

HIS STORY

The Hardened Soil

Jesus began by telling the crowds to listen, to pay attention. He drew their attention to a sower. According to what Jesus taught, He is the sower and the parable is about Him. He cast His Word (we know this from Mark 1:14-15), and His message was that God's kingdom had come. But this was a rebellious message to Rome and to Pilate. Talk of God's kingdom would be seen as treasonous to the ruling authorities, so Jesus spoke in parables to the crowd— so that only those with eyes could see and only those with ears could hear (vv. 11-12). In other words, only those with receptive hearts will understand and follow.

► **What are some things that can get in the way of a heart understanding the good news of the gospel?**

The Rocky Soil

These are the people who are initially receptive to God's kingdom. They may make a profession of faith and may even be baptized. But the picture Jesus paints is different. The joy of conversion is replaced by the struggles of life. An old friend pulls a new believer back into a sin habit. A desire to pursue one's old way of life overtakes the call to take up one's cross. Soon after, the professed convert has renounced his conversion. Why? Jesus said it is because there is no room for roots to grow deep. There is insufficient soil for effective faith and discipleship to grow. Jesus' point here is that some soil simply is too thin and some hearts too shallow for the gospel message to firmly take root—no matter what we do.

The Thorny Soil

Unlike the first two soils, this seed seems to genuinely want to take root. It is not stolen by birds and it has the ability to take root and grow. But faithfulness to the call to pick up our cross and carry it is nowhere to be found in this type of soil. Instead, there is a love for worldly distractions. The weeds of life choke the life out of this seed. It does not produce a crop because it succumbs to outside forces. Life choices take priority over Jesus. We chase worldly dreams or fall prey to needless worries.

The Good Soil

Even the most evangelistic Christian becomes disheartened sometimes. Sharing the gospel over and over while seeing no results can lead one to doubts. Am I doing something wrong? Do I need to rethink the way I present the gospel? Will everyone in our day reject the gospel? Jesus concluded the parable by answering these questions with a resounding no. The same farmer who sowed on the bad soil, using the same seed and receiving no crop, also sows the same seed on good soil and produces an amazing harvest.

Essential Doctrines

Special Revelation: *Special revelation refers to God revealing Himself to humanity through historical events, His Word, and through Jesus Christ. Through special revelation, human beings learn about God's character, His will, His purpose for creation, and His plan of redemption. Special revelation shows us the nature and character of God, and because God has revealed Himself in this way, we can know Him— through a saving relationship with Him in the person and work of Jesus Christ.*

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The Point: Christians are to forgive other Christians in the same manner they have been forgiven.

HIS STORY

Jesus Talked about Forgiveness

Matthew included Jesus' teaching on how Christians should respond to other Christians who have sinned against them.

► **How would you define forgiveness? How does your definition align with what Jesus said in these verses?**

Jesus' answer is somewhat difficult to understand. Some translations say "seventy-seven times," while others say "seventy times seven." Whichever translation you read, the point is the same. Jesus did not give a specific number of offenses after which we are no longer required to forgive. The number does not matter because Jesus taught that His followers are expected to forgive completely, without limits. Jesus' parable, which followed His response to Peter, teaches this point—Christians should keep on forgiving because of the magnitude of forgiveness that has been granted to us.

The Servant's Debt Was Canceled

According to the story, a slave owed his king ten thousand talents, an amount so outrageous that the debt could never actually be paid. This amount would be more than a person could make in an entire lifetime. The story does not lead us to believe the king was being unforgiving or unfair toward His slave. He simply wanted to recover as much of the debt as he could.

In a wonderful twist to the expected outcome, the king determined not to exact payment but to forgive the massive debt. No doubt Jesus' audience would have been shocked. What just king cancels a debt, especially one of such an enormous amount? With merely a word, an indebted slave was released from his financial bondage and his entire family escaped the approaching, lifelong, brutal punishment.

Christians Are Called to Forgive as They Have Been Forgiven

Jesus' ability to capture the attention of His audience was on full display here. After telling of a man whose immeasurable debt had just been forgiven, He went on to tell of that same man leaving the king's presence and finding a fellow slave who owed him a debt.

The punishment we see in verse 34 is sobering: Those who receive forgiveness but do not extend it to others are "wicked" and will be punished justly and severely. The translation we are reading mentions that the servant was turned over "to the jailers," but this is different than it seems. The original Greek word means torturer. So what this means is that the slave was tormented in the parable until the full payment was made—and recall how impossibly large his debt was.

