

“Jesus Was Gracious and Compassionate”

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Matthew 12:15–21

¹⁵ *Aware of this, Jesus withdrew from that place. Many followed him, and he healed all their sick, ¹⁶ warning them not to tell who he was. ¹⁷ This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah:*

- ¹⁸ *“Here is my servant whom I have chosen,
the one I love, in whom I delight;
I will put my Spirit on him,
and he will proclaim justice to the nations.
¹⁹ He will not quarrel or cry out;
no one will hear his voice in the streets.
²⁰ A bruised reed he will not break,
and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out,
till he leads justice to victory.
²¹ In his name the nations will put their hope.”¹*

All of us tend to look at things from a certain perspective, a certain angle. We do that because we're finite creatures: we only see and know part of the story, not the whole story. Because that's the case, we often tend to emphasize certain truths and ignore other ones. This is certainly the case when we talk about God. For example, some people like to talk about God's holiness or his power, while other people tend to talk more about God's love. It seems that this becomes even more exaggerated when we talk about Jesus. Some people talk about Jesus as if he never said anything negative. This would be the “all-inclusive” Jesus, the Jesus who runs around with a lot of Kleenex wiping away every tear. Others talk about Jesus as if were a tough-guy, the ex-carpenter who swung a hammer and caused a commotion in the temple, tipping over tables and making a whip to drive people out. And everyone seems to have their own version of Jesus: the ecologist Jesus, the philosopher Jesus, the feminist Jesus, the socialist Jesus, and the libertarian, free-market Jesus. Many of these views are true, but they end up being distorted because they're incomplete.

Any complete picture of Jesus confounds us all. He is tough and tender. He is gracious and demanding. He is inviting and terrifying. He was a common man but the most amazing person who ever lived. Jesus doesn't fit neatly into any box. We can't domesticate or tame him.

¹ Unless otherwise noted, the Scripture quoted herein is taken from the New International Version (1984).

Recently, when I talked about Jesus, I said he was a preacher who talked about sin. I said that he was divisive. All of that is true. But Jesus isn't just a hard-line preacher who condemns. He is also gracious and compassionate. John rather famously tells us that he is "full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). We need both truth and grace. Without truth, there is no right and wrong, no justice. Without truth, we can't say anything meaningful. Without truth, there's chaos. But without grace, there's no love or forgiveness. Without grace, there would be no second chances. So we need both truth and grace, and we must not forget that Jesus was gracious. Today, I want to focus on Jesus' grace. We need to know about the grace of Jesus because we all need it so badly.

In the passage that was just read, Matthew 12:15-21, we are told that Jesus healed people. When Jesus healed people and fed them, we are often told that he did that out of compassion for the people. Consider some of these passages:

Matthew 14:13-14

¹³ 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.

Matthew 15:32 (when Jesus fed the four thousand)

Jesus called his disciples to him and said, "I have compassion for these people; they have already been with me three days and have nothing to eat. I do not want to send them away hungry, or they may collapse on the way."

Jesus also taught people because he had compassion on them. In Mark 6:34, we read: "When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So he began teaching them many things." The people of Israel were supposed to be led by prophets, priests, elders, and kings. The Israelites were supposed to be shepherded by these leaders. But they weren't being taken care of. Jesus had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. And he taught them many things.

Back to Matthew 12. After Matthew tells us he healed people, he quotes from Isaiah 42:1-3. We're told that the Messiah isn't one who quarrels with people. That doesn't mean he didn't argue with people. If you read the Gospels, you know he did. But he didn't impose his will on people. He didn't force himself upon people.

In verse 20, we are told that Jesus will not break a “bruised reed.” Literally, this is a crushed or even shattered reed. Reeds had various uses. In the Bible, we see they are used for measuring rods (Ezek 40:3–8; 42:16–19; Rev. 21:15-16) and pens (3 John 13).² Reeds were cheap and replaced easily. A crushed reed was a useless thing, something that you throw away. But Jesus would not break and throw away these reeds. Of course, we’re not talking about reeds. We’re talking about people. Jesus was compassionate to those who were broken, those who were “damaged goods.” He didn’t treat them harshly.

The same thing is true of a smoldering wick. A smoldering wick is a wick that doesn’t work well. It smokes instead of burns and it is about to go out. Normally, one would replace such a wick. The old, broken one would be thrown away and replaced by a new one. But Jesus didn’t throw away people who were damaged. To translate this idea into something more relevant, we might say, “A broken snow shovel he didn’t throw in the dump.”

