

# The Compassionate Heart of Christ

## Matthew 11:28-30

**Series:** Loving God and Loving Others (Summer 2020)

**Preaching Date:** July 19, 2020

**Topic:** Loving God and others with our hearts

**Worship:** His Compassion

**Key Sentence:** We must embrace the compassionate heart of Christ

**Outline:**

I. The gentle and lowly heart of Jesus (Matthew 11:28-30)

II. The compassionate heart of Jesus (Matthew 15:32-38)

III. The joyful heart of Jesus (Hebrews 12:1-2)

**Matthew 11:28-30** Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. <sup>29</sup>Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. <sup>30</sup>For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

**Matthew 15:32-38** 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.” <sup>33</sup>And the disciples said to him, “Where are we to get enough bread in such a desolate place to feed so great a crowd?” <sup>34</sup>And Jesus said to them, “How many loaves do you have?” They said, “Seven, and a few small fish.” <sup>35</sup>And directing the crowd to sit down on the ground, <sup>36</sup>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. <sup>37</sup>And they all ate and were satisfied. And they took up seven baskets full of the broken pieces left over. <sup>38</sup>Those who ate were four thousand men, besides women and children.

**Hebrews 12:1-2** Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, <sup>2</sup>looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

## The Compassionate Heart of Christ Matthew 11:28-30

One of the things I'm enjoying about this summer series is the chance to talk about some good books. This is the third message already that I've been tempted to start with the line "I read a good book recently." Well, I did read a good book recently. It's called *Gentle and Lowly* and is subtitled "the heart of Christ for sufferers and sinners" by Dane C Ortlund. I hadn't read it when we laid out this series, but Monday morning when I set out to do some shuffling of the messages in the series I, rather impulsively for me, decided to add it this week.

The book dives into the heart of Jesus. What is his heart like? Ortlund offers a series of Scriptural studies to show convincingly that at heart Jesus is compassionate and loving. He says "This is a book about the heart of Christ. Who is he? . . . What is most natural to him? What ignites within him most immediately as he moves toward sinners and sufferers? What flows out most freely, most instinctively?" If that's not enough to intrigue you listen as he describes who the book is for. "This book is written for the discouraged, the frustrated, the weary, the disenchanted, the cynical, the empty. Those running on fumes. Those whose Christian lives feel like constantly running up a descending escalator. Those of us who find ourselves thinking: "How could I mess up that bad—again?" It is for that increasing suspicion that God's patience with us is wearing thin. For those of us who know God loves us but suspect we have deeply disappointed him. . . . Who wonder if we have shipwrecked our lives beyond what can be repaired. . . . Who have been swept off our feet by perplexing pain and are wondering how we can keep living under such numbing darkness. . . It is written in other words for normal Christians."

Normal Christians, I believe, need to have a better understanding of how utterly no-matter-what compassionate and loving Jesus is. This heart-level understanding of Jesus will have tremendous benefit for us. It will wean us away from the shame that so many feel that they are not living up to God's expectations and standards. It will wean us away from the paralyzing feeling that when I sin or when I doubt or when I drift God gets mad at me and punishes me. Ortlund contends that God moves toward us in those moments, that Jesus moves toward us and embraces us. He says "Such embrace is precisely what he loves to do. He cannot bear to hold back. We naturally think of Jesus touching us the way a little boy reaches out to touch a [snail or a] slug for the first time—face screwed up, cautiously extending an arm, giving a yelp of disgust upon contact, and instantly withdrawing. We picture the risen Christ approaching us with a severe and sour disposition.

This,” he says, “is why we need a Bible. Our natural intuition can only give us a God like us. The God revealed in the Scripture deconstructs our intuitive predilections and startles us with one whose infinitude of perfections is matched by his infinitude of gentleness.”

This morning we’re going to look at Scriptures from just the first three chapters of this book. There are many more. But in these three texts we’re going to look at the lowly and gentle heart of Jesus, the compassionate heart of Jesus and the joyful heart of Jesus. My key sentence for this is that we must embrace the compassionate heart of Jesus. I don’t use the word must in key sentences very often, but I think this is a must. For God’s sake, for our own sake and for the sake of others we must embrace the compassionate heart of Jesus.

Now you may ask me, “how does this fit with loving God and loving others?” the premise of our series. Ortlund addresses that in the first chapter. He says “all Christian toil flows from fellowship with a living Christ whose transcending, defining reality is gentle and lowly. He astounds and sustains us with his endless kindness. Only as we walk ever deeper into this tender kindness can we live the Christian life as the New Testament calls us to. Only as we drink down the kindness of [His] heart . . . will we leave in our wake, everywhere we go, the aroma of heaven, and die one day having startled the world with glimpses of a divine kindness too great to be boxed in by what we deserve.”

