

God's Way: Vision, Compassion and Prayer

by Paul Bassett

The church needs to see the world as God sees it, through God's eyes and not our own, and develop a vision for the lost, accompanied by compassion and prayer.

Scripture: Matthew 9:36, Luke 6:12, John 4:35, John 17:4, 1 Peter 2:10

Topics: "Spiritual Vision", "Effective Evangelism"

Description

Paul Bassett preaches on the importance of seeing the world through God's eyes, emphasizing the need for restored vision and compassion in the church. He highlights how Christ's deep compassion for the lost stemmed from His spiritual vision, urging believers to view individuals beyond the surface and to feel for them through Christ's heart. Paul stresses the necessity of prayer for laborers in God's harvest, pointing out that compassion and vision are prerequisites for effective evangelism. He underscores that the ultimate goal of all prayers and preaching should be the glory of God, as exemplified by Jesus who glorified the Father by finishing the work assigned to Him.

Transcript

One of the greatest needs of the church today is to see the world as God sees it, through God's eyes and not our own. As long as we view it only through our naked eyes we will only see it naturally and not spiritually, and our solution to the world's plight will accordingly be merely human. The church should have a different solution to man's plight, because it has a different view of man. Vision is an essential requirement for the man of God, for as the proverb reminds us, "Without a vision the people perish." Where a world is perishing without the knowledge of God it is evidence of a short-sighted, if not blinded, church.

Restored vision

The church has always required restored vision, and that vision has always come from the Redeemer Himself. We need to stand where Christ stood with His disciples long ago and see the mass of lost humanity through His eyes. It is recorded of Him: "But when he saw the multitudes, he was moved with compassion..." (Matt. 9:36). We live in a statistically crazy world--a world which for years has numbered its soldiers rather than named them, and now reduces man to a number in the latest computer. The mass media also seek constantly, sincerely but ineffectively to convey the hunger of the world through impersonal sets of statistics. We have not only lost sight of the individual in the crowd, but he has been filed away out of sight as an impersonal fact or nonentity. We live in a world where matter is more

important than a man and things more than people. In our age of the concrete jungle, and the high-rise block, we have, at best, a dehumanized man and at worst a soulless man whom one cannot grasp, let alone see or feel. I may perhaps be urged to care for his perishing body, but never, it would seem, for his immortal soul.

Though Christ's disciples viewed the same mass of lost and perishing humanity side-by-side with their Saviour it is recorded of him alone: 'When he saw the multitudes he was moved with compassion.' He clearly saw deeper than the physical. Spiritual eyes see beneath the surface and beyond the obvious. Spiritual vision sees beyond the seen. It also sees the many, but not at the cost of the one.

But although the disciples saw the same people as Christ, evidently they did not see the same plight that Christ saw. They had no sight of the soul condition of the people. It is not recorded of one of the disciples that he was moved with compassion. Until we see the world through Christ's eyes, we will never feel for it through Christ's heart.

Spiritual blindness

From the disciples' spiritual blindness we learn that it is possible to be a minister of the gospel, an evangelist, a church officer, or worker in the church for year after year, and yet to have no vision of souls perishing in a world without Christ. So it is fearfully possible for our so-called evangelical churches to be going on with their business while the world just outside the door of the church goes unnoticed to hell. May God give us before it is too late the same vision He gave to His disciples when He commanded them, "Say not ye, There are yet four months, and then cometh harvest? behold...lift up your eyes, and look on the fields; for they are white already to harvest" (John 4:35). Some members of the farming community say that when the corn is white it should have already been harvested. It is overripe! We have a world which is perishing in its sin because it is overripe for salvation. At the time of Christ's imperative command to evangelize, the church, as represented by His disciples, was standing back from evangelism because it believed the time was inappropriate. The time had not come!

It is good to recall the situation which prompted this God-given vision and command to "put in the sickle" and evangelize. At the end of a long day Christ had wearily sat down on a well and sent away His disciples to buy food. In their absence Christ fell into conversation with a woman who had come to draw her water supply. Christ's eyes looked beyond the earthen waterpot she carried to her empty soul. Yet, remembering His thirst, He courteously asked her for a drink of water. Contact was made. Sympathy crossed the cultural barrier between Samaritan and Jew, man and woman. Christ did not debate the rights or wrongs of the centuries-old feud existing between their nations. Spiritual vision sees beyond nationalistic and cultural differences to the plight and need of a lost soul. It looks beyond the apparent need of an immoral woman to the true need of her soul, above all else to the solution--the living water of the Holy Spirit. A Man of such vision and such sympathy opened the sinner's eyes to Himself, to a Man more than a Jew, to more than a prophet, to the Messiah Himself. Leaving her empty vessel behind her she carried away a life which was no longer empty. Natural thirst had to wait because spiritual thirst had been met. She, too, now had spiritual vision. Rushing back to her village this formerly immoral woman wanted everyone to meet her new-found Saviour. Her invitation was fervent and personal: "Come, see a man, which told me all things that ever I did: is not this the Christ?" (John 4:29).

