

The Compassionate & Tough Jesus

DAVE BAST

So, you think you know Jesus; but do you really? You may be quite familiar with the Gospel stories, but all of us tend to be selective in our memories of Jesus, focusing on those parts of his character we find appealing, and ignoring any evidence of other sides to him. So today on *Groundwork*, let's dig into scripture to study the Jesus we know as compassionate, but then there is the Jesus we do not know. Stay tuned.

DAVE BAST

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast, and I would like to welcome my co-host for this new series of programs we are beginning today, Reggie Smith. Reggie is pastor of Roosevelt Park Community Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan. He is also an adjunct professor at Calvin Theological Seminary and Grand Rapids Theological Seminary; and he is a board member of our partner ministry in *Groundwork*, Back to God Ministries International, so lots of reasons, Reggie, to welcome you to this program today and to the next several programs.

REGGIE SMITH

Thank you, Dave; good to be here.

DAVE BAST

We are starting this new series that we are calling The Jesus We Never Knew, which is actually not our title, it is something we borrowed.

REGGIE SMITH

That is right. It is a wonderful title that comes from Philip Yancey and a book that he wrote, and it is trying to figure out: we love this Jesus in which we all know and love and care for like a nice little teddy bear, but there is also this other side of Jesus – this Jesus that we seem to ignore – that we seem to want to not know very well, and that is what we are going to kind of dig out during this program.

DAVE BAST

I think another way of putting it maybe would be to say that we are going to try to look at the complete portrait that the Gospels give of him, including some of the stories and some of the chapters that we tend to skate over because maybe they are a little lengthy or maybe they are a little confusing at times, even, or less attractive. You know, we all know and love the Jesus who, as the hymn puts it: Jesus, thou art all compassion, full of kindness and mercy; but then there is this other stuff, too.

REGGIE SMITH

Yes, this other stuff – this other side of Jesus that we read in the Gospel stories – we want to avoid. Can Jesus hate? Can Jesus be hard? Can Jesus be the one who rubs us the wrong way? Can Jesus say things sarcastically? Yes, he can, when there is a way to try to wake us up to a fully orb'd Jesus in which we will grow deeper, but also that we will become more and more like him in our own character and in our lives.

DAVE BAST

Yes. You just made me think of a very important point that I heard somebody say a while back. If your God cannot ever say no to you, you have got the wrong kind of God. You've got, maybe, an idol.

REGGIE SMITH

That's right.

DAVE BAST

If your god can never... All he does is reinforce what you want to do and what you want to hear, there is a problem with that picture.

REGGIE SMITH

There is a problem with that. Either he is a sugar daddy or he is something else, but he is not the real God...

DAVE BAST

Not the God we meet in the Gospels – not the Jesus we meet in the Gospels.

REGGIE SMITH

That's right.

DAVE BAST

Here is the first story that... we do want today to talk about his compassion and focus on that at the outset, and this is one of my favorite examples of that. It is actually the first miracle of Jesus as recorded in Matthew Chapter 8 verses 1 through 3. Maybe you could read that for us.

REGGIE SMITH

¹When he came down from the mountainside, large crowds followed him. ²A man with leprosy came and knelt before him and said, "Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean." ³Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man, "I am willing," he said, "Be clean." Immediately he was cured of all his leprosy. ⁴And Jesus said to him, "See that you do not tell anyone; but go, show yourself to the priest and offer the gift Moses commanded as a testimony to them."

DAVE BAST

I just love that simple story – so brief – but here is this guy, a leper, untouchable according to the Law; he comes up to Jesus and he does not have any doubt about his power to heal him, what he wonders about is his willingness; so he says, "Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean."

REGGIE SMITH

He makes himself almost vulnerable, and Jesus takes that in. He says: Yeah, I am willing to do that. And he touches him. Imagine who are all the other people who are probably watching this? I mean, how did Matthew get this story? Were there other people watching? Yes, there were; and probably with complete horror, as touching a leper is almost the worst thing that you can ever do, because now you are ceremoniously unclean; but Jesus said: He is worth it. This is why I came into the world. And he touches him and makes him whole, and I am sure that he probably shocked a lot of people who were watching this.

DAVE BAST

Yes, it is kind of divine body language, maybe. You know, it is not enough for Jesus just to say: Yes, I care about you. I am willing to do this. He has to physically reach out and put his hands on the sores and the scarred tissue of the leper. What compassion. Wow! That is the Jesus we know.

REGGIE SMITH

Right.