We begin with the text that inspired Ortlund’s book title. Matthew 11:28-30 *Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. <sup>29</sup>Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. <sup>30</sup>For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.*” At the beginning of Matthew 11 Jesus was asked by messengers from John the Baptist if he really was the Christ. He affirms what they’ve seen and heard, affirms both John’s and his own ministries, but laments that his ministry, which he has by authority of the Father has not been received. Then he prays, one of the few prayers of Jesus recorded outside of John, and he thanks God that while the so-called wise and understanding have not received his message, it has been revealed to the ordinary and the uneducated, whom he calls “little children.” It is to these, his disciples and followers, the ones he has revealed himself to that he now offers this further invitation and revelation.

“Come to me.” This is Jesus’ own invitation. Ortlund says “For all his resplendent glory and dazzling holiness, his supreme uniqueness and otherness, no one in human history has ever been more approachable than Jesus Christ. No prerequisites. No hoops to jump through. . . . The minimum bar to be enfolded into the embrace of Jesus is simply: open yourself up to him.”

Verse 28 tells us explicitly who qualifies for fellowship with Jesus: “all who labor and are heavy laden.” Ortlund says “You don’t need to unburden or collect yourself and then come to Jesus. Your very burden is what qualifies you to come. Jesus says, ‘I will give you rest.’ No payment is required. His rest is gift, not transaction. Whether you are actively working hard to crowbar your life into smoothness (“labor”) or passively finding yourself weighed down by something outside your control (“heavy laden”), Jesus Christ’s desire that you find rest, that you come in out of the storm, outstrips even your own.”

Come to me and take my yoke upon you. A yoke, of course, is the heavy crossbar laid on oxen to harness them to their burden. Jesus said of the Pharisees and teachers of the law that they “tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people’s shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger.” But Jesus is different. If he calls you to a life of discipleship and to an ethic, in the Sermon on the Mount, more stringent than the Law, he does not call you to carry it. We are yoked with him, and his yoke is easy and his burden light. “Easy,” is a word often translated “kind.” Ephesians 4:32 “Be kind to one another.” The yoke Jesus lays on his disciples is a non-yoke, a yoke of kindness. “Who could resist this?” Ortlund says. “It’s like telling a drowning man he must put on the burden of a life preserver only to hear him sputter back, ‘No way! Not me! This is hard enough, drowning here in these stormy waters. The last thing I need is the added burden of a life preserver!’” “That’s what we’re like, confessing Christ with our lips but avoiding deep fellowship with him, out of a muted understanding of his heart.” His yoke is a non-yoke. What helium does to a balloon, Jesus’s yoke does to his followers.

But why? What is it about Jesus that leads him to offer this kindness to those who come, to receive us with our burdens and weights still heavy upon us? It’s because “I am gentle and lowly in heart.” This is Jesus revealing his very heart to us. Ortlund says “In the one place in the Bible where the Son of God pulls back the veil and lets us peer way down into the core of who he is, we are not told that he is ‘austere and demanding in heart.’ We are not told he is ‘exalted and dignified in heart.’ We are not even told that he is ‘joyful and generous in heart.’ His surprising claim is that he is ‘gentle and lowly in heart.’”

The word translated “gentle” occurs three other times in the New Testament: in the first beatitude, that “the meek” will inherit the earth; in Matthew 21:5 where Jesus the king “is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey”; and in Peter’s encouragement to wives to nurture “the hidden person of the heart with the imperishable beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit” Ortlund says “Meek. Humble. Gentle. Jesus is . . . the most understanding person in the universe. The posture most natural to him is not a pointed finger but open arms.”

The word “lowly” overlaps with “gentle,” together communicating a single reality about Jesus’s heart. This specific word lowly is generally translated “humble” in the New Testament, such as in James 4:6: “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.” But this Greek word typically refers not to humility as a virtue but to humility in the sense of destitution or being thrust downward by life circumstance. In Mary’s song this word is used to speak of the way God exalts those who are “of humble estate.” Paul uses the word when he tells us to “not be haughty, but associate with the lowly” referring to the socially unimpressive, those who have neither riches nor power nor prestige.