The Word of God explicitly tells us that Christ had always had an eternal vision of lost humanity. In that tremendous eighth chapter of Proverbs we see Christ, who is the wisdom of God, represented by Wisdom

and declaring in beautiful poetical language, "When he appointed the foundations of the earth: then I was by him, as one brought up with him: and I was daily his delight, rejoicing always before him." Then follow these amazing words: "Rejoicing in the habitable parts of his earth; and my delights were with the sons of men" (Prov. 8:29,30). Incredible though it may seem, His vision was not of the rolling Atlantic, nor the glory of the Grand Canyon, nor the undulating desert of Arabia, but of those apparently insignificant specks which are lost mankind. However, to Christ, they were the most significant sight in the whole world. In His estimation, man is the only wonder worth His eternal vision and eternal care. It is for this reason alone that He came down the stairs of heaven and became "obedient unto death, even the death of the cross." This same vision must become the vision of the twentieth-century church even as it had to become that of the first-century church.

God-given compassion - The heart of God

Compassion, like vision, is something you cannot create. You cannot work it up. You have to go to the heart of God and to His Word and begin to see man through the eyes of God. A vision of the lost is the prerequisite for compassion for the lost. Compassion is born out of vision, and both must proceed from God. Christ is the exemplar of both, for of Him we read, "But when He saw the multitudes, He was moved with compassion on them" (Matt. 9:36). The background to this moment of deep pathos is Christ moving through every city and village preaching the gospel. No place escaped His visitation. No one escaped His message. His strategy was not the result of some cold calculating plan for world evangelization, but of the movement of God's mercy for man. Here is nothing less than the heart of God moving towards lost man.

The word "compassion" in the original means that Christ was moved to the depth of His being. It is the same Greek word as that used by Paul when speaking of Onesimus, the slave who had run away from his master Philemon--only to run straight into the arms of Paul in Rome! Paul, having had the joy of leading him to Christ, sends him back to Philemon with a view to his being received as a new person and in a new way. He therefore describes what he now feels for his new convert. Paul tells Philemon that he is "mine own bowels" (Philem. 12), that is, as dear and as cherished as himself. To have compassion is to love sinners as much as you love yourself.

The same word is used again by the apostle Paul when he is writing to the church at Philippi. Even though he is now "Paul the aged" he will never forget the day when, in response to that vision in the night, the Macedonian call for mercy, he moved from Asia to Europe. Eventually he caught sight of the riverside, and of that group of godly women who asked him to preach, just as the seller of purple walked in--the first convert. Then there was that young woman caught up in the occult, and the jailor who nearly committed suicide in the jail at the time of the earthquake, because he thought all the prisoners had escaped. What a sight of pitiful trembling humanity he looked as he sprang into the cell pleading to know the way of salvation! No doubt as he wrote his Epistle from prison, Paul looked back on these things and thought, "I never could have done it without being sent to Macedonia on that mission of mercy and being constrained by Christ-given compassion." He paused for a moment to receive from God the right word to express the depth of feeling he still possessed for those believers in Philippi, now formed into a church. There could only be one word to describe his feelings: the same word which took him to Philippi in the first place--compassion! God knew he was neither lying nor exaggerating. So his pen hovered no longer over the parchment and he wrote, "God is my record [my witness], how greatly I long after you all in the bowels of Jesus Christ" (Phil. 1:8). What a man! He can even call upon God Almighty to witness the depth of his love for these Christians! Yet in the last analysis it was not Paul's love to which God was called to bear witness, but God's own love through Paul. Indeed it was not Paul's natural love, for he takes us back to the

source of his compassion, "the bowels of Jesus Christ." Christ's heart must capture our hearts before we will ever be characterized by compassion for a lost world.

