

Compassion and Evangelism

M. W. Bassford, 3-7-10

In our recent study of Mark in the adult Bible class, we came across a short little story of Jesus' interaction with a leper that gives us tremendous insight into the character of our Lord. We see this account in Mark 1:40-42. My favorite thing about this encounter has always been its description of the motivation of Jesus. He healed the leper because He was moved with compassion. In other words, just as soon as the man begged for His help, Jesus felt a deep, emotional sympathy for him in his plight, and a yearning to help him. That compassion was one of the hallmarks of Jesus.

In fact, as we look at Scripture, from beginning to end, compassion is a trait that is almost always associated with God. Jesus attributes it to a couple of the characters in His parables, but other than that, in real live action, it's almost exclusively the province of the Father and the Son. In this, perhaps the Bible is making a backhanded comment on the way that the human race tends to lack compassion. We're not necessarily very good at putting ourselves in someone else's shoes, feeling their problems and woes as strongly as they do, and yearning to help them.

Of course, simply because we're disciples of Jesus, this kind of compassion is something that we struggle to work on, but all of us have a long way to go before we reach the compassion of our Lord, and nowhere is this more evident than in our difficulties with evangelism. Many Christians aren't good evangelists precisely because they don't have sympathy for sinners. Let's check ourselves in this. Let's say that one Monday morning, a co-worker comes in with a hangdog expression. He tells us that over the weekend, he got drunk, got into it with his wife, and she threw him out of the house. What's our first response? Do we feel sorry for him and look for ways to help him, or do we think to ourselves, "Serves you right, you idiot drunk!?" Let's think about this as we consider compassion and evangelism.

Jesus' Compassion.

So that we can understand just what we're talking about, let's look at what the Bible has to say about the breadth of the compassion of Jesus. First, Jesus clearly felt compassion toward **THE HUNGRY**. Consider the evidence of Matthew 15:32. In this case, the multitudes were in a predicament of their own making. Jesus had never invited them to accompany Him to the top of this mountain in the middle of nowhere. However, they came anyway and stayed with him for three days, even though they hadn't brought provisions along for themselves. Jesus had no obligation to provide for them, but He chose to do so anyway because He had sympathy for them in their plight. We can learn from Jesus' behavior here as we consider the hungry of our own time. Certainly, we've all seen homeless people who could work but choose to cynically take advantage of the charity of others. The Bible tells us that if such a man will not work, neither should he eat. However, there's another group of needy out there, people who have repeatedly made bad decisions and now are suffering for it. Those are people that we should help, because Jesus was compassionate to them too.

Jesus was also compassionate toward **THE MOURNING**. We see this in Luke 7:12-13. Here, Jesus has just come to the gates of the city of Nain, when he encounters a funeral procession headed the other way. Jesus soon sees that a widow has lost her only son, and even though He hadn't planned to, He resolves that He's going to raise the young man from the dead. Why? Because He was moved by His compassion. None of us have the power to restore life to the dead, but whenever we see those who have lost a loved one, we should also feel compassion for them and act to help, whether they are inside or outside the church. Even something as simple as a sympathy card can be a huge help.

Likewise, Jesus also remembered **THE SICK**. Look at His behavior in Matthew 14:13-14. Once again, we have another illustration of Jesus as the reluctant celebrity. He continues to be pursued by crowds who want Him to help them, but rather than being offended by their harassment, Jesus feels their woes as strongly as they do and heals their sick. He had to have known that this would make His crowd control problem even worse. However, apparently He didn't care. What mattered to Him was not the convenience of His lifestyle. What mattered was helping others.

In this, we too need to share the mind of Christ. We need to be willing to help the sick around us, whoever they may be. We can't heal them like Christ did, but we can bless their lives with His love. Let's say that we know the mom next door is in the hospital for gall bladder surgery. We can prepare a meal so that Dad and the kids can eat. We can offer to babysit the rugrats so that Dad can have a longer, uninterrupted visit with his wife. We can offer to mow the lawn. When we are given opportunity to be compassionate, the ways we can help are only limited by our love.

Jesus extended His help not just to the sick, but to **THE BLIND**. Among other places, this appears in Matthew 20:33-34. Once again, these were not men whom Jesus was expecting to heal. They weren't on the divine itinerary. However, they cried out for help, and Jesus gave them their sight, because He wasn't a man who could turn away from those in need. Around us, there are certainly those who suffer from permanent disabilities, whether blindness or something else. We can't end those disabilities like Jesus could, but we can still help the disabled. As we are given opportunity, we should always seek to do for them the things they can't do for themselves as part of discipleship.

