

From Indifference To Compassion

Jonathan Rue
Matthew 14:13-21
08.02.09
'Live Upside Down' Series

I want to begin tonight by telling you two stories of 2 different people that have very contrary opinions about how to respond to someone else's need. The first person is a phone operator at Verizon Wireless, whose name was undisclosed to the newspapers. Two months ago, this Verizon phone operator, working a normal shift gets an emergency phone call from Sheriff Dale Williams of Carol County, Ohio. Sheriff Williams describes an emergency situation in which a man's life is at risk unless the police are able to find him. What had happened was that a 62 year old man in Carrollton, Ohio, had begun to freak out and break the windows in his house and scream and yell and so his neighbors called the cops. The cops arrived and they were told that the man had fled with a bunch of bottles of pills and they were concerned for his life. So, the police began a massive search for this 62 year old man. The search party consisted of a state highway patrol airplane, 2 Canine units, several fire departments, and more than 100 people on foot.

Well, Sheriff Williams was describing this to the Verizon phone operator and asking if they would turn the man's cell phone on so that the police could locate him by tracking the signal. See he was behind on his phone bill and Verizon had shut off his phone service. But the Verizon operator said no. He refused to connect the man's signal unless the Sheriff's department agreed to pay \$20 of the overdue bill. Here's what Sheriff Williams later said about it,

SLIDE:

"I was more concerned for the person's life. It would have been nice if Verizon would have turned on his phone for five or 10 minutes, just long enough to try and find the guy. But they would only turn it on if we agreed to pay \$20 of the unpaid bill. Ridiculous." —Sheriff Dale Williams

Well, after arguing a bit, Sheriff Williams agreed to pay the \$20 and started the process of transferring the money but just at that moment, the massive search party ended its 11 hour search for this man and finally found him unconscious and in desperate need of medical attention.

What a picture of the indifference of the world!

SLIDE:

The Indifference of the World

We have this cultural value that if it doesn't affect me, I don't care. Verizon Wireless, or at least this operator that was working for them, didn't care that this man's life was at stake, they wanted their \$20. We have become people so consumed with ourselves that we've lost the ability to care about other people. We're so concerned that our own needs are met, that when they are, we are indifferent to other that are in need.

Well, I want to tell you a second story tonight about a man named Chuck Feeney.

SLIDE:
Image of Chuck Feeney

Chuck Feeney was born in New Jersey during the Great Depression, raised in a Catholic family. Chuck put himself through college by selling 700 bologna and cheese sandwiches a week out of wicker basket. After college Chuck got into business with a man named Robert Miller and they together founded Duty Free Shoppers, which turned into a massive international retail company. Chuck didn't become a millionaire, Chuck became a billionaire.

In fact, Chuck Feeney should be worth over 4 billion dollars today, but he's not worth that much anymore. Chuck isn't even a Billionaire anymore. You see, 25 years ago Chuck set up a secret offshore bank account. But not the kind your thinking—it wasn't an illegal tax shelter like many wealthy people setup to hide their true income from the government. Chuck setup a secret account to hide his giving from the public. He wanted to conceal his plan to give all his money away. So he started this foundation called Atlantic Philanthropies, and it became one of the largest philanthropic foundations in history.

Well, after 15 years of secrecy, the word leaked out. And it was discovered that he was giving all of his money away. *The reason was that he was inwardly tormented by seeing the state of the world around him and comparing that against the fact that he had so much wealth.* He just couldn't justify having billions of dollars, while so much of the world is living and dying in grinding poverty. So he didn't live a lifestyle of luxury. He buys his clothes off the rack. He uses a plastic bag for a briefcase. He wears eyeglasses that he bought at a drugstore. He flies coach. He owns no house. He owns no car. He takes the subway around. He has five children who worked summers as hotel maids, cashiers, and waiters.

Here's how Chuck sums up his philosophy of living.

SLIDE:
"I had one idea that never changed in my mind — that you should use your wealth to help people. I try to live a normal life, the way I grew up. I set out to work hard, not to get rich." —Chuck Feeney

See Chuck Feeney could not sit back and enjoy the luxurious pleasures of wealth and be indifferent toward the suffering and disease and poverty all around us in the world. He just couldn't allow himself to be satisfied with his own needs. He took his 4 billion dollars and gave it away. And today Chuck Feeney has personal assets on the level of about a million and a half dollars.

Well, we've been doing a series called Live Upside Down.

**SLIDE:
Series Graphic**

And we're looking at the way that Jesus flips our cultural values on their head. And for us to follow Jesus, we're discovering that there are some key things in our lives that God is in the process of turning upside down.

