



SERMON GUIDE

THE HEART OF GOD

Touching Lives with Dr. James Merritt

The God of Compassion

The Heart of God | Week 35 | Lamentations 3:21-24

Introduction

I remember it like yesterday: Professor Joe Master was the most intimidating instructor I ever encountered during my accounting degree. He'd call on you, and you'd better be ready. At one point, for six weeks, I was sicker than a dog. With temperatures over 102 (and eventually discovering I had pneumonia), I went to class every week, dreading whether Mr. Master would get me up in front of the class to answer a tough question. Then this professor did something unexpected: He never called on me once. He showed me compassion when I needed it most. Life has a way of bringing us to desperate places where we question if God cares about our pain or our struggle. Writing about this kind of grief and pain, the weeping prophet Jeremiah makes a declaration that you need to hear today: "Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness" (Lamentations 3:22-23, NIV). When you're at the end of your rope and maybe even at the end of your hope, remember this truth: Your God is the God of compassion.

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Key Points

1. God Will Never Forget Us

Why do you wake up each morning still breathing? Jeremiah reminds us of something we often take for granted: "Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed ..." (Lamentations 3:22, NIV). The Hebrew word used in this verse is *chesed*. It appears 48 times in Scripture and is so packed with meaning that no single English word can define it. Most translations render it, "mercy" or "unfailing love." It's a strong sense of goodwill that can be relied upon, especially in times of need. And your very existence depends on this loving-kindness. Your heart beats, your lungs breathe, your eyes see because of God's mercy. Like David declared in Psalm 23, "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life ..." (v. 6, NKJV); God's mercy is tied to you wherever you go. He hasn't



forgotten your name, your circumstances, your prayers, or what you need. Under His mercy, you are never overlooked or abandoned.

God's *chesed*—His unfailing love and mercy—means you are always remembered, always on His heart, and always cared for.

2. God Will Never Fail Us

Unlike our compassion that often fails, “...his compassions never fail. They are new every morning” (Lamentations 3:22–23, NIV). The word “compassion” means “to suffer with,” and while we’ve all failed to be as compassionate as we should be, God’s compassions never fail. The Hebrew word for “new” (*hadas*) doesn’t just mean repeated; it means uniquely different. Every act of God’s compassion toward you is specific and tailored to your circumstances. Like snowflakes, no two are the same. God never begins with condemnation; He always begins with compassion. Every morning, this is His way of saying, *“I’m still here, I’m not going anywhere, and I will never fail you.”*

Each new day brings fresh, unique expressions of God's unfailing compassion, designed specifically for what you're going through.

3. God Will Never Forsake Us

How can you trust God when everything seems to be falling apart? Jeremiah gives us these four powerful words: "...great is your faithfulness" (Lamentations 3:23, NIV). The word "faithfulness" means firm, fixed, stable, steady, always dependable. Even when we are faithless, "...he remains faithful, for he cannot disown himself" (2 Timothy 2:13, NIV). God writes with a pen that never blots, speaks with a tongue that never stammers, and acts with a hand that never shakes. The rainbow reminds us of God's faithfulness to keep His promises. Whether

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you're running to Him or away from Him, obeying or disobeying, His faithfulness remains great. When you fail, He forgives. When you forget Him, He remembers you. When you fall, He picks you up.

God's faithfulness isn't dependent on your performance; it's grounded in His unchanging character and will never leave you abandoned.

Key Takeaway

At the very heart of God is a heart of compassion. When life brings heartache after heartache, remember that God will never forget you, fail you, or forsake you.

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The God of Compassion

The Heart of God | Week 35 | Lamentations 3:21-24

Reflection Questions

1. How has recognizing God's daily mercy in your life changed your perspective during difficult seasons? Where can you see His *chesed* (unfailing love) in your circumstances right now?

2. When you think about God's faithfulness in your past, what evidence do you see that He has never forsaken you, even in your worst moments? How does this build your confidence for future trials?

3. In what circumstances or relationships can you see an opportunity to model the Lord's compassion today?

Have you ever noticed that two people can look at the same thing but see completely different things? In the comic strip *Peanuts*, Lucy and Charlie Brown are cloud gazing when Lucy confidently identifies Mount Rushmore, Michael Jordan dunking a basketball, the state of Hawaii, and the Magic Kingdom. When she asks Charlie Brown what he sees, he says, "Well, I was going to say I saw a horsey and a ducky, but now I'm not gonna say nothing." Two of us will see completely differently, even gazing at the same thing. But God always sees through a heart of compassion. In fact, if you could perform open-heart surgery on God, you would see compassion all the way through. The God who has a heart of compassion also has the eyes of compassion. When you have a heart for God, you, too, will have the eyes of compassion.

