

Freely You Have Received, Freely Give

On Jesus' compassion

The philosopher William MacAskill is the leading proponent of a moral crusade called Effective Altruism. He was inspired by the writings of utilitarian Peter Singer, who proposed a simple thought experiment: if you stroll by a child drowning in a shallow pond, presumably you don't worry too much about soiling your clothes before you wade in to help. If you consider the child's location is, in reality, irrelevant —whether it is drowning in an actual pond nearby or in a metaphorical pond six thousand miles away— then devoting our resources to superfluous goods is much the same as allowing a child to drown for the sake of a dry cleaner's bill.

Seeing the logic in this thought, MacAskill gathered like-minded people into a now broadly influential faction, especially in Silicon Valley, which controls philanthropic resources on the order of thirty billion dollars.

Effective Altruism encourages its adherents to live simply and give the rest away—a secular tithe to eradicate poverty or other *au courant* causes.

While there is an admirable morality to the idea, it morphed into something less palatable very quickly. If one gives away, say 50% of one's income to eradicate poverty, how much more poverty could one eradicate making \$100,000 per year instead of \$50,000, or \$1,000,000 per year? So pursuing rampant capitalism became the norm for some Effective Altruism adherents. The most egregious example of which is the case of Sam Bankman-Fried, who in 2019, founded the user-friendly crypto exchange called FTX. By the time Bankman-Fried was twenty-nine, Forbes estimated his net worth at about twenty-six billion dollars, making him the twenty-fifth-richest American.

Some of you may have recognised FTX because the crypto exchange went bankrupt last year. It's collapse has had a wide impact on cryptocurrency markets, with comparisons made to the Enron scandal and Madoff investment scandal, and was described by US federal prosecutors as “one of the biggest financial frauds in American history.”

Similarly, MacAskill and other leaders of the Effective Altruism movement are using their money not for charitable causes but for political influence. In 2020, Bankman-Fried donated more than five million dollars to Joe Biden's campaign, making him one of the top Democratic contributors.

The desire to 'do something' is noble, but 'do anything' is questionable. Effective Altruism is philanthropy unhinged and detrimental. It presents a compelling morality but one built on guilt.

I believe Jesus shows us a better way by example, for his compassion knew no bounds.

Explanation

While our reading from *The Gospel of Matthew* is the main focus for my reflections this morning, the lectionary assigned our reading from *The Book of Exodus* to complement our main scripture focus. So, let me start there.

“Remember you were slaves in Egypt”

Our reading from *Exodus* depicts God giving instructions to the ancient Israelites through Moses:

This is what you must say to the house of Jacob and explain to the Israelites: “You have seen what I did to the Egyptians and how I carried you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself ... you will be my kingdom of priests and my holy nation.” (Exodus 19:3b–6a)¹

These words are a prelude to the giving of the Ten Commandments and they reflect a recurring theme we find throughout the Old Testament Torah that is most notable here, in the giving of the Law of God, and in the chastisements to return to God spoken through the prophets

Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out of there with a strong hand and an outstretched arm. That is why the LORD your God has commanded you to keep the Sabbath day. (Deuteronomy 5:15)

Time and time again, the Lord God reminded the ancient Israelites, through their leaders and prophets, to remember they were once slaves and to therefore act appropriately as those grateful for God’s generous gifts.

All the commands and wisdom of God were never presented as, “do this or die”. Instead, they were presented as, “remember what I have done for you, act accordingly, and be faithful in sharing the blessing I have appointed you to”.

The Lord God has been generous and gracious to humanity throughout our history because he is great and glorious and good. We like to say his grace is unconditional, but this is not true. It is true to say his generosity is *given without condition*—it is not something we deserve or can earn— *yet it is conditional* since it is meant to be shared with the whole world.

The Lord God freed the ancient Israelites from slavery in Egypt *so that* they would fulfill his covenant with Abraham to be a blessing, and so fulfil his eternal Purpose for Creation. “Remember you were slaves in Egypt, act accordingly, and share my blessing.”

Jesus Was Overwhelmed With Compassion

With that recurring theme of the Torah in mind, let us now turn to our scripture focus from *The Book of Matthew*:

Jesus continued going around to all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and every sickness. (Matthew 9:35)

The first thing to note is the precise nature of Jesus’ ministry.

Consistent with his own declaration in the opening sermon of his public ministry (Lk 4:16–21), Jesus taught and preached, *yet* he was also committed to a practical ministry: he healed *every* disease and sickness.

Of course, he could not have healed every disease and sickness because this is just logically impossible. He healed every disease that he encountered; he was not stumped by any disease or sickness presented to him. And he could only heal those he *actually* encountered, of those people presented to him.

Nevertheless, Jesus did not hesitate to do what he could *practically* as much as give instruction on the wisdom of God when the opportunity presented itself. Why did he act this way?

When he saw the crowds, he felt compassion for them, because they were distressed and dejected, like sheep without a shepherd. (Matthew 9:36)

Jesus was the perfect revelation of God the Father, so he perfectly revealed the compassion of our Creator.

Jesus “saw” the crowds. He recognised they were “distressed and dejected”, which is a softer way of describing the more literal translation, “oppressed and thrown to the ground”.

Does anyone deny the oppression of and violence being done to so many people in our day and age? That we are harassed and helpless, like sheep, seems a fair comparison to how I feel many days.

Jesus “saw” the people, not merely glancing their way but looking deeply into their hearts and lives. He recognised how pitiful and awful is the human condition, and so was *overwhelmed with compassion*.

Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is abundant, but the workers are few. Therefore, pray to the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into his harvest.” (Matthew 9:37–38)

Jesus’ first act of compassion was to invite others to pray for workers. A harvest yields fruit (or veggies, as the case may be), an abundant crop generous enough to feed a multitude.