Essential Doctrines

God is Merciful: *Mercy refers to God's compassion and is often expressed in God withholding something, such as punishment for sin (Eph. 2:4-5; Titus 3:5). Both mercy and grace are undeserved, meaning humanity can do nothing to earn God's mercy and grace. If one could, then it would no longer be the free gift of mercy or grace.*

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YOUR STORY

- ▶ **What makes it difficult to sometimes forgive others?**
- ▶ **What potential objections would someone have to forgiving another person again and again (“seventy times seven”)?**
- ▶ **How are you challenged by Jesus’ addition of the phrase “from your heart” to His command to forgive?**
- ▶ **What practical steps do you need to take in light of Jesus’ teaching in the parable of the unmerciful servant?**

YOUR MISSION

Head

The truth of the matter is our rebellion against God is a price too high for us to pay. We foolishly think we can repay Him by our good works or by cleaning up our act, but those things will never be enough to overcome our massive debt. Our inability to repay is what makes God’s forgiveness so remarkable—He forgives us and wipes our debt clean because of Jesus. He has extended forgiveness to those most in need.

- ▶ **Why is it important to realize we can never repay our personal debts? How does our inability to repay increase our amazement of God’s mercy and forgiveness?**
- ▶ **Why is it important for us to always remember our own forgiveness when confronted with needing to forgive someone who has wronged us?**

Heart

The world often lives by the mantra “Fool me once, shame on you; fool me twice, shame on me.” Jesus’ teaching is that no matter how many times a fellow believer sins against you, you are to forgive that person. There is no limit to your forgiveness because in forgiving “seventy times seven,” you are demonstrating that forgiveness is essential to Christian living. And in doing this, we cultivate a lifestyle of forgiveness, though not by ourselves. That is why Jesus told a story to reinforce to His followers the importance of forgiveness.

- ▶ **Why must forgiveness begin with the heart?**
- ▶ **What would such a level of grace and forgiveness within the church communicate to unbelievers?**

Hands

Is the way the unmerciful servant responded not the way we behave toward those who need our forgiveness? We who have been generously forgiven for our sins find those same sins disgusting in others. We often point out the same faults in others that we think we have mastered. This part of the parable of the unmerciful servant is the picture of what God sees in us when we fail to forgive others despite being forgiven of our rebellion. The daily discipline of forgiving others should be reflected in the lives of all those who claim to be under the forgiving grace of God in Christ.

- ▶ **What are some ways, even subtle ones, that we punish others instead of forgiving them for wrongs they have done against us?**
- ▶ **How can we resist the desire for vengeance and instead practice mercy as it has been shown to us in Christ?**

HIS STORY

Jesus summed up the Law and prophets

Some readers immediately think the question is about going to heaven after you die. But in its first-century context, the question would have had a different meaning. Asking about the way to inherit eternal life meant something like this: "Teacher, how can I make sure I will be part of God's kingdom when the Messiah comes and establishes His reign on earth? How can I make sure that whenever God returns to His people and makes everything right I'm will be part of that inheritance?"

Note Jesus' response to the expert in verse 26. Jesus basically said, "You're the expert in the law, so tell me what you find there." Jesus often responded to a question by asking another question. It's a way to reveal the heart behind the question. And that's what He did here.

Notice how the man responded. He quoted the two greatest commandments—love God and love your neighbor. Jesus Himself said on another occasion that the whole Old Testament—the Law and the Prophets—could be summed up this way (Matt. 22:36-40).

But here's the catch, and we'll see how the heart of the man was revealed in the next part of this passage: Who can fully and at all times love God and their neighbors as they are called to? If complete obedience to the law is required to inherit eternal life, then how could the lawyer make sure he was okay? Who can say they are without fault where complete obedience is concerned?

Jesus showed what compassion looks like

Simple question, simple answer. "You want to inherit eternal life? Love God and love your neighbor." But that answer implies full devotion—a perfection of love for God and people that none of us, if we're honest, can possibly fulfill. Not surprisingly, the expert felt the sting of the law's condemnation, namely the law's exposure of his failure to love God and his neighbor as he ought. And so, he quickly responded with another question, one that he hoped would justify him.

Jesus commands us to be compassionate to others

Body After telling the story of the good Samaritan, Jesus asked a question of His own. And look how Jesus' question differed from the original question asked by the law expert.

Do you see how Jesus changed the question? Basically, the expert in the law asked, "Whom do I need to see as my neighbor?" Jesus' question was different. His focus was on to whom you can be a neighbor. Instead of limiting the circle to a few "neighbors," He widened it without limit.

► What is the difference between doing acts of compassion and being a compassionate person?

Essential Doctrines

Social Concern: *All Christians are under obligation to seek to make the will of Christ supreme in our own lives and in human society. Means and methods used for the improvement of society and the establishment of righteousness among men can be truly and permanently helpful only when they are rooted in the regeneration of the individual by the saving grace of God in Jesus Christ. In the Spirit of Christ, Christians should oppose racism, every form of greed, selfishness, vice, and all forms of sexual immorality, including adultery, homosexuality, and pornography. We should work to provide for the orphaned, the needy, the abused, the aged, the helpless, and the sick. We should speak on behalf of the unborn and contend for the sanctity of all human life from conception to natural death. Every Christian should seek to bring industry, government, and society as a whole under the sway of the principles of righteousness, truth, and brotherly love. In order to promote these ends, Christians should be ready to work with all men of good will in any good cause, always being careful to act in the spirit of love without compromising their loyalty to Christ and His truth (Mic. 6:8; Eph. 6:5-9; 1 Thess. 3:12).*

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HIS STORY

The sin of the younger son

The three parables in Luke 15 (lost sheep, lost coin, lost son) were told in an environment that heightened the drama of their stories. The religious leaders were complaining about Jesus welcoming notorious sinners to His table. In response, Jesus didn't give an explanation but a series of stories, and the third one was especially pointed—casting Himself in the role of the loving father and His opponents in the role of a resentful elder brother.

