

**8.6.23                    Becoming More Like Jesus Matthew 9.9-13, 18-26, Matthew 14.13-21**  
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Have you ever noticed how some people try to look and act like people they admire or idolize? It could be someone in music like Taylor Swift or Beyonce, an athlete like Red Sox Alex Verdugo, or some other celebrity or leader people admire. It's a truth in life that you become like who you spend time with, and you become like who or what you praise. That's why the choices we make in this regard are so important. If the person you look up to is of great character and admirable in how she or he lives life, admiring that person will elevate your life and character. If the person you admire is lacking in integrity, virtue, honor, or godly character, then your devotion to that individual will cause your character and integrity to diminish.

For those of us who consider ourselves Christians, we're called to become more like Jesus whom we not only admire, but whom we worship and seek to serve out of love and gratitude. There's no better person to admire or idolize than Jesus. Choosing to become more like Jesus on a daily basis is the best decision an individual can make. If you're truly seeking to become more like Jesus, it will cause you to be more compassionate, caring, loving, kind, humble, generous, and courageous, just to name a few virtues that Jesus not only teaches, but embodies in his daily living.

We see this in the passages from Matthew 9 and Matthew 14 that we're hearing today. We see how compassion and caring are a priority for Jesus, and therefore, should be for you and me as well. Listen to **Matthew 14.13-21**

14:13 Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns.

14:14 When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; **and he had compassion for them and cured their sick.**

14:15 When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, *"This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves."*

14:16 Jesus said to them, *"They need not go away; you give them something to eat."*

14:17 They replied, *"We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish."*

14:18 And he said, *"Bring them here to me."*

14:19 Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds.

14:20 And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full.

14:21 And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

**All the scriptures today speak of the importance of compassion.** We began with **Psalms 145:8-9** which declares that *"The LORD is gracious and **compassionate**, slow to anger and rich in love. The LORD is **good to all**; he has **compassion** on all he has made."* All these things that are true of God almighty, are true of Christ as well. If we worship and spend time with a God like this, over time, we should become more gracious, compassionate, slower to anger, and richer in love ourselves.

In Matthew's Gospel, we see how the compassion of Jesus is demonstrated in several ways. **First, when you have a heart of compassion, you'll invest in people**, even people who are on the margins or looked down upon by others. In Matthew 9:9-13, we witness Jesus investing in Matthew, a tax collector despised by his fellow Jews for cooperating with the occupying Roman authorities and for extracting as much money as possible out of his neighbors. Jesus is willing to invest in someone who most people chose to demean and condemn and viewed as a sinner. Jesus and his disciples are even willing to eat in Matthew's house. When he's criticized by those who think a truly holy person would never associate with someone like **that**, Jesus quotes the prophet Hosea saying, (Matthew 9:13), **"Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners."** I want to challenge every one of us to **invest in a few people**. Share your compassion and time to help build up a few other people, especially those who may not have anyone else doing that for them. That's part of becoming more like Jesus.

As we continue in Matthew 9:18-26, we see Jesus not only **invests in people** he **cares for people**. A leader of the synagogue came in and knelt before him, saying, *"My daughter has just died; but come and lay your hand on her, and she will live."* 9:19 And Jesus got up and followed him, with his disciples. Jesus cares for those who are grieving and hurting and is willing to be with us in our pain. On the way to the leader's

house, a woman who had suffered with a physical issue for 12 years also comes to Jesus and touches his garment and is healed. Both Matthew and this woman were isolated and cut off from community because of their situations, yet Jesus cared for both of them, and he wasn't deterred or discouraged by what other people thought.

Then Matthew 14.14 states, *"When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; **and he had compassion for them and cured their sick.**"* When Jesus looks at people, especially hurting, sick, hungry, isolated, or needy people his immediate response is to **Have Compassion for People**. This is how he wants us to respond as well. **The only people in the Gospels Jesus doesn't have compassion for are people who don't have compassion.** Jesus' strongest condemnation is directed at the religious rule followers and judgmental moralists who have lost the purpose of their faith and criticize Jesus for eating with Matthew or healing a man with a withered hand on the sabbath. Becoming more like Jesus means you'll increasingly view people with compassion, not condemnation or judgment.

