

Compassion

M. W. Bassford

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Introduction.

- A. In our society, just as in any other, there is a tremendous need for compassion. There are millions in America now who are suffering from financial distress, and there are millions more who suffer from subtler ills, like isolation and friendlessness. Interestingly enough, one of the major political parties in the U.S. today is founded on the basic assumption that Americans are not naturally compassionate enough to meet those needs. In other words, that party assumes that when we see suffering that we could alleviate with our time and our resources, we will choose to do something else with them and allow the suffering to continue. That's why that party pursues a strategy that we could call forced compassion. It advocates government intervention and help in the lives of the needy, to be funded by forced taxation of those who would not otherwise help.
- B. Perhaps unsurprisingly, we see this same idea of forced compassion in the actions of many churches today. They see orphans in need and assume that individual Christians will not help those orphans, so they build orphanages. They see sick and shut-ins in the congregation and assume once again that the other members of the congregation won't help them, so they hire full-time employees to care for them and establish nursing homes. All of this, of course, is paid for by the members who wouldn't otherwise be compassionate.
- C. Now, brethren, as you know, I'm not a particularly political animal. I don't know whether Americans at large would be compassionate on their own. But I do know this: if this congregation ever reaches the point where we don't care for one another, that would be a spiritual disaster. We need to make sure that it never happens, that we love one another in deed and truth. These don't have to be big deeds. We see a small act of mercy described in Matthew 10:42. But they have to happen. Let's explore the Bible's take on compassion.

I. Defining Compassion

- A. Y'all have heard enough of these sermons by now to know where we're going to start with compassion: by defining it. One of the key Scriptural texts here is Mark 1:40-41. Notice, friends, what happens in this passage. Jesus sees a man who needs help, the man calls out to Him, and Jesus responds to the need. This wasn't the product of some intellectual debate inside the mind of our Lord. He didn't say, "Hmm; if I want to make God happy, I guess I'd better heal this leper." Jesus saw the need, and He instinctively reacted.
- B. This is the way that compassion is presented in Scripture. Its Biblical source is not the mind or the heart or even the kidneys—all things to which people of Jesus' time attributed thought. Instead, Biblical writers described compassion as coming from the bowels, an idea which our phrase "gut feeling" captures to some extent. Compassion wasn't something you reasoned your way to. It was something you felt. Compassion didn't come from a decision to act. It came from who you were. Today, then, we need to understand compassion and the closely related concept of mercy as the result of a split-second emotional reaction in us.
- C. Now, to someone from our day, that sounds like compassion is a set-in-stone characteristic. Culturally, we view our emotions as utterly beyond our control. Elvis didn't sing, "I CAN help falling in love with you." When we have that attitude toward our emotions, we naturally think that we are either compassionate or we aren't, and there's nothing we can do about it either way. However, that's not the picture that the Bible paints. Look, for instance, at the command given by Paul in Colossians 3:12. Where the text here says, "tender mercies," that's the same word in Greek as the "bowels of compassion" that we were talking about earlier. It's that instinctive gut reaction to somebody who needs help, and it is something that we are commanded to put on.
- D. In effect, the Holy Spirit is saying to us, "Not naturally compassionate right now? Tough. Get that way." God expects us to reshape our emotions so that we become better instruments of His will. This is something we accomplish through the classically Christian practice of getting outside ourselves, putting ourselves in someone else's place, and seeing the world through their eyes. Whenever we deal with another, we constantly need to ask ourselves, "What are they thinking? What are they feeling? What are they going through right now?" And then, as we figure out the answers to those questions, we learn how we should respond to them in the way they most want and need. This might be something we have to work on at first, but it soon becomes habitual.

II. Directing Compassion.

- A. Now that we know what compassion is, we need to figure out toward whom we should direct it. Jesus gives us some valuable insight into this toward the tail end of the parable of the good Samaritan, as recorded in Luke 10:36-37. In context, here's what's been going on. Jesus has told a lawyer to love his neighbor as himself. In typical weasel-word fashion, the lawyer wants to know who his neighbor is. See, folks? This whole defining-terms thing was alive and well 2000 years ago. I didn't start it. In response, Jesus tells the parable, and concludes His story with the question we see here. The point is a truly mind-bending one. Really, what the lawyer is asking isn't who his neighbor is. He wants to know who his neighbor isn't. He

wants to know whom he doesn't have to help. Jesus replies that the act of helping itself is what makes us into the neighbor of somebody else. We don't get to point to the law of God and say, "I don't have to love him. I don't have to feel compassion for him." Yes, we do, because everyone who needs help is a neighbor.

