

No One Like Jesus: Our Hands, His Hands
By Jason Huff
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Proverbs 10:5; Galatians 6:7-10; Matthew 9:27-38

Friends, our final Scripture reading comes from Matthew 9:27-38. May God add His blessing to this reading of His holy Word. "As Jesus went on from there, two blind men followed him, calling out, "Have mercy on us, Son of David!" When he had gone indoors, the blind men came to him, and he asked them, "Do you believe that I am able to do this?" "Yes, Lord," they replied. Then he touched their eyes and said, "According to your faith will it be done to you"; and their sight was restored. Jesus warned them sternly, "See that no one knows about this." But they went out and spread the news about him all over that region. While they were going out, a man who was demon-possessed and could not talk was brought to Jesus. And when the demon was driven out, the man who had been mute spoke. The crowd was amazed and said, "Nothing like this has ever been seen in Israel." But the Pharisees said, "It is by the prince of demons that he drives out demons." Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.""

Sometimes there's something so amazing going on in your life that you just have to share it. A couple of years ago, I was fascinated by the movie *Gravity*. It was so amazing that I couldn't shut up about it for a few weeks, enough that some of you even went to the theater to see it with me. We're that way with new discoveries: a new television show, a new food, a new restaurant, a new tourist destination. We want to let others in on this secret we've found.

But excitement dissipates over time. The movie leaves the theater. The great vacation restaurant is several hundred miles away. The television show finishes its season. We move on. That's because there's always something new to take our attention. We even talk about the weather or things that don't interest us much because it's something new to say.

I say this because the eighth and ninth chapters of Matthew are like someone who's so amazed by what they've experienced that they keep gushing about it. The difference from us is, the events of Jesus' life aren't ever going to lose their impact. They will always be amazing. No one in the history of the world is like Jesus.

At the same time, it can seem like Matthew is repeating himself. We've had eight healings and nine miracles in Matthew 8 and 9. Five of our last nine sermons featured a healing or miracle. But instead of being bored – yay, another miracle! – Matthew reports it like a baseball game with grand slam after grand slam or touchdown after touchdown. It's impossible to imagine, but Jesus keeps filling up the scoreboard with these incredible wonders.

We'll touch on Jesus' last two miracles in Matthew 9 and we'll see what they point us to – Jesus the Messiah and Jesus the compassionate Son of God. If we miss Jesus' compassion, we've missed the point of all Jesus did. Once we see Jesus' compassion, once we've been on the receiving end of it, we want more of it – not just for ourselves but those around us.

But first, let's look at the two final miracles Matthew details for us. There's a subtle shift because now, the miracles have Messianic importance. Jesus heals two blind men. While miracles happen in the Old Testament era, we never learn that someone's given sight. That particular miracle is a sign of the Messiah. We read in Isaiah 35:5, at the time of Messiah's coming, "Then the eyes of the blind will be opened and the ears of the deaf will be unstopped."

These blind men have an inkling of who Jesus really is. They call Him "Son of David." The title was for the One promised by Scripture, the anointed One in David's line that would rescue God's people. And they are healed according to their faith *in Jesus*. They aren't hoping for a miracle cure from the latest doctor – they believe that Jesus is the hope of Israel.

That's also why Jesus speaks to them indoors and warns them not to go spreading word of their healing. Why would Jesus want to keep it all a secret? It's because when the average Jew in AD 30 heard the word "messiah," they didn't think of a rabbi teaching them about the Kingdom of God and dying for the sins of the world. They expected a military leader who would destroy Rome and rule over Israel as King. Jesus kept a lid on His messiahship to avoid false expectations and unnecessary violence to attempt to make Him King by force.

The healings show how the views of the commoners and the religious leaders veer off in different directions. The blind men are confident that Jesus is the Messiah, along with the common people. When they see the healing of the mute possessed man, they are amazed. The more the common people see of Jesus, the more they believe He is the promised one.

But the Pharisees are defiant. The more they see, the more their authority is threatened, the more they stand to lose, the more they fight against Jesus. They go so far as to attribute Jesus' power to the demonic. They are in danger of crossing a line, of blaspheming the Holy Spirit, by saying that Jesus' power is not from God but the devil.

