

Compassion In Midst of Ministry – Matthew 15:21-39

- Pastor Tim Rech

Our God is compassionate. The Scriptures and our own experience as believers testify to this truth. Jesus, *“being the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of His nature”* (Heb 1:3), conducted His ministry with compassion. The gospel of Matthew records this regularly and will do so again in our passage today.

As His people, Christians are called to imitate Him in this regard.

Now we have already seen much about Jesus in Matthew so far. Jesus is the New Israel who did not fail in the wilderness and is the Beloved Son of the Father. We also see Him as the New Moses in the Sermon on the Mount. He is also the New Prophet and the last prophet standing. Above all this, Matthew has shown Jesus to be the New King whom has been given all authority. Such authority has been exhibited in His fulfillment of the Scriptures, His teaching, and the many miracles He performed and modeled in humility – a largely foreign concept in this world.

And what has been the response to Jesus been so far? Well, It has been mixed. There has been unbelief and rejection from the political and self-righteous religious leaders of the day as well as the hometown crowd. Jesus’ disciples have expressed small faith and frequent doubt although there are indications things are looking up for them. And some have shown great faith in Jesus. But such faith has come from unexpected people; a leper, a Roman centurion, a woman bleeding for 12 years, and two blind men.

And what has Jesus’ response been? He has commended those expressing great faith while teaching, encouraging, and spending even more time with those of small faith. But for those who reject in Him in unbelief, He quickly withdraws from them – He will not indulge them in their rejection of Him.

However, Jesus patiently teaches and compassionately ministers to all. There is no one like Jesus. Let’s hear more about Him and His ministry.

Compassion to the Outcast (15:21-28)

We pick up in 15:21...

21 And Jesus went away from there and withdrew to the district of Tyre and Sidon. 22 And behold, a Canaanite woman from that region came out and was crying, “Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely oppressed by a demon.” 23 But he did not answer her a word. And his disciples came and begged him, saying, “Send her away, for she is crying out after us.” 24 He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” 25 But she came and knelt before him, saying, “Lord, help me.” 26 And he answered, “It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs.” 27 She said, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.” 28 Then Jesus answered her, “O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire.” And her daughter was healed instantly.

Unclean Territory (15:21)

As an outcome to the latest confrontation with the Pharisees, Jesus had taught His disciples that man’s problem was not unwashed hands or unclean foods but rather an unclean heart. He then demonstrates

this truth by withdrawing to “unclean” territory – the region of Tyre and Sidon – Gentile territory. It does not appear Jesus travels all the way to these two cities but since it was a region of considerable size, He only approaches its border or crosses a short distance into it.

Tyre and Sidon are no strangers to the Bible. Its peoples were sea merchants known for their purple dye product exported all over the world. They were a proud, worldly wise, and wealthy people who worshipped a multitude of gods (Baal, the Ashtoreth, Molech?) and as Ezekiel tells us were proud of it (Ezekiel 28:1-9). There was a good relationship between its kings and Kings David and Solomon for a time but this soured. Israel and Solomon were heavily influenced by this people. The king habitually took Sidonian women for himself and Israel swiftly adopted its idolatrous practices. Tyre sold Hebrews into slavery for which God denounced them and pronounced judgment through the prophet Amos. They were a wicked and idolatrous people. Remember Jesus cited them back in 11:21 to show the deep hardness of heart in Chorazin and Bethsaida.

An Outcast Emerges (15:22a)

Once Jesus and His disciples arrived to the region, there emerges a person from it – a Canaanite woman. “Canaanite” is a name not heard much since the book of Judges. It is an Old Testament description of her people group and religion. The Jew would know this term well. The Canaanites were the people God dispossessed from the Promised Land by the hands of Joshua and the Israelites. However, they did not fully drive them from the Land as God had commanded. Israel was then deeply influenced by the Canaanites idolatrous practices which led to their own removal from the land and diminished stature as a people and nation. The Canaanites were fierce enemies of Israel. They were looked down upon by the average Israelite – they were the pagan dogs. They were the people who created the idols the region of Tyre and Sidon adopted.

So in the text Jesus had gone from a confrontation with the Pharisees “A” team sent by the corporate office in Jerusalem – the heavily religious teachers of God’s Law who fashioned themselves as “clean” to a person who was the epitome of “unclean” – a Gentile. And furthermore she was a woman and women were deemed of low stature in that day and in these cultures.

A Right Title on Wrong Terms (15:22b)

The Canaanite woman has come to Jesus for help for demon possessed daughter. She obviously had heard much about Jesus and what He could do. Perhaps she had come to the end of seeking all the Canaanite gods – they had been no help.