One of the ways you can grow in compassion is by **Remembering Everyone is Fighting a Hard Battle**. I think that's why a third of the 150 Psalms in the Bible are laments. Musically, they're the Blues. **Psalms 143:3-4 (NIV)**, is typical, *"The enemy pursues me, he crushes me to the ground; he makes me dwell in darkness like those long dead. So my spirit grows faint within me; my heart within me is dismayed."* Have you ever felt like that? I have. Some of us are feeling like that today. One of the negative impacts of Social Media is some people think everyone else's life is wonderful and without any problems and theirs is lousy in comparison. **Remember everyone is fighting a hard battle**, I am, you are, we all are. We all have areas of struggle and challenge that can beat us down and crush our spirit. That's why compassion and care are so important. Every single person you encounter is dealing with situations and issues that aren't obvious on the surface, that they haven't shared with others, that you know nothing about. On your computer there's something called a default setting. Do you know what that is? **As followers of Jesus compassion and care for people is to be our default setting.**

During my sabbatical Jill and I took a great trip to North Carolina, Georgia, and Tennessee in May during which we had many memorable experiences. On May 24<sup>th</sup>,

we visited Plains, Georgia, the home of President Jimmy Carter and his wife Rosalynn, who was the valedictorian of her class at Plains High School. The former high school is now a Visitor Center. Six days after we visited Plains, on May 30<sup>th</sup>, the Carter Family released a statement sharing that former First Lady Rosalynn Carter has dementia. The statement said in part, “She continues to live happily at home with her husband, enjoying spring in Plains and visits with loved ones. Mrs. Carter has been the nation’s leading mental health advocate for much of her life. As the founder of the Rosalynn Carter Institute for Caregivers, **Mrs. Carter often noted that there are only four kinds of people in this world: those who have been caregivers; those who are currently caregivers, those who will be caregivers, and those who will need caregivers.** The universality of caregiving is clear in our family, and we are experiencing the joy and the challenges of this journey.” As followers of Jesus, we’re to be known as compassionate, caregivers, just as Jesus was throughout his ministry.

**If you want to become more like Jesus as far as compassion and care, it requires changing how you look at people.** In **2 Corinthians 5:16-21** Paul writes about the need to **Change Your Point of View**. He says, (2 Corinthians 5:16), ***“From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way.”*** We no longer look at people through the limited, flawed, or selfish lenses of our own point of view, rather we begin with God’s help to try and see people through the eyes of Christ. Paul goes on to talk about the ministry and message of **reconciliation** and how we are ***“ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us.”***

One of the great ambassadors for Christ in my lifetime was evangelist Billy Graham who died at the age of 99 on February 21, 2018, in Montreat, NC. During our May trip, Jill and I visited Billy and Ruth Graham’s home, library and burial site in Charlotte, NC. It was moving and inspiring to see how God used them as a couple for so many decades and how their ministry adjusted and adapted as technology and the times changed. One of the memorable seasons of my early years in ministry was serving on the Prayer Committee for the 1992 Greater Philadelphia Billy Graham Crusade and having the privilege of being on the platform with Billy Graham on the opening night.

I don't know if it actually happened but one of my favorite Billy Graham stories is about the time Billy was returning to Charlotte, North Carolina after a speaking engagement and when his plane arrived there was a limousine waiting to take him home. As he prepared to get into the limo, he stopped and spoke to the driver. *"I'm 87 years old and I've never driven a limousine. Would you mind if I drove it for a while?"* The driver said, *"No problem. Have at it."* Billy got into the driver's seat, and they headed off down the highway. A short distance away sat a rookie State Trooper operating his first speed trap. The long black limo went by him doing 70 in a 55-mph zone. The trooper pulled out and caught the limo and he got out of his patrol car to begin the procedure. The young trooper walked up to the driver's door and when the window rolled down, he was surprised to see who was driving. He immediately excused himself and went back to his car and called his supervisor. He told the supervisor, *"I know we're supposed to enforce the law... But I also know that important people are given certain courtesies. I need to know what I should do because I've stopped a very important person."* The supervisor asked, *"Is it the governor?"* The trooper said, *"No, he's more important than that."* The supervisor said, *"Is it the president."* The trooper said, *"No, he's even more important than that."* The supervisor asked, *"Who is it?"* The young trooper said, *"I think it's Jesus, because he's got Billy Graham for a chauffeur!"*

Part of what's funny about that story is the sense in which it's true. Billy Graham was like a chauffeur for Jesus for decades. He took Jesus all across the United States and around the world. He brought Jesus to people who hadn't met him yet. He was committed, had a heart for people far from God, and didn't quit. On the road of life there are gaps that can only be bridged by caring and commitment.

