

Shaped by Compassion

Reflecting the Father's Glory

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Over the years, I've had the privilege of walking alongside many people and hearing their stories. There have been lots of beautiful stories. But also a lot of hardship and pain. Stories of pain: bullying, neglect, coercive control and abuse. Stories of shame: drinking and porn addictions, promiscuity and abortion. So many people dealing with worlds of pain.

Do you know what happens when you experience a lot of pain? You get bent out of shape trying to avoid any more pain. You try to get a handle on it and deal with it in the best way. But often you do it all wrong. And it just leads to more pain. Do you know one of the most precious things if you're in that space? It's being able to talk to someone. Someone who has compassion.

They're not quick to talk about it. You have to be present. You have to care. You have to be trustworthy. You have to be willing to face the pain with them. But if you are in that space, they will share with you what's really going on in their hearts. It's a beautiful thing. They are able to begin processing some of the things that have happened to them.

If you are compassionate then they are able to be open about the really hard things: the guilt and the shameful things that they have also done.

If you are compassionate, it's a profound gift. It reflects something of the Father's glory.

WHAT IS COMPASSION?

The Bible tells us that compassion is one of the most foundational character traits of God. When Moses wanted to see God, the LORD told him that was impossible. But he passed by in front of him and revealed his character to Moses. Do you know the very first thing he said about himself? In Exodus 34:6-7 the Lord says, "*The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.*"

The very first attribute the LORD highlights about himself is that he is merciful, or as you can also translate it, compassionate. So what does it mean to be compassionate? Our English word compassion comes from Latin. *Com* means with and *passion* refers to pathos or suffering. So literally it means that you come along with someone in their suffering.

In the Old Testament, the most common word for compassion has as root the word *raham* meaning womb. Having compassion means that you have a womb like tenderness for another. It refers to the protective, nurturing compassion that a woman has for her infant. It's not just a cold pity. It's a warm, familial affection where you care about someone and you act on that.

GOD'S COMPASSION

The LORD is a God who is compassionate. In Psalm 103 David talks about God's patience with us. "*As a father shows compassion to his children, so the LORD shows compassion to those who fear him. For he knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust.*" The LORD is a good Father who has compassion on us. That means, he stands alongside of us in our suffering. He doesn't expect more of us than we are capable of giving or doing. He remembers our dusty nature and he cares deeply for us in the midst of our pain and weaknesses, our vulnerabilities and limitations.

How often don't we read of that in the Psalms? Let me use one example. David is in distress. Psalm 34:6-8, *"This poor man cried, and the LORD heard him and saved him out of all his troubles. The angel of the LORD encamps around those who fear him, and delivers them. Oh, taste and see that the LORD is good! Blessed is the man who takes refuge in him!"*

The heart of being compassionate is that you listen to someone. You enter with them in their suffering. God does that for us. He knows. He enters into our suffering. He has done so most profoundly in Christ who came down as a human being so that he could enter our suffering and help us with that (Hebrews 4). The LORD is not a distant God, looking down from heaven on your suffering. He knows exactly what it's like. He's been there. And so you can open up to him and pour out your heart to him. I'm not sure how often you've done that, but it's one of the most profound experiences of life.

OUR NEED FOR COMPASSION

Sometimes I make a mess of my life. I fill my head reading up about Trump's latest shenanigans and the impact that has on politics and world markets. I get lost reading about all that stuff. And then on top of that, I do all my normal work, and my head is full. Too full. A day later, I get a smashing headache. I think to myself: what an idiot. And then I go to my Father, and I confess my sin and ask for his grace. Please be merciful to me. Please help. Show compassion. I call to mind Psalm 103. LORD, you know my dusty nature. You care.

It's interesting to note that God's compassion is often combined with his grace. With the fact that he is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. Compassion often reaches expression in loving someone, being slow to anger and being willing to forgive them. In Psalm 103, a few verses earlier, David reflects on that. He knows that very well from personal experience. You remember the story, 1 Chronicles 21. David is all proud and he numbers the people. The LORD says: now I have to punish you. You pick: three years of famine, three months of your enemies chasing you. Three days of my angel bringing a plague on you. David says: Lord, I don't really care what it is as long as it's you and not people. Your mercy is very great. And that's what happens. After the angel of the LORD has spent a few days destroying people, God can't handle it anymore. Stop! You have to stop. Don't destroy Jerusalem.

Now it's possible that you struggle with this. You might think to yourself that if you show compassion to your kids then you are not going to help them. You need to show leadership. Set the context. Be strict. Hold them to account. Otherwise, they are never going to learn. And it is true on one level that you have to hold them to account. Set high expectations for them. Call them to live up to that. But along with those high expectations, you also need to give them high nurture. The only way we can meet up to the expectations is if we are supported. And what stands at the heart of that support? It's compassion.