Jesus painted a picture of two types of lost people. The first is openly rebellious—the “in your face” sin of the younger son. The younger son's request illustrates the enormity and consequence of human sin. “God, we want what You can give us, but we don't want You!” The second is a more subtle type of sinner—seen in the older son. He represents someone who appears to be near God but is actually far away. He's the church member who wants God's blessing but could care less about God's name being honored or about glorifying God with his life. He doesn't care about his father or his brother—only about himself and what he can get out of the situation.

The mercy of the father

The crucial moment in Jesus' story occurred as the son approached his hometown. Jesus said that the father saw his son while he was still a long way off. This implies that the boy was probably at the edge of town, ready to head down the main street (which was usually the road that almost everyone in the village lived on). The father had been watching diligently, hoping to catch a glimpse of his son.

► **Make a list of several characteristics communicated by the father's actions in this parable. How are these characteristics also true of God?**

The sin of the older brother

Finally, Jesus turned the focus back to the older son, who had not been mentioned since the beginning of the parable.

We've seen the way the father ran to his ragged, prodigal son at the edge of the community. Similarly, the father went out to convince his puffed up and arrogant older son to come in and celebrate his brother's return. The loving father had two sons who blocked his love in different ways. The younger one had walled himself off from the father's love by doing evil, while the older one walled himself off from that same love by doing good. The older brother went through the motions so he could gain rights in the household, not true membership in the family. The younger brother—the repentant rebel—was inside feasting while the older brother—the “good” son—stayed outside pouting.

The father turned the focus away from possessions, works, and obedience. The father desired the relationship. The issue was neither the faithfulness of the older son nor the reckless living of the younger one. Rather, the spotlight shone on the younger brother not because of anything he had done but because the father-son relationship had been restored.

Essential Doctrines

Repentance: *Repentance is a response to God's gracious call to salvation. It includes a genuine sorrow for one's sin (Luke 5:1-11), a turning away from one's sin toward Christ (Acts 26:15-20), and a life that reflects lasting change and transformation (Ps. 119:57-60). It is the human counterpart to God's work of regeneration; in other words, the human side of our conversion.*

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YOUR STORY

- ▶ In what ways might our actions whisper to God what the younger son shouted to his father?
- ▶ In what ways does God's treatment of us go beyond what we might hope for?
- ▶ How can our "good deeds" be a way of walling ourselves off from a relationship with God?
- ▶ Why is it important to guard against the sin of the older brother just as much as guarding against the sin of the younger brother?

YOUR MISSION

Head

The father in Jesus' story did more than simply accept his returning son. With the entire community likely watching the dramatic events, the father ordered that a robe, shoes, and a signet ring be brought out from the house. The son had come from the pigs—he was smelly and gross. But the father would not allow his son to walk down Main Street looking so horrid. He demanded that the best robe be brought as well as the ring that signified sonship so that the son would avoid any shame. The father bore the shame when he ran down the street; the son went home dressed with honor.

- ▶ In what ways does the father's treatment of his son go above and beyond what anyone expected?
- ▶ What are some specific ways this story pictures our salvation?

Heart

Jesus' parable describes two types of sin—the outward rebellion exposed in the younger son and the inward bitterness concealed in the older son. The gracious father responded to both of his children with honor and love. But unlike the younger son, who fell with tears of repentance into his father's arms, the older son simply voiced a whiny complaint. His boasting about his faithful service revealed that he saw his father as if he were only a boss to be obeyed, and he was convinced he had been treated wrongly.

- ▶ What are some ways a heart closed-off to God will lead to a heart closed-off to sinners who find forgiveness?
- ▶ How does the gospel challenge and transform the closed-off heart?

Hands

One thing we learn from the younger son is that outwardly-rebellious sin eventually leads people to squander away their lives until they are at the mercy of whatever they have glued themselves to. People attach themselves to drugs, alcohol, relationships, TV, and so forth. We become addicted to something or someone we think will provide hope; instead, the addiction brings enslavement, reminding us to daily avoid the temptation to fall into the traps of the older brother and the younger brother.

- ▶ What are some common examples today of ways we might waste God's good gifts?
- ▶ In what ways does wasting God's gifts lead to slavery instead of freedom?

HIS STORY

The wicked tenants rejected their responsibility as stewards

The image of a vineyard instantly brought to mind Isaiah 5 for Jesus' hearers. The parable is about God and His people. As Jesus retold the vineyard story, He made it clear that the religious leaders (tenants) who had been called by God (owner) to watch over Israel (the vineyard) had failed. The people had received the great privilege of being chosen by God. But they had failed to live up to the responsibility that accompanies that blessing. God was looking for fruit from His people, especially from the religious leaders, but no fruit was found.