But this is not surprising. What is surprising is how she addresses Jesus. In crying out for mercy for her and her daughter she calls Him, “O Lord, Son of David”. First of all, it is respectful (“O Lord” or “Sir”). The citizens of Jesus’ hometown, the Pharisees, and often the disciples did not bother to respectfully address Him at all before blurting out their questions or accusations. But here is a Canaanite woman crying out and addressing Him as “Lord” or “Sir”. She also calls Him, “Son of David”. She obviously had heard the term from other people and simply adopted it. But this does not seem right because this is a Jewish title for the Jewish Messiah and she is a Gentile. The Jew understood this term and its background. They knew King David – he was their hero of yesteryear – the good old days when Israel was top dog in the world. Or did they really know him? “Son of David” refer to God’s promise to David that his throne would live forever. One would come from his line that would live and rule forever (2 Samuel 7:1-17).

Messiah would come from David's line. This is something Matthew points in the first verse and chapter of his gospel. He carefully shows that Jesus is THE descendant from David.

But "Son of David" is expressed only a handful of times in this gospel either by those of faith (the two blind men) or those in unbelief (the hometown crowd or the murderous religious leaders).

And now the suffering Canaanite woman calls Him, "Son of David" – an appropriate way to address Jesus but not from a Gentile.

A Delayed Response (15:23-24)

Jesus' response to the woman causes us to pause. Verse 23 says, "*he did not answer her a word*". Why? She came bringing an urgent need to the compassionate Jesus who seemed to be healing everyone brought to Him. She addressed Him accurately and humbly. But silence from Jesus.

The disciples were certainly not silent. Unnerved by the woman's incessant cries to Jesus, they begged Him to send her away. They did not want to be in the district of Tyre and Sidon anyway. Besides, Jesus had told them back in 10:5 to go nowhere near the Gentiles. What are we even doing here? Who set the GPS address anyway? Let's go home.

Jesus seems to ignore the disciples as well and then answers the woman, "*I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.*" We read this having the full perspective of God's redemptive history and Word fully revealed so Jesus response is surprising to us. But Jesus answer was not unexpected by the disciples and perhaps even the early church Jewish believers reading it (remember Peter in Acts 10). There was a clear distinction between the Jews and Gentiles at that time. Jesus came for the lost sheep of Israel first. The woman needed to understand this but then again maybe she already did...

A Persistent Pursuit (15:25-27)

Because Jesus' initial response was not enough for the woman. She now comes and kneels before Him, faced pressed to the ground, saying, "*Lord, help me.*" She had no one or nowhere else to go. So far in Matthew we have seen almost no profound reverence towards Jesus (one exception = the leper of 8:1). She is desperate for help but seems to know who Jesus is and will not give up pursuing Him.

Jesus now answers her more directly, "*It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs.*" Again, this is surprising. The Lord seems strangely cold to her and to her plight. Why does He seem not willing to accept her? And why does He refer to her as a "dog"? Do not the OT Scriptures point to a future kingdom consisting of members from all people groups?

Now Jesus is building on His first response but now adds a very important feature. The children refer to the house of Israel. The dogs refer to the Gentiles but not how the Bible usually refers to dogs – those garbage eating and often vicious dogs who ran wild outside. No, the dogs Jesus is referring to here are domesticated pets – a little pet dog - the ones they had and we have today at our house. The pets who are not only in our house but are probably in our laps as we sit on the couch or might even sleep on our beds. And what do many of us say about our pets? Well, they are part of the family!

Jesus is cracking open the door of the kingdom for the Canaanite woman. And she sees it. She instantly answers Jesus with, *“Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.”* She gets it. The little pet dogs belong in the house and they are accustomed to being fed by the master and his family. She belongs in the kingdom, maybe not the first to enter but she belongs! How her heart must have leapt at His gracious and compassionate words.

An Honored Faith (15:28)

So what did Jesus do here? Was He trying to make it difficult for her? Did He not want to talk to her but was compelled by her repeated cries? No, in this interchange, He simply drew out her increasing faith in Him. As she approached Him, she did not fully understand who He who was even though she called Him, *“Lord, Son of David”*. But His delayed and brief responses gave her understanding. She now knew who Jesus was and her faith was then on full display as she continually pursued Him and His favor. And by the way, such pursuit is a prominent characteristic of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Jesus commends her faith. She was a person of great or rather, mega-faith. Do not miss it – God is pleased by faith – it is the only way to be commended by God. The woman was not concerned with outward expressions of religion like washed hands. She did not come out from her dark region to adopt Jewish tradition. Rather she came to God in humble reverence by faith in Christ and pursued Him with a not-to-be denied persistence.