The plight of man

We will, however, only begin to experience such Christ-like compassion when we see the multitude and mass of lost humanity as He did. As vision is to see man through God's eyes, so compassion is to love the world with God's heart. Alas! How often we have made the mistake of trying to love the unlovely world with our own loveless hearts! Christ, as we have seen earlier, saw beyond the obvious and beneath the surface. Compassion sees the threefold cause of man's plight, yearns over it and moves to remedy it. Christ saw and felt something which the disciples failed to recognize.

Firstly, the multitude were "fainting." No doubt this was in a sense true physically, but even more essentially, spiritually. Sin has weakened men's very constitution. It has eaten away and eroded both his moral and spiritual fibre. Another word which describes the condition of mankind without God is "prayerlessness." We are reminded of Christ's maxim for man: "Men ought always to pray and not to faint." In His estimation the opposite to praying is not simply not praying, but fainting. For prayer is dependence upon God, prayerlessness is independence. A fainting world or a fainting individual is only a picture of a spiritually independent world weakened by sin.

Secondly, sin has also scattered mankind, not only from God, but also from one another. How incredible that a man, made in the likeness and image of God, should have been reduced to a mere animal--and a pathetic sheep at that: "scattered abroad as sheep"! How has such a state of affairs come about? To discover its cause we need to go back to a great evangelical preacher living some seven hundred and fifty years before Christ. He describes the reason for man's being scattered. It is that "all we like sheep have gone astray" (Isa. 53:6). "But why?" we ask. We are left in no doubt of the answer: our wilfulness. "We have turned every one to his own way." We have stubbornly refused to go God's way. We have chosen to carve out our own destiny. We have become, to use another picture, a world of scattered islands on the sea of sin. As God views us through eyes of compassion, He does not see us as we see ourselves. He sees us, not as a homogeneous whole, not as related to one another, but cut off and alienated from one another and, above all, from Himself. It is only after we have become Christians that we realize that in God's sight we "in time past were not a people, but are now the people of God." The reason, the secret, is this: then we "had not obtained mercy, but now have obtained mercy" (1 Peter 2:10).

Thirdly, Christ saw that the people were shepherdless. A shepherdless flock will always wander. This was the supreme reason why Christ came into this world--for a shepherdless world and a shepherdless church. Only a man who can truly say, "The Lord is my Shepherd" will ever go on to see, "I shall not want." The tragedy of our world is that it does not know it has lost its Shepherd or that the Good Shepherd laid down His life for the sheep. It is also a fact that no New Testament church lacked an under-shepherd, a God-given minister. We are categorically told that the apostles appointed elders in every church (Acts 14:23), and the risen Christ's gift to the church is a pastor and teacher (Eph. 4:11). A pastorless and shepherdless church was an unknown entity in the New Testament. Let us realize God's heart is moved to the depths over shepherd-less congregations. May the same be true of our hearts! In fact it is wonderfully moving to recognize that the gift of the pastor or shepherd to each local church is a gift from the heart of God. What a promise to us in our day: "And I will give you pastors according to mine heart, which shall feed you with knowledge and understanding"! (Jer. 3: 15).

Compassion is needed in dealing with all sinners, but the Scripture warrants our saying that it will be needed more and more by the individual Christian, minister and church of God, as we draw nearer to the end of the world. Jude reminds us of Christ's words: "There should be mockers in the last time, who should walk after their own ungodly lusts" (Jude 18). In this coming sensual age he enforces on all believers the need to build themselves up, in the sense of fortifying themselves against such pressures, by praying more than ever and keeping their lives in the love of God. Clearly no monastic exclusive separatist movement is called for. To those who have gone astray, compassion is to be the hallmark of a church in a sensuous and increasingly ungodly society. Compassionate evangelism is to be the order of the day: "And of some have compassion, making a difference" (Jude 22). Compassion will make a difference in that it distinguishes the particular sin and need of different individuals in society. Compassion not only feels for the ungodly, but fears the sins of the ungodly, as a fireman rescues the man from the burning house pulling him out as quickly as possible in case he is burnt. Our fear is of the fire of sin, so we are not only concerned to be "pulling them out of the fire" motivated by Christ-given compassion, but at the same time "hating even the garment spotted by the flesh."

Compassion is seeking to save the sinner, and beholding his plight, but never at the cost of fearing the power and contagion of sin.

