

Doing the Stuff – See, Feel, Do

When I was younger people use to be quite mean about my hair colour. The way I dealt with it was by following some advice I was given: just ignore them, pretend they are not there, walk away. Hopefully they'll get bored and find someone else to annoy: problem fixed.

Looking back on that now, I wonder if that's the best response. Is it OK to not bother to do anything?

When people hurt us, it is often because they are actually hurting and broken themselves. Perhaps a better response would be love and compassion, rather than apathy. What do you think?

With that in mind, let's look at Matthew 9:35-38:

³⁵ Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. ³⁶ When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. ³⁷ Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. ³⁸ Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field."

In this passage, Jesus provides us with a model of how we can engage with the world around us, a solution to apathy.

1) SAW THE CROWDS

First, Jesus "saw the crowds". Looking at verse 35, Jesus "went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness".

Jesus opened his eyes to what was going on around him. He didn't turn a blind eye to those who were hurting. He didn't pretend they weren't there. He made himself aware of their needs by giving them his attention. In fact, he took deliberate steps to put himself in situations where he would come across people. There are times in the stories of Jesus where Jesus seeks solitude and rest, but most of the time we see him spending time with a wide variety of people where he is going to come across pain, anger, illness, bereavement, and so on. He makes a choice to put himself in those situations.

So it made me think further, which is a bit dangerous: is seeing the crowd (like Jesus did) a choice? Do we sometimes make a conscious choice to remove ourselves from other people so we don't have to deal with their stuff?

For some of us being with other people comes naturally, and for others it doesn't. But I don't think this is a personality thing. There are many different ways we can connect with others, in large groups or small ones, whether you are extrovert like me or an

introvert; that's not the point. The point is that the first step to compassion is to put ourselves near other people and get to know them.

For me, I find I can connect with people through common interests, like with other mums at toddler groups. When I had my son Ethan (that gorgeous little ginger boy on the slide) it created new opportunities to make new friends and meet more people who didn't know Jesus yet. The early stages of having a baby can be very challenging, and I could have chosen to just stay at home and not bother. But by getting out, I had new opportunities to share my faith, and be who Jesus calls me to be.

So where in your life do you come across people who don't know Jesus? Who can you get to know?

Jesus calls us to get out of our comfort zone so we can LOOK directly at the brokenness of our world. He wants us to see the harassed, the helpless, the broken, and the oppressed. Jesus spent most of his time with people. Can we challenge ourselves to do the same?

2) FELT COMPASSION

Secondly, Jesus "had compassion on them". Looking at verse 36: *"When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd."*

Jesus didn't isolate himself from their pain and suffering. He lowered his guard and made himself emotionally vulnerable. He did not suppress the emotions that were stirred up. These emotions went right into the heart of Jesus. Jesus took their pain and suffering upon himself, taking it away from them and making it his own.

Feeling compassion isn't some kind of lovey-dovey sensation or having pity on someone. Compassion goes straight into the heart. We have empathy with the brokenness of another person. Many of us feel this very deep down, as a gut-wrenching feeling. The Greek translation for the words used in this passage literally means "gutted"; so Jesus' response is a real deep, physical response.

Sometimes, for us, it just gets too much and we choose not to engage. We come across something in the world around us that we just don't want to engage with. You could say those who choose apathy are choosing to be emotionally absent. Those who choose compassion are choosing to become emotionally vulnerable.

I've shared this story before, about a time when I went to Tesco and saw a man who worked there with his wrist in a support. Every time I went back he still had it in this support and I felt God prompting me to pray for him. I shared how I ignored God's prompting and came up with many excuses.

Did I feel compassion? Yes.

Did I choose to show compassion? Not this time.

Think of the way Jesus responds to people around him in the bible. Sometimes he weeps. Sometimes he gets angry. Sometimes he rebuked people. Sometimes he was moved with compassion, sometimes deeply distressed. But he never chooses not to bother.

3) TOOK ACTION

Third, Jesus took action. He *"taught in their synagogues", "preached the good news of the kingdom", and "healed every disease and sickness"*. Jesus' compassion propelled him into ministry. His emotional investment could not allow him to neglect the harassed, the helpless, the broken, and the oppressed. Their pain became his pain, so he set about doing something about it. He restored them physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

This passage is packed with examples of how Jesus took action, let's remind ourselves. Matthew 9:35-38

"Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to 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.'"

The Bible is full of examples of Jesus taking action. He gave blind people the ability to see, cured people from terrible diseases like leprosy, healed the paralysed, organised a massive picnic when the crowds were hungry. He even raised the dead. There are many more examples but my point is that Jesus didn't ignore the problem. Jesus took action!

The kind of action Jesus took may seem like a very high bar, it might seem unattainable to you today. But some kind of action, even if it is just a small step, and even if we don't really feel like it, can make a massive difference.

I have missed many opportunities to take action. I'm very good at coming up with excuses and can justify my actions.

- He'll be OK, someone else has gone to help him
- She looks sad, she doesn't want me bothering her
- I'm in a bit of a rush, if I had more time...
- I'm only Sarah Byde, I'm not...

But this series of talks has been inspiring me to do more. I have been using “40 acts from stewardship”. This is an online resource for Lent with lots of ideas of small steps you can take to live generously. Stewardship is a Christian financial organisation. They focus on generosity and ‘giving back’, but I find it interesting that to undertake the tasks they set, the challenge is not usually a financial one, but a people one. We can usually afford their ideas, they are not expensive. But investing time and taking risks with people is more challenging.

