

# THE COMPASSION OF JESUS

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If we had the compassion of Jesus, it would change our families, churches, and neighborhoods for the better. It would allow us to give to others what all of us want for ourselves. It would enable us to fulfill the purpose for which we leave our footprints on this planet.

This life-changing grace is the passion of the author's life. Vernon Grounds was one of the directors of RBC Ministries, a past president and current chancellor of Denver Seminary, and an ongoing mentor to the men and women whose lives he continues to influence. Dr. Grounds, who is in his nineties, models better than anyone else I have ever known the compassion he writes about in the following pages.

*Martin R. De Haan II*

## CAN WE AFFORD TO BE COMPASSIONATE?

German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche said that pity is a slave-morality fit only for weaklings. Lenin, the founding father of communism, insisted that his disciples be steel-like and ruthless. “You can’t make an omelet,” he told them, “without cracking a few eggs; neither can you have a successful revolution without cracking a few skulls.”

According to ethicist Philip Hallie, the American author Henry David Thoreau, whose books are still read and applauded, scoffed at “sniveling compassion” and argued that “compassion is a very untenable ground” for a lifestyle, and that we forfeit our one chance for rich and vibrant experience if we

spend our days “suffering with all sufferers, feeling compassionate for all victims in the world.”

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*If the strong  
give their strength  
to the weak, who  
will remain to  
be strong?*

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Experts wrangle about the precise meaning of terms like *pity*, *sympathy*, *mercy*, and *empathy*. For our purposes, though, we will ignore any hairsplitting distinctions. We will regard all of these emotional reactions as aspects of compassion. Furthermore, we will consider compassion to be neighbor-love in action.

*Pity* and *sympathy* are, of course, words that we use every day. They express how we feel when we observe

another person undergoing affliction of body, mind, or heart. We recall what was taking place within ourselves as we underwent some similar experience. In our imagination we spontaneously project ourselves into that person's situation, maybe involuntarily tightening our muscles, clenching our fists, drawing in a deep breath, even getting tearful.

If the shared experience is intense enough, we call it *empathy*. It's as if we somehow crawl inside the sufferer's skin, and the two of us merge into a sort of emotional oneness. Physically, of course, we remain two separate organic entities; yet we may become psychologically unified. In some cases that sense of togetherness may be intense and prolonged as when day and night a mother indwells the anguish of a seriously ill child. When we empathize,

we are so identified with the other person that it's as if we are hearing with her ears, seeing with her eyes, resonating with her heart, and thinking with her mind.

Aroused by an encounter with need and distress, an empathic reaction elicits a heartfelt sense of concern. It is that identifying emotion that arises from the innermost center of our being. In Colossians 3:12, the apostle Paul used a Greek term for internal organs to refer to a "heart of compassion." By the exercise of focused attention, we achieve an insight different from the knowledge provided by logic or science. In the biblical sense of the word *know*, we experience a profound perception. We know with a sort of deep intimacy similar to that ultimate intimacy Adam had when he knew his wife Eve and they became one flesh (Gen. 4:1).

# COMPASSION IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

The god of the philosophers is the Unmoved Mover that imparts motion to whatever exists. Untouched by our creaturely concerns, He (really It) is the inexhaustible source of energy for the throbbing dynamo of the cosmos. The god of human speculation is a god without heart. Absolutely perfect, that god exists in unruffled sameness for all eternity. That god has no emotions, since emotion involves a change from one state of feeling to another—from calmness to an upsurge of anger, for example. By definition, though, the god of the philosophers is like an icicle that never melts.

By contrast, Jehovah, the God of the Israelites, is not just a mind. He is not just thought—eternally thinking

thought. The God of the Old Testament, and the New Testament too, while unchanging in His nature and purpose, is genuinely personal. Whenever the Bible talks about the true and loving God, it uses personal pronouns.

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*Many people  
imagine a god  
who has no  
emotions.*

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How, then, can we grasp what God is like? We take our own personhood as a clue to divine Personhood. We eliminate anything imperfect and magnify everything about God to an infinite degree. That helps us to try to understand the reality of God as He actually is in His flawless Personhood.

The Bible discloses that

the one true and living God actually feels. He experiences a whole gamut of reactions that are similar to our own. But one of the emotions repeatedly attributed to Him is compassion. Scripture tells us that He is eternal, holy, just, all-good, wise, powerful, and loving. And because He is loving, He is compassionate. That adjective points to a divine attribute that is like the trait we have in mind when we characterize a human as compassionate.