Instead of apologizing for their lack of fruit, the tenants of the vineyard treated the owner terribly. They resented the interruption of the vineyard owner through his sending of messengers. Their problem was not that they didn't bear any fruit; it was that the fruit they bore was bad! Instead of offering the good fruit of repentance for their failures, they offered the bad fruit of rebellion.

► **What are the responsibilities that come with our privilege of being God's people? What kind of fruit are we to bear as Christians?**

The wicked tenants rejected God's warnings and His Son

Although the main point of this parable is the judgment of God, we shouldn't overlook the shocking display of patience on the part of the vineyard owner. He kept sending messengers to the tenants, and the tenants continued to mistreat the messengers.

Just as the wicked tenants mistreated the servant-messengers, the religious and political leaders of Israel also mistreated the prophets. You'd expect God to respond immediately after having one of His prophets mistreated. Instead, God continued to warn His people of the consequences of their sin. He continued to send prophet after prophet, no matter how badly they were treated.

The parable continued with the vineyard owner sending his own son and, for those of us reading and listening to Jesus' story now, the analogy is crystal clear. Just as God's people had rejected the warnings that had come from love, they would also reject the Son who came in love. The wicked tenants saw the son and coveted his inheritance. Instead of responding respectfully and rightly, they threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. The same week that Jesus uttered this parable, the religious leaders would conspire to throw Jesus out of Jerusalem and crucify Him on the outskirts of town.

The wicked tenants were rejected by God

This parable of judgment ends with Jesus quoting from a psalm. The parable's analogy blurs into reality as it becomes clear Jesus was issuing a strong judgment against His people's failure to bear fruit. The religious leaders recognized how this parable was spoken against them.

Essential Doctrines

Nature of Hell: *For those who are not found in Christ at the time of their death, the Scriptures say that God's condemnation remains upon them (John 3:36) and that they will be judged according to their deeds done on earth (Heb. 9:27). The punishment that awaits unbelievers in hell is an eternal, never-ending suffering that comes from sins committed against an infinite God (Matt. 25:41,46). In hell, sinners are forever separated from God.*

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YOUR STORY

- ▶ **We tend to think of warnings as something bad, a message of judgment. How are God's warnings to us a sign of His grace?**
- ▶ **What words would you use to describe the vineyard owner if he had decided not to judge the wicked tenants?**
- ▶ **Why does punishment seem so proper in this case? How does this influence the way we view the judgment of God?**
- ▶ **How would you use this parable to explain to both people who are religious and non-religious that our only hope is in knowing the Son, Jesus Christ?**

YOUR MISSION

Head

Notice just how religious the rejection of Jesus and the prophets was in this parable. Sometimes we tend to think of people in categories of religious or irreligious, as if the former is good and the latter is bad. But in this case, the people who received the strongest condemnation from God were the religious leaders and the people who bore no fruit.

- ▶ **What are some ways we might use religious devotion to mask our lack of fruitfulness?**
- ▶ **What aspects of this parable's warning apply to us today?**

Heart

We fail to apply this parable well if we do not consider our own hearts and lives. We cannot rely on our religious devotion or our sincerity to escape the wrath of God. We must rely only on Jesus, the cornerstone of our faith, who incorporates us into His people. Belonging to God's people is both a privilege and a responsibility, just as it was in Jesus' day.

- ▶ **Why is it tempting to think you are safe from God's judgment because you are "religious" or "spiritual?"**
- ▶ **According to this parable, what does true religion look like?**

Hands

Where do we fit in this story? On the one hand, the parable serves as a warning to all who reject the Son of God. Reject Jesus and you invite the judgment of God. On the other hand, the parable serves as a warning to those who think they belong to God's people but continue to ignore His warnings. We show we truly belong to God by obeying Him, heeding His warnings, and embracing His Son. By failing to heed God's warnings, we take our stand against the prophets and against Jesus Himself.

- ▶ **How does this parable challenge us in our efforts of sharing Christ with others?**
- ▶ **What role does "bearing fruit" play in our mission to share and show the love of God?**

HIS STORY

Mary went to Jesus with a need

Here we have a scenario where Jesus, along with His mother and disciples, were invited to a wedding. From all appearances, Mary was not just a guest at this wedding—obviously she was involved in the serving, planning, or at the very least a trusted member of the family or a close friend. She could have been like the cousin or aunt who shows up on the morning of the wedding and asks, “How can I help?” We know Mary was intimately involved because she became aware of a need that was not public: The wine had run out.

The need was there, and Mary plainly presented it to Jesus. What did Mary expect Jesus to do? We can't be entirely sure. Some speculate that adding Jesus and His disciples to the wedding feast may have overloaded the need for food and drink, causing the embarrassment. Some suggest that perhaps Jesus could have acted as a helper, going to purchase more wine. But Jesus' response to His mother shows that she knew He was capable of a supernatural response.

