

“Compassion”

1 Kings 3:16-28; Philippians 1:3-9;
Matthew 9:35-37; Luke 15:11-32

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Compassion. Compassion is an interesting word. It's that idea that we actually notice what's happening with someone else, especially their distress, and we want to do something about it. Paul, in his letter to the Philippians, is suggesting that he is thinking about them with the compassion of Christ. It gives us that phrase and reminds us that as we think about who Christ was, compassion is central. It is, perhaps, that very sense of compassion, the ability to see the other in distress, is what God is all about in sending Christ to be with us, knowing our need for guidance, for forgiveness, for hope and for help.

As we begin to think about what this word means, what it is for us to have compassion, it's interesting we get this story about Solomon demonstrating his wisdom. But he's also demonstrating the compassion of a mother, the compassion to care so much for her son that even if she doesn't get him, she wants him to live.

As we look at the word “compassion” in the Old Testament, the translation can almost mean “to be in the womb.” It's a care that surrounds, and holds, and feeds. Another idea is that it's a touch. When somebody has touched our lives we recognize they might have touched our lives because of their compassion. It's that sense in the word.

The New Testament Greek has some of the same kind of intention to it, but it also is a little more focused on the experience of the one with compassion. When we say our heart goes out to someone, that's the Greek sense of the word. It's almost a visceral feeling or experience or response to the distress of another and the desire to solve that distress.

So the very first thing I feel like I hear in Christ's compassion is that the other has to enter into our lives. When Jesus was among the crowd, he didn't just look at the crowd and say, “Wow, those poor blighters. They must have done something wrong to get themselves in that situation.” He looks at them and says they are harassed and helpless. He saw them with compassion. He didn't blame them for their condition.

There's the story in Mark of Jesus going off to try to be alone. He needs to try to process that John has just died, and yet the crowd meets him, and it is by his compassion that he recognizes their condition. His disciples were going to just send them away. But Jesus' compassion changes what they do. He changes the attention from his own need to the need of the crowd because his compassion led him to do so.

Luke talks about the compassion of the father when he saw the son coming. Jesus tells the story: the father sees his son at a distance and it is the father's compassion that compels the father to run out to the son. Compassion leads us not only to notice the

other, not only to recognize the distress and the needs of others, but then to want to embrace the other, to take action. The father goes out to embrace the son.

What does it mean to embrace the other? It doesn't always mean giving a hug, although it might be a good thing a lot of the time. But there are other ways of embracing, of engaging with someone else, of finding a way to enable ourselves to help in the midst of the distress of another.

When Jesus did the healing, he was reaching out and embracing. He was doing more than saying, "I feel for you." In fact, at one point he says something along those lines. He says, "Don't just say you feel for somebody and then not do anything." It's really not compassion if you say, "Oh, I feel for you brother. I hope you get better," and just go away. It's not engaging. Jesus engaged with those who came. Not only did he let them into his life, change what he was doing, but because he could see their need and could see that they were helpless and harassed, he started giving free health care. He started healing them. He embraced them. He brought them back by touching the ones that were being shunned because they were ill. He was bringing them back in to community. It was not only a healing of the physical; it was a healing of the social. He was bringing them into a world they were alienated from into life.

It is that idea of the compassion of Christ that invites us to notice the need, the distress of others, to go beyond just focusing on our own stuff to let others in. Then to recognize that we can engage.

It was as Paul talked about the compassion of Christ, he then goes on to pray that they might have love that more and more gives them the knowledge to do what is best. The father's compassion led him immediately to act and to know what to do, to know what the best thing was. Not so with the older son. The older son feels to me so much more like the world's response: "He did something wrong. He needs to be punished." It's a retributive justice, not a restorative justice.

The older son feels so much like a world that suggests that it doesn't matter what's gone on with that boy because he's done something wrong. He can't be restored. He can't be one of us. It would be so interesting if we could recognize the role of compassion instead of punishment; the role of compassion instead of judgment. We're certainly thankful for the compassion of God that shows us grace because otherwise—judgment.

There is one other issue around compassion I want to talk a little about. Sometimes we can use our recognition that we need to be compassionate or a recognition that we want to help as a way of actually distinguishing who's good and who's not or lifting ourselves up and diminishing someone else. *They* need the help. It's *those people* that need the help. I think about a time in our lives when we had young children and we had a friend who every now and then would say, "May I watch your children?" In doing that, she was making it seem like we were doing her a favor by allowing her to watch our children. And yet, she was really showing her compassion for us. She saw that we

were harried and hassled, harassed and helpless, and that we needed help, but her way of doing it made it seem like we were doing her a favor, enabling her to show us compassion without diminishing us in the process.

Thank God we have Jesus, who is a compassionate savior that brings us that sense of God's grace, that God wants to draw us into life, not to just punish us for the mistakes we might have made, but gives us a way out of some of the decisions we've made that are problematic. He invites us into life.

So as we think about what it means to have compassion, I think we can recognize that it means we have to notice the distress of another and perhaps even the joy of another, because a joy not shared is also a lonely place. But it begins by noticing. Then it impels us to action, to desire to embrace, to surround somebody with care, and in doing that to lift each other up to find that by the grace of God, the love God gives us, we might more and more gain the knowledge and understanding we need to do what is best for one another and for our world. Amen.