Now, if you were wondering what the evangelism component of this lesson was, here it is. Just like Jesus had compassion for all of those with physical problems, He also had compassion on **THE LOST**. We see this plainly in Matthew 9:36-38. This is yet another case where Jesus is ambushed by those in need and is moved with compassion for them. It wasn't enough for Jesus just to teach these weary sheep without a shepherd. He asked the disciples to pray for other shepherds too, so that as many of these lost souls as possible could be returned safely to the fold of God.

The key point here is just how similar Jesus' reaction to the lost was to His reactions to those with physical needs. He saw people who needed help, and He helped them, whether with miracles of healing or words of divine wisdom. These weren't two different playing fields to Him. They were essentially the same thing, because both gave Him opportunity to express His love for others. That's how it has to be for us. There are plenty of Christians out there who would cross the street to avoid helping an outsider, but then wonder why they're so bad at evangelism. The reason is because in real life, they don't care about non-Christians in ANY way. They are not motivated by compassion for others, period, and it's evident to those whom they try to teach. If we want to be good at bringing in the lost, our evangelism has to be of a piece with the rest of our lives. It has to be only the most important expression of a life of compassion.

Our Compassion.

The Scripture is filled with compelling reasons why this compassion for the lost should be in us. First, we should be compassionate **AS SINNERS** who were once lost ourselves. Let's think about Paul's thumbnail sketch of what it's like to be lost in Ephesians 2:12. In recent days, the news has been filled with pictures from the devastation in Haiti. When we see those pictures of gruesome injuries and horrible destruction, it makes our hearts wrench. Brethren, compared to all those earthquake victims, the lost are actually worse off. All of the blessings that we know in Christ, all the joys we share in as Christians, are things that they don't have. Worse, after a miserable life here, they're headed for eternal torment. We all know what it's like to have been in that same wretched state. They're there right now, and will remain there unless we do something. How can we consider that and not be moved by our compassion?

We should also be compassionate to sinners **AS GOD'S CHOSEN**. Paul outlines the cause-effect relationship here in Colossians 3:12. Think about it like this: when an apartment building catches on fire and all the occupants are running out, firefighters run in. Why? Because they have been chosen to help and trained to help in a way that no one else can. Because if they don't do it, nobody will. Brethren, we are spiritual firefighters. We are members of the church that God has chosen to bear His light to the nations, we are equipped for His service by His word, and nobody but us can do the work that we have been called to do. If we don't do our jobs, people die, and they die eternally. If that sounds like a tremendous weight for us to bear, well, it is, but that's what it means for us to be part of God's chosen.

Compassion is also a part of our calling **AS DISCIPLES**. We are people who have chosen to dedicate ourselves to imitating Jesus. The actions of our Lord right now are described in Hebrews 4:15-16. There's no such thing as a pretty sin. There's no such thing as a smart sin. If we were in Jesus' place, as sinless as He is, all of us would probably get sick of Christians' continual sin problems. However, Jesus isn't like that. He sympathizes with our weaknesses because He remembers what it was like to be tempted. He gives us grace and mercy whenever we seek it. In a word, He is compassionate toward us. As Jesus Himself says in John, we will never be greater than our Teacher. We can only work to become like Him, and as we've seen, one of the central elements of Jesus' character was compassion toward sinners. Whether we knew it or not, when we made that commitment to follow Him, we also made a commitment to learn His compassion. We need to learn to share His sympathy toward sinners. Like Him, we need to offer grace and mercy to everyone. It is true that some Christians are going to be better at this than others. Some people are spiritually gifted at being compassionate. However, even if we aren't among those gifted, and I certainly am not, we have to work on it. We have to work on loving and helping the lost, because that's what it means to follow in the footsteps of Jesus.

We should also learn compassion **AS THE SPIRITUALLY WISE**. James presents the attributes of spiritual wisdom in James 3:17-18. If we possess this wisdom from above, it will give us a long-term perspective on what is really happening spiritually. We will be able to look at the sinner and see a tormented soul at war with God, a war that can lead to only one conclusion. With a gentle and merciful heart, we will look to make peace, peace with God and with His people. We will recognize that we can't make peace by riding in on our high horses and insulting sinners. Instead, we'll have to work with them patiently, honestly, always keeping the long-term goal in mind, always keeping both our speech and our lives pure. If we sow that seed, then peace will be the result. That's the compassion we learn from wisdom.

Finally, we should show mercy and compassion **AS PEOPLE TO BE JUDGED**. James reminds us of this in James 2:13. Simply because we are Christians, simply because we know the truth, all of us are exposed to the terrible temptation to trust in our own righteousness, to think that really, we're pretty good. Not so. On the day of judgment, we have one hope, and one hope only: the compassion and mercy of God. However, God warns us that unless we are compassionate and merciful to others, He will not extend His compassion and mercy to us. Let's remember that as we encounter sinners, and look to be merciful to them. The soul we save with our compassion may be our own.