- B. This is true generally, but it is especially true in the context of 1 Peter 3:8. We have a duty to feel compassion for everyone, and that duty is heightened when it comes to Christians. When we see another Christian with some need unmet, we should react as strongly to that as if it were our own need going unfulfilled. We need to rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep, not because we think it's the right thing to do, but because that's our natural and unconsidered reaction. To us, other Christians need to be like extensions of ourselves. Sadly, sometimes things don't work that way. Sadly, sometimes our compassion unites us with one Christian and leaves us wholly unmoved by another. Brethren, that's not the way things need to be. Every person here needs to be as important as every other person, because that's how they are to Jesus.

III. Practicing Compassion.

- A. Now that we know what compassion is, and we know about our duty to be compassionate to everyone, but especially to Christians, we need to learn how to put our compassion into practice. James gives us some important insight into this in James 1:27. Specifically, James mentions orphans and widows here, but it's completely in line with the text to include anyone who needs help in this same group. This was a verse that saw a lot of talking over during the institutional controversy some 50 years ago. Some brethren maintained, and indeed still maintain, that this passage gives churches authority to build things like orphanages. That is a truly tragic interpretation. Not only is it bad logic—after all, this passage is clearly directed not to entire churches, but to individuals—but it also shifts the duty of care away from us and to the church. Here's what inevitably happens in that way of reading things. Inevitably, Christians who believe that start saying, "I don't have to help that brother or sister because I already helped. I put my check in the collection plate, and that's doing my share." Brethren, that's not what Jesus did during His time on earth, and it's not what God expects. God doesn't just want our money, He wants our lives, lives of compassion devoted to Him and His people.
- B. So, then, each one of us has an individual responsibility to be compassionate, to want to help one another and to act on that desire. Paul further defines this responsibility with his words in Romans 12:6, 8. This passage describes the showing of mercy—in other words, compassion in action—and it says that as we show mercy, we need to be cheerful about it. This is yet another attack on the illusion of loveless, emotionless Christianity. Showing mercy to one another is not just a responsibility we have. It is also a joy. It's nothing to be dreaded when we go visit so-and-so for the hundredth time. It's not an occasion for a martyred sigh when we cook a meal for someone who needs it. Instead, we need to be delighted to have the opportunity to do those things, just as we're happy to sit down to a well-cooked dinner when we're hungry, because if the needs of a brother in Christ truly matter to us as much of our own, filling those needs is as satisfying as filling our own.
- C. Finally, though, we need to practice compassion like this because it matters as much to Jesus as it does to the people we help. This is the point that Jesus makes in Matthew 25:31-40. This is a Scripture we've studied in this series already, but there are two things we need to note about it here. First of all, notice how many of the things Jesus praises are acts of mercy. Second, notice how much they matter to Jesus. This tells us that when we take an hour out of our day to visit Sister Hall or Sister Lee, or when we drop by an ailing brother in the hospital, it's just as important as if we showed mercy to the King Himself. Why would it be so important to Jesus? Simple; it's because of His own compassion. Just as Jesus is the height of every virtue, so too is He the most compassionate being imaginable. When His people hurt, He's hurting right there with them. As a result, when we meet the needs of our brethren, it's just as though we were meeting the needs of Jesus.
- D. From all this, it's obvious that we need to be compassionate, but on a day-to-day basis, we might not know how to put that command into practice. That's why our fourth service group is going to be the **COMPASSION GROUP**, and unlike all our other groups, it's going to be led by an elder, Joe Bunch. Here's how it will work:
1. **Congregation informs group leader of all hospitalizations.** Basically, if you or a family member is in the hospital, let Joe know. To be honest, I don't understand it when folks keep things like that secret.
 2. **Group leader passes on information to group members.** This will probably be a call or e-mail from Joe or his trusty secretary Nancy letting everybody know who's in where.
 3. **Group members visit the sick.** Basically, if you get the call, you go visit the brother.
 4. **Group members also visit one shut-in every two weeks.** This is just a regular visit to any shut-in.
- E. As with all the other groups, there are also **REASONS TO JOIN** this one.
1. **You prefer medium-size, medium-frequency commitments.** This one's kind of in between some of the other groups. It'll take about an hour every other week, plus hospital visits.
 2. **You have opportunity and ability to get out and visit people.** Obviously, there's a lot of time and car travel involved in this one. If you have problems with either, this group probably isn't for you.
 3. **You want to show love to some of the less conspicuous members of the congregation.** Basically, if you're concerned that everyone here be loved and treated alike, this group is for you.

Conclusion. All of this compassion pales in comparison to the compassion of Jesus, which can be yours this morning.