful, and you must cry out to him. The scriptures assure that "whoever will call upon the name of the Lord will be saved."

For those who are following Christ, the blind men provide for us a lesson in how to pray. David bowed his head in contrition over his sin and wrote out his prayer of confession. We find it in the psalms; it is Psalm 51. And here is how he began, "Have MERCY on me O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin!" He continued with the assurance that God will not despise a broken and contrite heart. We need to pray with an awareness of our condition and our need. Let your prayers be filled with the awareness that what we need from God is mercy and grace to help. And we should not be nonchalant when we pray. We should cry out in desperation, in complete dependence upon him. I think of Hannah when she was barren. There she was before the Lord earnestly pouring out her heart. Eli, the priest, observed and thought she must be drunk. Bare your heart before God when you pray.

And then be specific. Jesus came up to the men and said, "What do you want me to do for you?" They said to him "Lord, let our eyes be opened." When you pray, tell God what it is you want, with specificity. You can see much better when he answers, "Yes." Ask for mercy and tell him specifically what you are asking from him. General prayers are hard to measure and it is hard to see answers to general prayers. Rather tell the Lord precisely the help you need.

Let's look next at . . .

## **II. The Callous Ingratitude of the Crowd**

The crowd stands in contrast to the two blind men.

A. For one thing the crowd was great. The men were two but the crowd was many. The many created a clique of sorts, an exclusive group, proud and thinking highly of itself. Such is the danger of popularity and seeking that which is popular. People are driven to keep up with the masses and measure their significance from the world. Crowds are fickle and they move from one thing to another. The crowd that was following Jesus was enamored with him for the moment, but in a matter of days the masses would be calling for his crucifixion. When you get your significance from the clamor of the crowd, you think you are something because you belong. You fail to see how deeply you need mercy. The two men sitting by the roadside look to be in an unenviable position, but it was where they needed to be to recognize that what they lacked was not to belong to the crowd but to belong to Christ.

Brothers and sisters, do you complain about the things that make you feel weak? The things that seem to cut you off from what is popular, from what is easy in life? Do you ever sit in self-pity

wishing you could be like “everyone else”? That is a bad place to be. It is a bad place to belong to the herd that runs this way and then that way and then the other way. It is so much better to feel alone, separated, weak, vulnerable, and even left out, to feel as though there is nothing about you to exult in. Those are the conditions which magnify your weakness and demonstrate your need and the beauty of the opportunity to trust and to cry out for mercy. Loneliness and heartache and seeing our lack of strength, acknowledging we have nothing to boast about—these are not curses but blessings. Do not despise them. God uses them to draw close to you by drawing you to cry out for him.

B. Not only was the crowd great, they were moving. They were walking. As Jesus and his disciples went out of Jericho, a great crowd FOLLOWED him. The blind men were sitting. The crowd was enjoying the gift of sight AND they were enjoying the gift of movement because they had sight. And then they were annoyed when two men far less fortunate than them cried out in need. When the men cried out they rebuked them. The crowd was self-absorbed. They had every reason to be grateful but they were callous toward the needy.

Look at the crowd and determine not to be like them. When you are intentionally aware of God’s blessings and you give thanks for what you know you do not deserve, it fuels treating others with mercy and grace. Paul wrote to the Colossians, “And whatever you do in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God.” Thanksgiving is a wonderful holiday. For the Christ follower, thanksgiving is also to be a way of life. Which do you find yourself doing more frequently these days? Complaining? Worrying? Or giving thanks? Can you walk? Are you alive? Has God blessed you with mercy? Does he assure you that he will keep you and protect you? Do you have more than enough? Then give thanks! The more you give thanks the less you will close your heart when you see others in need.

### **III. The Compassion of Jesus**

Two terms loom large in expressing the tenderheartedness of Jesus in this text. Here are these two blind men sitting on the roadside. They are crying out to Jesus and asking for MERCY. That is the first term. As Jesus stops and interacts with them, he is moved with PITY. Pity is the second. Most Bible translations use the word COMPASSION instead of pity. Mercy and pity or mercy and compassion are intertwined together. To have mercy is to act with pity or to act with compassion. Mercy and compassion require recognizing a pitiful condition. They are affected out of tenderhearted identity with the wretchedness and misery of that condition. They feel it.

The cry of the blind men reaches the ears of Jesus, but their situation also reaches his heart. They seek mercy. And he notices. He talks with them. He listens to them. And the clearest idea I can get from the original language here is that Jesus was MOVED with PITY. He didn’t just act with pity; he was MOVED with compassion. When Jesus healed the blind men and gave them sight, he was not merely performing an act of benevolence for the two men. He experienced an inward sensation of pity because he empathized with their misery and desperation. It relieved him to bring relief to them.

