

Jesus' New World Order

Message 8

Compassion in God's Kingdom

Mark 6:7-52

What do You See?

What do you see when you pause just before you enter your classroom? What do you see when your eye scans the crowd in Goodman stadium at the Lehigh football game? And what do you see as you gaze across the campus, while fellow-students throng the sidewalks on their way between classes? I can still remember looking out my dormitory window at the lunch and dinner crowd surging up the path and into the dining hall. My window was right above the entrance to the dining hall, and before it was a broad walkway from the other dormitories. I stood there and wondered, "Who are these people? Why are they here, and where are they going?" In tonight's passage we are going to see Jesus similarly encountering a multitude of people, and we are going to see that Jesus sees more than we commonly do when confronted with a crowd.

The Disciples

Our passage opens with Jesus implementing the plan He initiated in chapter 3. After the Pharisees had turned against Him definitively, after He began attracting huge crowds from all over Palestine and the surrounding area, He went up on a mountain and called his disciples to Him. From his disciples He chose twelve, as the text says, "That they might be with Him, and that He might send them out to preach, and to have power to heal sicknesses, and to cast out demons." Since then they have been working on the first part of this plan – the "be with" part. The disciples have been following Jesus around, observing Him as He preaches, heals, and casts out demons. They were there when He defined His followers as a new family. They were present when He gave the secret of the Kingdom – that it is entered by embracing His word. They were with Him as He calmed the sea, cast out the legion of demons, healed the deadly flow of blood, and raised the dead girl. They have seen all this, and have experienced first-hand the power of Christ in the lives of other people.

Now it is time to begin the second stage of Jesus' plan. Jesus begins to put the disciples into service, directly assisting Him in the ministry. Now it is their turn to begin preaching, healing, and casting out demons. Jesus sends them out with clear, detailed instructions. They are not permitted to take along any supplies, any food, any money, or even a change of clothes. As the new judges of Israel, He sends them out in pairs, to fulfill the Old Testament requirement for a double witness¹.

Their witness has a two-fold character. First, they are witnesses in the sense of proclaiming what they have seen and heard of Christ. Their message is *His* message, the one they heard Him preach, "The time is fulfilled, the Kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel." To anyone who may have been inclined to doubt their message, or to think that the disciples forgot it, or got it mixed up, there was another disciple present to vouch for the words of the first.

Second, they are witnesses of the response of the people. According to the customs of the times, they are supposed to depend on the townspeople for hospitality. As decent Jews they should be able to expect a place to stay when they travel from town to town. How much more, as preachers of the gospel and disciples of Jesus, should they be given food and shelter? Now, we may recognize that someone here or there would be so rude and selfish that he would turn away the disciples, but what would cause everyone in a town to do so? Well, who might come to speak that everyone in *your* hometown would refuse to hear? I

¹ Deut. 17:6; 19:15.

thought I would suggest some examples, but I can't think of any. Some of us here might not like Bill Clinton and others might not like George Bush, but I doubt that many of us would refuse to give a bed to either if he needed it. He would have to be someone quite awful to be shunned by *everyone*, wouldn't he? That is the point here. To refuse food and shelter for the traveling preachers would be so rude, it could only happen if the townspeople judged their ministry to be very offensive. And since the disciples are doing exactly what Jesus is doing, the town would be judging Jesus to be offensive.

If the disciples are unable to find *anyone* in a town who will receive them, then the whole town has rejected Jesus. This is a serious problem. Jesus came as a King to establish His Kingdom. To reject Him is in essence to declare for the enemy. When the day of reckoning comes, such a town will be found guilty of rebellion against the King and punished accordingly. Thus, as the rejected disciples leave the town, they give one last warning – they shake the dust off their feet. This is a symbolic action, equivalent to saying, “This town, even its dirt, is cursed. We do not want to be defiled with anything connected with this town.” Jesus says that on judgment day He will honor such a curse, and punish that town worse than He punished those evil cities in the Old Testament, Sodom and Gomorrah, which He destroyed with fire from heaven. This is a very severe judgment. Before such a verdict could be passed, there must be certainty that it is warranted. This is the second reason for the two witnesses. One disciple may make a hasty decision, but with two there is a better chance of true judgment.