Eliminate God's compassion, and God is no longer God—the personal God who interacted with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Eliminate compassion, and God is no longer the God who has experiences akin to our own states of joy, regret, grief, and merciful kindness. Eliminate compassion from God's nature, and Scripture must be rewritten, our understanding of the divine

nature must be radically revised, and theology must be turned inside out. But compassion can't be eliminated. It must, instead, be given a place of honor among God's attributes. He is the caring God.

It follows, therefore, that if Jesus is the self-revelation of the God of the Old Testament, then compassion will be embodied in Him. And it is. As Friedrich von Hügel, a British scholar with a German name, lay on his deathbed, he managed to say, "Caring is what matters most." With great difficulty he added, "Christianity taught us to care." Von Hügel's dying testimony, while movingly true, needs to be both clarified and qualified. Certainly Old Testament believers were taught to care by Jehovah's deeds and declarations. Yet Jesus, as compassion incarnate, made caring central in His ministry.

He swept aside any legalistic distortions of, and any ethnic limitations on, the all-inclusive grace of the triune God. And caring is that compassionate neighbor-love that Paul in 1 Corinthians 13 declared to be the greatest of all virtues—one that our Savior and Master modeled perfectly.

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***For Jesus to embody the God of the Old Testament, He had to have a heart full of compassion.***

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A Jew by birth and a devout Jew by practice, Christ knew that His heavenly Father, the Jehovah of the Old Testament, is the God of compassion. A student of the First Covenant exhibiting a unique knowledge of its teaching, He was profoundly

aware that His Father's compassion was highlighted by the inspired authors. Texts like these must have given Him an in-depth perception of Jehovah's heart.

- “You, O Lord, are a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness” (Ps. 86:15).
- “‘For a brief moment I abandoned you, but with deep compassion I will bring you back. In a surge of anger I hid My face from you for a moment, but with everlasting kindness I will have compassion on you,’ says the Lord your Redeemer. . . . ‘Though the mountains be shaken and the hills be removed, yet My unfailing love for you will not be shaken nor My covenant of peace be removed,’ says the Lord, who has

compassion on you”  
(Isa. 54:7-8,10).

- “You will again have compassion on us; you will tread our sins underfoot and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea”  
(Mic. 7:19).

Had God’s law of compassion been obeyed, life in Israel for both women and men would have been the happiest possible in our fallen world. Psalm 85:10 depicts a community in which righteousness and peace kiss each other. The Hebrew word for peace, *shalom*, is so rich in content that it’s almost untranslatable. Thus the society envisioned by the psalmist, as a society of *shalom*, is an order of life characterized by joy and justice, piety and plenty, kindness and caring. But God’s people failed to achieve God’s loving ideal. Isaiah graphically depicted the

moral and spiritual sickness of that disobedient nation.

*Why should you be beaten anymore? Why do you persist in rebellion? Your whole head is injured, your whole heart afflicted. From the sole of your foot to the top of your head there is no soundness—only wounds and welts and open sores, not cleansed or bandaged or soothed with oil. Your country is desolate, your cities burned with fire; your fields are being stripped by foreigners right before you, laid waste as when overthrown by strangers (1:5-7).*

Divine punishment, administered in sorrowful grace, again and again overwhelmed Israel. After Solomon’s reign, the nation split into two rival kingdoms. Eventually pagan invaders ravaged that country and took into exile the survivors of war, famine, and disease.

Jehovah in His mercy eventually allowed a remnant of Israelites to return from exile. They fiercely resolved to take whatever measures were necessary to prevent a repetition of their ancestors' sinful failure. So a long period of legalism began that extended from roughly 400 BC to AD 400. Under well-meaning rabbis, many of them devout and learned, a restrictive system of rules and regulations developed.

At first circulating orally, these teachings and their interpretations were gradually written down. Commentary was added to commentary until they eventually became the multi-volumed Mishna and Talmud, a veritable library of precise, hairsplitting directives and prohibitions.

For example, the Fourth Commandment forbids Sabbath work. But what is work? It is defined under 39 different headings called

“fathers of work.” For instance, carrying a burden is work. But then the question arises, “What is a burden?” According to commentator William Barclay, the Mishna tells us that a burden is “milk

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***In an effort to prevent spiritual trespassing, well-intentioned rabbis built fences around fences, until the whole land was full of fences.***

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enough for a gulp, honey enough to be put on a sore, oil enough to anoint the smallest member of the body . . . water enough to rub off an eye-plaster, leather enough to make an amulet, ink enough to write two letters of the alphabet, coarse sand enough to cover

a plasterer's trowel, reed enough to make a pen, a pebble big enough to throw at a bird, anything which weighs as much as two dried figs."