Well, tonight we're looking at a central value of the life of Jesus, the value that would make a billionaire live like a college student, the value of showing compassion to those in need. This cuts across the cultural pull of selfish indifference. The common internal attitude that says, "So what?" "Why should I care?" "Why should I care about somebody that is starving in Africa?" "Why should I care about a Aids pandemic on another continent?" "I'm ok. My needs are taken care of."

Now on the outside, everybody cares. I'm not talking about that. There's very few people that would say "I don't care about genocide in Sudan". But what I am talking about is the feeling that leads to action. I'm not talking about feeling sorry for someone, I am talking about compassion.

Well, as we look as always to Jesus as our model for living, we see that Jesus, by his very existence, the Son of God coming to earth in the flesh, is a living model compassion. Of God doing something about the plight of humanity, instead of just being content to cut us loose. The existence of Jesus is proof that God was not content to sit and heaven with an air of indifference about the world that had turned away from him. No, Romans 5:8 says

**SLIDE:
Romans 5:8 (TNIV)**

But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Jesus, by his very life and death and by the ministry that he modeled for us, shows us how to live a life of compassion. I've called tonight's talk From Indifference to Compassion. Let's Pray.

TITLE SLIDE:

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So what does it take to break through the wall of indifference, the wall of feeling sorry for someone and doing nothing? What does it take to actually have compassion on someone, meaning that you do something to help them. Well, as always, we are going to look to Jesus and see how he did it, how he had compassion of people.

We're going to look at a text tonight that gives us a great picture of how to have compassion in the midst of a need all around us that is so much bigger, so far beyond what we have resource in and of ourselves to solve. Most of us have a heart for compassion. We like the idea of compassion, but are paralyzed by the size of the need in the world today. And so we end up doing nothing and just feeling bad about ourselves, but Jesus has a better way.

So let's open up God's word to the book of Matthew, the first book in the New Testament. Matthew, chapter 14, starting in verse 13. Jesus has just gotten the saddening news that John the Baptist has been beheaded. John the Baptist was the forerunner of Jesus, the guy that was preaching, "Make straight the way of the Lord," that the Messiah is coming. And he is the one that baptized Jesus in the Jordan River. And so Jesus receives news that Herod has just beheaded John the Baptist. And so we read this.

SLIDE:

Matthew 14:13-21 (TNIV)

When Jesus heard what had happened, he withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place. Hearing of this, the crowds followed him on foot from the towns. 14 When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them and healed their sick.

15 As evening approached, the disciples came to him and said, "This is a remote place, and it's already getting late. Send the crowds away, so they can go to the villages and buy themselves some food."

16 Jesus replied, "They do not need to go away. You give them something to eat."

17 "We have here only five loaves of bread and two fish," they answered.

18 "Bring them here to me," he said. 19 And he directed the people to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up

to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then he gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the people. 20 They all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over. 21 The number of those who ate was about five thousand men, besides women and children.

So here we get a clear view of the compassion of Jesus.

SLIDE:
The compassion of Jesus

And notice that immediately after hearing this terrible news about John the Baptist, the first thing that Jesus did was withdraw to a solitary place to be alone.

SLIDE:
He withdrew

Look at this in verse 13.

SLIDE:
Matthew 14:13 (TNIV)
When Jesus heard what had happened, **he withdrew** by boat **privately** to a **solitary place**...

Now here's Jesus, our model of the compassionate life. Jesus is withdrawing to be by himself. So even Jesus needed time away, to be alone, to be with God, to recharge himself. Even Jesus couldn't be inundated with people's needs every second of every day. And there's this great fear of stepping into compassion. There's this fear that if I get involved in helping the homeless, if I get involved with Fruit of the Vine ministries here, to give groceries out to people, to volunteer at some of the outreaches, to go to nursing homes, that I'm going to be inundated with people's needs, it's going to overtake my life and it's going to squeeze out everything else. But when we look at Jesus, Jesus withdrew. He went off to be alone. All of his time was not given to healing people, and to meeting people's needs and feeding people. He needed to have time himself to withdraw and to pray. To decompress.

Now the problem is that the crowds followed him and heard about where he was going and so they went and met him. So Jesus is trying to spend time by himself, and he's confronted with a massive crowd of needy people. But Jesus does not ignore them. He does not look away, but instead the text says that *he saw the crowd*.

SLIDE:
He saw the crowds

He saw them. Look at verse 14.