Jesus changed the water into wine

Later in His ministry, Jesus would say these words: “Every good tree produces good fruit, but a bad tree produces bad fruit. A good tree can't produce bad fruit; neither can a bad tree produce good fruit” (Matt. 7:17-18). In essence, Jesus was saying we can be identified by the fruit we produce.

This is helpful because we learn that Jesus' miracles were often used to validate who He was and the message He was proclaimed. Peter expressed this truth when he said that God did signs, wonders, and miracles among the people through Jesus, which affirmed Him as God's Son (Acts 2:22). God enabled and instructed Jesus to perform miracles to identify Himself through them, and those miracles began with a kind gesture from Jesus when He turned water into wine.

His miracles highlight His divine authority and power

When Jesus turned the water into wine, it was as holy, set apart, and as glorious as any other of God's miraculous displays. The amount of wine and the quality of wine were not missed: John wanted to make sure we grasped that the 100 plus gallons were considered the best by the chief servant (John 2:6,10). God's perfect holiness and glory was revealed through the perfection of the outcome.

This wouldn't be the last time one of Jesus' miracles caused someone to believe in His true identity. Yes, He met needs. Yes, He healed. Yes, He touched, loved, cared, and helped. But every miracle was solely focused on one purpose: to glorify the Father. The servants who saw the miracle may have had no idea who Jesus was and why He had followers, but the miracle changed them forever. The disciples certainly knew who He was and had agreed to follow Him, but this miracle gave them a deeper connection in believing He was who He said He was.

► **Imagine you were one of the servants at the wedding. How would you have responded to Jesus' command? His miracle? Now, imagine you were one of the disciples. How would this strengthen your faith and confirm your decision to follow Him?**

Essential Doctrines

Miracles: *A miracle is an event in which God makes an exception to the natural order of things, or supersedes natural laws, for the purpose of demonstrating His glory and/or validating His message. Miracles are recorded throughout Scripture; miraculous signs and wonders were oftentimes evident when a prophet or an apostle was speaking God's message to the people. Because we believe God to be all-powerful and personally involved in this world, we believe He can and does perform miracles.*

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YOUR STORY

- ▶ **Why do we sometimes find it difficult to bring our personal needs to God?**
- ▶ **What does this story teach us about Jesus' concern for us, even in the small areas of life?**
- ▶ **When have you seen God reveal His glory outside the walls of your church? How were the observers changed?**
- ▶ **How can God's work of salvation in your own life be used to glorify God to those around you?**

YOUR MISSION

Head

God's glory is uniquely displayed in various ways throughout Scripture. When Moses saw His glory in the burning bush, the old shepherd knew it was more than a plant on fire (Ex. 3). When the glory of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai as a cloud, no one mistook it for your everyday cumulus clouds (Ex. 24:16-17). When Belshazzar saw the handwriting on the wall, he knew he wasn't seeing things (Dan. 5:5-9). When God announced the birth of Jesus, it was to lowly shepherds, and the announcement was enhanced by the angelic host.

- ▶ **When have you witnessed something that was unmistakably God?**
- ▶ **How has that experience affected you?**

Heart

Though she was a mature woman, full of faith, Mary was childlike in her request. When a young child has a need, she goes to her parents confident they can meet her need. Children don't try to bargain or instruct their parents when a true need arises; they simply state the need. The irony of this scenario at the wedding is that the mother comes to the Son, acknowledging His authority and divine power.

- ▶ **What are some areas of life where you need to recognize and submit to Jesus' divine authority and power?**
- ▶ **How does your confidence in Jesus' authority and power reveal itself in your prayer life?**

Hands

Just as Jesus considered His purpose before each miracle, we should consider our purpose before each conversation, each lunch meeting, each relationship, and each trial: Am I reflecting Christ? Do I point others to Him? Can others tell by my words and actions that Jesus is King of kings, Lord of lords, and the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world? When you tell others how Jesus won your heart, called you by name, and changed you from the inside out, you are just as amazing and awe-inspiring to unbelievers as the turning of water into wine.

- ▶ **Share about a time when you were personally amazed by Jesus because of His work in someone else's life.**
- ▶ **What are some intentional ways you can be sure Jesus is displayed in your life this week to those around you?**

HIS STORY

Jesus had compassion on the crowds

When Jesus stepped off the boat, the crowd was there waiting for Him. He alone had the power to heal them inside and out. He alone brought the words of eternal life. They weren't seeking simple entertainment; they were seeking Jesus to work the miracles in them that they had only heard about from the stories of long ago. Their parents had taught them about Moses, the plagues, the parting of the Red Sea, water from a rock, and manna. And this Man seemed to be just as strong as Moses in the power of God. And so, though no doubt tired, worn, and emotionally spent, Jesus had compassion on them.

Before He ever provided the crowd with a meal, Jesus provided them something far more valuable—Himself. The bread from heaven in the exodus nourished God's people, but the Bread of Life satisfies forever (John 6:35-38). So, in His compassion, He healed their sick.

