

# The Compassion of Jesus

Matthew 15:29-39  
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What does the Lord intend in displaying His mighty acts in history? In other words, why does the Lord not only give us His word to hear and obey, but also His visible wonders to behold?

The question, of course, assumes that God is active in history and is active in the universe He has created. For we are not deists, believing that God created all things in the beginning and then retreated to heaven never to personally intervene in history. No, our God, the one true living God, the God revealed in Holy Scripture, though infinite in His being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth, is yet a God who is near us, nearer than the words that form on our tongues. History is the manifestation of God's glory in loving, redeeming, justifying, sanctifying, and glorifying wretched sinners like you and me. Whether it be God's extraordinary acts of providence (i.e. miracles) or His ordinary acts of providence (i.e. His daily provision for all our needs), God is actively and personally at work in this world. Those who do not see God active in history are blind indeed. This Lord's Day we shall see that Christ's miracles revealed three significant truths: (1) The Compassion of Christ (Matthew 15:29-39); (2) The Obstinacy of the Pharisees (Matthew 16:1-4); and (3) The Weakness of Christ's Disciples (Matthew 16:5-12).

## **I. Christ's Miracles Reveal the Compassion of Christ (Matthew 15:29-39).**

A. The Lord Jesus having returned from the area of Tyre and Sidon first went to the eastern side of the Sea of Galilee known as Decapolis. This was perhaps due to his desire to avoid immediate confrontation with

Herod and the Pharisees on the west side of the Sea of Galilee in the region of Galilee. The Lord had a plan and a divine time schedule according to which He ministered. He avoided confrontation with His opponents when it did not serve the will of His Father. Dear ones, let us also learn that we must choose our battles over the truth wisely. Not every possible confrontation for the sake of the truth is the wisest course of action on our parts, lest we spend our entire lives in nothing else. If we are constantly confronting our opponents, when will we have time to feed the lambs in our household and in the Church who earnestly and patiently wait to hear the truth of Christ?

B. After healing great multitudes who were lame, blind, mute, and maimed (in Matthew 15:29-31), the Lord yet ministering in the same region of Decapolis on the east side of the Sea of Galilee again performs one of the most amazing miracles: He multiplies bread and fish to feed thousands. This time there are four thousand men, rather than five thousand men besides women and children (Matthew 14:15-22). Can you image witnessing seven small loaves of bread and a few fish multiplying before your very eyes, demonstrating there is no lack of power to supply the needs of people (and particularly His people). Such miracles confirm the person and work of Christ, but also like parables the Lord's miracles teach us spiritual truth as well. Why would the Holy Spirit inspire Matthew to record a miracle that was so similar to one which he had just recently recorded in feeding the five thousand (Matthew 14:13ff)? I would suggest there are two reasons.

1. To demonstrate the Lord's compassion in supernaturally feeding the four thousand who had attentively been with Him for three days already (Matthew 15:32, note the word "because"). The Lord's compassion and pity for this multitude was not limited to giving them spiritual food, but was also revealed by providing physical food for these who had first demonstrated their spiritual appetite to such a degree that

that they had remained with Him for the past three days. Since these people had come from some distance, it is unlikely that they had made any provision for food (at least for the length of time). Perhaps by the third day they had run out of food. But they still were not ready to leave when they were being fed such heavenly truth (perhaps similar to Christ who had spiritual meat to eat that sustained Him, John 4:32-34). They manifested a hungering for righteousness that overshadowed their hungering for food. How thankful I am that the length of the sermons preached from this pulpit is not an issue to you who hunger and thirst for the Word of God. That is not the case in so many churches where a 15 minute sermonette is preached to a full building of Christianettes who can't wait to get home and on with the day to amuse and please themselves as if the Lord's Day was just any other day of the week.

a. Dear ones, the Lord Jesus is amazingly kind and compassionate to the needy, but can we fall upon the compassion of Christ and the promises of God to provide for our needs, if we do not manifest an earnest desire to commune with Christ, to sit at His feet and be taught of Christ, to love and obey Christ (even at the expense of our own personal comfort)? We cannot simply ignore and neglect our communion with Christ and then expect to have all our needs met. We cannot live in unrepentant sin and then expect the windows of heaven to open with the answers to all our prayers. Our trials in life are often intended to reveal to us our need to be constantly in prayer thanking Christ for every blessing that is ours and calling out to Him for every need that we have—not just when we face a crisis, but each and every day.

b. The four thousand here enjoyed the blessing of Christ's compassion and His mighty acts because they hungered in their souls for the Lord. That is not to say that the multitude earned the compassion of the Lord through their works, nor do we. No, the compassion of the Lord was first manifested to the multitude and to us in graciously granting the desire to hunger for Christ and to embrace Him by

faith. The Lord now graciously rewards the four thousand and likewise rewards us for exercising the faith and works which He first freely bestowed.

