

February 20, 2005 by Steve Brandon



A Heart for the Lost

Matthew 23:37-39

A heart for the lost is, ...

1. Persistent
2. Willing
3. Tender
4. For the Worst of Sinners

This week I received a card in the mail. It was addressed to me, but I didn't know the one who was sending it. As I opened up this card, I noticed that the card quoted Jesus, "Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted." On the inside was written the following note: "Steve, ... Sorry to read of your fathers passing away. Dads are specially ... and yours had to have been extraordinary." (My father hadn't passed away. He was in the congregation as I read this note. As such, there were a few laughs. I told him that he was looking pretty good this morning. There were a few more laughs. Then, I turned the matter to a more serious tone).

Though my father is alive and well this morning, the day will soon come when I do indeed receive a note like this in the mail. My father is turning 70 years old this year. His day of facing Jesus is coming soon. But our day is coming also! Death will soon come upon us all. I heard of a man close to our congregation whose wife just passed away this week. My burden, as a pastor, is to prepare you for "that day." It ought to be the burden of every pastor.

I know of two pastors of the 19th century who were concerned with presenting their congregations complete in Christ (Col. 1:28). Their names were Andrew Bonar and Robert Murray M'Cheyne. They were close friends, who constantly prayed for one another and spoke with one another concerning their ministries. On several occasions I have heard of the conversation that they had with each other. These two men were speaking with one another about their preaching labors on the previous Sunday, M'Cheyne had asked Bonar, "What text did you preach on?" Bonar replied, "The wicked shall be turned into hell..." (Ps. 9:17a). And M'Cheyne then responded in typical fashion, "And did you preach it with tears?"

Too often, our understanding of the realities of life and death are merely abstracted. Too often, we can speak about eternal matters, like heaven and hell without feeling them. I know that I can. But, God can't speak without feeling. God knows full well what happen to those who reject the gospel. He knows full well what their condemnation will mean.

This is well displayed in the life and ministry of the Lord Jesus. Nobody spoke as strongly of hell as He did. He described as a fiery furnace (Matt. 13:41-42, 50). He spoke of it as a hot, agonizing flame (Luke 16:24). He described as a place of eternal fire (Matt. 25:41). "Eternal punishment" were His words (Matt. 24:46). He called it a "second death" (Rev. 21:8). Jesus preached the reality of hell, because He knew that it was a place where people would go if they failed to repent! But, nobody spoke as tenderly as Jesus did. Sinners loved to be with Jesus, because He gave them a hope. Jesus described heaven as a glorious place, worth far more than any treasure that you might store up here upon the earth.

In our text this morning, we will see Jesus put forth His compassion, even for those who are hell-bound. The title of my message this morning is "A Heart for the Lost." I invite you to open your Bibles to Matthew 23.

In recent weeks, we have been studying this great chapter in which we have see Jesus strongly condemns the Pharisees for their hypocritical lives. For all of their great efforts to get into the kingdom of heaven, they fell short. Jesus wasn't glad with these hard-hearted Pharisees. He wasn't saying, ... "You wicked slime! You are getting exactly what you deserved!" as if from a heart of vengeance. This was not the heart of Jesus at all. Rather, Jesus was saddened to put forth such strong condemnations against these scribes and Pharisees. Jesus didn't get some sadistic thrill from these words. They didn't give Jesus delight. They gave Jesus anguish of heart. Jesus wasn't a cold-hearted judge executing judgment upon these people. Jesus was a soft-hearted Savior, expressing His love and compassion to those who would have none of it.

We come now to the last three verses of this chapter.

Matthew 23:37-39

"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling. Behold, your house is being left to you desolate! For I say to you, from now on you shall not see Me until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!'"

From verse 37, I want you to see four characteristics of "A Heart for the Lost" A Heart for the Lost is, ...

1. Persistent

I get this from the word, "often." It simply means "many times." Jesus extended His grace and compassion many times to these scribes and Pharisees. They heard Him speak upon the mountain side (Matthew 5-7). They heard Him speak in their synagogues (Luke 4:16-30). They heard Him speak in the temple (Matt. 21:12-17). They heard Him speak in the fields (Matt. 12:1-8). They heard Him speak in Peran (Matt. 19:1-12). They heard Him speak in Chorazin (Matt. 11:21). They heard Him speak in Bethsaida (Matt. 11:21). They heard Him speak in Capernaum (Matt. 11:23). They heard Him speak in Nazareth (Luke 4:16-20). They heard Him speak in Jerusalem (Matt. 22). He sent His disciples into all of the cities of Israel and Judah (Matt. 10:5-6). People came to hear Him from Galilee and Decapolis and Jerusalem and Judea and from beyond the Jordan (Matt. 4:25).