Thus the hairsplitting went on endlessly. Life-giving laws were changed from being a delight and joy and the source of soul-enlightening guidance and blessing (as seen in Psalm 119) into a yoke of bondage. It became a rigid system of religious ritualism, which Jesus denounced with justified wrath:

*Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You shut the kingdom of heaven in men's faces. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to (Mt. 23:13-14).*

To be sure, there were teachers of the law, rabbis, priests, and scribes who as spiritual servants of Jehovah proclaimed and practiced

Micah 6:8, "He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God." Likewise, many ordinary Israelites were models of virtue and piety, loving God and doing good to their neighbors. But the

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***Life-giving laws  
were changed from  
being a delight and  
joy into a yoke  
of bondage.***

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Jewish people as a whole, oppressed by both their Roman conquerors and their own pharisaic hierarchy, found life a heavy burden. Economically impoverished and spiritually ignorant, they were "harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd" (Mt. 9:36).

# COMPASSION IN THE LIFE OF JESUS

**I**nto this turbulent situation Jesus came with His revolutionary message of God's kingdom. It was entered by the simple exercise of repentant faith, and it called for loving obedience to the King and Father and loving service to brothers and sisters in the new divine kingdom and family. Indeed, such service was to be rendered to every member of the human family as well. Its one all-inclusive law was love—a love that Jesus spelled out in His Sermon on the Mount, a love that fulfilled the Ten Commandments (Rom. 13:10). Thus the controlling motive of attitude and behavior in this born-again society was to be compassion, love in action, the caring concern modeled by Jesus Himself.

As God incarnate (the Son of God and God the Son), Christ was a mirror of flesh flawlessly reflecting His Father's nature, not only the divine holiness but the divine heart. Himself sinless and most acutely sensitive to sin, Jesus sympathized with sinful people who were suffering the consequences of inherited depravity and personal transgression. He was aware that the multitudes He ministered to were made up of sinners, most of whom were spiritually like bruised reeds, splintered and emotionally ready to break.

He realized too that in the crowds pressing around Him were souls whose faith was not burning brightly but was at best like smoldering flax (Mt. 12:20). Gently, not with harsh judgment, He sought to strengthen the bruised reeds and bring the smoldering flax to a flame. One of His favorite Old

Testament texts was Hosea 6:6, where Jehovah said, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings." Jesus, as recorded in Matthew 9:13 and 12:7, appropriated those significant words spoken by God Himself to defend His tradition-violating compassion.

## **JESUS' COMPASSION FOR CHILDREN**

The people of Israel were a society that prized children. Typical of the value placed on their offspring, especially males, is Psalm 127:3-5.

*Sons are a heritage from the Lord, children a reward from Him. Like arrows in the hands of a warrior are sons born in one's youth. Blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them. They will not be put to shame when they contend with their enemies in the gate.*

This same high evaluation is repeated in Psalm 128:3.

*Your wife will be like a fruitful vine within your house; your sons will be like olive shoots around your table.*

Abortion and child exposure, which were practiced by the pagan nations surrounding the Holy Land, were sinfully abhorrent to God's elect people. They hailed every birth with joy and gratitude.

Growing up with brothers and sisters, Jesus no doubt had opportunity and responsibility to help care for His younger siblings. He thus acquired realistic insight into the characteristics and needs of children (Mk. 3:31-32; 6:3). While the Gospels give no specific information about family relationships in the home of Mary and Joseph, we have good reason to believe those parents were sensitive, caring, and God-

fearing. Joseph, who may have died rather young, was evidently a pious man of prayer and a devout worshiper of Jehovah. In rearing his offspring we may assume that he followed the guidelines of Deuteronomy 6:6-7.

*These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.*

Mary, a woman of trustful obedience (Lk. 1:38), had a rich knowledge of the Old Testament, as her Magnificat shows. It is an impressive collage of biblical texts and images (vv.46-55). So Jesus, His own attitudes influenced by the attitudes of His parents, became a lover of children. During His ministry, He took delight in welcoming them whenever

they clustered around Him. He had an acute understanding of their need for warm acceptance and adult help. How different He was from that gifted servant of God, C. S. Lewis, who in all honesty confessed, "I myself do not enjoy the society of small children . . . I recognize this as a defect in myself—just as a man may have to recognize that he is tone deaf or color blind."

In the multitudes that followed Jesus were children who were acutely hungry or at least malnourished. Some were sick with all-too-common ailments—and none of our modern medicines were available to alleviate their distress. Some of them were deformed and blind. Some were in the grip of demonic powers (Mk. 9:17-18).