DAVE BAST

Or I think of another passage just in the next chapter in Matthew – in Matthew Chapter 9. He did not just have compassion for people's physical needs, he cared about their spiritual lostness, too, and Matthew says he was going about preaching and teaching and healing and he saw the great crowds and it says he had compassion on them because they were like sheep without a shepherd.

REGGIE SMITH

Yes, that Greek word, *spagchnizomai*. It is a real deep down, intestinal kind of word. In the Black community we call that *chitlins*. So, Jesus felt it deep down in that he had just an ache inside of him that said: I love these people so much that I am willing to do whatever it takes in order to bring them to God; and that is the role that he knew he had to play.

DAVE BAST

And there are plenty of other examples in the New Testament of Jesus' incredible feeling for the suffering of others. You think of some of the times he even wept or cried at human suffering.

REGGIE SMITH

Yes, right; we see this nice humanity of Jesus, in which most of us can identify with; but we also need to see this other side of Jesus, who sometimes has to get in our faces – sometimes has to wake us up – and we hope that we can see that Jesus, too, because if we do not see that Jesus, then we have kind of a caricature of Jesus, and that is really getting into some dangerous territory, don't you think?

DAVE BAST

There is just a very strong tendency for each one of us, I think, to see Jesus in the pattern of our own personality or our own likes and dislikes; so, a lot of people just want to talk about the compassionate, loving, gentle Jesus – merciful and mild – but do not forget, there are also people who are kind of hard cases, and they just want to see the angry Jesus or the fierce Jesus or the hellfire and brimstone Jesus...

REGGIE SMITH

That is right.

DAVE BAST

And, you know, shout condemnation on everyone. The challenge for us, and I think what we want to try to do in this series of programs is hold both those sides in tension. So, just ahead on *Groundwork* we will look at another side of Jesus that will add depth to our understanding, and that is the hardness that Jesus can display.

Segment 2

REGGIE SMITH

This is *Groundwork*, where we dig into the scriptures to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Reggie Smith.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast, and Reggie, we have been talking about the compassion of Jesus. I think of an old hymn we used to sing when I was a kid in church: Whiter than snow; yes, whiter than snow. Now wash me and I will be whiter than snow. But it has a line in there that goes: To those who have sought Thee, Thou never said'st "No." Now wash me and I shall be whiter than snow. But there is actually a story in the Gospels where it looks a lot like Jesus did say, "No," to somebody who was seeking him.

REGGIE SMITH

And imagine that Jesus says, “No,” to people. Isn’t that a wonderful thing?

DAVE BAST

I don’t think so.

REGGIE SMITH

I don’t think so; but this Jesus does say, “No.” And if we don’t get this Jesus who says, “No,” to us, all we have is a sugar daddy; and we really do not want a sugar daddy; what we really need is a savior, and I think that is what Jesus is really pulling us toward as we talk about this Canaanite woman and her interaction with Jesus.

DAVE BAST

You know, this is a tough one. It is not easy to explain exactly what Jesus is doing here because we have just seen how compassionate he is, how welcoming, and the whole Gospel is full of these stories. People come streaming to him and he knocks himself out to help them and heal them and welcome... “Suffer the little children to come unto me. Do not hinder them,” you know; all that side; and then we come to this story in Matthew 15, where he is now outside of the territory of Israel; he is in a gentile area, and this gentile woman – she is described as a Canaanite – comes up to him and begs him for help for her sick daughter. So, we are thinking: Hey, it’s a no-brainer, right, Jesus? A sick child and a pleading mother?

REGGIE SMITH

Take care of it, Jesus.

DAVE BAST

Yes; and this is what he does.

²⁵The woman came and knelt before him, “Lord help me,” she said. ²⁴He replied, “It is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to the dogs.” ²⁷“Yes, Lord,” she said, “but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table.” Wait a minute. Hey, did I hear that right? Did he call this woman a dog?

Reggie Smith: I think he just did. Jesus is not being politically correct right here.

DAVE BAST

So what do you think is going on?

REGGIE SMITH

I think Jesus is trying to push the envelope. He is trying to not just talk about filling her physical needs, but he is talking about her spiritual needs, and sometimes we ignore that at the peril of just looking at the surface stuff that Jesus does for us; and Jesus always, like a good surgeon, wants to go deeper into us. He wants to cut away any and everything that moves and gets in the way or is an obstacle in him being her only savior. A lot of us do not think that that should... Jesus should just be nice. Jesus should just be: Oh, I will just do this for you and go on and live your life any way you want to. Jesus knows how to get under our skin by talking to this woman, even calling her out, if you want to say that.