His ministry to the people of Israel was repeated and recurring. His was a message of compassion and mercy and grace and kindness. He was offering the kingdom of heaven to those who were poor in spirit and who knew their sin. He offered the kingdom to those who were gentle, merciful, and pure in heart. The kingdom belonged to those who hungered and thirsted after righteousness (Matt. 5:3-10). Jesus said that upon these people would come incredible blessing. He taught people how to live and what to seek after (Matt. 6). He taught people how to pray (Matt. 6:9-13). He taught people how to forgive (Matt. 18:21-35). He fed the multitudes (Matt. 14:13-21). He healed gave sight to the blind. He made the lame to walk. He cleansed the lepers. He gave hearing to the dumb. He preached the gospel to the poor (Matt. 11:4-5).

If anyone ever had an opportunity to hear the good news of the gospel, it was the people of Israel and Judea. If anyone ever had an opportunity to see the proof that Jesus was the long expected one, it was the people of Israel and Judea. For three long years, Jesus ministered to the people of Israel. Time after time after time after time, Jesus demonstrated His great compassion and kindness. His message was clear. It was all about the joy and happiness that you would obtain through repenting and believing that Jesus was the Messiah.

As often as Jesus taught these scribes and Pharisees, He was rejected. Or, to use Biblical language, "He was despised and forsaken of men" (Isaiah 53:3).

Why did Jesus continue in His work and labor for these people? Because He had a heart for "the lost sheep of the house of Israel." (Indeed, this is what Jesus called them in Matthew 10:6). When you have a heart for a lost soul, you too will go to him or her. You will go again and again and again and again. The reason why we don't go again and again and again is because our hearts are cold toward those who are lost.

A heart for the lost is, ...
2. Willing

This comes straight from the words of Jesus. He said, "I wanted to gather [you]" (verse 37). It was His desire. It would have given Him much delight. When Jesus preached to the people of Israel, it wasn't because He was under some sort of divine obligation simply to preach to them. It wasn't merely because His heavenly Father told Him to preach to them. Jesus didn't preach from only motives of obedience. Rather, the heart of Jesus extended to these rebellious people. Jesus could do no other than teach the word of God in truth to them. His desire was for them to be gathered to Himself.

Those of us who have come to know and trust and love the doctrines of grace, know that our salvation is entirely dependent upon God. Romans 9:16 says that salvation "does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy." When a sinner turns from His way, it is only because the Lord moved in His heart first. And yet, we must never believe that the heart of God is cold toward those to whom He will eventually judge. If there is any proof for this, it comes right here from chapter 23. For 36 verses, Jesus has been condemning the scribes and Pharisees in no uncertain words. And yet, here in verse 37, hardly without taking another breath, the Lord Jesus puts forth His heart-felt willingness to see Jerusalem saved. You can't get over these words, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, ... how often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings."

When Jesus condemns, it isn't with a cold heart. It is with a soft heart. In Ezekiel 18:23, we read that the Lord takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked. There are those who might well quote, "Jacob I loved and Esau I hated" (Romans 9:13). That is well and good. Paul quoted this verse. But, I ask, "Does this mean that God had only love for Jacob and only hate for Esau? Or, is the person of God a bit more complicated than this?" Did God have only love for Jacob when he deceived Esau into forfeiting his birthright? (Genesis 25). Did God have only love for Jacob when he deceived his father, Isaac, into blessing him, rather than Esau? (Genesis 27). Did God have only hate for Esau when he chose to be gracious to Jacob, rather than killing him, as Jacob feared? (Genesis 33). I say that the Lord's emotions are far more complex than merely one side.

We know of this. Imagine yourself as a jury member in a murder case. As the testimony comes out, you find out that a man was out drinking one night. He had a few too many beers and hopped in his car to ride home. On the way home, he swerved his car across the center lane, right into another oncoming car. A woman and her three children were killed in the car accident, as they were out grocery shopping. And as is often the case, the drunk man lived.

As the testimony continues, you find out that this man was a good man. He worked in the local factory, rarely missing a day of work. He was well liked by those at work. His neighbors found him always to be helpful, especially to the single mother, who lived down the street. He had three children of his own. His wife dearly loved him. Furthermore, it came out that this man rarely drank any alcohol. But, the recent, unexpected illness of their four year old little boy had brought in some overwhelming hospital bills. One night, he wanted to escape it all. That's what drove him to the bar that night.