People hurt back then in different ways. Many were poor and had physical problems, such as diseases and handicaps. I can’t imagine what it would have been like to live with a debilitating condition two thousand years ago, without modern medicine. But people also hurt because of broken relationships and bad decisions. And people are still hurting in many of the same ways. Though we have modern medicine, we can’t completely escape pain. And we still have broken relationships. Other people can be mean, abusive, and cruel. And a lot of our hurt comes from our own wrong decisions, our own sin.

It has often been observed that Jesus dealt with the humble and broken people with love, while he was more harsh with the proud. He was more tender towards those who knew they needed help and more tough with those who didn’t realize their true condition. Some people think that Jesus was always tough on the rich and the religious and always gracious to the poor and the “sinners.” But that’s not always the case. Some rich people became believers, people such as Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10) and Joseph of Arimathea (Matt. 27:57-61; Mark 15:42-47; Luke 23:50-53; John 19:38-42). Some Pharisees and members of the Sanhedrin, including Joseph and Nicodemus, also became followers of Jesus (John 19:38-42). Surely many poor

² Ironically, the Roman soldiers gave Jesus a reed as a mock scepter, and they then beat him on the head with it (Matt. 27:29-30).

people rejected Jesus. So, the real dividing line is between the humble and the proud, those who realized their need and those who did not, those who had faith and those who lacked faith.

We see Jesus' compassion and graciousness in some of his encounters with women who were considered "sinful." This morning we'll look at Luke 7:36-50. In this passage, we find three people: Jesus, a woman with a sinful past, and a Pharisee named Simon. The woman has put her faith in Jesus and is grateful for the forgiveness she has found in him. Simon does not seem to have that kind of faith. Pay attention to how the two of them are different.

³⁶ Now one of the Pharisees invited Jesus to have dinner with him, so he went to the Pharisee's house and reclined at the table. ³⁷ When a woman who had lived a sinful life in that town learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee's house, she brought an alabaster jar of perfume, ³⁸ and as she stood behind him at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them.

³⁹ When the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is—that she is a sinner."

⁴⁰ Jesus answered him, "Simon, I have something to tell you."

"Tell me, teacher," he said.

⁴¹ "Two men owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. ⁴² Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he canceled the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?"

⁴³ Simon replied, "I suppose the one who had the bigger debt canceled."

"You have judged correctly," Jesus said.

⁴⁴ Then he turned toward the woman and said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I came into your house. You did not give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. ⁴⁵ You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet. ⁴⁶ You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet. ⁴⁷ Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—for she loved much. But he who has been forgiven little loves little."

⁴⁸ Then Jesus said to her, "Your sins are forgiven."

⁴⁹ The other guests began to say among themselves, "Who is this who even forgives sins?"

⁵⁰ Jesus said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

The scene of this passage is the home of Simon, a Pharisee. Simon has asked Jesus to come to his house and eat. Pharisees are normally portrayed as self-righteous people in the Gospels, but even so, Jesus eats with one here.³ Darrell Bock, who has written one of the best commentaries on Luke, says, "He is making himself available to all types of people from all types of

³ Luke is the only Gospel writer that tells us that Jesus ate with Pharisees. See here and Luke 1:37; 14:1.

backgrounds.”⁴ As they are eating, “a woman who had lived a sinful life” comes to Jesus with a jar of perfume. The text doesn’t tell us what her sinful past was. Some people think she was a prostitute. Others think she might have been adulterous. Jerram Barrs says, “From the way Simon thinks about her we should probably assume that she is either a prostitute or a woman who has been sexually promiscuous in such an open way that the whole community knows about her immoral life.”⁵ Honestly, we don’t know, but we do know that Jesus dealt with other women who had sexual sins (John 4; 7:53-8:11), so it wouldn’t be surprising if that were the case here.

What’s interesting is that this woman doesn’t say anything in this entire passage. But her actions speak loudly.⁶ She cleans Jesus’ feet in a most unusual way, by wetting his feet with her tears, wiping his feet with her hair, and then kissing his feet and anointing them with the perfume. This may seem very odd to us, but we need to consider a few things. People wore sandals at that time, which meant their feet would become rather dusty. Good hosts would allow their guests to wash their feet. It appears that this woman was first weeping—not just crying, but bawling.⁷ She then began to wet Jesus’ dirty feet with her tears, wiped them with her hair, and then poured perfume on them. This perfume would have been very expensive. Clearly, this is an act of gratitude and love. As the whole passage reveals, she is a “sinner” who has been forgiven by Jesus. Her act of service flows out of love and gratitude.