Key Points

1. Actively Seek People Who Are Far from God

So many of us wait for hurting people to find us, instead of going out to look for them. But Jesus didn't set up business in a palace with a "by appointment only" sign. "Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness," (Matthew 9:35, NIV). The Son of God took the initiative to go where people were, instead of waiting for them to come to Him. You might think this was easy for Jesus. But the historian Josephus tells us that Galilee contained about 200 cities and villages with roughly 3 million people. Jesus must have walked from sunup to sundown to give hope to the hopeless and help to the helpless. Sunday isn't a resting place but a launching pad. We gather to worship and learn so we can leave and find people who aren't in church, proclaiming the Good News of the Gospel. As evangelist Dwight L. Moody said when he was asked the best way to reach the masses: "Go after them."

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The Eyes of Compassion

The Heart of God | Week 36 | Matthew 9:35-38

When you see people through the eyes of compassion, you actively seek those who are far from God, instead of waiting for them to come to you.

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2. Accurately See People Who Are Far from God

Ever feel annoyed when you're in a crowd? What would change if you saw crowds the way Jesus sees them? "When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd" (Matthew 9:36, NIV). When you feel claustrophobic in a crowd, Jesus feels compassion. Charles Spurgeon said, "If you would sum up the whole character of Christ ..., it might be gathered into this one sentence, 'He was moved with compassion.'" Jesus saw past their faces to their fear, past their dress to their despair, past their looks to their lostness. The word "harassed" literally means "to skin an animal." Life had cut these people to the quick, leaving them battered and worn out. "Helpless" means flat on your back, unable to get up, like sheep who will starve if they fall over. A sheep without a shepherd is dead meat, with no shot and no chance. Let that move us to move toward our neighbors, coworkers, and family members who don't know Jesus.

When you see people the way Jesus saw them and feel what He felt, you'll do what Jesus did: actively seek them and take Jesus to them.

3. Actually Sacrifice for People Who Are Far from God

Jesus told His disciples, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field" (Matthew 9:37-38, NIV). Jesus didn't ask them to pray for more sheep to come but for more shepherds to go. In other words, not praying for a bigger harvest but for more harvesters. When the disciples prayed this prayer, Jesus immediately called His 12 disciples and gave them



authority, essentially saying, “Thank you for being the answer to your own prayer.” The word for “workers” in this verse refers to common, ordinary, minimum-wage farm laborers. You don’t need seminary training or a college degree to have eyes of compassion. Compassion costs time, effort, and comfort, but Jesus demonstrated this by physically touching diseased, dirty, smelly people whom others wouldn’t even look at. A 12-year-old named Malachi Russell showed compassion when he battled cancer, writing down 17 people who needed Jesus, one for every month he was expected to live. He led over 100 people to Christ before going to Heaven.

Instead of pointing to others, pray, “Lord, here am I, send me,” and let compassion lead you to sacrificial love and service.

Key Takeaway

Let God open your eyes to see people the way He sees people and open your heart to feel for people the way He feels for people. Then, with eyes of compassion, you can't help but do for people what Jesus did.

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The Eyes of Compassion

The Heart of God | Week 36 | Matthew 9:35-38

Reflection Questions

1. When you encounter crowds or groups of people, do you typically feel annoyed and want to escape, or do you feel moved with compassion like Jesus? How could you begin to see differently?

2. Think about your daily routine—at work, in your neighborhood, or running errands. Who are the “harassed and helpless” people you encounter regularly whom you might be seeing but not truly *seeing*? How could you begin to look past the outside and begin to show empathy for what they may be going through?

3. Jesus instructed His disciples to pray for more workers in the harvest field, then immediately sent them out as the answer. Are you praying, “Lord, send someone,” or, “Lord, send me”? What practical step could you take this week to be a worker in God’s harvest field?

Introduction

I remember visiting Mother Teresa's Home for the Dying in Calcutta and remember the story of an American tourist who once witnessed her tenderly dressing a leper's wounds. After a moment, he said, "Sister Teresa, I wouldn't do what you're doing for \$10 million!" She replied, "My friend, neither would I. Neither would I!" Mother Teresa wasn't motivated by money but by compassion. She modeled the heart of one of the greatest pictures of compassion in the Bible, where Jesus encounters a man with leprosy. Just as Mother Teresa reached out to touch the untouchable, Jesus shows you that a heart of compassion will lead you to touch the untouchable and love the unlovable. In Mark 1:40-45, we discover that compassion truly has the magic touch, and we also find the three touches you can give people around you today.