Finally, a compassionate man is a man who has God-given vision and compassion for the lost. To be such a man he needs to be so close to Christ in his life that he becomes one with Him in compassion. No greater example can be found of a man whose life, belief and conscience were controlled by Christ's compassion than the apostle Paul. He can declare, "I say the truth in Christ, I lie not, my conscience also bearing me witness in the Holy Ghost, that I have great heaviness and continual sorrow in my heart. For I could wish that myself were accursed [separated] from Christ for my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh" (Rom. 9:1-3). He reminds us of Moses' degree of burden for lost Israel when he was willing to have his name taken out of the book of life that their names might be written there in his place (Exod. 32:32). So likewise Paul, who formerly hated these Jewish Christians and persecuted them unto death, has known the compassion of Christ replace the hatred of sin. He, too, is willing to be separated from Christ and accursed for ever if it will gain their salvation. Paul shows us the complete Christian, seemingly a paradox--rejoicing and sorrowing in the same heart at the same time. He, who could "rejoice in the Lord always," could equally say, "I have great heaviness and continual sorrow in my heart" over his lost people. God give us a like heart! Then it will be written: "When they saw the multitude, they were moved with compassion."

God-given prayer

"Then saith he unto his disciples, the harvest truly is plenteous, but the labourers are few."

Prayer for workers

Firstly, we need a God-given burden of prayer for workers. We are so moved by Christ's description of lost humanity perishing before our once blinded eyes that, as we open them to see the fields white already to harvest, we feel the next step is obvious: it is to go and preach the gospel immediately and recruit others to join us. Such is the inspiration of Christ's vision of, and compassion for, the lost, that we wait in eager expectation for the command to go and preach. Yet the command never comes. Not, that is, the command to preach to the lost, but the command to pray: "Pray ye therefore the Lord of the harvest, that he will send forth labourers..." The reason for prayer is because the number of souls waiting to be harvested far

outnumbers the labourers. For in Christ's estimation, "the harvest truly is plenteous, but the labourers are few." How pathetic, and yet how challenging, that the needy souls waiting to be saved in our world far outnumber the preachers and workers of the gospel! Yet prayer is needed also because Christ alone has lordship over the harvest of lost souls. What an encouragement to know that Christ is Lord not only of the church, but also of the lost! He is Lord of the harvest. For that reason alone we must pray to Him. We have seen His lordship of vision and His lordship of compassion, but we need also to see His lordship of labour.

We are called to pray to the Lord for a very special person, for a very special work: for someone who possesses the Lord's vision and the Lord's compassion, who realizes at the outset of the work of evangelism that he is overwhelmingly outnumbered by the lost. The numerical statistics of the perishing world demand that a man appreciate that the magnitude of the task is such that, without Christ, it is beyond him. How can the few reach, let alone save, the many? Particularly when we realize that they are scattered by sin across the face of the earth and are fainting in their sins without a shepherd to help them. Did not Milton cry out, "The hungry sheep look up and are not fed"? Are they not like the man by the Pool of Bethesda who for years on end had sat unnoticed, unloved and unreached? Christ was amazed he had not been saved before. The man's answer to Christ was a condemnation of the compassionless church: "Sir, I have no man..." (John 5:7).

What Christ is saying is that we must pray that such a state of affairs may never exist again, when the lost are waiting for years on end to be saved, and no man has the time to bother about them.

It is interesting that Christ did not say the Christians are few, but the labourers are few. Often the Christians in our churches are many, but the labourers are few. We need not only to pray for more labourers, but surely that Christians will be changed by Christ into labourers among the lost. We are praying for a rare man, one who is a gift of God to the church. For, if the church could produce such men, Christ would not command us to pray for them. If Christ has promised them in answer to prayer, they will come. Yet only if we pray will evangelists and church members be sent to evangelize among the lost, young and old, of our villages, towns and cities. We need to pray for a new generation of pioneers. Is it not a case of "Ye have not because ye ask not"? But, as vision comes before compassion, so prayer follows both. A visionless and compassionless church will not be praying for labourers. However, when we begin to pray, the grace of God will lay hold upon men who will do the work of ten men or more. Such was the testimony of Paul when he surveyed his labour for lost souls. He could trace the change the grace of God made not only in his life but in his work for God and man. For he wrote, "I am the least of the apostles, that am not meet to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am; and His grace which was bestowed upon me was not in vain; but I laboured more abundantly than they all: yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me" (1 Cor. 15:9,10). In a sense his labours exceeded those of the rest of the disciples put together! He laboured across different continents for God, not merely in preaching and in prayer, but labouring from "house to house" night and day.