So the disciples went out and preached, healed and cast out demons. And they had fabulous success! Can you imagine their excitement when they came back to Jesus to report all they had done? The authority He had given them really worked! It is like my oldest son Daniel and his computer. Day by day the parts came in until they all arrived. Then he opened all the boxes and began assembly. Several hours later came the big moment. The switch was pushed – and behold, the screen flickered and next thing we knew, we heard the Windows chime. It worked! Although we knew it should, still we were excited. I am sure the disciples were similarly enthusiastic about their trip. They succeeded in doing the ministry Jesus had been doing all this time. And mixed in with their excitement was a good measure of fatigue. It is exhausting to travel all over the countryside by foot, preaching and ministering to people. Jesus had spent the time preaching as well, so they were all tired. It's not surprising, then, that Jesus suggested they go away for a rest.

I am sure you can put yourself into this situation. You have been in tiring circumstances – like after your 4:00 exams. A few years ago I met Joel coming up the walk at 5:10, looking unlike I have ever seen him before or since. He had just finished his exam and was a zombie! Or the past couple of weeks, some of you looked rather strung out. Often after my seminary exams I felt the same way. Or after hard physical labor – like laying concrete. If you have never done this, you cannot imagine how draining it is to pour concrete. Well, you fill in the blank. The disciples were tired, and we know what it is like to *need* a break.

The Shepherd

But when they arrived at the “deserted place” they found a small city of people there. Later we discover that 5,000 men were present. If we add some women and children, we might suppose 10 to 15,000 people total. What would you do if, at the end of a long day you faced thousands of needy people? Your first instinct is to hop back on the boat and look for a truly deserted place – miles away from these noisy crowds! You are too wiped out to handle more people. I remember once when I was going home from college. Exams, and ministry had taken a lot out of me, and I was wiped out. I particularly remember praying as I boarded the bus, “Lord, please let me be by myself so I won't have to converse with anyone.” All I saw was a potential drain on my energy. But when Jesus looked out at the surging crowd of 20-30,000, He did not see a bunch of noisy, bothersome, draining people. He saw sheep without a shepherd.

Sheep are often used as illustrations in the Bible. To grasp the impact of these illustrations, it is

important to understand what sheep are like. Aside from their distinctive appearance, covered with soft, white, fluffy wool, the main characteristic of sheep is their stupidity. Sheep cannot take care of themselves. Cows will wander from pasture to stream and back again as a group, but sheep all wander in their own direction and get lost. This is a serious problem because sheep are unable to protect themselves – they have no natural defenses. Cows will protect their young, but sheep are unable to do that either. Sheep cannot even give birth by themselves. In lambing season the sheep farmer must get up at 1:00 AM to check on the animals and help any ewes which began their labor since he went to bed. If he waited until morning, both mother and baby might have died. Sheep are dumb and helpless. Without a shepherd to protect them and lead them, they will die.

When Jesus got off the boat and was confronted by tens of thousands of noisy people clamoring for His attention, He was not annoyed or angry – for He saw beneath the surface. He saw people who were ignorant, lost, and helpless. He saw people who would die without a shepherd to teach and guide them. Jesus knew that they came to Him because, like sheep, they knew who their master was – and Jesus could not let them down. What could He do – turn them away to be devoured by their enemies? Cast them aside to fend for themselves? No! Here we see again that word that keeps popping up in reference to Jesus – compassion. It is a combination of “com”, meaning with, and “passion”, meaning suffering. Jesus knew the plight of these people and He *suffered with* them. He was distressed to find them lost and needing a shepherd, so like a shepherd, He fed His sheep.

Jesus taught the multitude until evening began to approach. Remember, they are out in a remote place, so there is no food or shelter nearby. They are going to have to do something before nightfall. Soon the disciples step up to offer a suggestion. “Send them away to buy bread,” they say. But Jesus has a better idea. “You feed them,” He replies. But then the disciples respond in a shocking manner. “Shall we go and buy 200 denarii worth of bread?” When we notice that a denarius was worth a day’s wage, we can see that this is a rude question. If you work 50 weeks per year at 5 days each week, this is 4/5 of a year’s wage. It is equivalent to saying today, “Shall we go buy 30 or \$40,000 worth of bread?” That’s a lot of bread! At a dollar and a half a loaf, that is 30,000 loaves of bread – far too many for even 15,000 people. Now that we think of it, the disciples’ reply is worse than rude, it is sarcastic! Why would the disciples speak to Jesus in such a manner? Furthermore, as we look more closely at the passage, it becomes clear that while Jesus has been full of compassion on the crowd, the disciples have been sulking the whole time.

It is not hard to figure out what is going on here. In fact, you probably see it already. The disciples came out to this deserted place for a rest, and instead Jesus makes them endure another day of teaching and healing. They are angry, and they have a right to be angry, don’t they? After all they have done for the people, and for Jesus, you would think they could at least get a little rest, but no. This Jesus guy has some messianic complex. He cannot turn anyone away. Any time someone comes with a problem, He thinks He has to fix it. He just has no sense of balance. He does not realize He cannot save the whole world Himself, and His egomaniac tendencies wear out even His best friends. It is about time someone stood up to Him and brought Him down to reality, and it looks like it is up to the disciples to do it!