Now, as a jury, you go to sentence this man, who is obviously guilty, and must be punished according to the law. But, would not your heart ache for him. You will sentence him to death or life in prison, according to the law of the land. You will rip this man away from his family. As you think of his wife and his children, would your heart ache for them? Would anything in your heart long for the man to go free, back to his family?

I believe that this illustrates God's perspective on the lost. Certainly, they have sinned against Him. To be sure, any sin against an infinitely holy God deserves infinite punishment. For God to be true to His justice, He must punish them for their sins and for their refusal to repent. And yet, God isn't only justice. God is also compassion and kindness and grace. And the merciful heart of God will judge! But, he will judge with pain in His heart.

I believe that Jesus is exhibiting such a heart in this passage. He looks upon lost Jerusalem, and expresses His love for them, who have turned their backs on Him. Jesus was willing, but they were unwilling. That's what the last portion of the verse says, "You were unwilling."

A heart for the lost is, ...

3. Tender

Jesus uses the illustration here of a hen, gathering her chicks under her wings. The same imagery is used several times in the Bible. In every instance, the idea is that of safety and protection. Consider the following verses, ...

Psalm 17:8, "Keep me as the apple of the eye; Hide me in the shadow of Your wings."

Psalm 36:7, "How precious is Your lovingkindness, O God! And the children of men take refuge in the shadow of Your wings."

Psalm 91:4, "He will cover you with His pinions, and under His wings you may seek refuge. His faithfulness is a shield and bulwark."

But notice here that Jesus employs a *tender* term of protection. It is the nourishing and cherishing care of a mother hen. We have all seen mothers do this. A child is in danger and afraid. Perhaps she has noticed a barking dog or heard a loud noise or seen a stranger at the door. We have seen the child run to mom, who will cradle the child in her arms, who comforts her child to assure her that all is well.. This protection is warm and endearing. It's not simply dealing with their fears. It's not putting the dog in its kennel. It's not putting earplugs in the child, so that the loud noise will no longer be heard. It's not shutting the door on the stranger. It is a tender bringing close and protecting.

Jesus said that it was on many occasions that he had wanted to protect Jerusalem, closely bringing them into His loving arms. Protect them from what? One can only suppose that Jesus had in mind the coming wrath of God. It is salvation that Jesus is talking about here.

Jesus pictures the offer of His salvation as that of a mother hen protecting her chicks. And this is salvation: finding refuge in Jesus. I love how the Bible gives us so many pictures and illustrations of saving faith. There are times when salvation is described in the imagery of birth. You need to be born again (John 3). At other times, the imagery of a new heart is used (Ezekiel 36). At other times, it is the imagery of drinking from the waters of life (John 7). In our text this morning, it is running into the safe arms of Jesus.

In all of the illustrations that the Bible gives, there is a slight nuance of difference. Being born again implies a new start to your life. Receiving a new heart implies the necessity of changing from the inside out. Drinking from the waters of life implies the refreshing, life-sustaining nature of saving faith. Here, with the loving wings of Jesus, we see a tenderness about Him. The picture is of one fleeing the danger, by running into the loving arms of Jesus. And I believe that this is exactly the point. Jesus has a tender disposition toward those who are lost. We must have the same as well.

Now, this is especially surprising when you consider who these people were and what these people had done, ... which leads us to our fourth characteristic of a heart for the lost.

A heart for the lost is, ...

4. For the Worst of Sinners

By this, I simply mean that such a heart will reach out to the worst of sinners. Consider the ones to whom Jesus was speaking. Jesus didn't say, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that always does everything right." Nor did Jesus say, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that loves God and His commandments." Nor did Jesus say, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that helps the widow and the orphan." None of these are right. It is, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her!" It is "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who always rebels against God, who hates what God says, and who kills those who speak on behalf of God." This is the city that Jesus was lamenting: a wicked and sinful city.

Oh, they may not have been sinful in the sense that Sodom and Gomorrah, who pursued the lusts of their flesh, was sinful. Oh, they may not have been sinful in the sense that Tyre and Sidon, who pursued worldly treasures, was sinful. They were sinful in that they refused to hear the clear message of God, which came to them "in many portion and in many ways" (Heb. 1:1). Here, when God "spoke ... in His Son," (Heb. 1:2) the rejection continued on. I believe that their sin was worse than that of Sodom and Gomorrah and Tyre and Sidon.

Perhaps you will remember back in Matthew 11, when Jesus cursed the cities of Chorazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum for failing to believe in all of the wonderful miracles that He did in that city. Jesus said that they would face greater condemnation than the wicked cities of Sodom and Tyre and Sidon. We can only conclude that greater condemnation comes from greater sin!

