

Compassion, the Folly of the Weak?
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Matthew 9:9-13 New American Standard Bible (NASB)

As Jesus went on from there, He saw a man called Matthew, sitting in the tax collector's booth; and He *said to him, "Follow Me!" And he got up and followed Him.

Then it happened that as Jesus was reclining at the table in the house, behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and were dining with Jesus and His disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they said to His disciples, "Why is your Teacher eating with the tax collectors and sinners?" But when Jesus heard this, He said, "It is not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick. But go and learn what this means: 'I desire compassion, and not sacrifice,' for I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners."

Her name was Margaret

We were in the middle of a Bible Study when suddenly a man appeared at our classroom door.

Since we were in the middle of a Bible Study and I was the teacher --- I have to admit that I decidedly did not show compassion.

After the man left --- Margaret turned to me and said four words that have stuck with me for close to twenty years --- HOW DO YOU KNOW?

What of course she was saying was: How do I know that wasn't Jesus that I had just turned away?

The Dalai Lama says: "On this planet, over the last three thousand years, different religious traditions developed. All these traditions carry the same message: the message of love. So the purpose of these different traditions is to promote and strengthen the value of love, compassion. So different medicine, but same aim: to cure our pain, our illness. As we mentioned, even scientists now say basic human nature is compassionate."

Did you hear that?

To me that is a powerful and profound statement ---- "scientists now say basic human nature is compassionate."

I hear those words and wonder ---- is that really true? Is our basic instinct to care and connect with others?

When I turn on the TV or open the newspaper that is not what I see.

I see violence and hatred and anger

What exactly is compassion?

In his book: *A Fearless Heart: How the Courage to Be Compassionate Can Transform Our Lives*, Thupten Jinpa offers this definition.

"Compassion is a sense of concern that arises when we are confronted with another's suffering and feel motivated to see that suffering relieved."

"Compassion is what connects the feeling of empathy to acts of kindness, generosity, and other expressions of altruistic tendencies."

When you open up the stories about Jesus you should be struck by one thing --- whenever Jesus encountered somebody his attitude was one of compassion toward them.

In the first chapter of Mark's Gospel Jesus encounters a man with leprosy and we are told that he healed him because he was moved with compassion.

The Sermon on the Mount is an attempt by Jesus to get us to change the way that we view the world --- to change our attitudes into attitudes like his.

An attitude of love and compassion

The Gospels are filled with story after story of Jesus compassion

There is of course the story of the prodigal son
or the feeding of the 4000

or the ten lepers

or the woman caught in adultery

or the Good Samaritan

Do I need to go on? Because of course I could

But two stories really grabbed at me this week.

They are both found in the ninth chapter of Matthew's Gospel. Actually the whole chapter is so typical in that it is example after example of the compassion of Jesus.

The chapter opens with Jesus crossing the Sea of Galilee and returning to Capernaum.

While there a paralyzed man is brought to Jesus and an interesting exchange takes place.

Seeing the paralyzed man Jesus says to him: "Your sins are forgiven"

Some in the crowd didn't like what he said and Jesus says to them:

"Why are you thinking evil in your hearts? Which is easier, to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up, and walk'? But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins"—then He said to the paralytic, "Get up, pick up your bed and go home."

He then sees Matthew --- a tax collector at work and he invites him to follow him.

And our story this morning takes place in which Jesus is attacked for hanging around with sinners.

And he tells us very clearly what his ministry is all about.

'I DESIRE COMPASSION, AND NOT SACRIFICE,' for I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners."

Jesus states clearly that he isn't into legalism or judgment --- he wants his followers to live a life of compassion.

He then shares the parable of the wineskins --- calling us to be creative and adaptive to the world we live in.

Then we have a story about a synagogue official whose daughter died --- and Jesus heads off to his house.

Along the way Jesus encounters a woman who has been bleeding for twelve years and he heals her. Her bleeding made her unclean and thus should not have had an encounter with Jesus or any pious Jew --- but he had compassion toward her.

Jesus comes to the official's house and is told the daughter is dead --- but he brings her back to life.

Then Jesus encounters two blind men and he touches their eyes and restores their sight.

Then Jesus meets a demon possessed man and he cast the demon out.

All because he had compassion for them

I am tired already!

And, if that wasn't enough Matthew then tells us:

Jesus was going through all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every kind of disease and every kind of sickness.

Seeing the people, He felt compassion for them, because they were distressed and dispirited like sheep without a shepherd. Then Jesus said to His disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Therefore beseech the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into His harvest."

This is just one chapter in the Gospel of Matthew --- every action of Jesus is one of compassion towards those that he met.

I think something else is important here that I want to come back to in a moment.

Even the early followers of Jesus understood that at the core of their being they were to be people of compassion

In the letter to the Colossians, Paul explains what qualities we are to have as disciples of Christ.

