

## **Compassion for People without Christ**

### **Matthew 9:35-38**

The past year the leadership of Faith has been asking the question, “Out of all the things we could pursue over the next 3 to 5 years, what are the most strategic? What things are the most critical if we are going to fulfill our mission here in Manhattan and around the world?” We understand our mission to be “helping people come to faith in Christ and experience God in all of life.” Given that “mission,” we’ve been seeking God about the most strategic things we need to emphasize in pursuing that vision.

As we have prayed and talked and planned, we have identified five broad areas that constitute what we believe are the most critical things for us to pursue over the next 3 to 5 years. You’ll see a brief explanation of these five areas in the insert in your bulletin (see also at end of this manuscript). These aren’t just good things that we should be doing; these are the things that we believe God wants this congregation to pursue at this time in history. Over the next year we’ll be discussing all five of these areas in a variety of different contexts (small groups, sermons, classes, ministry teams, etc.). We don’t know exactly what it will look like to pursue these things; but we’re excited about seeing how God leads.

But today we are going to begin discussing an area of our vision we call “Active Compassion for Those Without Christ.” Here’s what that statement says:

We desire to cultivate a culture of outreach, whereby all members intentionally develop relationships with unbelievers, inviting them into the life of the church where, with a team approach, each of us plays a role in bringing people to faith in Christ.

We’ll be unpacking this statement over the next several weeks. But here’s one way to picture our vision for Faith when it comes to “active compassion for those without Christ”: Imagine that we’re here on a Sunday morning five years from now. We want every person who calls “Faith” his/her church to be able to look across the room and see at least one other person that they’ve helped lead to Christ. It could be someone from your workplace or from your neighborhood. Or maybe that person was invited by someone else and you befriended him/her. Or you may have prayed for that person and his/her relationship with Christ. Or perhaps you served in an outreach such as Alpha; your hospitality and welcome helped provide the context in which that person came and had honest conversations about Christ. Or you prayed with that person to trust in Jesus alone for new life. We understand that leading people to Christ is usually a “team effort”; people come to faith in Christ as a result of many different interactions with numerous believers.

Can you see yourself looking across the room and seeing someone else whom you’ve helped lead to Christ? Some of you can, but perhaps many of you cannot. Most believers have gotten the idea that they don’t have what it takes to lead others to Christ. They’re not bold enough or trained enough or dynamic enough or articulate enough or committed enough or whatever. Consequently, leading others to Christ isn’t really something that most Christians consider to be a live option. Maybe I’m describing you. It’s like you’re sitting on the bench, but you’re pretty sure you’ll never actually get in the game.

We hope that in the not too distant future, you see yourself very differently. We hope that you come to the conclusion that as a follower of Christ, you are uniquely qualified to be used by God in this process of drawing people to Himself. Not in isolation from others, but in conjunction with others. You have a role regardless of your gifting, your maturity, your temperament, or your stage of life. That's because the foundational thing that a person needs to be used by God in helping others find their way back to Him is **compassion**. If there is one thing that should characterize every believer in Jesus Christ, it's compassion.

Today we are going to see from Matthew 9:35-38 that compassion fueled Jesus' mission in this world. First, we're going to see that Jesus "felt compassion" for the people He encountered. We are trusting that we too will ***"feel compassion" for people without Christ.***

Matthew 5-9 forms a major section in the book of Matthew. Matthew marks off this section by placing the same description of Jesus' ministry both before and after these chapters. Verse 35 is the second "bookend" for this section (the other being 4:23). Matthew describes Jesus' ministry in terms of His proclamation of the gospel of the kingdom and in terms of His healing ministry.

35 And Jesus was going about all the cities and the villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every kind of disease and every kind of sickness.

The SoM in chapters 5 through 7 was Jesus' expression of this "gospel of the kingdom," describing the good news of how life can be in the kingdom of heaven. When God rules a person's life, there is a freedom from anger, lust, revenge, anxiety, etc.; there is a love for enemies, an unhypocritical prayer life, etc. Chapters 8 and 9 gave examples of how Jesus healed "every kind of disease and every kind of sickness." Nothing was beyond Jesus' authority.

But as Jesus looked at the multitudes, He understood that their needs were far greater than He would be able to address personally during the few short years of His earthly ministry. Notice how Jesus understood the condition of the people.

36 And seeing the multitudes, He felt compassion for them, because they were distressed and downcast like sheep without a shepherd.

Jesus was deeply moved by the condition of the people. As the OT writers had done, Jesus likened people far from God to sheep without a shepherd. If there's one thing that sheep need, it is a shepherd. Sheep are unable to protect or take care for themselves; they are easily taken advantage of; they wander into danger unawares. The multitudes - then and now - are like that. All of us like sheep have gone astray (Isaiah 53:6). The thing to notice is that Jesus didn't condemn them for being sheep - rather He had **compassion** on them for not having a shepherd. The root of the verb "to have compassion" refers literally to the internal organs of the human body: the intestines, the liver, the guts, the viscera. Jesus was viscerally moved to compassion when He saw the multitudes. Jesus was angry when He saw the hypocrisy and legalism of the Pharisees, but He was moved to **compassion** when He saw the multitudes. He wanted them to be taken care of; he wanted them to find clean water and good grass and protection from all the dangers out there.

