

“Compassion”

Mark 6:34-44 & 54-56

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Prayer for Understanding Ever present Lord, we thank you for your word, which is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path. Holy Spirit open our eyes to your presence, open our ears to your voice and open our minds to your wisdom. Amen.

God has compassion for everyone. **Mark 6:34 & 54-56 “Jesus saw the huge crowd as he stepped from the boat. Jesus had compassion on them because they were like sheep without a shepherd. The people recognized Jesus at once, and they ran throughout the whole area, carrying sick people on mats to wherever they heard he was. Wherever Jesus went—in villages, cities, or the countryside—they brought the sick out to the marketplaces. They begged Jesus to let the sick touch at least the fringe of his robe, and all who touched Jesus were healed.”**

God has compassion for you. God cares about you. God understands you. God longs to be your friend. God knows you completely. God’s compassion connects you with God fully so that God cries when you cry, God laughs when you laugh, God hurts when you hurt, God grieves when you grieve, God rejoices when you rejoice, God celebrates when you celebrate.

God’s compassion heals. God knows exactly what you need. God will provide all you need, make you whole and glorious. God’s compassion is so immense and resurrecting that it poured out of Jesus, even a mere brush of one’s fingertip to a stray fiber on Jesus’ robe healed one completely.

Jesus’ compassion is more than thinking and emotions. Jesus’ compassion is a connection with each person, a weaving together of two persons into one, enabling God to fully feel what we are feeling. Jesus’ compassion is a diagnostic for one’s soul that pinpoints exactly what each person needs and provides that need. Jesus’ compassion delivers the unique needs of each person.

Theologian Douglas John Hall said: “Compassion is the center of our faith. Compassion is the essence of God who has created us and before whom life is lived. Primitive and modern religion regard God as “ominous, wrathful, angry, vindictive. God is none of that. God is moved by human need and reaches down to deal with our needs. God is compassion.”

God’s compassion is eternal, healing, resurrecting, and unique for each person. Pastor John Buchanan preached: “This idea that God is compassionate is so far-reaching, so radical, that people struggle with it, doubt it, compromise it, attach conditions to it, and in the worst case turn it upside down and come out with the opposite: a God who issues commandments, becomes angry when disobeyed, and appoints representatives to be God’s prosecuting attorneys, judge, jury, and punisher. Every religion, our own included, has its radical fringe that not only ignores this central notion of a compassionate God but preaches an exclusivist doctrine that cannot tolerate the other and manages somehow to transform compassion into hatred.”

Karen Armstrong in her book, *The Great Transformation* wrote: “Our only hope as a civilization is to return to the depths of wisdom: a God of compassion expressed in politics, economics, public policy—all with compassion at its center.” Imagine life with all people being compassionate. Imagine the transformation that is coming when compassion is the center of economics, public policy, religion, and politics.

When everything seems to be falling apart, when life takes an unexpected turn...The job you have counted on to provide for your future comes to an end. It is healing to know God knows, cares and ultimately will heal you. The tests come back, the news is bad, your health is waning. God knows, cares, is with you and ultimately will heal you. A meaningful relationship suddenly changes. It is healing to realize God has compassion for you. Grief overwhelms you making life arduous. God is compassionately carrying you. You hear news that is fearful, divisive, or violent. God’s compassion will get you through the valley to green pastures.

Compassion is the healing force of God. All who touched the fringe of Jesus’ cloak were healed. The disciples learned compassion from Jesus. Our scripture is assuring us that God has compassion for us. Our scripture is urging us to expand, develop, and nurture our compassion for others, urging us to consider how we are being called to love through the impulses to care, know, and heal, that are bubbling up in us, urging us to embody God’s compassion for everyone.

Mark 6:34-44 NLT “Jesus saw the huge crowd as he stepped from the boat. Jesus had compassion on them because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So Jesus began teaching them many things. Late in the

afternoon his disciples came to him and said, “This is a remote place, and it’s already getting late. Send the crowds away so they can go to the nearby farms and villages and buy something to eat.” But Jesus said, “You feed them.” “With what?” they asked. “We would have to work for months to earn enough money to buy food for all these people!” “How much bread do you have?” Jesus asked. “Go and find out.” They came back and reported, “We have five loaves of bread and two fish.” Then Jesus told the disciples to have the people sit down in groups on the green grass. So they sat down in groups of fifty or a hundred. Jesus took the five loaves and two fish, looked up toward heaven, and blessed them. Then, breaking the loaves into pieces, he kept giving the bread to the disciples so they could distribute it to the people. Jesus also divided the fish for everyone to share. They all ate as much as they wanted, and afterward, the disciples picked up twelve baskets of leftover bread and fish. A total of 5,000 men and their families were fed.”

Like the disciples we are being called to grow our compassion. The disciples had a little compassion when they recognize the crowd was hungry. Sadly, this compassion was mostly indifferent for they wanted Jesus to meet their needs. In essence, Jesus responded to have more compassion. Do something about their needs. Check your resources. Recruit others to help. Pool your resources and share. Grow your compassion to loving action.

The Golden Rule, “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you,” lacks compassion. I have learned time after time that treating others like I want to be treated is often not helpful and sometimes is hurtful. A compassionate rule is “Do unto others as they want to be treated.”