Key Points

1. Give People the Touch of Hope

What does it look like when someone has completely lost hope? Leprosy was the most terrifying disease of Jesus' day. White spots hardened, got infected, and spread across the body. Victims had a foul odor and were banished from villages. There was also tremendous emotional cost to this disease. Those suffering from leprosy were required to stay 50 paces from anyone, and forced to yell out, "Unclean! Unclean!" wherever they went. In Mark 1, we meet a man who, for almost 10 years, hasn't heard one friendly voice, felt one loving touch, or heard one loving word. When he encounters Jesus, he says, "If you are willing, you can make me clean" (v. 40, NIV). He knows Jesus is able to heal him; he just doesn't know if Jesus is willing to touch him to heal him. This day, he experiences something he hasn't felt for a decade—a touch of hope.

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Every day, you encounter people who live their lives in quiet desperation, thinking there's no hope for their broken situations. You can take Jesus to them and give them the magic touch of hope.

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2. Give People the Touch of Healing

Jesus, moved with compassion, reached out and touched the leper, declaring, "I am willing ... Be clean" (Mark 1:41, NIV). This leper recognized his miserable condition and knew he needed healing. He wasn't just wanting to be healed; he was willing to go to the Healer. Many people want to go to Heaven but aren't willing to surrender to the only One who can take them there. Jesus told the Pharisees, "You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life ... yet you refuse to come to me to have life" (John 5:39-40, NIV). The Pharisees wanted Heaven but weren't willing to submit to the Lord of Heaven. This leper can be a picture of all of us. We are all spiritual lepers in need of Jesus' touch of healing, and we receive it when we are willing to surrender to the Healer. That's also how we receive His touch to give to others.

Through God's grace and power, you can touch others with the healing power of the Gospel, telling anyone that if they're willing to be clean, they can be clean.

3. Give People the Touch of Heaven

Did you know God's power wants to meet your willingness today? And you don't have to wait for His touch to meet you someday. I like how Mark gives us a unique image of this man's healing: "Immediately the leprosy left him and he was cleansed" (Mark 1:42, NIV). In the blink of an eye, this man received a brand-new body, hands, feet, hair, eyebrows, and eyelashes. He was completely restored. For the first time in



The Magic Touch

The Heart of God | Week 37 | Mark 1:40–45

Reflection Questions

1. Who in your life right now might be living in “quiet desperation,” needing the touch of hope that only Jesus can provide through you?

2. Think about the difference between wanting healing and being willing to go to the Healer. In what areas of your own life might you be wanting God’s blessing but unwilling to fully surrender to Him?

3. The healed leper disobeyed Jesus by telling everyone about his healing instead of staying quiet, while Jesus tells us to tell everyone and we often tell nobody. What’s keeping you from sharing your story of God’s touch in your life?

Forgiven Forgiving

The Heart of God | Week 38 | Matthew 18:21–35

Introduction

I once read this in an article in *Reader's Digest*: “Primates, like bonobos, mountain gorillas and chimps often follow confrontations with friendly behavior like embracing or kissing ... The only species that has so far failed to show outward signs of reconciliation is the domestic cat.”¹ Unfortunately, there are more than a few cats in the church today. When Peter asked Jesus how many times he should forgive someone who sins against him, suggesting seven times as generous, Jesus responded with “seventy-seven times,” meaning there’s no limit to forgiveness. C.S. Lewis put it best when he said that we all agree that forgiveness is a beautiful idea until we have to practice it. But through the parable of the unforgiving servant in Matthew 18:21–35, you will discover being forgiven means forgiveness is part of your calling and how to practice it.

Key Points

1. Behold God’s Unbelievable Grace

Why should you forgive when the hurt feels impossible to release? Jesus tells a parable of a servant who owed his king 10,000 talents (equivalent to \$13.2 billion today). To put this in perspective, it would take 167,000 years for an average worker to repay this debt, or 2,283 lifetimes. When the servant begged for patience, saying, “...I will pay back everything” (Matthew 18:26, NIV), his request was absolutely impossible to fulfill. Yet “The servant’s master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go” (Matthew 18:27, NIV). This is exactly your situation and mine: You owe a sin debt you could never pay, but Jesus paid the debt He didn’t owe. You didn’t deserve it, but God did it anyway out of pure compassion. We need to behold His unbelievable grace.

Remember that you owe God nothing because Jesus paid it all. This unbelievable grace transforms how you view God’s grace and your forgiveness of others.

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1 “Why Cats Don’t Forgive,” *Reader’s Digest*, May 2016, p 31.



2. Bemoan an Uncharitable Heart

The same servant who was forgiven billions of dollars immediately found a fellow servant who owed him 100 denarii, which was roughly five months' wages or .0000167% of what he had owed the king. Instead of showing mercy, "He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded" (Matthew 18:28, NIV). He had this man thrown in prison until he could repay the debt. Remarkably, Jesus reports no word of gratitude from the forgiven servant, no expression of appreciation for the king's mercy. You may ask, "Why should I forgive this person who has done this thing to me? If he does it more than once, why should I keep forgiving him?" The short answer is simply this: "Because the God who has forgiven me continues to forgive me."