Simon, however, doesn’t see things this way. He says, “If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is—that she is a sinner” (v. 39). Earlier in this same chapter, some people claimed that Jesus was “a great prophet” (v. 16). But Simon doesn’t think so. He seems to think a real prophet would know what kind of sinful, unclean woman this was, and he wouldn’t allow her to touch him. Simon wrongly assumed that a man of God could not have fellowship with sinners.

Jesus was aware of his reputation among the scribes and Pharisees. He ate and drank with unrighteous people; therefore, the Jewish leaders called him “a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and ‘sinners’” (Luke 7:34). Jesus knows what Simon is thinking, so he tells him a short parable. A moneylender has two debtors. One of them owed five hundred denarii, about

⁴ Darrell L. Bock, *Luke: 1:1–9:50*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1994), 694.

⁵ Jerram Barrs, *Learning Evangelism from Jesus* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009), 133. Bock (*Luke 1:1-9:50*, 695) thinks this is a possibility.

⁶ Bock, *Luke 1:1-9:50*, 695.

⁷ The verb used is βρέχω, which is used to describe rain showers (Matt. 5:45; James 5:17; Rev. 11:6). *Ibid.*, 697.

one and a half year's wages. The other owed fifty denarii, about two months' wages.⁸ The moneylender forgives both the debtors. Who will love him more? Or, to put it another way, who will be more grateful? The answer is easy: the one who has been forgiven more. Even Simon know this answer.

The meaning of the parable seems quite clear. According to Darrel Bock, "the moneylender depicts God; the debt is sin, the two debtors depict different levels of sinner: the one who owes less pictures the Pharisee, while the one who owes more represents the woman."⁹

Then Jesus tells Simon that that he, the host, did not wash Jesus' feet, but the woman did. Apparently Simon did not think Jesus was worthy of this honor, but the woman did. Simon did not greet Jesus with a holy kiss, probably a kiss on the cheek, but the woman kissed Jesus' feet, which were probably still fairly dirty. Simon did not anoint Jesus' head with olive oil, but the woman anointed Jesus' feet with expensive perfume. The point is clear: this woman has been forgiven much, and because she is so grateful, she has expressed her love in very clear ways. She has given Jesus her all. She has cleaned his feet in the most intimate of ways. She has given him the most expensive gift she could give, a bottle of perfume. She is worshiping Jesus. Simon, on the other hand, does none of this. He shows no sign of gratitude or love. It's clear that he doesn't believe Jesus is the Messiah, let alone a prophet.

What's interesting is that Jesus shows that he is a prophet because he knew Simon's thoughts and he knew the woman's sinful past, whatever it was. But Jesus is much more than a prophet. He tells the woman her sins are forgiven (v. 48). Now, who can do that? Did the woman commit some offense against Jesus? Not directly. But only the offended party, the one sinned against, can forgive someone else, someone who committed the offensive act. The other guests at Simon's dinner party realize this. That's why they ask, "Who is this who even forgives sins?" (v. 49). The answer, of course, is God. God is the one who forgives sins. This idea is already presented earlier in Luke, when Jesus heals the paralyzed man who is brought to him on a stretcher by four of his friends (see Luke 5:20-24). Jesus tells the woman, "Your faith has saved you." He makes it clear that her acts have not saved her, but only her faith.

Of course, it is God who saved the woman. Faith is the instrument of salvation. We are saved by God's grace, and this comes *through* faith. It does not come through works, through

⁸ Robert H. Stein, *Luke*, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1992), 237.

⁹ Bock, *Luke 1:1-9:50*, 700.

any actions we do. It does not come from saying a set of words, as if we could chant a magical spell to receive forgiveness. Salvation doesn't come through giving away all your possessions or trying hard to be squeaky-clean. It doesn't come through going to church and getting baptized. It only comes by being united to Jesus through faith and through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. And this is an act of God. After we're saved, we should express our love and our gratitude to God, and this should come quite naturally.

Simon, the Pharisee, was probably a very moral person. He probably thought of himself as clean, because he did all the right religious things. He probably didn't understand the depth of his sins. He didn't understand what Isaiah 64:6 says:

All of us have become like one who is unclean,
and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags;
we all shrivel up like a leaf,
and like the wind our sins sweep us away.

Even the best things we do are polluted by sin. It is impossible for us to earn our way to God. And this should have two major implications:

One, the fact that we are saved by God's grace and not our good deeds should cause us to worship God. We should be like the woman, weeping over our sin and weeping because God has forgiven us. Have you had moments like this? Not all of us are terribly emotional. We might not all literally cry when we think of our salvation. But I think we should be moved somehow.

