When my friend Joann met her future husband and they lived out a storybook courtship, she anticipated that their Christian marriage would be “happily ever after.” A decade later, the marriage exploded in her face. Her husband left her for another woman, and she began the long, painful task of bringing up two young boys alone. Financial problems dogged her. The frustrations of being both mother and father, homemaker and wage-earner drove her into depression and sapped all of her energy. Loneliness became her constant companion.

One of her greatest disappointments was the lack of support she felt from the family of God. The past twelve years have been marked by
an unending struggle to pay the bills, rear her two sons (now teenagers) to Christian manhood, and rebuild the self-esteem that had been pulverized by the divorce.

Most of us have friends, like my friend Joann, who stagger under seemingly unbearable burdens but who still hope that somehow Jesus Christ can make a difference in their lives. If we walk with Jesus through the Gospels, we see Him surrounded by such people. Matthew 9 opens with a group of men who were beside themselves to know what to do about a paralyzed friend. They had heard rumors about the young rabbi called Jesus. Could He do something for their friend? They hoisted the man up on his mat and took him to Jesus.

Later in Matthew 9, a ruler of the synagogue pleaded with Jesus to do something about his little daughter who had just died. As Jesus left the ruler’s house, two blind men followed Him, calling out, “Son of David, have mercy on us!” (v. 27). As they left Jesus’ presence, a demon-possessed man, unable to talk, was brought to Jesus. In a single chapter, Matthew shows us the desperate needs of very different people who had one thing in common: They hoped that, in the midst of their crushing despair, Jesus could make a difference in their lives.

**FOCAL POINT**

In the New Testament many clamored to be near Jesus because He healed people and raised the dead. Since He is no longer on earth operating in the same manner, what is it about Him today that should make people gravitate toward Him?

**The Compassion of Jesus**

Matthew 9 spills over with the compassion of Jesus for suffering people. It ends with these words:

*Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues,*
preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every sickness and every disease among the people. But when He saw the multitudes, He was moved with compassion for them, because they were weary and scattered, like sheep having no shepherd. Then He said to His disciples, “The harvest truly is plentiful, but the laborers are few. Therefore pray the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest” (9:35–38).

In the middle of Matthew 9, we encounter another desperate person, a woman who had hemorrhaged for twelve long years. Her story reaches us not only through Matthew’s gospel but through Mark’s and Luke’s as well. We begin exploring this woman’s suffering in Mark 5:24:

So Jesus went with [Jairus, the ruler of the synagogue], and a great multitude followed Him and thronged Him. Now a certain woman had a flow of blood for twelve years, and had suffered many things from many physicians. She had spent all that she had and was no better, but rather grew worse (vv. 24-26).

Twelve years! While we aren’t positive what this bleeding was, it is usually assumed that it was a continuous menstrual period—for twelve long years. Even in today’s world with modern medicine to help us, that would be exhausting and debilitating. As for any modern woman today, for her it would have meant being sapped of energy. It meant constant suffering and weakness. It may have meant depression. But in the time of Jesus, it was much, much worse.

TIME OUT FOR THEOLOGY

Because of Levitical law, clearly stated in Leviticus 15:19, this woman was considered unclean. Anyone she touched or anything she touched would also be considered ceremonially unclean. This would mean that if she were to touch Jesus or His garments, she would render Him unclean as well. The fact that she was in the middle of a crowd would also suggest that she was endangering the people in the crowd ceremonially.
To begin with, her bleeding made her a social outcast. The nature of her ail-
ment in Israel was particularly degrading. From a Jewish perspective, a woman
could not suffer from any more terrible and humiliating disease than constant
hemorrhaging. Women with flows of blood were ritually unclean and literally
untouchable.