That's why Jesus said of Himself in John 10, "I am the Good Shepherd." He would eventually lay down His life for the sheep because their condition moved Him to compassion. He didn't die on the cross for the sheep because He was "under contract" with the Father; He lay down His life because He was moved to compassion. Jesus understood that compassion is costly. Jesus had so much compassion that He was willing to be poured out on behalf of the multitudes.

***Here's the question:*** Is this how we think about and feel about people? Are we moved to compassion by the desperate condition of people who are like sheep without a shepherd? Do we feel compassion for people without Christ?

You and I know people whose lives are so incredibly messed up that we can hardly believe it. Sometimes it's staggering really. Like sheep without a shepherd, many, many people are starving for something that really nourishes their souls; they have very little protection against the many dangers out there – dangerous people, dangerous habits, dangerous circumstances. We all know people like that; at times we *are* people like that. And we all know people who don't seem that messed up, but who live in quiet desperation - always hoping that "things will get better" and yet never turning to God for help. If we would be like Christ, we should be moved to compassion by such people as Jesus was.

Too often we stop far short of compassion. Sometimes we analyze and diagnose the sins of our culture without really being moved to compassion; sometimes we never get past critiquing others' lives because they are distressed and downcast like sheep without a shepherd. But anybody can do that (Christian and non-Christian); it's easy to critique the world around us and the lives of the people around us. But if you've ever had anybody critique your life lately, I think you'll agree that it's not particularly helpful. If we would be like Jesus, we will actually be ***moved to compassion***. Our hearts will go out to people; we will be viscerally moved by their condition.

If we are going to be able to look across the room five years from now and see people whom we've helped come to faith in Christ and who are actually experiencing God in all of life, it won't be because we've designed some slick strategies and programs. It will be because we have been moved to compassion just like Jesus. Compassion – true compassion – has a powerful effect in the lives of others. If we are moved to compassion, the sky is the limit in terms of the impact we can have right here at home.

The progression here in Matthew 9 is critical to understand. Only after describing the compassion of Jesus does Matthew record Jesus' challenge to His disciples to pray. And only after Jesus challenges the disciples to pray does He send them into the harvest. The progression suggests that we should ***Allow our compassion to fuel prayer and action (vv. 37-38; Matthew 10)***

37 Then He said to His disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. 38 "Therefore beseech the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into His harvest."

In light of the fact that the harvest is so great, and in light of the fact that the workers are few, we should ask the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into His harvest. Notice what our part is and what God's part is. ***Our part*** is to pray. Our compassion should compel us to pray. Jesus uses the word "beseech" – referring to ***ferently requesting*** something of God. This is no casual,

"God, how about sending a few laborers into Your harvest?" This is a heart-felt pleading with God to supply people to go to others and explain that there is a Shepherd for their souls. How can we be content when there are so many sheep without a shepherd? If we have the compassion of Jesus, we won't be satisfied just because there are *some* laborers. We will ask for *more* laborers – both here in Manhattan and around the world.

The fundamental assumption here is that the multitudes contain many people who will turn to Jesus as the Good Shepherd if only they hear the truth and see it lived out in the lives of Jesus' followers. People/believers are God's chosen instruments for drawing others to faith in Christ. How can people believe if they don't hear? How can they hear without someone to tell them? How can people tell them unless they are sent? (Romans 10:14-15) If we have the compassion of Jesus, we'll pray, asking God to send laborers into His harvest. Our part is to pray.

**God's part** is to send out the workers. The burden for sending out laborers falls upon God. It is His harvest; He sends out His workers. In the context of Matthew 9, these "laborers" would be going to people right there in Jerusalem – the very multitudes that Jesus was looking at. Significantly, in chapter 10 we read that Jesus sent His disciples to "the lost sheep of the house of Israel" – people who were like sheep without a shepherd. It's no coincidence that those who fervently pray for God to send out laborers are often the most effective in sharing Christ.

In the larger context of Matthew 28, these laborers would be sent out to all the nations/peoples of the world. As a local church, we should think both in terms of being laborers here at home, in this region of the world, and to the uttermost parts of the earth. There should be a continuity between what we do here in Manhattan and what we send people to do on the other side of the world. Next week we'll explore this idea more fully. When you read the fuller description of our vision for "active compassion" you'll see that we see the need to pattern ourselves after those whom we've sent to other parts of the world. Next week you'll hear what this might mean from some of those we've send.

But for now I simply want us to see that compassion isn't a passive thing; compassion fuels prayer as well as action. We are moved to trust God and we are moved to reach out to people with the love of God.