We're about to sing "Amazing Grace," perhaps the most famous hymn of all. The words were written by John Newton (1725-1807). Newton was a British slave trader in the eighteenth century. While he was a young man, he lived a rough life. He joined the British navy against his will when he was eighteen. After attempting to desert the navy, he was flogged and released on a small island off of Sierra Leone in West Africa. He spent over a year living in poverty until he found employment on a slave ship. While at sea, one night there was a violent storm, and Newton called out to God. This was the beginning of his conversion experience. Later, he would quit the slave trade and he spent the last forty-three years of his life as a pastor. He was able to work against the slave trade in England and he influenced William Wilberforce (1759-1833), a Member of Parliament who worked for years to abolish the slave trade and the institution of slavery in the United Kingdom.

But Newton was never able to forget his sin and the salvation he received by God's grace. He said of his youth, "I not only sinned with a high hand myself, but made it my study to tempt and seduce others upon every occasion: nay, I eagerly sought occasion, sometimes to my own hazard and hurt."¹⁰ "Shortly before his death he is quoted as proclaiming with a loud voice during a message, 'My memory is nearly gone, but I remember two things: That I am a great sinner and that Christ is a great Savior!'"¹¹ Is this your experience? Do you marvel at God's grace? Do you know the perfect holiness of God, how pure he is and how high his standards are? Do you know the depth of your sin? If you know these things, and you have come to Jesus in faith, you should be amazed at God's grace. If you haven't experienced the wonder of God's grace, it may be time to examine yourself. This is no light thing. Your eternal destination hangs in the balance. Salvation is freely given, but salvation leads to transformation, and discipleship comes with a cost: whoever would gain eternal life in Jesus must give up his or her old way of life (see Matt. 16:24-25).

The second major implication from the fact that Jesus is gracious and compassionate is that we, his people, should also be gracious and compassionate. John Newton believed that the experience of God's grace should change someone. This is what he wrote about the experience of a Christian: "He believes and feels his own weakness and unworthiness, and lives upon the grace and pardoning love of his Lord. This gives him an habitual tenderness and gentleness of spirit. Humbled under a sense of much forgiveness to himself, he finds it easy to forgive others, if he has aught [anything] against any."¹² Christians should be humble and forgiving. We should be tender and gentle. We can also be tough like Jesus, and cling to the truth of the gospel like Paul, but we can't be tough and tenacious without being tender, too.

By the way, our society doesn't understand this well. They can't understand how you can be loving and humble yet also tell people they are sinning against God. But anyone who has family members, people that are loved, knows how this works. If you see your children or a sibling doing something wrong, you don't love that person any less. But you urge that person to

¹⁰ John Newton, *Memoirs of the Rev. John Newton*, in Richard Cecil, *The Works of the John Newton*, vol. 1 (London: Hamilton, Adams & Co., 1824), 13.

¹¹ Kenneth W. Osbeck, *Amazing Grace: 366 Inspiring Hymn Stories for Daily Devotions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1996), 170.

¹² John Newton, Letter VI: "Of the Practical Influence of Faith," in Richard Cecil, *The Works of the John Newton*, vol. 1 (London: Hamilton, Adams & Co., 1824), 170.

do the right thing. Sin is, in the end, self-destructive. It does us harm. So if we truly love someone, we will urge them not to sin.

We also have no right to look down on others and act as if we're better than they are.

This is what John Newton wrote about what our attitude towards non-Christians should be like:

A company of travellers fall into a pit: one of them gets a passenger to draw him out. Now he should not be angry with the rest for falling in; nor because they are not yet out, as he is. He did not pull himself out: instead, therefore, of reproaching them, he should shew them pity. He should avoid, at any rate, going down upon their ground again; and shew how much better and happier he is upon his own. We should take care that we do not make our profession of religion a receipt in full for all other obligations. A man, truly illuminated, will no more despise others, than Bartimeus, after his own eyes were opened, would take a stick, and beat every blind man he met.¹³

We were saved by God's grace. But for the grace of God, we wouldn't be Christians. So, we can't act as though we are better than non-Christians. We didn't pull ourselves out of the pit. We didn't make ourselves alive. We would still be spiritually blind if God hadn't opened our eyes.

Unfortunately, even Christians can forget that they are justified by God's grace, not by their works. Christians have sometimes looked down on others and paraded their righteous deeds. Sadly, some Christians even think of this as evangelism.