And this takes us back to Matthew 1:1, *“The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham.”* Jesus is the Son of Abraham, who was not a Jew but rather a Gentile. Granted, he fathered the Jewish nation in the physical sense. But to Abraham the promise was given that in him, all the families of the earth would and shall be blessed (Gen 12:3). The Son of David had now come with authority and has been said, He was filling David’s house with His people. The Canaanite woman was one of them, a son or rather a daughter of Abraham.

Ephesians 2:11-13 says,

11 Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called “the uncircumcision” by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands— 12 remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. 13 But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

And He immediately grants her request and instantly heals her demon possessed daughter.. there is no one like Jesus.

Can you see what a profound meeting and conversation this was between Jesus and the Canaanite woman? As the scene shifts, many more Gentile “dogs” will follow this Canaanite woman. We read on..

Compassion to Heal (15:29-31)

29 Jesus went on from there and walked beside the Sea of Galilee. And he went up on the mountain and sat down there. 30 And great crowds came to him, bringing with them the lame, the blind, the crippled, the mute, and many others, and they put them at his feet, and he healed them, 31 so that the crowd

wondered, when they saw the mute speaking, the crippled healthy, the lame walking, and the blind seeing. And they glorified the God of Israel.

A Prominent Place (15:29)

Jesus does not “withdraw” this time but continues his brief detour away from Jewish territory and walks further among the Gentile peoples. It is widely understood here that Jesus entered the Decapolis region on the southeast side of the Sea of Galilee. The book of Mark is explicit on this point while Matthew gives us more subtle hints. The Decapolis is that region to the east consisting of ten Gentile cities.

Jesus then goes up on a mountain presumably in view of the Sea of Galilee and more importantly to a place where many people can see Him from far away. And He sits down. This should take us back to Matthew 5:1 where Jesus did the same thing on a different mountain before proceeding to give the Sermon on the Mount as the new Moses. But here by sitting down, He shows He has authority over not only the Jew but over the rest of the world and its peoples.

A Desperate People (15:30)

Great crowds of mostly Gentile peoples come to Him.

These people bring Him their lame, blind, crippled, mute, and others with physical problems. The sense here is not only that they are bringing people to Jesus but actually flinging them at His feet. Like the Canaanite woman, these are desperate people bringing their broken family member and friends to the King sitting on the mountain.

And He compassionately heals them... ministering to the peoples of the world. Jesus is demonstrating the Old being phased out by the New. Faith will arise through the work of Jesus and disciples will be made among all the nations. (Matt 28:19)

New Praise (15:31)

Out of such great compassionate healing, comes new praise – new in that much of it has not been heard to this point especially in the hearing of the Jews – it was Gentile praise. They “*glorified the God of Israel*”. This is a significant event in God’s plan to redeem people. And it gives us a glimpse of Pentecost shortly after Jesus resurrection and ascension (Acts 2:11).

Such Gentile praise stands in stark contrast to the rejection of the Jewish religious leaders. Such praise should have come from His own people – the house of Israel.

Compassion to Sustain (15:32-39)

But Jesus and His compassion are not done with this crowd for they have another great need:

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.” 33 And the disciples said to him, “Where are we to get enough bread in such a desolate place to feed so great a crowd?” 34 And Jesus said to them, “How many loaves do you

have?” They said, “Seven, and a few small fish.” 35 And directing the crowd to sit down on the ground, 36 he took the seven loaves and the fish, and having given thanks he broke them and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. 37 And they all ate and were satisfied. And they took up seven baskets full of the broken pieces left over. 38 Those who ate were four thousand men, besides women and children. 39 And after sending away the crowds, he got into the boat and went to the region of Magadan.

Now you might say, “Why is this same miracle being repeated again?” Well, you would be right. Back in chapter 14 Jesus fed the five thousand. Both miraculous feedings develop in the same way but there are some differences. First to note, are the differences in numbers. Throughout church history the feeding of the 5,000 was understood to be the provision for the Jews while the 4,000 is for the Gentiles. The 4,000 has been understood to symbolize the four corners of the earth from which the Gentiles came. And the multiple use of sevens in this text has been seen to represent the worldwide scope of Jesus’s message or completeness as in seven days of creation and the seventy nations in the world at the time of Genesis 10. Twelve small baskets leftover for the 5,000 signified enough for the twelve tribes of Israel. Seven leftover for this crowd signified completeness of Christ’s mission to the world.