**Who are you becoming more like at this time in your life? Who do you want to be like?** Every day you make choices that shape who you are and who you're becoming. C.S. Lewis wrote in his classic book *Mere Christianity* that, *"Every time you make a choice you are turning the central part of you, the part of you that chooses, into something a little different from what it was before. And taking your life as a whole, with all your innumerable choices, all your life long you are slowly turning this thing into a*

*Heaven creature or into a hellish creature: either into a creature that is in harmony with God, and with other creatures, and with itself, or else into one that is in a state of war and hatred with God, and with its fellow creatures, and with itself. To be the one kind of creature is Heaven: that is, it is joy, and peace, and knowledge, and power. To be the other means madness, horror, idiocy, rage, impotence, and eternal loneliness. Each of us at each moment is progressing to the one state or the other."*

Be careful about the choices you're making in terms of whom you praise, idolize, and admire; whom you want to follow, emulate, or become like. There is no better person to seek to become like than Jesus. Invest in people as Jesus did; especially those on the margins, the lonely and the isolated. Share compassion and caring. Ask God to help you see people not through your own eyes or the eyes of the world, but as Christ sees them, as beloved children loved by God.

**Blessing:** Go to lead a life worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as you bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God. Go and share and spread the compassion the Lord has shared with you.

## Questions

1. Psalm 145:8-9 (NIV) states, "*The LORD is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love. The LORD is good to all; he has compassion on all he has made.*" What do these verses tell you about the character and the compassion of God?
2. What do you learn about the value and importance of investing in people from Matthew 9:9-13 and what Jesus does with and for Matthew? How are you investing in and seeking to add value to others?
3. Read Matthew 9:18-26 and reflect on or discuss what you notice about how Jesus cares for people. What does he do? How does he act? While you may not have the same power as Jesus, how are you extending yourself to care for others?

4. In the Gospel of Matthew 14.13-21, Jesus looks at the crowd with compassion and responds to their needs. How are you doing that and how might you do that in your own life?
5. Psalms of Lament like Psalm 143 are a reminder that everyone you encounter is fighting at least one hard battle, often one you know nothing about. How should this impact how you respond to others? How does this help us look at others with compassion, rather than contempt which is an incredibly damaging emotion?
6. In 2 Corinthians 5:16, Paul writes, "*From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view.*" What difference would it make for you to be training yourself to see every other person not from a human point of view, but with the compassionate eyes of Christ?

## Before Communion

When we were in Plains, Georgia, in May, Jill thought it would be nice if we attended a midweek prayer service at a little Baptist Church. We walked into the church and surprised the few people who were sitting around a table in the Fellowship Hall. They were ending early because there was going to be a hearse coming through town on the way to Andersonville National Cemetery. The remains of a young man from Plains had been identified 73 years after his death in Korea and he was finally going to be laid to rest in his home state. We wanted to be part of honoring this young man's sacrifice, so we left the church and returned to the former Plains High School where National Park Service employees were gathering on the sidewalk and handing out flags. We each took a flag, and we walked further up the street to the corner of the main road running through Plains where we could see other people assembling.

As we walked, I looked up online about U.S. Army Private First-Class **Luther Story**, (Company A, 9<sup>th</sup> Infantry regiment, 2<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Division) who had been posthumously awarded our nation's highest honor for bravery, the Congressional Medal of Honor.

(If you're interested in more details you may find them here:

<https://www.cmohs.org/recipient/luther-h-story>)

I won't go into detail about the courage Luther Story demonstrated, however, what he did was incredibly brave and self-sacrificing as he fought and ultimately died so that his comrades could safely withdraw and live.

That is the height of love, compassion and caring and it's similar to what Jesus did for us that we remember as we gather at this table. Jesus showed love and courage in dying on the cross and by his sacrifice we may be healed and reconciled to God and live.