I have heard Christians boast of such self-righteous "evangelism." I remember a man in a Bible study who said that when he and his family were at the movies, he told the man behind him to stop swearing. In a separate conversation, I heard his wife say that the other people at her workplace know she is a Christian because she doesn't swear. Both the husband and wife thought that they were witnessing by showing others their good morals.¹⁴ Now, it's fine not to

¹³ Newton, *Memoirs of the Rev. John Newton*, 105.

¹⁴ Barrs (*Learning Evangelism from Jesus*, 113), provides two other good examples of this false brand of evangelism:

One person told me that one day at work, she had criticized her fellow employee for the soft porn novels sitting on her desk. She had told the other woman that they were offensive to her as a Christian. I asked what the effect of this was. She replied that the woman had told everyone else in the office about it during the coffee break; and then, the next day, the woman asked her to remove her Bible from her desk, because she found it offensive.

An even sadder example came from a young man who started working at a garage. On the first day he was deeply upset by the 'girly' posters prominently displayed in the work area. He denounced the posters to the other men, telling them how offended he was, and he gave them a stern lecture about sexual purity and God's condemnation of lustful thoughts. The next day the men had obtained some far worse posters of pornographic images and tacked them to the walls. The young man immediately resigned his position. He told me this story because he was proud of

swear, and it's even a good thing to tell someone, "Hey, I have my kids with me, can you please watch your language?" But that isn't evangelism.

Think about it: what message did these people communicate through their actions? Did they indicate something of God's love and grace? Or did they just let other people know that they were morally superior? How were their actions different from a Mormon's or a Muslim's? The message that they were communicating wasn't Christianity. It was moralism. That message says, "Be good and you get God." Christianity says, "You can never be good enough to get God. But God came down to rescue sinners and bring them to himself." We don't need to communicate a "holier than thou" message. We need to communicate that we are great sinners who are saved by a great Savior. We need to communicate that no one is good enough to earn God's favor because each one of us has sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. We need to tell people that the only way to be put back into a right relationship with God is through repenting of sin and putting one's faith in Jesus.

Jesus, who was without sin, had the right to look down on sinners, and he did not. The only ones he condemned were the self-righteous, the proud. (This does not necessarily mean the religious people. Some of the most proud, self-righteous people today are those that have little to do with religion). When Jesus interacted with "sinners" such as tax collectors, prostitutes, and adulteresses, he offered himself as an alternative to their sin. He didn't overlook or condone their sin—remember, Jesus preached against all kinds of sin. He spoke to them with compassion, grace, and love. And he certainly wasn't afraid to spend time with these people. If we don't act like Jesus, by loving unbelievers and spending time with them, then we're acting as if we're holier than Jesus.

The Pharisees and scribes complained that Jesus ate with various sinners. We see this in Luke 5, right after Jesus called Matthew, a tax collector who was also known as Levi. This is Luke 5:29-32:

²⁹ Then Levi held a great banquet for Jesus at his house, and a large crowd of tax collectors and others were eating with them. ³⁰ But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law who belonged to their sect complained to his disciples, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and 'sinners'?"

his actions. He had been a good witness to Christ, and then he had been persecuted for righteousness' sake.

³¹ Jesus answered them, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick.
³² I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.”

Jesus spent time with tax collectors and sinners—often sexual sinners. I wonder why this is so. Of course, I believe it’s a historical fact. But I also believe that God is not only the author of the Bible, but also the author of history. Ultimately, everything that happens is under his control. So why does Jesus spend time with these people? Perhaps because sex and money are the biggest idols. Perhaps because all of us, prior to coming to Jesus, were idolatrous. Actually, we were adulterous. We were unfaithful to our true spouse. The Bible continually compares idolatry, the worship of a false god, to spiritual adultery. In that sense, we were all like this woman who came to Jesus. We had sinful pasts and bad reputations. We were unclean. But Jesus was compassionate and gracious to us. He saved us—not because of anything we did, but because of all that he did. He took our penalty for sin when he died on the cross. He died a criminal’s death though he never did anything wrong. And we are credited with his righteousness, his perfect obedience, his spotless moral record. That is amazing grace.

Jesus came to seek and save the lost (Luke 19:10). He came for the sick and the sinners (Luke 5:31-32). Let us be amazed by his grace, and let us be gracious to others. Let’s spend some time around non-Christians. Let’s tell them where hope and forgiveness can be found. Yes, we will have to talk about sin and some hard truths, but we can do that in love. It’s been said that Christians are just beggars telling other people where to get bread. We’re no better than others, but we know what is best for everyone.