Well, the disciples certainly had a reality check in the events that followed. They passed out five loaves of bread and two fish to 15,000 people, and an hour later they gathered up 12 baskets of leftovers! Those must have been mighty big loaves of bread and jumbo fish to go that far! Reality just isn’t what it seems to be. Jesus did the impossible again, this time intimately involving the disciples.

The King

Now why is this story interrupted by the story of Herod and John the Baptist? That is an entirely different story and has no direct connection to this one. Well, this is not the first time we have seen this phenomenon in the Gospel of Mark. Remember when Jesus’ family came out to seize Him because they

though He had become insane? That story was interrupted by the story of the scribes who came to accuse Him of being possessed by Satan. Then there was the story of Jairus' sick daughter. That was interrupted by the story of the woman with the deadly hemorrhage. In each case, Mark blended two apparently different stories to draw attention to the fact that each had the same point. In the case of the family and the scribes, the point was that, although the family seemed to love Him, they were acting like His enemies, just as the scribes. In the case of the daughter and the woman, the point was that Jesus has power over death. In a similar manner here, the story of Herod makes the same point as the story of Jesus feeding the crowd. It just does so by contrast.

Herod is the king, and is thus responsible for protecting his people. Herod starts out as a good guy in this story. He moves to protect John the Baptist from his wife's murderous intentions. He likes to hear him preach, and receives the word gladly. But then things take a sour turn. Herod throws a great party for his nobles and high officials. This had to go well, or the political fallout could be disastrous – even deadly for Herod. The party gets going and it is a great success. The highlight is when his wife's daughter comes in and dances for the men. She is seductively wonderful, and Herod, in a moment of passion, promises to reward her with anything she wants. I suppose most of us would have no trouble thinking of a grand reward we would like – a million dollars, a Jaguar, a degree! But what could a young woman request who is accustomed to getting everything she wants anyway? A palace? No, what would she do with that? An elephant? Are you kidding? Gems? She already has those. What would be exciting, something none of her friends had ever had? The Romans would sometimes celebrate a birthday or some other festive occasion with private gladiatorial games. But then her mother had the perfect answer. A live head! Let's get rid of that dangerous enemy John, and display his head on a platter. No one has done anything like that before!

Herod is in agony. He really likes John, and likes his message. What a gruesome idea! What a horrible death! And to someone who clearly does not deserve to die. But then, neither does Herod deserve to die, does he? And if he makes a fool of himself in front of all his nobles, it will quickly be reported in Rome that he is too soft for the job. If one of his officials does not move to knock him off, at least his support from Rome will be diminished. On the other hand, if everyone sees that he is the sort of man that will behead a man at his step-daughter's wish, no one will risk crossing him. Yes, it is a tragedy. But then, life is tragic. Only the best of us survive. Poor John, perhaps he will fare better in the afterlife.

So here we have the contrast. Jesus, the divine king, who in his weariness is moved with compassion by the plight of ordinary people – and Herod, the royal ruler, who during his party kills the innocent to protect His own reputation before the nobles. Herod turned out to be the stony soil. He liked John, and thought he had a good message. But when trouble set in, he immediately turned on him. The word did not take root in Herod's life. He valued his own word more than the word of God, and killed the preacher. Meanwhile, Jesus kept sowing the word and the good soil kept taking it in.

But what of the disciples? They began as good soil. Then they became sowers of the word. But when hardship set in, they stopped sowing. They began in the role of Jesus, caring for the sheep, but ended caring only about themselves, like Herod. How can Jesus have a ministry of compassion when His chief disciples have none?

The disciples get no rest even after the crowd breaks up, for Jesus makes them get back into the boat. Warily they pull away from the shore, no doubt cursing the sea, and the wind, and maybe even Jesus. They row all night, by now delirious with exhaustion. When Jesus comes walking on the sea they become hysterical, and after the wind stops they are left in a daze. Did they forget who He was? Did they forget that He can stop the stormy wind? Yes, they forgot. They were so focused on their own misery, they forgot all about Jesus. But what is worse, their hearts were hardened. This is the first step toward rebellion. This was the first step the Pharisees took on their journey to becoming Jesus' enemies. Hard hearts cannot receive the

word anymore than hard soil can receive the seed. Are the disciples a lost cause? If so, it all began with anger because they did not get rest when they wanted it.

What do You See?