We can learn from the LORD in this. The LORD is a holy God. Totally set apart from sin. He teaches us his law and expects us to obey it. But then along with that he gives us very high nurture. He gives us his Holy Spirit who enables us to be holy. He is also very compassionate and merciful. He knows our weakness and is willing to forgive us.

It is true that there is a point at which the LORD will no longer be compassionate. He does teach us to not be compassionate any longer. But that's a very long way down the road. In Deuteronomy 7:16 he told Moses that when they took over the promised land they were to destroy the people who were living there. *"Your eye shall not pity them, neither shall you serve their gods, for that would be a snare to you."* These people had given themselves over to the worshiping false gods, sacrificing their children in the fire, committing incest and every manner of inappropriate sexual relationship.

God told Joshua. Wipe them out. Show them no mercy. The LORD actually teaches his people something similar if someone hates his neighbour and deliberately murders him. Deuteronomy 19:13, *"Your eye shall not pity him, but you shall purge the guilt of innocent blood from Israel, so that it may be well with you."* So it's true that there is a time when someone stands beyond compassion. But that's very far down the road.

But you know, even when God's people get to that point, it's the hardest thing in the world for the LORD not to be compassionate. He can't do it. At least not for long. Hosea 1:6 God tells Hosea to call his daughter Lo-Ruhamah. Literally No Compassion or No Mercy. And his son: Not My People. God's saying: You are not my people and I am not going to show you mercy. But then at the end of the Hosea 2 God says that he will again restore his people. *"And I will have mercy on No Mercy, and I will say to Not My People, You are my people"; and he shall say, 'You are my God.'"* The LORD is a compassionate God. He will restore his children once again. It's the gift he's given in Christ.

HOW TO SHOW COMPASSION

So what does it mean in real life, brothers? In Colossians 3, after telling us to be renewed in the image of God, the first thing we are told is to put on compassionate hearts. The LORD calls us to reflect his character. Pain always bends us out of shape in some way. When you meet someone who is bent out of shape, then it is really easy to look down on them in judgement. Why are they doing that? That's so dumb. That's not right. Or you tell your kids: *"Get over it. It's nothing. Quit complaining. Don't think about it so much."* You know, you can do that. But it's the opposite of showing compassion.

Having compassion means that you enter into the suffering with them. It starts by being a good listener. That's hard. You have to care. You have to show interest, take the time, and put in the energy if you really want to listen. And then if you show yourself to be trustworthy and people open up about the real experiences of their lives then being compassionate means that you have mercy on them. It means that you recognise that your wife is not you. Things may be hard for her in a way that they're not for you. You have patience with that. You take into account her weakness, limitations and you explore together with him what it would look like for him to respond in faith in this situation.

God calls you to be compassionate, just as he calls others to show compassion to you. Is that you, brothers? Are you a compassionate person? Have you experienced a lot of compassion in your life? To make it personal: Was your father a compassionate man? Did he understand you? Take the time to know you and walk with you through the hard things in life?

Some of us missed out on that. As men, when we are facing hard things, then it's often our natural inclination to push it away, bury it, get on with life. We don't give it much airtime. But you know that can be dangerous. If you haven't dealt with it, then it's not as if the emotion just disappears. Sometimes it comes out later as anger, irritation, withdrawing or drinking.

On top of that, many of us have a Dutch Reformed heritage. Some of our forefathers lived through the war or had some other really difficult things that they had to deal with. One approach was to be stoical about it. Push it away. Don't think about it. Don't talk about it. So what happens with the pain? Sometimes it just gets buried.

And the way it reaches expression is that you just can't deal with hard things. Your wife, your child, a member of your ward comes to you and they have a lot of pain in their lives and your natural reaction is to shy away from that. You don't want to hear about it. You don't want to deal with it. And so you don't engage. And they are left with their pain. And the cycle repeats itself.

That's not God's intention. He has a far better plan for us. He calls us to reflect his glory. He wants us to look to Christ so that we might be renewed into his image. It's as we look to Christ that we are filled with his Spirit and we are given a compassionate heart.

So let me ask you, brothers. What kind of pain are you carrying? What kind of vulnerabilities do you have? Do you have the courage to be honest with yourself about that? Are you able to tell someone else, the LORD about it? It's often the first step in growing in compassion.

As we face our own sins and weaknesses, our own pain and dumb ways of dealing with sin, that we begin to grow in humility. That is the breeding ground for compassion. It says we stand before the Lord with empty hands and plead with him for his grace and compassion that he changes us to being men who are gracious and compassionate with those around us.

THE LORD'S INVITATION

The Lord gives us an incredible invitation in Matthew 11:28: *"Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls."*

Our Lord Jesus is gentle and lowly in heart. He is compassionate. If you go to him, you will find rest for your soul. When he lives in you, and you are recreated into his image, you become compassionate like him. You reflect the Father's glory. It's a beautiful life that leads to peace and rest.