These two words are how Jesus describes his heart. “Look in here,” he says, “and you’ll find I am gentle and accessible, not haughty or harsh.” He came to us at our level, emptied himself of glory and humbled himself to death, so that we might come to him. “He doesn’t simply meet us at our place of need; he lives in our place of need. He never tires of sweeping us into his tender embrace. It is his very heart. It is what gets him out of bed in the morning.”

The heart of Jesus is gentle and lowly. More generally, the Gospels show us that the heart of Jesus is compassionate. When a character quality or emotional quality of Jesus is named, more often than not it’s compassion. Let’s read Matthew 15:32-38 *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.”* <sup>33</sup>*And the disciples said to him, “Where are we to get enough bread in such a desolate place to feed so great a crowd?”* <sup>34</sup>*And Jesus said to them, “How many loaves do you have?” They said, “Seven, and a few small fish.”* <sup>35</sup>*And directing the crowd to sit down on the ground,* <sup>36</sup>*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.* <sup>37</sup>*And they all ate and were satisfied. And they took up seven baskets full of the broken pieces left over.* <sup>38</sup>*Those who ate were four thousand men, besides women and children.*

“I have compassion” Jesus says. “I see these needs and I have a gut response of longing.” Most of you know about this word. It literally means a gut feeling and it is translated in the King James Version “bowels.” His bowels were moved. One example: a Puritan named Richard Sibbes writes “When [Christ] saw the people in misery, his bowels yearned within him; the works of grace and mercy in Christ, they come from his bowels first.” Ortlund says “the Jesus given to us in the Gospels is not simply one who loves, but one who is love; merciful affections stream from his innermost heart as rays from the sun.” Merciful affections stream from his innermost heart as rays from the sun.

In Matthew 15 Jesus sees the physical need of this crowd that had gathered far away from the towns of Galilee. His compassion shows the working of his heart. “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.” The disciples focus on hard realities “Where are we supposed to get enough food? We’ve got seven loaves and a few small fish.” “I am enough,” Jesus says, “have them sit down.” Then his compassion, which is joined to the perfect power of God, turns the few loaves and fish into food for the 4000 families.

Over and over Jesus feels and shows compassion. Quick list: Matthew 14:14. Jesus goes to the other side of the lake, the crowds follow and “When he went ashore he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion on them and healed their sick.” His compassion, his gut concern for the suffering moves him toward the sick. We know in the Gospels that he moved toward lepers, and toward blind men and toward sinners and tax collectors. Mark 6:34 “When he went ashore he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. And he began to teach them many things.” This may be the same incident, but where Matthew saw his compassion for the sick, Mark sees his compassion for the lost, these sheep without a shepherd. Out of that compassion he began to teach them.

Matthew 9:36-38 “When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. <sup>37</sup>Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; <sup>38</sup>therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.” What is it that calls forth this compassion? It’s their lostness. They are, again, like sheep without a shepherd, but he sees that they are harassed and helpless – that is, burdened and heavy laden - and he says “pray that God would raise up people who would move toward them in this need” and care for them with the Gospel’s good news message. He wants us to be people who bring compassion to the lost, so that many will come to him for rest and rescue.

One more, Luke 7:11-15 “Soon afterward he went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a great crowd went with him. <sup>12</sup>As he drew near to the gate of the town, behold, a man who had died was being carried out, the only son of his mother, and she was a widow, and a considerable crowd from the town was with her. <sup>13</sup>And when the Lord saw her, he had compassion on her and said to her, “Do not weep.” <sup>14</sup>Then he came up and touched the bier, and the bearers stood still. And he said, “Young man, I say to you, arise.” <sup>15</sup>And the dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother.”

Notice again how Jesus' compassion moved him toward the need. Touching a dead person made you ceremonially unclean, just as touching a leper did, But Jesus moved toward the need even when it was wrapped in uncleanness. Not even death could thwart the power of his compassion. The word compassion is not used in John 11. But we see it clearly as Jesus weeps at the tomb of his friend Lazarus, and again death cannot stop his compassionate heart from acting.

Ortlund says "the cumulative testimony of the four Gospels is that when Jesus Christ sees the fallenness of the world all about him, his deepest impulse, his most natural instinct, is to move toward that sin and suffering, not away from it." Do we believe it? Deep in our hearts do we believe that his compassionate heart is for us? Ortlund says "'Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.' The same Christ who wept at the tomb of Lazarus weeps with us in our lonely despair. The same who reached out and touched lepers puts his arm around us today when we feel misunderstood and sidelined. The Jesus who cleansed messy sinners reaches into our souls and answers our half-hearted plea for mercy with the mighty invincible cleansing of one who cannot bear to do otherwise. . . . Christ's heart is not far off despite his presence now in heaven, for he does all this by his own Spirit. . . . through his Spirit, Christ's heart envelops his people with an embrace nearer and tighter than any physical embrace could ever achieve. His actions on earth in a body reflected his heart; the same heart now acts in the same ways toward us."