► **Jesus went away to be alone, but the crowds followed Him. He could have been frustrated or angry, but instead He showed compassion. Think of a time when you needed to be alone. What would your response be if a crowd had approached you with their needs?**

Jesus provides by doing the impossible

After Jesus' long day of grieving and healing, His disciples approached Him somewhat like the Israelites did with Moses—less belligerently but with a similar faithless message.

Jesus provides by meeting needs through His followers

When the disciples first approached Jesus about the need to send everyone away to buy food, Jesus told them to give the people something to eat instead of sending them away. What? Jesus' intention all along had been to use His disciples to meet the needs of the crowd. He knew the masses were physically hungry for a meal, but their spiritual hunger was even deeper. Sending the crowd away would only meet the physical hunger; using His followers to meet the physical needs of the crowd as He met their spiritual needs would bless everyone.

Though the power and the miracle came through Jesus, it was carried out by the human hands and feet of the disciples. Jesus blessed the food but turned over the heavenly meal to the very men who had complained about the time, the lack of food, and the amount of people still sitting around them (Matt. 14:15,17). And before their very eyes, the five loaves and two fish became food for thousands. These were not snack-sized portions, either—the people ate and were satisfied!

Essential Doctrines

Jesus' Deity: *Within the person of Jesus Christ, there are two natures—the divine nature and the human nature. Scripture teaches He is fully divine and fully human. His divinity is on display in passages that describe Him as being equal with God (John 1:1-18; Phil. 2:5-11; Col. 1:15-20; Heb. 1:1-3). The New Testament also points to the deity of Christ by showing how He possesses attributes that God alone possesses (Mic. 5:2; John 1:4), how He performs works that only God performs (Mark 2:5-12; John 10:28; 17:2), and how He Himself claims to be the Son of God (Matt. 26:63-64; John 8:58; 10:30; 17:5).*

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YOUR STORY

- ▶ What are some reasons we might refuse to show compassion to others? Are any of these justified? Why or why not?
- ▶ What are some circumstances for which people blame God?
- ▶ What does blaming God say about a person’s understanding of who God is?
- ▶ How does this story help us to trust Jesus more in our daily lives?

YOUR MISSION

Head

This story reminds us that similar to Jesus’ command to bring to Him whatever food and resources the little boy had, He tells us to bring all we have to Him. He says to bring Him our stress, our lack of patience, our insecurities, and our pain. He tells us to trust Him with all of it and to not hold back, thinking we can handle some of it on our own. This is the opposite of the Israelites. They grumbled and complained and blamed. They yelled at Moses and wanted to go back to Egypt. Their human assessment was that they were hopeless, so their solution was a return to slavery. But with God in control, everything is possible for those who believe in Him (Mark 9:23). He alone can do the impossible with what you have. But you’ve got to bring it to Him. All of it.

- ▶ What is your impossible situation today?
- ▶ What would it mean for you to take your situation fully to Jesus?

Heart

Compassion was not just something Jesus had, but something we as His followers should have as well. When we see people desperate, hurting, grieving, and full of sorrow, our compassion for them leads us to share our resources, our meals, and our homes. We give words of peace, comfort, and hope. And even when we’re exhausted or grieving ourselves, we don’t harden our hearts, but look to God as our example. The love of the Father and the Son and the Spirit was not limited to emotions—God acted on it. Likewise, we as followers of Christ are not called to feel compassion but to be compassionate.

- ▶ What situation led you to feel compassion recently? How did you act on it?
- ▶ What difference did your act of compassion make in the life of another? In your own life?

Hands

When we accept Jesus as Lord and Savior, we learn that we’re called to be servants, but sometimes that servitude leads to much more—sometimes He works through us in pretty amazing ways. Sometimes we step out in faith, leaving our comfort zone and everyday routine, only to find out that God is allowing us to be used to magnify His glory to those around us.

- ▶ How has God used a person to reveal Himself to you?
- ▶ How has God used you to love or lead someone in His name?

YOUR STORY

- ▶ What benefits have you experienced from spending time alone praying to God?
- ▶ How are you encouraged by knowing Jesus walks on top of the raging storms of life?
- ▶ How might this story challenge the way you view current “storms” of life you may be dealing with?
- ▶ What should we learn from Peter’s mistake of taking his eyes off of Jesus during the storm?

YOUR MISSION

Head

This passage should help us recognize that in what we might call the storms of life, we can often find our minds clouded with doubts and fears. Sometimes mental storms have greater impact and more collateral damage than physical storms. Although physical storms come and go, mental storms seem to remain. Regardless of the kind of storms we may experience, knowing Jesus provides us with peace in the storm. The gospel reminds us that because of our relationship with Jesus, we have peace with God as well as access to the peace of God.

- ▶ How does prayer reflect our understanding of God’s sovereignty over our circumstances?
- ▶ Which do you find more significant: physical storms or metaphorical “storms of life”? Why?