I love the way that Eugene Peterson translates this in the Message (Col 3:11-14)

Every item of your new way of life is custom-made by the Creator, with his label on it. All the old fashions are now obsolete. Words like Jewish and non-Jewish, religious and irreligious, insider and outsider, uncivilized and uncouth, slave and free, mean nothing. From now on everyone is defined by Christ, everyone is included in Christ.

So, chosen by God for this new life of love, dress in the wardrobe God picked out for you: compassion, kindness, humility, quiet strength, discipline. Be even-tempered, content with second place, quick to forgive an offense. Forgive as quickly and completely as the Master forgave you. And regardless of what else you put on, wear love. It's your basic, all-purpose garment. Never be without it.

To be a follower of Jesus means that we are to be clothed in compassion.

That is the way Jesus lived --- that is the way he wants us to live.

But how do we do that --- How do we live a life clothed in compassion?

Compassion isn't easy. But going back to the opening statement made by the Dalai Lama, science does suggest that it is innate.

James Doty writes:

Stephanie Brown, professor at SUNY Stony Brook University and the University of Michigan, has shown that the act of experiencing compassion and helping others actually leads to tremendous mental and physical well-being for us as well. While survival of the fittest may lead to short-term gain, research clearly shows it is survival of the kindest that leads to the long-term survival of a species. It is our ability to stand together as a group, to support each other, to help each other, to communicate for mutual understanding, and to cooperate, that has taken our species this far. Compassion is an instinct. Recent research shows that even animals such as rats and monkeys will go through tremendous effort and cost to help out another of its species who is suffering. We human beings are even more instinctually compassionate; our brains are wired for compassion.

The problem is --- even though we are wired for compassion --- we have also learned to turn away from opportunities to be compassionate.

Desmond Tutu writes: "Our human nature has been distorted."

We fear compassion because we're afraid of experiencing the suffering, the vulnerability, and the helplessness that can come with having an open heart.

Psychologist Paul Gilbert suggests that many people are afraid that if they are compassionate they will be taken advantage of, that others will become dependent on them, and that they won't be able to handle others' distress.

So we rationalize and justify and often turn the other direction

At the Gathering of Men's retreat this weekend we looked at how Meridian Street is engaged in acts of compassion and how we can make a kingdom difference in the name of Jesus --- but the question was raised --- how do we make an impact without becoming overwhelmed by all the need?

The Princeton philosopher Peter Singer has a great example of this.

He talks about somebody who's walking past some water and sees a child drowning. And this person happens to be in very fancy clothes - let's say an Armani suit or some very expensive shoes. And the question is, if you're the only one there and the only one capable of saving the child and there's no time to spare, should you, in fact, ruin your suit, should you ruin your shoes and save the life? Let's say that you would lose \$200 doing that. And almost everybody would say, of course, the child's life is worth more than the \$200.

And then Peter Singer turns around and says, well, what if we could demonstrate that there's a child's life halfway around the world and that \$200 would be sufficient to save that life? Why aren't you spending the \$200?

And of course, lots of us don't.

The child in the pond who's drowning feels very real to us and feels like our responsibility in ways that the child halfway around the world or even two miles away does not.

I want to go back to that passage from Matthew's Gospel for a moment.

Jesus was going through all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every kind of disease and every kind of sickness.

Seeing the people, He felt compassion for them, because they were distressed and dispirited like sheep without a shepherd. Then Jesus said to His disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Therefore beseech the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into His harvest."

Did you hear what Jesus says to us?

He has compassion on the people because they didn't have anyone who was willing to lead them and they he says to his disciples (he says to us --- his disciples)

"The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest."

Jesus demonstration of compassion becomes an invitation to you and me to become people of compassion.

Compassion is the center of who Jesus is --- and thus it is to be at the core of who you and I are to be.

Rodney Stark, a religious sociologist wrote the book: *The Triumph of Christianity*. In it he asks a rather basic question from a historical sociological perspective: How did Jesus change the world?

He argues that what separates Jesus from the ancient world was his revolutionary emphasis on compassion and mercy.

Stark writes:

In the midst of the squalor, misery, illness, and anonymity of ancient cities, Christianity provided an island of mercy and security It started with Jesus

In contrast, in the pagan world, and especially among the philosophers, mercy was regarded as a character defect and pity as a pathological emotion: because mercy involves providing unearned help or relief, it is contrary to justice

[Thus] humans must learn "to curb the impulse [to show mercy]"; "the cry of the undeserving for mercy" must go "unanswered."

"[Showing mercy] was a defect of character unworthy of the wise and excusable only in those who have not yet grown up." This was the moral climate in which Christianity taught that ... a merciful and compassionate God requires humans to be merciful and compassionate.

Compassion is to be at our core.

So let me end with a little challenge.

I came across a wonderful podcast from NPR on compassion. And at the end of the show, Shankar Vedantam invites his audience --- and I am inviting you to do the same.

He asks:

What would you do if you had to spend one day beaming compassion into the world? It could be something small - acknowledging a stranger. It could be something big - changing the direction of another person's life.

Give it a try --- and beam compassion and let me know what you experience.