DAVE BAST

I don’t know, maybe he is testing how earnest she is. I like what you suggest that he wants to give her more than just the physical healing of her daughter. I mean, you know, Reggie, you are a pastor, how when people come with prayer requests. Somebody has said it is like, you know, list your body parts kind of thing, because we almost always think about who is sick and what is hurting, and you know, that is what we pray for. We all want these physical things; but Jesus knows we have a deeper need than that.

REGGIE SMITH

That is right. He knows that we have a deeper need in that we have hearts that have been broken, grudges that we hold; and Jesus does not want to just deal with our surface stuff; and a lot of us, we do not bring the actual stuff. We kind of camouflage it, we kind of dress it up, and Jesus is not fooled by that, but we like to think that he is; and he goes right for the jugular with this woman and pulls out something marvelous and beautiful, but he had to do the hard stuff in order to get to the really infected stuff.

DAVE BAST

Well, I also think of some of the other examples in the Gospels where he comes across as really hard – hardnosed. I mean, there is a chapter later on, Chapter 23, where he just blasts the scribes and Pharisees and calls them every kind of name; in fact, we are going to look at that in the next program and dig into that a little more deeply; but maybe the hardest thing of all comes in Matthew 25, where he tells this parable of the sheep and the goats.

REGGIE SMITH

Yes, and in there he is talking about splitting folks up – sheep on the one side and goats on the other side. Isn't Jesus supposed to be like Rodney King, "Can't we all get along?"

DAVE BAST

Yes, right.

REGGIE SMITH

And He does not do that. He makes distinctions, and we do not like to see Jesus make distinctions about us, but he does.

DAVE BAST

You know, I hear that and read that and I recoil from it because that is the passage where Jesus says that one day he will say to some, "Depart from me, I never knew you." Now, you want to talk hard? You want to talk hard, and he kind of leaves it that way. There is no...

REGGIE SMITH

There is no fallback.

DAVE BAST

There is no second chance, no. He does not say: Oh, I am just kidding. And I just wonder whether he is not telling us all these things and showing us this side of his character so that we do not end up among the goats, you know?

REGGIE SMITH

Right, yes. He is trying to pull us back to square one, and really pull us back to: Am I really your only savior? Am I really the one who leads your life – all areas of your life? And for him to say, "Depart from me, I did not know you," then that kind of sets us all up for: Did we really know him? Did he really know us? Yes, he did.

DAVE BAST

Yes; we think we know him because we talk to him, even; we talk about him; we go to church; we worship him. Is it possible that I might do all that stuff and still be a goat? Still be one of those that he puts on his left?

REGGIE SMITH

That's right.

DAVE BAST

And it is kind of like, I think, a doctor who finally gets real with you. He is trying to get through and he keeps talking to you gently and then a little more sternly and little sterner, and finally he says to you: You had better cut that out. You had better quit doing that or you are going to die. Period. You are going to die – I tell you, you are going to die. And that is maybe the most compassionate thing he could do in order to try to wake us up.

REGGIE SMITH

That's right. It is like a good parent who tries to warn a kid about dangerous stuff that he or she may touch and he or she has to say it so hard with emotion that kind of has a hard edge to it, but it wakes us up, and then they explain: This is why I said that. This is why I am doing it. This is why you should not touch that, because it is not good for you. I think that Jesus does that very often. We love this compassionate side of Jesus, but Jesus has this hard edge about him that he wants to bring us back – bring us back to what it means to be one of God's people; and we sometimes need that jarring to get us to wake up again.

DAVE BAST

Yes, and I think even here with this story of the Canaanite woman, he wants to do a lot more. He does heal her child. He is going to do that – he knows he is going to do that; so he is kind of playing with her here. He does not really think she is a dog, but he wants to do more for her than just that. It is not enough just to have your hurts healed physically, or even emotionally. We have spiritual need, and that is what he ultimately wants to go to; and we have a story that shows both sides – his compassion and his hardness – that we will look at in just a moment on *Groundwork*.

Segment 3

DAVE BAST

Welcome back to *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast, and joining me today as my co-host is Reggie Smith.

REGGIE SMITH

We have been digging into scripture to find out about this Jesus who has two sides to him; one that is compassionate and one that is kind of hard-edged, and now we are going to look at John 8 – kind of look at this woman's life as she is caught in adultery and see how Jesus deals with her. Listen to this:

¹Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. ²And at dawn he appeared again at the Temple courts, where all of the people gathered around him, and he sat down to teach them. ³The teachers of the Law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery. They made her stand before the group ⁴and said to Jesus, "Teacher, this woman has been caught in the act of adultery, ⁵in the Law, Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" ⁶And they were using this question as a trap in order to have the basis of accusing him. But Jesus bent down and started writing on the ground with his finger. ⁷When they kept on questioning him, he sat straight up and said to them, "If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her." ⁸And again he stooped down and wrote on the ground. ⁹At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left with the woman still standing there. ¹⁰Jesus straightened up and asked her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" ¹¹"No one, sir," she said. "Then neither do I condemn you," Jesus declared. "Go now and leave your life of sin."