Heart

Think about it—Peter was about to step away from the only means of protection he had in the midst of the storm, namely, the boat he was sitting in. Peter had been in storms like this before and knew how dangerous they could be. But he stepped out on faith, trusting in Jesus’ words calling him to come forward. Today, the story teaches us that God often uses a storm to bring us to a place where we humbly cry out, “Lord, help us!” It is in those moments that we are reminded of Jesus’ power to hold up disciples of weak faith and keep them from being swept away by the waves.

- ▶ What are some current life storms where Jesus is calling you to step out in faith?
- ▶ What are some ways we can show courage and faith in Jesus in the midst of our difficult life situations?

Hands

It’s crucial we see Jesus engaged in ministry on a full-time basis during this season of life. He was fully dedicated to the mission God sent Him to fulfill. Jesus ministered to others with all of His heart, mind, soul, and strength. Therefore, to ensure physical endurance to complete the mission, He carved out the needed space to be alone with the Heavenly Father, which is something that all believers can learn from when it comes to being on mission with God.

- ▶ How does this session challenge your own prayer life?
- ▶ Why is it so important for us to realize that spending time alone with God helps us to rest, regroup, and be refreshed?

YOUR STORY

- ▶ **How does Jesus' compassion toward the multitudes challenge the way you show compassion to those nearest to you?**
- ▶ **Why is spiritual healing more beneficial than physical healing in the long run?**
- ▶ **What does this story teach us about seeking physical healing for others?**
- ▶ **How as this story challenged you personally?**

YOUR MISSION

Head

The primary blessing that those who embrace Jesus as Savior receive is complete spiritual healing for our sin sickness. In light of this, we must understand that while we are not promised physical healing from all sickness on this side of eternity, those who trust in Jesus will never face the wrathful consequences of their sin. Believers will never face separation from God, the outpouring of His wrath, and the eternal sickness and death awaiting those who do not believe (Rev. 21:4).

- ▶ **What are we to believe about Jesus because of His claims and His miracle in this narrative?**
- ▶ **What are some ways we can help others understand the priority of having our sin sickness healed, even over our desire for physical healing?**

Heart

The men were motivated to go to great lengths to see Jesus engage the paralytic by their desire to see their friend healed. These men had strong faith because they truly believed Jesus would restore the man physically. We can learn from these men as it relates to our family members and friends. What lengths are we willing to go to in order for them to encounter Jesus and be restored not only physically, but also spiritually?

- ▶ **How does this story strengthen our own faith in Jesus' ability to restore us?**
- ▶ **Like the friends in this story, what motivates you to help people encounter Jesus? Why?**

Hands

The crowd gathered at the home where He was staying obviously knew Jesus would not turn them away. This should be a reminder for us that we should pray that the masses of lost sheep in our world would seek out and trust the compassion of Jesus. When we engage with the lost, may the compassion of our Savior be felt through our tender words, engaging eye contact, and openness to meet their needs. In doing this, we will reflect our Savior who has loved us in the same way.

- ▶ **What are some excuses and objections we can come up with for not engaging with the lost in order to share the gospel with them?**
- ▶ **How does the compassion of Jesus Christ coming to us in the gospel overcome our excuses and objections?**

HIS STORY

Jesus encountered the demoniac

Christ demonstrated great power while He walked on earth. And He did so in many ways. Several stories in the Gospels tell of Jesus encountering people who were demon-possessed. Let's take a look at one of the most memorable exorcisms Jesus performed.

Unlike those who bound the man and cast him out to live among the dead, Jesus met this man on the shore and engaged him. Jesus didn't turn His back on this needy sinner. In fact, it was for people like this that Jesus came in the first place. Jesus cared about this demoniac because he saw a sick man, not just the demonic spirit that ravaged him. No amount of medicine could help this man. No self-help book could revive him. Jesus knew what we know now—that He alone had the power and authority to change this man's life forever.

► **What do you think causes us to be afraid of things we don't understand? Why do you think we fear evil despite God's command not to?**

Jesus confronted the evil spirits and had compassion on the demoniac

One of the main truths we learn from this story is that all demonic forces, including the Devil, are subject to the power of Christ. No demonic spirit has the final word. The Devil and his demonic forces are subject to One who is much greater and more powerful. Note that the text says the demons begged Jesus and that Jesus gave them permission to enter the pigs. The Bible says that demons believe "and they shudder" (Jas. 2:19) Thus, we know that evil spirits believe in the power of God and know that they are under His authority and are only permitted to do what He allows.

Jesus called the man to testify to God's goodness in his life

When Jesus delivered this man, He had a much bigger plan for the man's life than for him to just live out the rest of his days in peace. This man was charged to testify to the goodness of God that he had experienced firsthand. Here we learn that the gospel that saves is the gospel that sends. When God redeems you, He gives you a mandate and a mission.

All followers of Christ have a mandate—to tell those who don't know God about what He has done for them. Jesus told him to go home to his own people and tell them what happened to him. This is the power of a personal testimony. While God does sometimes use seminary-trained preachers who proclaim the Word of God to lead people to faith in Christ, the Great Commission is not reserved for preachers alone. Rather, the Great Commission is for ordinary Christians to take the good news of Jesus to new people and places.