The Law laid this down in Leviticus 15:25–27:

*If a woman has a discharge of blood for many days, other than at the time of
her customary impurity, or if it runs beyond her usual time of impurity, all the
days of her unclean discharge shall be as the days of her customary impurity. She shall be
unclean. Every bed on which she lies all the days of her discharge shall be to her as the
bed of her impurity; and whatever she sits on shall be unclean, as the uncleanness of
her impurity. Whoever touches those things shall be unclean; he shall wash his clothes
and bathe in water, and be unclean until evening.*

Leviticus 15 concludes with these words spoken by God to Moses and
Aaron: “You shall separate the children of Israel from their uncleanness” (v. 31).
Going Further

Refer

1. Examine what these passages tell us about God’s compassion.
   a. Psalm 103:1–5
   b. Psalm 103:13–14

2. Notice the characteristic that accompanies compassion in these three verses:
   Psalm 111:4; 112:4; 145:8.

Thinking Through

1. Alice Mathews states: “Most of us have friends… who stagger under seemingly
   unbearable burdens, but who still hope that somehow Jesus Christ can make a difference
   in their lives” (p. 7). What might these people be hoping for? What difference can
   Jesus make in these situations?

2. Central to Jesus’ intervention in the suffering of people was His compassion. We see
   this in His miracles in Matthew 9. How do we see His compassion today?

3. We often think of Levitical laws as having to do with the Old Testament. Why was there
   concern during Jesus’ day about keeping the people separate “from their uncleanness”
   (Leviticus 15:31)?

Warming Up

Do you know someone who seems to be carrying an
“unbearable burden”? What is that situation?

An Unbearable Burden

To begin to appreciate Jesus’ compassion for
the people He encountered.

MEMORY VERSE
Matthew 9:36—
“When [Jesus] saw the
multitudes, He was moved
with compassion for them,
because they were weary
and scattered, like sheep
having no shepherd.”
Digging In Read Mark 1:35–42

1. What did Jesus do before He went out into the villages to preach and to heal? How do we know that He sought to be alone with God?

35 [Jesus] went out and departed to a solitary place; and there He prayed.

36 And Simon and those who were with Him searched for Him, 37 When they found Him, they said to Him, “Everyone is looking for You.” 38 But He said to them, “Let us go into the next towns, that I may preach there also, because for this purpose I have come forth.” 39 And He was preaching in their synagogues throughout all Galilee, and casting out demons.

40 Now a leper came to Him, imploring Him, kneeling down to Him and saying to Him, “If You are willing, You can make me clean.” 41 Then Jesus, moved with compassion, stretched out His hand and touched him, and said to him, “I am willing; be cleansed.” 42 As soon as He had spoken, immediately the leprosy left him, and he was cleansed.

2. Jesus said about preaching to the people: “For this purpose I have come forth” (v. 38). Why did He say this and not “I came to die for the sins of the world”?

3. Jesus’ compassion in verse 41 caused Him to do something that many of us would be afraid to do. What was that, and what does it teach us about Jesus?

Prayer Time

Use the Our Daily Bread article on the next page as a guide for a devotional and prayer time relating to the topic of compassion.

Reflect

1. What are some situations in which you are hesitant to show compassion because you fear people who might be “unclean” in some way?

2. On a scale of 1 to 10 with 1 being low and 10 being high, what is your Compassion Level?
Christ’s Compassion

Why is it that when we hear about someone who is suffering, we are more interested in the details of what, why, when, and where than we are about how we can help?

When the disciples passed the blind beggar (John 9:1), their curiosity about why he was suffering outweighed the prospect of reaching out to help him. “Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” they asked (v. 2). Their pop quiz for Jesus revealed that they were dreadfully out of step with their Master’s heart. In fact, lurking beneath their question was a judgmental spirit—a desire to know who to blame—as if that would make anyone feel better!

Thankfully, Jesus modeled a compassionate response. Rather than speculation and condemnation, He marshaled His resources to help, which in this case meant complete healing. He made it clear that the man’s blindness was intended to provide a moment for God to be magnified through Jesus’ compassionate touch.

Feeling curious about somebody’s problem? Shift into Jesus’ mode, and move past the point of curiosity to his or her point of need. Reach out and touch someone’s pain. Show the compassionate love of Jesus in action.

—Joe Stowell