When you begin to pray for others, do not be surprised if you too begin to feel compassion for them and find yourself wondering what you might do to alleviate their suffering. Jesus was no fool.

Jesus’ Choice Was An Arbitrary Gift

First beginning with praying for workers, the next step was to appoint workers.

These are the names of the twelve apostles... (Matthew 10:2–4)

Understand the group of Jesus’ disciples was much larger than these twelve. Out of all his disciples, Jesus chose these twelve to be sent, to become apostles.

Writer and speaker Frank Viola talks about choosing a ‘ministry dream team’ of successful Christian speakers and ministers to “work together in spreading the explosive gospel of the kingdom in this earth”.²

Presenting a less serious version of this idea, Australian podcasters, Duncan Robinson and Chris Cipollone, jokingly discussed setting up a ministry version of a Fantasy Football or Fantasy Basketball league called a Fantasy Bible Mock Draft. Shockingly, Abraham remained on the bench!³

With his choosing of these twelve to be his core team of apostles, Jesus did nothing like setting up a ministry dream team. Jesus’ choice, in fact, seems almost arbitrary and random. There was very little to commend these guys to such an important mission.

“Humans see what is visible, but the Lord sees the heart” (1 Sam 16:7). God’s generosity may seem arbitrary, but Jesus is no fool. He knew what he was doing, and those unlikely and undeserving men set the world on fire, continuing the spread of God’s blessing to the ends of the earth!

The Disciples Were Given The Holy Spirit Much Earlier Than Pentecost

Allow me a short digression.

I mentioned in my Pentecost, sermon a couple of weeks ago, that Pentecost was not the first time the Holy Spirit had filled the disciples of Jesus.⁴ I really did expect someone to challenge me on that statement because, I do not know about you, but I myself have heard many sermons make precisely that claim!

In our scripture focus, we read:

Summoning his twelve disciples, he gave them authority over unclean spirits, to drive them out and to heal every disease and sickness. (Matthew 10:1)

As you go, proclaim, ‘The kingdom of heaven has come near.’ Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those with leprosy, drive out demons. (Matthew 10:7–8a)

In this passage is described Jesus sending out the apostles ahead of him, to announce his coming to the people of Galilee. While in their towns and villages, the apostles were to perform deeds of power, with authority! They certainly could not fulfil this ministry without the Holy Spirit, so must have been filled at that time as much as they were at Pentecost. Just sayin’!

Compassion Is The Only Response Appropriate To The Gift

Back to our regularly scheduled topic.

Freely you received, freely give. (Matthew 10:8b)

This then is the crux of the matter.

“Freely you received, freely give”, sounds an awful lot like, “Remember you were once slaves in Egypt”.

For the ancient Israelites and for the first disciples of Jesus, they were shown compassion unconditioned, but conditional on their subsequent compassion for others. They had received mercy, so were expected to show mercy. They had been shown grace, so were expected to extend grace. Jesus loved them when he washed their feet, so the disciples were to do the same for each other.

When compelled by compassion, how could anyone possibly contravene the commands of God?

Application

“Pray For Workers”

We often see young people protesting on the streets of our major cities. These ‘Snowflakes’ wave their banners, block traffic, disrupt the peace of the city workers. They focus on the problems—for instance, the climate is so bad!—experience intense feelings of angst, but

lack any real views on what one can actually do. They call for the government to act, but how is protesting not merely wanting others to do the work for them?

Sure they eat their tofu, and wear only clothes made out of vegetable leather, and drive only electric cars, but their anger and extreme lifestyles do nothing to demonstrate their way is better for the average Aussie.

When Jesus instructed his disciples to pray for workers, he was not-so-secretly wanting them to respond for the need is so obviously great. He was moved by compassion and did all that he could (Jn 9:4-5). Jesus wanted others to join him in acts of compassion, which included preaching and teaching, healing and deliverance.

After Pentecost, when the apostles asked for the community to appoint deacons to “wait on tables” (Ac 6:2-3), this was not abnegating their responsibility, but a recognition we each have different skills and resources to apply to the task of building communities that exemplify the Kingdom in the world.

The friends of Jesus do not merely talk about how things can be different, but are actively engaged in making a difference because we believe the Way of Love is far superior to the harassment that leaves us helpless, and to the oppression that throws us to the ground.

Because our eyes have been opened by our awareness of the love of God, we are to overflow with compassion in acts of power and authority, to bring healing and deliverance to those around us, to teach the truth and speak to power for the common good. When the world sees how they are blessed by our presence and work, they will see we are motivated by love and compassion, they will yearn to know Jesus for themselves, for his way is better than we can hope for and more than we can achieve for ourselves.

See the need. Pray for workers. Imagine how you yourself might be a worker. Act compassionately in any small way you can out of gratitude for the grace and generosity of our great, good, and glorious God

Endnotes

- 1 Unless otherwise noted, all scripture quotations are taken from *The Christian Standard Bible* (Nashville, TN, USA: Holman Bible Publishers, 2017).
- 2 Frank Viola, “My Vision for a Ministry Dream Team” (PDF), <http://insurgencebook.com/DreamTeam.pdf> (accessed 17-Jun-2023).
- 3 Duncan Robinson and Chris Cipollone, “A shock benching for Abraham in this Fantasy Bible Mock Draft”, *The Dead Elephants Podcast*, 17-Mar-2023, <https://replug.link/5d1f6a60> (accessed 17-Jun-2023).
- 4 Ian Forest-Jones, “Christ Appearing to His Own”, 28-May-2023, <https://narellancong.org.au/teaching/christ-appearing-to-his-own/>.