Religious sin in the worst of all sin! Because religious sin goes against all knowledge and understanding. This is why Paul considered Himself the "foremost of sinners" (1 Tim. 1:15). Was it because Paul sinned worse sins than anybody else? No! But rather that Paul sinned the things he did against the fullest knowledge of anybody.

It was to these in Jerusalem to whom Jesus expressed His heart. They knew the Torah better than anyone and yet rejected the greatest revelation. Though the prophets were sent to them, they killed them instead. These are the ones to whom Jesus consistently, willingly, and tenderly sought out. It teaches us that no sinner is beyond the heart of God.

Perhaps you are here this morning, and you think that your own life is beyond hope. Perhaps you think that the Lord certainly wouldn't forgive you. I ask you, "If Jesus was willing to gather the worst of sinners to Himself, is He not willing to gather you?" You have every opportunity right now to cry out to Him who is able to save to the uttermost!

A heart for the lost is persistent, willing, tender, and reaches out to the worse of sinners.

The thing that shocked me this week in my study was that Jesus expressed all of these things to those who had already received their sentence of condemnation. It was after Jesus pronounced these strong condemnations that Jesus continued to display His heart for these hell-bound people. It's not like Jesus held out any last hope for these scribes and Pharisees. Verses 38 and 39 remove all doubt about this. They explain clearly the finality of their judgment.

In verse 38 we read, "Behold, your house is being left to you desolate!" This is a clear allusion to the words spoken by the prophet Jeremiah, which are found in chapter 22. He warned the people of Jerusalem to "do justice and righteousness" (verse 3). He warned the people not to mistreat the stranger, the orphan or the widow" (verse 3). Then, Jeremiah promised great blessing if they would indeed do these things. He said that "kings will enter the gates." He promised that they will sit "in David's place on his throne." He said that all in the city, the kings and the servants and the people, will be riding "in chariots and on horses." (verse 4). And yet, the warning comes in Jeremiah 22:5, "But if you will not obey these words, I swear by Myself," declares the LORD, "that this house will become a desolation." This is exactly what Jesus said would come to fruition. Jerusalem would be left desolate. In A. D. 70, the Romans came and utterly destroyed the city. Since that day, the Jews have faced constant persecution!

In verse 39, Jesus had one last bit of parting advice to those who He condemned. He said, "For I say to you, from now on you shall not see Me until you say, 'Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!'" This again is a reference to the Old Testament. It is a direct quotation from Psalm 118:26, "Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord." Perhaps that verse rings in your ears as a familiar verse. It should be. When Jesus entered the city of Jerusalem, this was the hymn that they were singing. They were singing, "Hosanna to the Son of David, Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!" It is a hymn of conquering praise. It is a hymn that will be sung when Jesus returns again. When Jesus returns, all the world will sing His praise (Phil. 2:9-11). These who had rejected Him will see Him no more until He comes in His glorious splendor to claim the world as His own.

These were a bit like the very last words at His trial. In Matthew 26:63, the Jewish high priest said to Him, "I adjure You by the living God, that You tell us whether You are the Christ, the Son of God." Jesus said to them, "You have said it yourself; nevertheless I tell you, hereafter you shall see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of power, and coming on the clouds of heaven" (verse 64). Jesus was informing those who had rejected him that they can only wait for their just condemnation. Their day was over. They were lost in their sin. But, as Jesus looked back upon His dealings with these people, He still had a heart for them.

My question for you is this: "What is your heart for the lost people around you?" I want for you to think of people in your life, who you think are entirely ought of the reach of God? You can hear the judgment of God already pronounced against them. They have sinned high-handedly against all knowledge. They have no conscience toward evil. They are totally unwilling to flee to the open arms of Christ. They are on the path to certain doom. Don't give up on them. Seek them with persistence. Seek them with tenderness. They are not outside of the reach of God. Tell them to flee to Christ, who has a heart to gather chicks underneath His wings.

Isn't this the story of the prodigal son? He had strayed and wandered far off. There was seemingly no hope for him. And yet, the Father's heart still burned in love for Him. When he finally returned, it was a great day of rejoicing. For we read, "There will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents, than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance" (Luk 15:7). This is because God has a heart for the lost and will rejoice when they come into His fold.

Charles Spurgeon once preached upon this text of Scripture. The title of his sermon was, "What Jesus Would Do." This was long before the big WWJD marketing. I believe that there are many lessons for us to learn from the heart of Jesus toward those who are perishing. Is your heart persistent? Is your heart willing? Is your heart tender? Is your heart reaching out to the worst of sinners?

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on February 20, 2005 by Steve Brandon.
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