► **What are some ways we can carry out our mission of sharing what Jesus has done for us both locally and globally?**

Essential Doctrines

Demons: Demons are angelic beings who sinned against God and now continually work evil in the world today (Job 1:6; Zech. 3:1; Luke 10:18). Demons oppose God and seek to destroy His work, as seen in the Bible's description of Satan, the head of demons, who seeks to "steal and kill and destroy" (John 10:10). Though demons have power, they are limited by God's control and can only act within constraints God permits. In the end, all of the demons will be cast into the lake of fire, for which it was originally created.

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HIS STORY

Jesus encountered a sick woman on the way to Jairus' house

Today's passage contains a story within a story. It begins with Jesus on His way to help a man whose daughter was at the point of death, but then someone else showed up.

► **Take a moment to list several signs in the story that the characters are desperate. What other actions do you associate with desperation?**

Jairus was desperate because he knew that, without the power of God, he would lose his daughter. The woman who touched Jesus was desperate as well. For twelve years, she had suffered from an illness that afflicted her in more ways than one. She'd suffered physically from the illness, financially (after seeing countless doctors), and socially (because of the shameful nature of her disease). Like Jairus, she knew that her situation was hopeless without Jesus.

Jesus healed the sick woman

Because of her disease, this woman was subject to ridicule and shame. Her rights as a citizen were affected. Now, picture the scene. This woman, rendered unclean by her condition, was trying to get to the Messiah—the only spotless, innocent, pure Man to ever live. According to the law, her uncleanliness should have kept her from approaching Jesus. But there was something about this Man she had heard about: He had power to heal. And that's just what He did.

Jesus brought Jairus' daughter back to life

First, we trust Jesus because of His power. Death is no match for the power of Christ—it does not get the final word. Why else do we pray to the Lord on behalf of those who are on their deathbeds? Because that's what we are supposed to do? No. We seek the face of God because we are sure of His sovereign ability to heal.

Second, we trust Jesus because of His presence. Jesus was with Jairus every step of the way, giving you and I an example of His promise that He will never leave us or forsake us (Josh. 1:5). No matter what you are facing today, by faith, take hold of the promise that Jesus is with you.

Third, we trust Jesus because of His compassion. Compassion never filled a man more than it filled the life of Christ. Jesus is able to sympathize with our weakness in every way (Heb. 4:15). He knew exactly what Jairus was feeling. You might ask, if Jesus was so compassionate, then why did He wait to tend to the child who was near death? Why did He stop to help this woman who had been sick for twelve years? Couldn't she have waited? Jairus might have even thought to himself, "That woman's disease will always be there. Jesus, can't you come back to her after you heal my daughter?"

Essential Doctrines

Guilt and Shame: *Guilt refers to the objective status of someone being found guilty for a wrong committed, as well as the incurring of punishment that comes with it (Matt. 5:21-22; Jas. 2:10). Shame is the emotional pain that comes from sinful actions. Scripture teaches that human beings are guilty in an objective sense, and also feel the weight of shame in a subjective sense.*

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HIS STORY

Jesus heard news of Lazarus' sickness

This family (Mary, Martha, and Lazarus) knew Jesus well. He had stayed in their home and had eaten meals with them. They were not only His followers, but also His friends. They had seen what He did for people who needed healing, so Lazarus' family knew Jesus had the power to heal.

Did Lazarus' family want Jesus to know about his sickness and do something about it right then? Absolutely. However, Jesus had a different plan. Jesus told His followers Lazarus' sickness wouldn't end in death, and then He even stayed where He was for two more days.

▶ **How might complete trust in God have helped Mary and Martha as they faced their brother's death? How might it help you as you face losses?**

Jesus invited Martha to believe in Him

Martha and Mary had the same reaction you or I might have had upon seeing Jesus: "Lord, if you had just been here, Lazarus would still be alive!" Both of Lazarus' sisters knew Jesus had the power to do whatever He wanted. Not only could He give life, but He could also renew life.

▶ **What's so surprising about Jesus' delay? How does Martha's reaction demonstrate this?**

Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead

Imagine the scene here. Lazarus had been dead for four days. Those around the tomb probably held their noses. A four-day-old body would have certainly smelled—at least, you would expect it to. But in this case, something different happened. Jesus asked for the tomb to be opened, and it was. Jesus then called out for Lazarus to walk out of the tomb. And sure enough, Lazarus walked out—still wearing the clothes he was buried in.

Essential Doctrines

Life After Death: *The Bible teaches that when a Christian dies he or she immediately is with the Lord (Luke 23:43; 2 Cor. 5:8). This is what some people call an intermediate state, given that the final state for believers takes place at the future resurrection (Rev. 6:10-11). For those who are not in Christ, life after death results in being separated from Christ in a state of suffering, even though future judgment remains (Luke 16:19-31).*

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