So we've seen that the one who invites us to himself is gentle and lowly at heart. We've seen that his heart moves toward us with compassion. Dane Ortlund's third chapter is "The Happiness of Christ," and our third point is that Jesus, in being gentle and welcoming, especially in showing his compassion through his sacrificial death and victorious resurrection, does it with a heart of joy. Puritan Thomas Goodwin says "his own joy, comfort, happiness, and glory are increased and enlarged by his showing grace and mercy, in pardoning, relieving, and comforting his members on earth." Christ's joy is increased as he moves toward sinners and sufferers with gentleness and compassion. Goodwin argues that in "from his filling them with all mercy, grace, comfort, and felicity, [Jesus] himself is becoming yet more full, by filling them." As truly God, Christ cannot become any more full; he shares in his Father's immortal, eternal, unchangeable fullness. Yet as truly man, Christ's heart is not drained by our coming to him; his heart is filled up all the more by our coming to him. To put it the other way around: when we hold back, lurking in the shadows, fearful and failing, we miss out not only on our own increased comfort but on Christ's increased comfort. He lives for this. This is what he loves to do. His joy and ours rise and fall together.

But is this biblical? Let's read Hebrews 12:1-2 *Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, <sup>2</sup>looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.* Hebrews 11, just before this, is that great roll call of faith where the author of Hebrews points out the faith of the Old Testament believers who trusted the promise of Christ despite the difficulty and turmoil it brought on them and who only now and in Christ and in us are seeing the promises they were given fulfilled. Then, in Hebrews 12, the author pictures us running our own race of faith by looking to Jesus and following Jesus, in other words by obeying his command to come to him.

Then comes verse 2 which says that Jesus as pioneer and perfecter of our faith endured the cross, despising the shame and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. Why? For the joy set before him, for the sake of the joy of his heart. What joy is this? The joy of seeing his people forgiven. Remember the whole point of Hebrews, that Jesus is the high priest to end all high priests, who has made the final atoning sacrifice to completely cover the sins of his people so that they are provided for "to the uttermost"

This is what the writer means when he speaks of Jesus sitting down at God's right hand. "After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high." "Now the point in what we are saying is this: we have such a high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven." "But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God." In all these verses, Jesus's seating at God's right hand is associated with his priestly atoning work. The priest was the bridge between God and people. He connected heaven and earth. Jesus did this through his climactic sacrifice of himself, purifying his people once and for all, cleansing them of their sins. Ortlund says "It was the joyous anticipation of seeing his people made invincibly clean that sent him through his arrest, death, burial, and resurrection. When we today partake of that atoning work, coming to Christ for forgiveness, communing with him despite our sinfulness, we are laying hold of Christ's own deepest longing and joy."

Ortlund has a tremendous illustration of this, that I've already shared with a number of people. He says "A compassionate doctor has traveled deep into the jungle to provide medical care to a tribe afflicted with a contagious disease. He has had his medical equipment flown in. He has correctly diagnosed the problem, and the antibiotics are prepared and available. He is independently wealthy and has no need of any kind of financial compensation.

But as he seeks to provide care, the afflicted refuse. They want to take care of themselves. They want to heal on their own terms. Finally, a few brave young men step forward to receive the care being freely provided. What does the doctor feel? Joy. His joy increases to the degree that the sick come to him for help and healing. It's the whole reason he came."

"So with us, and so with Christ. He does not get flustered and frustrated when we come to him for fresh forgiveness, for renewed pardon, with distress and need and emptiness. That's the whole point. It's what he came to heal. He went down into the horror of death and plunged out through the other side in order to provide a limitless supply of mercy and grace to his people."

The heart of Jesus is a heart that invites you today, with your burdens and your labors, with your sin and your suffering, to come to him. The heart of Jesus is moved with compassion as he moves toward you in sacrifice and forgiveness. The heart of Jesus is living in the joy on the other side of that sacrifice, which he endured that we might be rescued. So take his yoke upon you, take his life preserver upon you, and you will receive rest and rescue for your soul. The compassionate heart of Jesus rejoices to welcome sinners and sufferers.