SLIDE:

Matthew 14:13-14 (TNIV)

...Hearing of this, the crowds followed him on foot from the towns. 14
When Jesus landed and **saw a large crowd**, he had compassion on them
and healed their sick

See, you can't have compassion on people if you can't see them. If you look away. If you turn your eye. If you insulate your life against ever running into anybody who has need, you don't have opportunity to show compassion. But this is harder and harder to do in our day in age. In our global village, we are aware of all the major problems of countries all over the world. If there's a famine in Africa, we hear about it. If there's a tsunami in southeast Asia, it's all over the news. And because we are so saturated by bad news, by problems, by needs, we exceed our capacity to comprehend it. And so we become deaf to the need. We don't really hear it. We become blind to the needs. We don't really see them.

But Jesus, even though he's trying to get away, he's trying to be by himself, the crowds find him and it says, he saw them and had compassion on them. Seeing the people's needs was a necessary motivator for the compassion that Jesus demonstrated. A great way to stir compassion in your life is to see the needs around you, to become an observer of life, of people all around you, to actually notice the homeless person on your way to class. To be aware of the person behind you in the grocery line with food stamps. To educate yourself about some of the global crises, like the AIDS pandemic in Africa, or genocide in Sudan. If you find yourself hollowing out, where you don't feel things anymore...you watch the news and it's like watching fiction. Practice really seeing someone's need. That's the beginning of compassion. Because after Jesus saw the crowds, he had compassion on them.

SLIDE:

He had compassion

Look at verse 14.

SLIDE:

Matthew 14:14 (TNIV)

When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, **he had compassion on them** and healed their sick.

Jesus had compassion on them, meaning he did something about their needs. He met them where they were at and healed the sick that were there. People came seeking Jesus, that he had been healing all these other people and so they brought their sick to them and he healed them.

Physical healing is an act of God's compassion where he reaches down into our lives and says I care about you and I want to do something about it. I want to take your sickness; I want to take your disease away. So, that's one way that God shows compassion to us. This is one simple way that we can show compassion to each other. By praying for your friend or coworker when they are sick.

But there's so many ways that we can show compassion to one another. Anytime that we reach out to meet somebody's need, that's an act of compassion. Compassion is tutoring kids in the zone afterschool program in the community center. Compassion is handing out grocery bags in the food pantry. Compassion is spending time with the elderly in local nursing homes. Compassion is also financially supporting organizations like Compassion International or Bread for the World, that are assisting people who are hungry in the world.

So Jesus has compassion and heals people, but notice that Jesus doesn't just take care of everything himself. The disciples come up and say, hey these people don't have food, send them away. We're far away from a town, they're going to get hungry pretty soon. Jesus continues to show compassion and he looks back at his disciples and says, you give them something to eat.

SLIDE:
He said: "You give them something"

Look at verse 16.

SLIDE:
Matthew 14:16 (TNIV)

Jesus replied, "They do not need to go away. You give them something to eat."

You give them something. Jesus is teaching his disciples here about compassion. That it's not just something for Jesus to do. Compassion is not just something that the church does. It's not something that we have a program for. It's not something that we have a pastor for. Now we have lots of programs that show compassion. Fruit of the Vine is our Urban and Mercy ministry. And pretty much everything that Fruit of the Vine does is an act of compassion for people. Dan Franz is the pastor over that ministry, and Dan's days are full of acts of compassion for people. But it's not Fruit of the Vine's job to show the compassion of Jesus for you. It's not Dan Franz's job to show the compassion of Jesus for you.

Jesus wants all of his disciples to get involved in showing compassion to other people. God could snap his fingers and meet everybody's needs, but he doesn't.

He says, you give them something. There is something involved in compassion where it costs us something. It's inconvenient. It takes effort. It might take money. But to be compassionate is a transformational transaction between two people; the person in need and the person that is meeting that need. And it impacts both parties. And so Jesus is a genius by not just feeding everybody himself, but by telling his disciples, you give them something to eat.

And the disciples of course, start bucking in reaction, coming up with reasons not to, excuses. And we are just factories of excuses for indifference.

SLIDE:
The excuses for indifference

There are so many reasons why we shouldn't do anything in the world to help people. The first excuse that the disciples is that people should help themselves.

SLIDE:
People should help themselves

See, the disciples are being preemptive when they come to Jesus to tell him to send the crowds away because people are going to start to get hungry. And they think, hey, we're being wise here, we're thinking about the people. So we see this in verse 15.