What do you see when you look across Lehigh's campus, with throngs of people surging along the paths from one place to the next? Do you see nothing because of the homework assignment due tomorrow? Are your thoughts focused on lunch, since you missed breakfast? Do you see 500 other people in your way making you late for class? What do you see when you cast your eyes about the classroom? Do you regret, once again, that you don't have a T. A. who can speak English clearly? Are you angry that you are required to take a mathematics course that is maddeningly difficult? Do you look for the hot babes or the cool guys? Do you wonder if that cute blonde is a Christian so you might have a chance at dating her? Do you wish that handsome guy in the next row would notice you? Where *are* your thoughts? Do you see nothing but yourself? Or do you see sheep without a shepherd? Do you see friends and strangers lost and without Christ? Do you see people who will graduate, get a good job, marry the one they love, have children, divorce, go through life in bitterness, grow old without any real friends, die and go to hell?

Where is your compassion? Is it only for yourself and your own problems? Do you care about anyone but yourself? Are you Herod, willing to do anything to advance your own life? Perhaps you would never get to the point of killing someone, but do you ignore the needs crying out around you because they will get in the way of reaching your goals? Or perhaps you are more like the disciples, willing to follow Jesus as long as it does not take too much time and energy. You come to RUF when it is convenient, help others when your own work is finished, and love those who love you. But what happens when your important agenda *is* interrupted by needy people? Do you also get angry with Jesus for asking too much of you? Do you sulk and get sarcastic with Jesus for pushing you to do more than you want? Or are you like Jesus, always ready to serve others? It all depends on what you see, doesn't it? And on the condition of your heart.

The good news here is that Jesus has compassion on us all. We all enter life focused entirely on ourselves, and we all are capable of deeds just as heinous as Herod's. When we begin to follow Christ, we all begin like the disciples, half-hearted and mostly selfish. But the goal is to be like Christ, and the great good news is that Christ makes us like Himself. He eventually turned the twelve disciples around, and He will turn you around, too. Christ has compassion on poor, lost disciples who keep turning away from Him.

Christ's Kingdom is a kingdom of compassion. It is the only place in this world where the poor, the sick, the ugly, the ignorant, the failures and rejects of human society can find comfort and security. The Christ who had compassion even when He was tired is always ready to welcome and help the needy. This means you, and this means your friends, too. But when you become part of His Kingdom, you have to live by its values. You also must show the same compassion on the hurting that Jesus shows to you. And Jesus gives you the energy to do so. Jesus will help you to become compassionate. But you must turn to Him, call to Him for help. Just do not allow selfishness to harden your heart.

Seeing the Needy

I was a new campus staff serving at Temple University in Philadelphia. I biked three miles to campus twice a week to lead Bible studies and advise the student leaders of the fellowship group there. One day I began to feel ill about mid-morning. I became so chilled I went out to the food truck, bought a cup of coffee, and sat huddled in my coat in the building trying to get warm. I thought about going home, but I had a Bible study in the afternoon, I just did not feel right about leaving. So I stuck it out as the hours ticked by. About noon my chill turned to a fever, and I went back to the food truck for a cold soda to get some relief. Three o'clock came and the Bible study began. We had been studying Daniel, and this week we were reviewing what we had learned about God. Half-way through the study someone spoke up and said, "I have

to confess, I really don't believe all this stuff about God's power and authority. If I did, I would live differently." Well, here was a direct challenge to God! Not knowing what to do, but thinking I had to do something, I said, "OK, the Unification Church [a cult] has set up a display in the student center. Let's finish up our Bible study, then let's go over there and talk to them, and pray for God to bring one of them to our Friday meeting. Let's ask God to demonstrate His power that way." Everyone agreed, and at last I managed somehow to make my way home and fall into bed. On Friday, one of those we talked to came to the meeting. It was a major turning point in the ministry. The person who had interrupted our study was a lapsed Christian. She had turned her back on the Lord and married an unbeliever. But from then on she returned to Jesus. God took someone who was too sick and inexperienced to know what to do, and used him in a miraculous way. All it took was compassion on the sheep. If He could use me, He surely can use you – if are willing to be available to Him.

Who do you know who needs Christ? Who are the hurting and needy around you? If you can think of no one, perhaps you are only seeing yourself. Perhaps your heart is hard, cold, calloused toward others. Pray, then, for Christ to give you eyes of compassion. Pray for Him to soften your heart. If you do see the needy and hurting around you, pray for Him to use you to minister to them. Even when you are at the end of your rope, too weak, too tired, unable to go on, Christ will have compassion on you, too, and strengthen you to serve others. Just trust Him, and do not harden your heart.

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