The numerology is hard to ignore but we do not want to overdo it. This aside, Matthew weaves some stated differences into the passage that help us see this is a different crowd of people than the Jewish one from chapter 14.

Compassionate Resolve (15:32)

Jesus has been ministering to the crowd for three days and it is understandable they are hungry. They had come together from a much larger region than those who had come for the day in the feeding of the 5,000. He knows hunger and desires for them to have enough strength to make the long trip home.

Meager Provision - Hopeless Task (15:33-34)

Hearing what Jesus intends to do, the disciple’s response is essentially “Huh - where are we going to find enough bread in this desolate place?” Now how can the disciples forget so soon what had happened with the 5,000 on the other side of the Sea of Galilee? This is shocking until we remember this happens to us all the time. In the daily situations of life, we frequently forget what Jesus has done and is doing in our lives.

So we need to cut the disciples some slack here. Furthermore, time has passed since the feeding of the 5,000 and the “normal” supply of bread has certainly resumed – many meals have been received without a miracle.

The disciples also had no ministry category for the Gentiles. They likely assumed the same miraculous feeding would not be extended to the Gentiles as was given to the Jews.

And it seems the disciples did not share their Lord’s compassion for these foreign people – no indication of care stated here. During the feeding of the 5,000 narrative, they pointed out to Jesus the people’s need and offered a solution albeit it fell short of the Lord’s plan - but no such attempt here. A lack of compassion shows a heart not aligned with God. It prevents us from seeing needs and appropriating what God makes available to us in meeting the needs of others.

Overall, this scene is yet another building block to increase the disciples' understanding of Jesus and their weak faith. Does your faith need further development?

So when Jesus asks, "*how many loaves do you have?*", the disciples can only offer "*Seven loaves and a few small fish* – a lot of good that will do us!"

A Familiar Miracle (15:35-36)

Jesus then goes to work. He directs the crowd to sit on the ground which was unlike the grass upon which the 5,000+ sat on back in Israel. This was truly a desolate place with hard ground.

Jesus simply gives thanks and repeats the practice of breaking the food and miraculously multiplying the food in His hands! He then distributes to the people by the hand of the disciples in the same way He would later minister to His people through these future apostles. Everything is done in an orderly manner. This is how God works.

A Satisfied People (15:37-38)

There is nothing like a good meal when hungry. Four thousand men along with women and children ate and were satisfied by the hand of Jesus on that mountain that day. Like the Jews, the Gentiles would and will be satisfied by Jesus too. And as we have already seen, Gentile praise is flowing.

And there was more than plenty leftover to get them home – seven large reed baskets full. Jesus supplied and supplies an abundance. Many more Gentiles will eat from the hand of Jesus and be satisfied...in the early church up to today and beyond. I hope you are experiencing the satisfaction of being fed by Jesus in all aspects of your life.

Return to His Primary Mission (15:39)

Jesus then dismisses the crowd and His time in Gentile country draws to a close. He sails back across the Sea of Galilee to Magadan, an unidentified town at or near the border of Jewish territory. We know this because in the next verse (16:1), the Pharisees and Sadducees come again.

He would ultimately return though through His apostles and His church – to Tyre and Sidon and to all the nations.

Reflect & Respond

- God is calling out a people from all nations on the basis of faith in Jesus Christ - are you ok with this? Or are some people more acceptable to you than others?
- See how Jesus did ministry; The Lord of the universe yearned with compassion to help the suffering of other people. He was perfectly sensitive to the needs of others. He took time and went out of His way, even deviating from His primary mission to the lost sheep of Israel, to help those from other nations. Jesus met the needs of suffering people whether it was healing or simply giving them their daily bread. Such compassion took Him to the cross to save His people from their sins.

- Each of us in Christ does ministry. Ministry is about people. So how is your ministry characterized? Do you minister with compassion or are you just going through the motions? Perhaps for you ministry has simply become a schedule to keep or a list of tasks. Check yourself.
- Be encouraged, we have Jesus Christ, the Son of God, our compassionate high priest who sympathizes with our weaknesses and with whom we have access to His throne of grace to receive mercy and find grace in our time of need. (Heb 4:14-16)
- Be encouraged.. this passage is a preview to the gospel going to the Gentiles and coming to our personal door 2,000 years later. We have much to be grateful for – if Christ had us on His mind then, will He not compassionately care for us today? There is no one like Jesus.