Is there not a danger today that in our churches we are praying for part-time missionaries, ministers and workers on short-term service? When did we last hear a prayer for a labourer? Dare we pray, "Send us another Paul, another Carey, another Studd"? I am frequently challenged by the picture on my study wall of an old bald-headed man in a bush jacket. He is no longer handsome, young or strong. He is "burnt out for God." His immortal words written beside his worn-out mortal body challenge me: "If Jesus Christ be God and died for me, then no sacrifice can be too great for me to make for Him." Such was the maxim of C. T. Studd.

Such men when they come from God will labour with Pauline zeal and like a woman giving birth. So Paul again can challenge us: "But it is good to be zealously affected always in a good thing, and not only when I am present with you. My little children, of whom I travail in birth again until Christ be formed in you" (Gal. 4:18,19).

It seems abundantly plain that a prayerless church will not have labourers given it by God. God will trust only a prayerful church with labourers, because they will still require the prayers of the church even when God has given them back to the church. Surely we will never see a new generation of effective labourers until we see a new generation of men and women who pray effectively. We need those who, like Epaphras, will be "always labouring fervently for you in prayers" (Col. 4:12). Then again in evangelism we need labourers like Epaphroditus, who was Paul's "companion in labour" and at the same time the "messenger" of the church at Philippi (Phil. 2:25). Supremely we have the example of Christ Himself, who did not appoint the apostles to evangelize the world until He had spent a whole night praying for labourers. For we read of Him, "And it came to pass in those days, that he went out into a mountain to pray, and continued all night in prayer to God." We are left in no doubt of the purpose of His all-night prayer vigil for "when it was day, he called unto him his disciples: and of them he chose twelve, whom also he named apostles" (Luke 6:12,13). These were special men: they were "the prayed-for ones of God"; they were disciples, "the taught ones of God," who became the apostles, "the sent ones of God." We, too, need to pray before we send men in God's name.

Returning to Christ's command to the church to pray the Lord of the harvest for labourers, we must add one final cautionary word. If we would pray personally for labourers it is implied that we must be willing to be one of those labourers if God so chooses us. For Matthew 10 commences, "And when he had called unto him his twelve disciples...." Clearly, if we call upon God for labourers, we must be willing to be called by God to be a labourer for the Lord of the harvest.

Why is it, we may well ask, that we give so little time to prayer in proportion to other work we do for the Lord? Is it not, in the last analysis, that in fact we do not equate prayer with work? That great missionary, James Gilmour, who laboured for God in Mongolia, came to this same conclusion: "There is a great feeling that when a man is praying he is doing nothing, and this feeling makes us give undue importance to work, sometimes even to the hurrying over or even to the neglect of prayer." Another great missionary labourer for God, Edward Payson, said it all when he declared, "If we would do much for God we must ask much of God."

Before leaving this graphic picture of the harvest field of the world, we need to see that God revealed first the field of labour and then called for prayer for workers. We need to ask the Lord to show us, in our churches, where He wants us to labour for God. How easy it is to draw up plans of operation and areas of outreach, without first asking the Lord to show us His work! Perhaps there is no greater prayer in this context than this one: "Let thy work appear unto thy servants" (Ps. 90:16). There follow four further precious pithy petitions concerning that God-given field of service: "and thy glory unto their children"; then, "and let the beauty of the Lord our God be upon us"; and, in conclusion, a repeated petition, "and establish thou the work of our hands upon us; yea, the work of our hands establish thou it."

What wonderful condescension of our God! When we, His labourers, pray to Him He not only shows us the field of work for Him, and allows His beauty to rest upon us, but He puts His work into our hands. His work becomes our work. Yet we must never labour independently of God, for in answer to prayer He alone will grant us success by establishing "the work of our hands."

Prayer for the glory of God

If the burden of this book has been to remind us of the God-given provision for the evangelization of our lost world before it is too late, let us realize above all else that the final purpose of all our prayers and preaching is not the salvation of immortal souls, nor even the establishing of local evangelical churches, but rather the glory of God. To glorify God in evangelism is to finish the work which God has given us to do. That great evangelist to the New Hebrides, John Paton, realized that he was immortal until his work was done.

Let our last picture be of the One who combines in His glorious person both the message of the gospel and the office of the evangelist. We are privileged to enter into His prayer life at the end of His ministry, as He looks up into heaven and into His Father's face and declares, "I have glorified thee on the earth: I have finished the work which thou gavest me to do" (John 17:4). How often we merely use the word "glory" as a full stop at the end of our prayers! Let us rather realize that we shall never glorify God until we finish the work God has given us to do for Him in this world, and that includes the work of evangelism.

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