Matthew continues on, summarizing all that Jesus did. He taught, He preached, He healed. Everything that Jesus does is blessed. Then we come to the heart of the matter: "When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd."

Jesus had compassion. He saw the masses of humanity, Jew and Gentile alike, and He saw they were without hope. The average person was condemned by the Pharisees as unspiritual, unworthy of God's love and help. They struggled paying taxes to Rome, keeping themselves fed, and keeping the faith in a world where the people in power served countless gods and goddesses. Sheep without a shepherd wander. They get lost. They find themselves in trouble, caught in thorns, stalked by wolves, and soon, they are devoured. When Jesus saw them – people just like us – He had compassion.

But what is compassion? It's easiest to define it by what it isn't. For example, pity is the discomfort *we* feel when someone is in a painful or difficult situation. Sympathy is feeling sorry for that person. We are still distant from that person, but we wish things were better for them.

The next step up is empathy. Empathy attempts to see things from someone else's point of view – to see the world through their lenses. It takes more effort. It requires us to understand them better. In the incarnation, in becoming human, Jesus shows the incredible empathy of God because God takes on our nature and likeness. He empathizes with us by literally becoming one of us. It's a kind of empathy beyond what any of us can even experience.

But compassion is even greater than empathy. Compassion is empathy in action. It is working to provide better conditions for those around us. One of the biggest non-profits that helps millions of children around the world is called Compassion International. It's not Pity International or Sympathy International or even Empathy International. It's Compassion International. Individuals and churches – like our own – give \$40 a month to help those struggling and their communities. We don't just wish them well and hope or even pray for the best. We do something to help. And what defined Jesus was His compassion, to the point that Matthew says He cured every disease and sickness wherever He went.

As Jesus sees the crowds, helps them, heals them, He says, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field." This is an interesting saying that's been interpreted different ways. But because the language is poetic, we have to look at it in its context.

The harvest is people. Jesus cares about people. People come into God's Kingdom. People are the crops. You don't plant crops only to let them go to waste, to rot in the field; you go out and get them. God has ignited faith in many people, different kinds of people, from all over the world. But they cannot come into the Kingdom unless they are reached, unless they are harvested. We like to think that we choose God; we bring ourselves into the Kingdom. But *God* brings us into the Kingdom; He draws us to Himself, and He uses others He has already drawn to Himself to draw in others. Just as a field isn't going to harvest itself, people outside the church, outside of the Kingdom aren't going to come in without God's compassion lighting the way.

But there are few workers. What does that mean? Some believe that Jesus means evangelists – those who have the unique spiritual gift given by God to quickly and effectively lead people to faith in Jesus Christ. Others take it to mean ministers – people called to preach God's Word and teach it to others, who are given charge over a group of people to care for spiritually. Some understand it to be missionaries – those called to foreign lands to share the good news of Jesus with those who've never heard it before.

But the funny thing is, Jesus doesn't define the workers, and neither should we. There are all sorts of workers involved in a harvest. Some go out and pick the fruit or the grain from the field. Others sort out the good from the bad. Some stomp the grapes or mill the grain. Some bag it up or put it in a wine cask, preparing it for the future. All are a part of reaping the harvest.

When we read this prayer, we aren't praying for any one kind of worker to bring people into God's Kingdom. We pray there would be workers – introverts, extroverts, upper class middle class lower class, different races and backgrounds, different gifts and talents – all of us living out the compassion of Jesus so more and more people are drawn into the Kingdom. It's not about missionary work or evangelism work or pastoral work – it's about God's work done through us.

Compassion is the basis of the cross – Jesus actively gave His life for our sakes. If we carry His cross daily, we live lives of compassion, of active care and concern for others. People know we are Christians by the way we act towards others and each other, especially because compassion is downright rare. Mother Teresa once commented that the same thing is missing in lands with tons of money and lands with none – compassion. She said, "Maybe they are starved for bread in Africa. You are starved for love in the United States."

When we pray for God to send workers into the harvest, we pray for others, but we also pray for ourselves, that we can live in compassionate ways that show the awesome power and love of God for others. We pray that we might be a part of God's harvesting team and that we would have more recruits to do it alongside of us, so that we have the joy of brothers and sisters working hand in hand.