SLIDE:
Matthew 14:15 (TNIV)

As evening approached, the disciples came to him and said, "This is a remote place, and it's already getting late. Send the crowds away, so they can go to the villages and buy themselves some food."

The disciples are saying, Jesus, these people need to feed themselves, so let's send them away now, so they're able to help themselves, so they don't get desperate later on. They ought to be helping themselves. And a related excuse here is that, you know, it's not my problem.

SLIDE:
It's not my problem

We didn't ask these people to come out here in the middle of the country, away from villages where they could get their food. That was their own decision. It's not my problem, so let's send them away so they can help themselves. Well, Jesus isn't convinced by these excuses and so he tells them, you give them something to eat. And then the next excuse comes up. And the disciples say, but we don't have enough for everyone.

SLIDE:

I don't have enough for everyone

They said this.

SLIDE:

Matthew 14:17 (TNIV)

"We have here only five loaves of bread and two fish," they answered.

And this is the compassion killer isn't it? What can I possibly do with my limited resources? Standing the face of such overwhelming need? 5000 men PLUS women and children, and we've got 5 loaves of bread and two fish! We don't have 1/1000th of what we need to do what Jesus is telling us to do. And as we are confronted with the magnitude of human suffering in the world today, we have a similar response as the disciples. How can we possibly make a difference with what we have? Why not just eat the food ourselves and say people should help themselves. It's not our problem. We don't have enough for everybody. So we're just going to keep what we have to ourselves.

There are so many great excuses not to do anything, but somehow, there are lots of people that still make crazy moves of compassion and reach out beyond the scope of their own lives. I want to invite up a couple of people that have done this in 2 big ways.

Interview:

Ben and Melissa Miller

Ben and Melissa Miller are members of our church who are currently missionaries in Tanzania with the Vineyard church plant that was sent there a few years ago. They have been home on furlough for a bit and getting ready to go back.

Looking back at the text, in the face of all of these amazingly good excuses, Jesus says to the disciples, bring what you have to me.

SLIDE:

Jesus' answer: bring what you have to me

The disciples tell him that they only have five loaves of bread and two fish and in verse 18, Jesus says this.

SLIDE:

Matthew 14:18-21 (TNIV)

"**Bring them here to me,**" he said. 19 And he directed the people to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up

to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then he gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the people. 20 They all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over. 21 The number of those who ate was about five thousand men, besides women and children.

This is the key to compassion. This is the only way that we could ever be crazy enough to hope that we could make a difference, and that is by bringing what we have to Jesus. And letting him multiply it. Because the reality is, you or I just really are not going to make that big of a difference in this world, with the magnitude of pain and suffering all around us. But when we bring the small resource that we have and we bring it to Jesus, God can do far beyond what we could ever hope or imagine with what we give to him. We have limited talent, we have limited resource and finance. We have limited time. And yet when we give what we do have to God, he can turn it into a big difference in the world.

And notice here the end result is not that they were only able to feed everyone, but that in fact, everyone ate and was satisfied and verse 20 says that the disciples picked up 12 basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over. So the end result is that they have even more food than they had before they gave away everything they had to people.

And isn't that how God works? That when you are open handed with what you have and you give of yourself in compassion to those in need, what you're going to find is that God will give to you even more than you had before. Back to our friend Chuck Feeney—after giving away four billion dollars, his life is much richer for having helped all of the people that he has in his life, rather than just being a gravitational vortex, pulling material possessions into himself. He has made a massive difference in the lives of the poor and the suffering and the sick in the world.

This last Tuesday, Chuck Feeney's foundation donated 100 million dollars to medical research at two hospitals in Australia. And Feeney made the comment that

SLIDE:

“Wealthy people should not sit around and complain that you've lost your money in these difficult times. If you give it away, you will be using it.”

—Chuck Feeney

What an image of a billionaire who is using his wealth wisely by giving it away. And friends, you may not have realized this, but if you are a follower of Jesus, you are a spiritual billionaire. You and I have received the riches of God's compassion to us. We've received the forgiveness of our sins, we've received the love and acceptance and grace of our Father in heaven and he has lavished his affection on us. So, how can we hoard that, and spend it all on ourselves?

Jesus invites us to take a look around and see the need in the world and put to death our indifference by stepping out in compassion.

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The Indifference of the World

The compassion of Jesus

He withdrew (v. 13)

He saw the crowds (v. 14)

He had compassion (v. 14)

He said: "You give them something" (v. 16)

The excuses for indifference

People should help themselves (v. 15)

It's not my problem

I don't have enough for everyone (v. 17)

Jesus' answer: bring what you have to me (v. 18)