DAVE BAST

That is a great story. That is so well told. Just listening to it again, it is so impressive to me; all the little details that John brings out. It was dawn, he said. Jesus had been on the Mount of Olives. He goes to teach again in the Temple courts and the people gather around him and all of a sudden here come the scribes and Pharisees dragging this woman along. They must have grabbed her out of bed or something, you know, because... and they are all irate. Talk about hard men. These are hard guys, because they do not care about the woman. They do not even care, really, about her sin. Clearly she had done it. They just want to trap Jesus. They hate him so much, and here is the... It is a clever trap because if he condemns the woman he kind of loses the good feeling of the crowd – Oh, hey, wow, you know. I thought this was a nice guy. And if he does

not condemn her, then he is breaking the Law of Moses and they've got him, you know. And then this detail...

REGGIE SMITH

That is just amazing! Jesus is standing there; he does not say anything. The woman is standing there, and now he starts writing on the ground. What did he write on the ground? Was that kind of the original Etch A Sketch? Just writing and just making doodles; but he is really just taking his time. He knows exactly what he is going to do; he knows exactly how he is going to do it; but he is just doing it maybe for dramatic purposes because he knows he has a crowd; he knows that people are listening; and then he straightens up and he says: Okay, if you have no sin, throw the first stone. Can you just hear the collective thud that just happened over the crowd? It is interesting that John begins with the older ones; the older ones get it – we don't have him. Let's just pick up our marbles and walk away. And maybe the younger ones...

DAVE BAST

Another great detail... the older ones are the first to recognize: Wow, my life is a mess, too. I better not sit here like a hypocrite and judge this sinful woman.

REGGIE SMITH

That's right.

DAVE BAST

But then we come to the punch line of this story, where Jesus looks around; they have all melted away, and he said: No one to condemn you? And she says: No, sir. And then he adds: Neither do I. But then: Go and leave your life of sin. This wonderful, compassionate but tough: I am not going to condemn you, but I am not going to say what you did was okay.

REGGIE SMITH

That is right.

DAVE BAST

Sort of love the sinner but hate the sin kind of thing. We talk about that. It is awfully hard to do, but Jesus does exactly that.

REGGIE SMITH

Jesus is such a master – such a genius of telling us about ourselves, but telling us in such a way that we get it. He tells her: Go away; sin no more. But he knows she will probably sin again, but Jesus also knows, does this woman see him as her only savior? Is he the only one who said I do not condemn you? No, I don't like the way that your lifestyle is, but here is the thing, honey: I love you; I care about you; and I care about you so much, I am going to tell you the truth about yourself. And I know I may never see you again, because John never ends the story. We do not know what happens to this woman, but Jesus does it in such a way that he holds in tension his compassion, but also his holiness; and he puts them together and he tells us in such a way that we get the truth about who we are as human beings.

DAVE BAST

Yes; and I think it is very difficult for us to try to practice this as we think about... not theoretically – not groups of people – but individuals in our own lives or people in our churches or people that we met, to actually love those people without condoning the sin that they do – to embrace them – to not condemn them, but also to say: No, that is wrong. You mustn't do that. It is extremely difficult, but I think for us, the point is ourselves. That is how God feels about us. Yes, he loves us, but he hates our sin. Do we get that? He really hates our sin while loving us. So, to me the thing to do is apply this to myself.

REGGIE SMITH

Right; and that is what we should all do. I mean, as a pastor I get all kinds of people, but I also have to be... The word is for me, too. The word is for my life; that there are very oftentimes that I don't get it that I need a savior.

DAVE BAST

Yes; and when he is hard on me maybe he is really being compassionate because he wants to be the surgeon who cuts out my sin; who does not just heal my body, but who heals me through and through so that I can ultimately belong to him.

REGGIE SMITH

That's right.

DAVE BAST

Well, thanks for joining our *Groundwork* conversation today, and don't forget that it is listeners like you asking questions and participating that keep our topics relevant to your life. So tell us what you think about what you are hearing and suggest topics or passages you would like to hear on future *Groundwork* programs. Visit us at groundworkonline.com and join the conversation.

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