In the story of the Good Samaritan, a Jew is beaten up on the side of the road. Two important religious authorities pass the man by, but a Samaritan – from a people group the Jews hated – showed him mercy. We know little about the two religious authorities that pass the wounded man on the side of the road. I'm sure they felt pity, because everyone feels a little uncomfortable when somebody's beat up and bleeding right in front of you. The religious leaders might have felt sympathy or even empathy for the man. They might have genuinely felt sorry for him; they might have even thought, "What a hard thing for that man to go through, to be left abandoned and cold and alone and beaten nearly to death." But they didn't show compassion. Only the Samaritan – someone the Jewish people hated – showed compassion.

Compassion is not an option but a necessity for the Christian. James 1:27 tells us that true acceptable religion is showing compassion to widows and orphans in their distress. In James 2:17, we read that faith must be accompanied by action or it is not real faith. In Matthew 25, the parable of the sheep and the goats, we learn that many who call Jesus Lord don't make it into the Kingdom because they failed to be compassionate – they did nothing to help the poor, the stranger, the hungry, those in need. Compassion is not something we get around to in the Christian life – it defines it. You cannot imitate Christ without imitating His compassion.

So how do we show compassion? It starts within the body of believers. We start in our home by taking care of our family, friends, and neighbors. Compassion begins by taking a casserole over to a church member's home after a hospital stay, sitting with them during a surgery, checking on the homebound, helping a friend at school with homework, showing Mom or Dad or son or daughter grace when they make a big mistake rather than jumping all over them about it. It starts at home because nobody's going to be convinced by our compassion to the outside world if we don't have it inside our own doors.

Then we reach out. This is where it's tough because it requires a lot of us – our time, our money, our work. Pity, sympathy, and empathy don't require us to get our hands dirty, but compassion does. Compassion means meeting with others, inviting them to Meal and a Movie, volunteering at Military Avenue, baking the cookies for the swim team or whatever your kids (or grandkids!) are doing. It's genuine cost and genuine time spent. Let's not pretend that compassion once a quarter or even once a month will cut it. To follow Christ's lead, we need to show compassion on a regular basis, both to those close to us and those who we don't know well.

That's why Jesus urges us to pray for God to send more laborers into the fields. We can't do it alone. It's not easy work. But how does the saying go? "Many hands make light work." When we all do it together, the work of the Kingdom becomes less a chore and more of a privilege. When we share in the sacrifices, we share the rewards. When we share in sacrifices for compassion's sake, we lift each other up.

When we practice compassion, we share in the heart of Jesus. No matter how much compassion we show, we will never outdo Jesus. Over the last several weeks in Matthew, we've seen His compassion towards so many people, people that we would write off, count as nothing, count as unworthy, or at best, people we would feel sympathy for. But Jesus left His throne, His rightful place at the Father's side, to come and show God's compassion one-on-one. That's our call as faithful servants of our master.

Today I'm going to give you a very real way that we can sacrifice together to make compassion happen. Our friend Virgil was a champion of compassion to people who were struggling. He blessed CrossWay's food pantry ministry – from a financial perspective, he almost singlehandedly underwrote it because he cared that others would have food. For us to continue to show that compassion to others, we're going to need to sacrifice.

Yet it's not a big sacrifice at this point. If four of our families would give \$20 a month specifically to the Deacons, in addition to what they give now to our regular fund, that would keep the food pantry ministry going as it has been. I'm not saying that everyone's going to have that \$20 or will feel led to help in this way, but that's one way we can keep showing compassion as a faithful congregation. I'd also encourage you to help our Deacons by buying a bag of groceries every now and again that we could give away. That helps the Deacons so they don't have to spend as much time shopping each month. It's my prayer that the food pantry might expand, that we might reach more people through it than we do now – and as we do, we might need to sacrifice more. Yet God will make a way for that to happen.

God is immensely compassionate, showing mercy to those who don't deserve it and extending care to those on the fringes. Jesus calls upon us to labor for Him and bring more people into the Kingdom through showing His compassion. Our hands are His hands; our money is His money; our time is His time. Let's go out today determined not to shrink back from following Christ, but to follow His lead, give as He gave, serve as He served, walk as He walked, and compassionately love as He first loved us.