2. Another reason it would seem that Matthew has recorded this miracle even though it is so similar to the feeding of the five thousand is to reveal the compassion of Christ in continuing to instruct His disciples in truths which they had been taught on an earlier occasion, but had not learned (Matthew 15:33). The Lord's compassion and patience with His disciples never ceases to amaze me. Having witnessed the power and compassion of the Lord in a similar situation (perhaps three or four months earlier in feeding the five thousand) and now being confronted with the same circumstances, the Lord continues to teach not only by His words, but also by His deeds. In fact, the response of the disciples in here Matthew 15:33 sounds so similar to that of the Israelites in the wilderness (Psalm 78:19). Oh, the patience of the Lord with us, His beloved children. Where is the harsh rebuke from the Lord? The Lord's correction of His disciple comes not with harsh words (though it would have been perfectly appropriate to do so), but rather in revealing His compassion to them by reminding them of how He provided earlier by doing it again.

3. Dear ones, when we see the compassion of the Lord patiently working with His disciples to grow them up in Himself, how can we be so impatient and harsh in our treatment of one another (in home/church)? We can be so abrupt and so upset with others because they do not learn as quickly as we learn, but who ever learned as quickly as the Lord Jesus, and yet who was more patient in teaching others than Christ?

## **II. Christ's Miracles Reveal the Obstinacy of the Pharisees (Matthew 16:1-4).**

A. After feeding them at His table in the wilderness, the Lord dismissed the multitude and immediately sailed to the west side of the Sea of Galilee into the region of Galilee where there awaited Him a group of Pharisees and Saducees (Matthew 16:1). They did not come to seek answers to honest questions, but rather sought to lay a trap for the Lord by putting certain questions to Him which they hoped they could use to condemn Him. They particularly asked that Christ show them a sign from heaven proving that He was sent by God.

B. What they may have been particularly seeking was that He would like Elijah specifically call down fire from heaven for them to see. Not only were these religious leaders so blind that they would not believe the many miracles He had already performed (even the feeding of the five thousand and the feeding of the four thousand), but it appears they wanted a particular miracle tailor-made to suit their tastes. Here is where unbelief leads. The obstinate and unbelieving are never satisfied with the evidence or testimony presented to them. For ultimately the problem with those who are obstinate to Christ is that they do not want to believe, they do not want to be convinced of the truth. It is not a question of sufficient evidence, but rather a question of refusing to believe the evidence God has given to them. In order to show the willful obstinacy of the unbelieving heart, turn with me to Matthew 27:41-42. There they say that if He will come down from the cross, they will believe Him. And yet when the Lord performs an even greater miracle and comes forth from the dead, they cover up the truth with a lie (Matthew 28:11-15).

C. The Lord sighs deeply at the unbelief of the Pharisees and Saducees and says that He will not give them the sign for which they have sought (Matthew 16:4). The Lord here condemns the generation represented by these Pharisees and Saducees who seek a specific sign

from heaven after witnessing so many signs, just as He likewise condemns the unbelief of all who hear the gospel of Jesus Christ and will not believe. The Lord in effect states that the sign of Jonah will be the supreme sign that He is who He says He is—His own resurrection from the dead.

D. Dear ones, the miracles of Christ reveal both the obstinacy of the enemies of Christ and the faith of the disciples of Christ (John 20:30-31). Do the miracles of Christ recorded in Scripture and the mighty acts of God in providing for your daily needs reveal your unbelief or your faith in Christ and your thankfulness to the Lord? Does God's great power in creation and providence draw you unto the one true living God or leave you unaffected or even desensitized to the Lord? Remember what the Lord Jesus Himself said about the state of indifference (neither be hot or cold, but lukewarm and neutral): Revelation 3:15-16.

E. Ought we to seek for miraculous signs as an evidence of those who are faithful ministers of Christ? Remember what Jesus Himself said in Matthew 7:15-23. Miracles were indeed authenticating signs of the Apostles of Jesus Christ (2 Corinthians 12:12). Although the Lord is not limited in performing the miraculous in this age if He so wills it, nevertheless, it is not by the miraculous sign that we will ultimately know the man to be a false or faithful shepherd or not, but by His doctrine and life (Matthew 7:15-20).