Remember God's forgiveness daily, and you'll find grace to forgive others.

3. Beware of an Unforgiving Spirit

But what happens when you choose bitterness over forgiveness? The king called the unforgiving servant back: “You wicked servant ... I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?” (Matthew 18:32–33, NIV). The servant was handed over to the jailers until he could pay his entire debt. Jesus then says, “This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart” (Matthew 18:35, NIV). If you refuse to forgive, if you decide to sleep in the bed of bitterness, and if you continue to be chained to a grudge, do you know who you’re going to wind up hurting the most? Forgiveness primarily benefits the one who forgives, not the one who’s forgiven. Though it costs you, you must forgive. I’ll quote C.S. Lewis again: “To be a Christian means to forgive the inexcusable because God has forgiven the inexcusable in you.”

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When you forgive others out of the forgiveness God has given you, you release yourself from the chains of bitterness and choose freedom over prison.

Forgiven people forgive people. Remember how much God has forgiven you, and you'll find the grace to forgive others, no matter how deeply they've hurt you.

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Forgiven Forgiving

The Heart of God | Week 38 | Matthew 18:21–35

Reflection Questions

1. Who comes to mind when you think about someone you need to forgive?
What has kept you from releasing that debt and choosing forgiveness?

2. How does understanding the magnitude of your own sin debt to God (represented by the 10,000 talents) change your perspective on forgiving smaller offenses against you?

3. Jesus said we must forgive from our hearts (Matthew 18:35). What specific action will you take this week to actually forgive someone instead of just thinking about it?

A lady driving from Washington, DC, to Richmond had a flat tire and sat stranded by the roadside praying for help. Two cars passed by—one with a “Smile, God Loves You!” bumper sticker, the other reading “Honk If You Love Jesus!”—but both drivers moved to the far lane without stopping. Then a man in an old pickup with no bumper sticker pulled over, changed her tire, and refused payment, saying he hoped someone would help his wife if she were stranded. Three men drove by that day, but only one chose the right side of the road. How can you know which side you would be on? Comfort is found on the wrong side of the road; compassion is found on the right side of the road. Through Jesus’ parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:25–37, discover that when you have a heart *for* God, you’ll have the heart *of* God—a heart of compassion that shows love with no limits to a world desperately needing mercy.

Key Points

1. Risk Your Comfort

When the priest saw the beaten man on the Jericho road, he “...passed by on the other side” (Luke 10:31, NIV). As a religious leader, this priest faced a dilemma—touching a potentially dead body would make him ceremonially unclean, requiring a week-long cleansing process and separation from his family. There might be robbers nearby, putting his own safety at risk. Getting involved would force him completely out of his comfort zone. It’s one thing to believe in compassion; it’s another thing to practice it. When you comfort hurting people and show compassion to those in need, there will be times you’ll have to risk your comfort. But authentic faith requires moving beyond personal convenience to meet others’ desperate needs.

Choose compassion over comfort, knowing that God calls you to step out of what's comfortable to serve others in their greatest moments of need.



4. Realize Your Duty

Jesus changed the lawyer's question from "Who is my neighbor?" to "What kind of neighbor am I?" The expert couldn't even bring himself to say "Samaritan," only answering, "The one who had mercy on him." Jesus commanded, "Go and do likewise" (Luke 10:37, NIV). This story shows us three levels of living: The robbers said, "What's yours is mine, I'll take it"; the religious leaders said, "What's mine is mine, I'll keep it"; but the Samaritan said, "What's mine is yours, I'll share it." The deeper meaning points to Jesus, the ultimate Good Samaritan who traveled the road to Jerusalem with a cross. He found us, beaten and robbed by sin, left for dead on the roadside. He gave His life to restore ours. He sends you to do the same. You might be asking, "Who is my neighbor?" Your neighbor isn't defined by color or creed but by the nearest need.

Stop asking who deserves your help and start asking how you can be the neighbor someone desperately needs today.

Key Takeaway

When you choose the right side of the road, you risk comfort, reject indifference, respond with compassion, and realize your duty to love without limits—because that’s exactly what Jesus did for you.

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The Right Side of the Road

The Heart of God | Week 39 | Luke 10:25–37

Reflection Questions

1. Think about a recent time when helping someone would have required you to “risk your comfort.” What held you back, and how might you respond differently, knowing that real compassion requires getting out of your comfort zone?

2. In what areas of your life have you been guilty of the “sin of omission”—not actively harming others but failing to do good when you had the opportunity? How might you reject indifference this week?

3. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. noted that the priest and Levite asked, “What will happen to me if I help?” while the Samaritan asked, “What will happen to him if I don’t help?” How could this shift in perspective change how you see the needs of those around you?