I want to back up and ask the question, "What do you do if you realize that you don't really have much compassion for the people around you who need Christ?" Do you fake it until you feel compassion? Two suggestions: First, if you're a believer in Christ, the place to begin is by pondering the compassion you've received. Many of us can look back and see how distressed and downcast we've been at various times in our lives. Where would we be if someone hadn't shown *us* compassion! We should never tire of pondering the compassion that we've received in Jesus Christ; the more overwhelmed we are with God's compassion for us, the more likely we are to show compassion to others.

Second, go through your days asking God to give you compassion for the people you see. Make this a matter of continual prayer. The people in our lives can become like furniture: you don't really notice them anymore; they're just there. But ask God to give you new eyes to see people the way He sees them. I dare say that some of the people in your life are distressed and dispirited like sheep without a shepherd. When you realize that ask God to give you compassion. Try this for . . . oh . . . say . . . a year or so and see what God does in your heart.

Let me share an example of how God is giving me compassion for someone who needs Christ. About a month ago Brenda and I were in the grocery store and we ran into a guy I hadn't seen in years. We used to live in the same neighborhood. We weren't close friends or anything – just acquaintances. But as we talked the thought occurred to me, “I bet he could use a good friend. . .” As we finished our brief conversation that day I asked him for his phone number so I could call him later. The other week I gave him a call and we talked for 15 or 20 minutes. We got caught up on each others' family and jobs and the details of life. It turns out he's dealing with some life-threatening medical issues; it's not at all clear whether he'll make it much longer. His wife died a few years ago; his children have each gone through some difficult issues over the past few years. He's not had an easy life. It was really good connecting with him again. As we talked I got the sense that he really appreciated my concern. As we got off the phone I asked him, “You wouldn't mind if I prayed for you would you?” He said, “No I wouldn't object a bit. I'd never turn down prayer.”

God has given me compassion for my friend. He could use a Good Shepherd to lead him to good water and green pastures. He desperately needs protection from the dangers he faces. He needs someone to comfort his soul. For me in this relationship, compassion means praying for him and calling once a week to ask if there's anything I can do for him. I don't have any complicated strategy for leading my friend to Christ. I don't know if I'll ever look across the room here on a Sunday and see him worshipping God and Jesus His Son in the power of the Holy Spirit. I hope so with all my heart. I pray that God uses me and others to lead Him to Christ. But as I pursue this relationship, it's mainly a matter of “feeling compassion” and allowing that compassion to fuel my praying and my words and my actions.

I'm convinced from Scripture and from experience that if we as a church are actively showing such compassion to hundreds of people across this community, that God will do a work in our midst. We will have the joy/satisfaction of seeing many people come to faith in Christ and experience God in all of life.

## **Our Vision for Faith Evangelical Free Church**

### **Fall, 2008**

It is our desire that in the next five years, by God's grace, we might *help more people come to faith in Christ and experience God more fully in all of life*. Therefore, we devote ourselves to these five critical areas of vision:

#### **A Deepening of Prayer**

*We desire for every member to have a rich, growing life of prayer, and for every ministry of the church to begin in petition and end in praise.*

#### **A Plan for Spiritual Transformation**

*We desire to provide clear and effective structures and processes whereby all members can progress toward Christlike character, expressing their growing love for God and others through willing service to both fellow believers and unbelievers.*

#### **A Lifestyle of Worship**

*We desire that meaningful corporate worship on Sunday mornings be simply an expression of, and stimulus for, a lifestyle of worship in all our hearts and homes.*

#### **A Culture of Welcome and Acceptance**

*We desire to welcome and accept fellow believers and non-believers—whatever their situation in life—and, more than just being friendly, actually cultivate true, growing friendships.*

#### **An Active Compassion for those without Christ**

*We desire to cultivate a culture of outreach, whereby all members intentionally develop relationships with unbelievers, inviting them into the life of the church where, with a team approach, each of us plays a role in bringing people to faith in Christ.*

#### **Further Explanation of An Active Compassion for those without Christ:**

We want to become a church that lives the lifestyle here at home that we send our missionaries to live in other parts of the world. As we pattern ourselves after our missionaries, it will involve an intentionality toward unbelievers, whereby each member of Faith is aware of the relationships he or she already has with unbelievers, and then intentionally cultivates those friendships while developing new ones. A missionary pattern encourages us to design “forms” for our outreach that are culturally appropriate and effective. A missionary pattern encourages us to think strategically. Finally, a missionary pattern encourages us to think in terms of teamwork, realizing that someone who comes to faith in Jesus Christ has invariably been influenced by numerous believers, and not just by the one evangelist. (For example, no doubt, some believer was this person's friend, someone else warmly welcomed them at the door, someone else set up the tables or cooked the meal for a program like Alpha, someone else prayed for this person by name, and someone else opened up God's healing Word and spoke the Gospel message.) A picture of the measure of this vision's success is when each of us at Faith would be able on a Sunday morning to look across the room and see someone for whom we could say, “I was part of the ‘team’ that brought that person to Jesus.” A vision for a culture of outreach, patterned after our missionaries, will have one additional result—namely, we have a vision for a deeper participation in the lives and ministries of our missionaries, expecting that God will raise up others in our midst to serve in other cultures.