One of the ideas in “40 Acts” was a “generosity bucket” to store things in that you can then give out to people. I didn’t get as far as buying a bucket but I did decide to take action!

My plan was to pick up a few things I needed at the shops and get an extra item to give away. I only had £11.52 in my wallet and I had quite a long shopping list including the item that I wanted to give away. I also needed some money left over to buy a drink at Cafe Nero as I decided to go there and see what God was doing. So with my £11.52 I was thinking “this is not possible”. I had a conversation with God, my concern was my expensive taste in face wipes but I have sensitive skin so they are the best ones. Ok God they are going to have to be half price for me to do this. I continued with my shopping, I found most things on offer, or at a reasonable price and guess what my face wipes *were* half price. I found some lovely flowers and decided to get them to give away and in Cafe Nero I had the exact amount I needed for my drink.

I sat, waited, and tried really hard to listen to God - but nothing. I was thinking “surely there is someone that is hurting that needs to be encouraged”, but nothing. By the time I had finished my drink I didn’t feel like God had pointed anyone out to me. And I still hadn’t given my flowers away.

Luckily Ethan, my 19-month-old son, was there to encourage me. He told me I had to give them to a “lady”. I felt compelled to give someone flowers who was standing at a cash machine, so I hung about nearby. Luckily there were no policemen around. But I couldn’t find anyone. Then suddenly someone appeared. I explained that today was the first day of lent and instead of giving something up I was doing something called “40 acts of generosity”. I said “I’d like to bless you with these flowers and tell you that God loves you.” She seemed really surprised and happy, and didn’t really know what to say or do.

I also decided to right a wrong. I went back to find this man at Tesco and pray for him. I said to God: if you want me to pray for him, let him be at work today and put him somewhere where he is available to talk to, preferably on his own, so I can do this. So I’m there, I felt so nervous looking up every aisle, seeking this guy out. I walked around twice but I couldn’t find him.

So what did I take away from these experiences? God was with me, I was obedient. I felt a bit disappointed that nothing happened in Café Nero and that I couldn't find this man in Tesco. But I felt good that I took an opportunity and let God lead again.

You might be saying to yourself, "No No! You don't understand. I'm not being called to do all the crazy stuff that Jesus did in the Bible." Well Jesus calls all of us, no matter who we are, how we feel. "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field."

Will you join in?

Buying someone some flowers was a really small action to take. It is much lower risk than praying for healing, or rebuking someone, or any of those other things Jesus did. I'm sure when Robbie Dawkins visits us he will be encouraging us to do all sorts of things that will be in, and out, of our comfort zones. But the things we are talking about are all part of our mission from God. For me this small action of giving someone flowers helped me reconnect with God and his mission as I let him lead again and I was a willing participant.

FEAR, APATHY, AND OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD

So how can we begin to take these steps of seeing the crowd, feeling compassion, and acting in response?

I'm learning that the more we spend time with God, the more we want to do what he does. We can't force compassion, but if we become more like Jesus then his compassionate heart will begin to take over. We still need to make a choice: will we choose to be like Jesus no matter how we are feeling, no matter who we compare ourselves to, no matter the response or outcome?

If you're sat there and feel like your relationship isn't right with God, perhaps it is affecting your compassion for others and your willingness to act. What can we do to get back on track?

I've got four simple suggestions.

1. Acknowledge what's gotten in the way of your relationship with God and repent.
2. Trust God again: let him into every aspect of your life. Spend time with him, but don't put pressure on yourself, just do what comes naturally. As your relationship with God evolves, so will your devotional time.
3. Let God lead again. Give him control, let him direct you. Listen.
4. Serve God again. Make it about him not us.

One of the books we have been referring to in this series is called "Do What Jesus Did" by Robby Dawkins. You can get this book from Vineyard Records if you are interested. In the book something that I found really encouraging was where Robby Dawkins says;

The thing is to press in, keep pressing in and pressing up. Keep seeking his presence. Seek his presence when no-one's watching. Let it infect every part of who you are, in the character choices you make.... The joy is there - the unbelievable privilege of being friends with such a cool God and being someone who shares his secrets with. It honours him so much when we keep pressing into the things of God...

If we can spend more time in God's presence, it will really help us with this stuff.

TO CONCLUDE

Jesus gave us a simple model to help us.

"Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to 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."

1) Jesus opened his eyes to the people around him. He didn't cross over to the other side of the street when he saw someone in need. He didn't pretend to look away to avoid an uncomfortable conversation. He confronted the harsh realities of life head on.

2) Jesus shared in their pain with a gut-wrenching sympathy. He gave himself permission to become emotionally vulnerable. He didn't subscribe to the "don't ask, don't tell" policy. Their pain became his pain.

3) Jesus took action. He didn't say, "That's not my problem" and pass it to someone else. Jesus wasn't looking from the sidelines. He was out there in the field, playing hard, staying focused, getting bruised, and ultimately defeating the opposing team.

I believe that the love and compassion of Jesus Christ will turn the world upside down. Do you want to be a part of that? Now is the time to be obedient to God's prompting.

No more excuses! No more coasting! No more lukewarm. Let's see the crowd, be compassionate and let's take action.

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