Those of you who have children or grandchildren know this experience. Whenever they have been injured or sick, you feel as if their condition is your own. You are inwardly moved with the misery of their condition, and their relief is yours as well. My son Philip and my daughter Ariail and I hiked along the cliffs of the Apostle Islands Lakeshore a few summers ago. We had intended to be in our kayaks, but the waves were far too high that day. So we walked the trail along the top of the cliffs over Lake Superior. Occasionally the cliffs protrude out from the safe zone in the form of narrow slivers. These slivers are narrow with drop-offs of a hundred feet or so on either side down to the

churning lake below. It is not the kind of situation that calls me to come. But it calls my thrill-seeking children. An image is etched in my mind of Philip standing there enjoying the thrill. Meanwhile, I am standing way back from the edge in the safe zone, but because he is my son I am feeling inward tumult and anxiety exactly as though it was I out where he is. His return was my relief.

You do not have to have children to know compassionate identity. We have looked for several weeks now at pictures of the historic and terrible flooding in South Sudan. Those images help us imagine what it would be like if that was our experience, and we feel pity. If you look upon a pitiful condition and you feel within your being the depth of heartache and despair, then you have felt compassion. As Jesus interacted with these two men he was connected with the misery and desperation they felt. He was moved in his own being as he looked upon the situation of these two men.

Brothers and sisters, Jesus is Messiah. He is king over all. When I think of kings and queens and royalty, I think of people who live off in palaces and who enjoy any and every imaginable luxury there is, who have no idea and little to no concern to know what it is like to live in the real world. No doubt, there have been compassionate monarch's in the history of the world, but they can be no more than a dim glow compared with King Jesus.

Several aspects of Matthew's account underscore the magnificence of his mercy. For one thing Jesus was traveling. He was on his way to Jerusalem to arrive by Passover. But he was not in such a hurry that he did not have time to notice and be troubled by the two men on the roadside.

Jesus was bearing a heavy emotional load at this time as well. He had just informed his disciples that when they arrived in Jerusalem he was going to be delivered to the authorities and be mocked, flogged, and crucified. But his looming anguish did not so preoccupy him so that he would fail to notice and feel for these two men in great need.

Consider also that Jesus was accompanied by a great crowd. In effect Jesus was a celebrity. And when you are a celebrity, there comes pressure to please the crowd that celebrates you. Think how public pressure in our day has been applied and celebrities have stepped back from what they professed. It hurts to lose the adulation of the crowd. But the compassion of Jesus was not hindered in the least by the opinions of the crowd.

Finally, we should realize that the two blind men were unimportant to the world. These were beggars, not men of prestige or high rank, but from the lowest level of society. They had nothing to offer the world. And yet, Jesus compassionately notices the ones nobody else will.

Is this not good news?! Jesus Christ is the king like no other because for one thing he is king of all. He is son of David. He now sits at the right hand of God until the earth becomes his footstool. But high as he is, his compassion descends to the depths—even to two obscure blind men, even to you and me at our worst in our most pitiable condition of weakness and brokenness and blindness. Look how Jesus stands in complete contrast to the crowd. They rebuke but Jesus listens. He clarifies what the blind men desire. He touches them! Jesus did not touch the blind men because he needed to touch them to heal them. He touched them to express to them his compassion and mercy for them so that they could feel and know that he identified with their situation.

And he healed them. And this is what truly makes Jesus the king like no other. He not only identifies with their situation, he is able to change it. He rules blindness and misery. He rules over sin and

darkness and Satan. And he is working all things together for good to those who love God and are called according to his purpose. Believe on him and he will save you from your sins. Draw near to his throne with confidence that you will find mercy and grace to help in time of need.

### **Conclusion**

Queen Elizabeth may have been able to comfort the citizens of Aberfan by her visit and by her visible expressions of sorrow, but she could not change their situation. She could not undo the catastrophe. But Jesus is the king like no other. His compassion runs far deeper than any other. But most importantly He does far more than feel our pain. He came in the aftermath of the catastrophe of sin to undo its damage. He came to give sight back to the blind, to restore righteousness in the place of sin, to set free the prisoner, and to bring the dead in sin to life. And he did it by taking our place. His visit culminated in his crucifixion and death, his offering himself as a sacrifice to absorb in himself the wrath of God due us. And he conquered. He rose triumphant from the grave and he is ascended to right hand of God until he makes his enemies his footstool.

He is the king like no other because he rules in compassion over his people. Bless the Lord, O my soul!