### **III. Christ's Miracles Reveal the Weakness of Christ's Disciples (Matthew 16:5-12).**

A. After having rebuked the obstinacy of the Pharisees and Saducees there in Galilee, the Lord again enters a boat and crosses to the other side (i.e. the east side) of the Sea of Galilee. Apparently in the haste

to leave the hostile Pharisees and Saducees, the disciples had forgotten to bring with them adequate food for their trip. They had with them only one loaf of bread. Here they were so concerned about having only one loaf of bread when God in flesh was with them who had multiplied the bread to feed thousands (to which they were witnesses)! Since their mind was consumed with the bread they did not have with them, they were ill-prepared to deal with Christ's warning in Matthew 16:6: "Take heed and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and of the Saducees." What did the Lord mean by this warning?

1. Leaven is an additive to bread which makes the bread rise and become puffed up. The Lord was, therefore, warning the disciples concerning the corrupt teaching which the Pharisees and the Saducees had added to the truth of God which caused them to become puffed up in the sight of God and man (Matthew 16:12).

a. The Pharisees you will recall added to the doctrine of God by bringing in their own man-made traditions into the worship of God, thus making void the commandments of God which alone ought to be our regulating principle in the worship of God (Matthew 15:1-9). In so doing, they made the worship of the one true living God a man-centered service. The Lord condemned the Pharisees for such worship as did the apostles who called it will-worship (Colossians 2:20-23).

b. The leaven of the Saducees in Matthew 16:6 is called the leaven of Herod in Mark 8:15. This is likely because the Saducees had embraced the corrupt teaching of the Herodians who looked for every way to advance their political agenda through the religion of the Jews. Whereas the Pharisees had added to the worship of God, the Saducees were the liberals between the two groups and used whatever political maneuvering to maintain their positions of authority in the Sanhedrin and with the Romans. The Pharisees despised the Romans for their military occupation of Palestine. The Saducees were opportunists looking for ways to use the Romans to their own advantage—there is no political

reformation without a biblical reformation which brings faith in the gospel and repentance in breaking God's commandments.

2. Thus, the Lord condemns both the false doctrine of will-worship on the part of the Pharisees, and the false doctrine of expediency and compromise of the truth ("the ends justify the means") on the part of the Saducees. The Lord calls both of these teachings leaven, i.e. additives to the true religion of Christ—additives which will spread until they infect the whole body of Christ's truth. For that reason, Paul says that all such leaven whether in doctrine or in practice out to be purged from the Church (1 Corinthians 5:7-8).

B. Now the disciples miss the whole point of Christ's warning as I said before because they are worried about the food they should have brought with them (Matthew 16:7).

1. Herein is revealed the weakness (not obstinacy or rebellion) of the disciples and again the patient forbearance of the Lord. Through a series of four questions the Lord rebukes them for their forgetfulness and their slowness to understand the significance of His miracles (Matthew 16:8-11).

2. The disciples had forgotten the miraculous work of multiplying the bread to feed the five thousand when it was time to feed the four thousand (Matthew 15:33). Next they had forgotten the miraculous work of multiplying the bread to feed the four thousand when they took not enough food with them here in Matthew 16:7ff. Why have the disciples forgotten these miracles and not applied them to their lives? Jesus gives the answer in Mark 8:17: "Have ye your heart yet [or still] hardened?" How had the disciples hardened their hearts? By simply not apply the truth of the miracles to their lives they had not learned and had not increased their faith in Christ's compassion, love, mercy, care, and power. This is what happens, dear ones, when we see the mighty hand of God in the Word of God, in our lives, in our family, in this world, and yet



do not apply it, meditate upon it, learn it, and practice it. We forget that truth which makes us lukewarm rather than passionate for Christ.

3. The unbelief of the disciples, however, issued from weakness, not from obstinacy. This was the difference between the Pharisee's response to the miracles of Christ and the disciple's response to the miracles of Christ. The Lord Jesus was patient with the weakness of His disciples, but was not with the obstinacy and rebellion of the religious leaders who continued in willful unbelief of Christ no matter what miracles were performed and no matter how much the gospel was proclaimed.

Dear ones, the Lord continues to minister to those who hear the gospel who are weak and yet repentant, rather than those who are obstinate and unrepentant and do not bring forth the fruit of repentance. I am so thankful that the Lord Jesus did not cast me aside for my many weaknesses, faltering and failing time and time again, but He sees my sorrow and grief over my sins and freely forgives and restores me when I fall. We are likewise to follow in the footsteps of our Lord in ministering to others. Those who are weak and repentant, we forgive. Those who are obstinate and unrepentant and justify their sins, we leave them to their unbelief (Hebrews 2:3-4).

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