Steve Dean wrote: “The Golden Rule is fatally flawed because it requires no compassion whatsoever. You only need to think about how you want to be treated, and then do the same. You do not need to consider someone else’s perspective at all. Consequently, the Golden Rule fails to acknowledge in order to connect with and understand others, we need to escape our own egos. People face radically different day to day experiences. We need to humbly seek out others’ unique perspectives and strive to see the world through their eyes. The Golden Rule offers no such guidance. Intuiting from our own singular perspectives will never give us true insights into the lives of others. Insight requires compassion. Interestingly, catcallers and street harassers may be following the Golden Rule. They think, ‘I’d like others to tell me that I look attractive, so I should do the same unto them by telling them that they look attractive.’ Thinking only about how you would want things to happen is a terrible way to assess what is good for others. It is far more important to learn what they want for themselves. This requires us to exhibit humility and open a space for them to share their perspective. It requires us to respectfully acknowledge the validity of their lived experience. It requires us to seek additional perspective from their friends as well as others who may experience similar day to day experiences. Obviously, not everyone goes around explicitly informing us what they want, so there is a lot that is left to our own intuition. Compassion enables us to understand what life looks more fully like from a multiplicity of viewpoints, and more capably respond to each individual’s unique needs. Compassion helps us escape our own perspective, so we are able to see the needs of others.”

I have had numerous conversations with people who have been hurt by family and friends who are treating them like they want to be treated and saying things that helps them but is hurtful for this person. I encourage them to be honest, to bluntly say, “I am grateful that you are trying to help, however treating me as you want to be treated is not helping me, it is not what I need.” Or saying, “that saying is not helpful for me.” Hopefully, that person then has enough compassion to listen, hear, and comprehend these words and then ask what the person needs, listens to their answer, does what they need, keeps asking what they need, and providing what they need as everyone’s needs are constantly changing.

Deeper compassion goes on journeys with a person to discover together what they need. Often, we do not know what we need. Often, we struggle to adequately communicate what we need. Compassion is asking questions, listening, and discovering together what someone needs and then providing that need. Compassion is loving again and again and again until one can provide a perfect fit for one’s needs.

God’s compassion created us, knows us completely, and provides precisely what we need. God’s compassion values us so much that God does not force us to be like anyone else. God’s compassion brings out our true colors so humanity can be woven into a glorious colorful tapestry. God’s compassion brings out our true sound so humanity can produce a wonderful harmonious symphony.

Nicholas Wolterstorff in *Lament for a Son* wrote about his need for compassion stating: “What I need to hear from you is that you recognize how painful it is. I need to hear from you that you are with me in my desperation.”

Pastor Carol Allen recalls a time when she desperately needed compassion. “I remember one particular time in my life when I was skeptical about God’s presence and power. I decided to go where I thought people were suffering the most. If I did not find God there, I could conclude that God did not exist. I went to a shelter for homeless families, and I asked the children there about God. “Is God here?” I asked, and “How do you know?” Kids put their hands on their hips, shook their heads, and looked at me like I was crazy. “You don’t know?” they said. “Tell me,” Pastor Carol

said. I remember especially the reply of one 9-year-old boy. "Well, it's like this," he said. "God came into my mother's mind before I was born and came into me through her umbilical cord. I learned to read. I can run and I can help people. That is how I know God is here!" I also learned that the children felt safe and appreciated in this particular shelter. Many of them still maintained a tough resiliency, a hope for their future. The children in that shelter took me seriously and witnessed to the faith that had been placed within them. I saw God's compassion in their faces and in the faces of the staff who cared for them and their parents, and I came back to the church renewed, ready to join others in helping the church be compassionate, the kind of saving place in the world that the homeless shelter had been for me."

Whenever one is indifferent to another, they are betraying the image of God within themselves. Indifference for another is hostility for oneself, for indifference suppresses the compassion of God that is actively striving to permeate our being and overflow from us so a mere fleeting encounter with us heals them with God's compassion.

How you think, your conversations, affects your emotions, your compassion. Psychologist Michelle Shiota explains how research has found that our emotions are malleable and that our thinking can influence our emotions.

Neuroscientist Anil Seth explains, "Say for example, you are walking in the woods, and you see a grizzly bear. It once was thought the emotion comes first. You see a bear. You feel afraid. Because you are afraid, your adrenaline levels rise. Your heart rate rises. Your breath quickens. Your pupils dilate. And blood rushes to your skeletal muscles. The old theory was that fear sets in train all kinds of flight and fight responses so that you are well-prepared to run away and live another day. In other words, the emotion triggers the physiological responses. But according to the latest research, the human body probably works the other way around. The brain registers a grizzly bear, and that perception sets in train all the physiological responses. The emotion follows the response of the brain. The brain decides which emotion to conjure up. If you have observed media on bear attacks, know someone who was attacked by a bear and talk about how dangerous bears are, then your thoughts will produce fear when you see a bear. If you have observed media on the proper way to observe a bear in the wild, know people who have safely encountered bears and talk about the wonder of seeing a bear then your thoughts will produce excitement when you see a bear.

Our thoughts and conversations effect our compassion. Our brain uses memories from the past to make sense of the immediate future, which then becomes our present. Anyone can expand their compassion by altering the news they consume, their thoughts and conversations. If one consumes fearful news, engages in negative conversations, and thinks about terrible outcomes, then when they encounter anyone associated with these perceptions, emotions of fear, anger, and hate will flood their being. If one consumes hopeful news, engages in positive conversations, and thinks about good outcomes, then when they encounter others' emotions of compassion, love, and joy will flood their being.

Jesus was training the disciples to expand their compassion. Jesus modeled compassion. Jesus taught forgiveness, love, community, resurrection, and goodness. Jesus listened. Jesus knew exactly what each person needed and provided that unique need for them. When the crowd was hungry Jesus invited the disciples to grow their compassion by feeding the crowd together. God is eager for all of us to expand our compassion. Together let us strive overflow with compassion so a mere fleeting encounter with another heals with God's compassion. Amen