The disciples of Jesus were annoyed by restless children so they tried to push the noisy irritants to

the outskirts of the eager crowds that gathered to hear the Nazarene. Harshly they ordered them to be quiet or, better still, to go away.

Children, nevertheless, clustered about Jesus, longing to be picked up and held in His welcoming arms. Clearly, they must have sensed His love for them. He embraced them and even prayed God's blessing on their young lives, much to the surprise of His mistaken would-be protectors. Indeed, He rebuked those parent-rebuking disciples (Mk. 10:13-16). Not only that, He declared that children were to be welcomed in His name and that they—so dependent, so trustful, so teachable, so free from guile—serve as models of that faith in the heavenly Father that gains entrance into His kingdom (Mt. 18:1-5). He declared as well that anyone who causes a child

to go astray will suffer severe punishment (Mk. 9:35-37,42). Objects of angelic care, children are to be objects of human care, not viewed merely as packages of protoplasm to be disdained and even destroyed at adult discretion (Mt. 19:13-14).

It should be mentioned that infanticide was a frequent practice in the culture of the Greco-Roman world before and after the time of Christ. A revolting example of the cruel indifference to one's own offspring is a letter, dated AD 1, sent by a Roman husband, Hilarion, to his wife Alis. He expresses tender greetings yet instructs her, "If—good luck be with you—you bear a child, if it is a boy, let it live, if it is a girl, throw it out." That utterly hardhearted attitude is manifested even by Seneca, a great first-century Stoic philosopher. He

actually wrote, “We strangle a mad dog; we slaughter a fierce ox, we plunge the knife into sickly cattle lest they taint the herd; children who are born deformed or weakly we drown.” Absolutely antithetical to this cruel callousness was the tenderheartedness of Jesus. Think of how the compassionate Lord would react to the practice of abortion in our own day.

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*Jesus saw  
children through  
merciful eyes  
and had tender  
concern for  
all their needs.*

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Did Jesus foresee with inexpressible regret the destiny of the children clamoring for His attention? As they grew up, they would

face hardship and exploitation in their oppressed country. For many, there would be nagging poverty, a struggle simply to subsist. Some would be afflicted with painful disease and die at an early age. Most would necessarily become adherents to a demanding religion that would fail to lift their emotional burdens and would leave them spiritually unsatisfied.

Their religion, which was the substance of their culture, would increase their hardship and blight their enjoyment of the simple pleasures of life (Mt. 23:1-4). And in the eternity beyond time, would they enter into God's presence and blessedness, or would they be wretched exiles forever? So while our Lord rejoiced when children came to Him, His heart must have ached for them as well.

## **JESUS' COMPASSION FOR WOMEN**

Not only was Jesus compassionate toward children, He was also uniquely compassionate toward women. Indeed, His attitude toward them and His relationship with them were revolutionary. Israel was a patriarchal society in which women occupied a subordinate position and were in many ways treated as social and spiritual inferiors to men.

It's difficult, though, to generalize, because the rabbis differed among themselves on this issue. Fathers too differed in the upbringing of their daughters. And husbands differed in how controlling and restrictive they were with their wives. Love and personality differences made for great differences in the experiences of Hebrew women.

Yet it is undeniable that

generally a woman's lot in that patriarchal society was hard. The prevalent belief in female inferiority found terse expression in the prayer offered by Jewish males: "God, I thank Thee that I was not born a dog. I thank Thee that I was not born a Gentile. I thank Thee that I was not born a woman."

In their younger years, daughters were often treated with suspicion. They were closely supervised in order to prevent anything that might be viewed as unchastity.

When she began her menstrual cycle, a woman was unclean and needed purification (Lev. 15:19-30). To touch a menstruating woman was to undergo defilement that required ritual purification. Incidentally, a man was not to touch any woman except his wife, not even if she was his cousin and the touch accidental.

When a girl reached a marriageable age, she was bartered by her father. After marriage she could be bartered by her husband.

The female role was that of housekeeper, with none of the conveniences we take for granted today. Her other role was that of childbearing with frequent pregnancies—the more she bore, the higher a wife was held in esteem. After childbirth, a woman was regarded as unclean and in need of purification (Lev. 12).

If a wife displeased her husband, he could divorce her, but a wife was not granted the same right (Dt. 24:1-4). If she was suspected of adultery, a wife could be subjected to the frightful water ordeal (Num. 5:11-31), but no such provision was made for testing a suspected husband.

A woman had no property rights. She could not serve as a witness. She

could not share equally in worship. Singing and chanting were done by men exclusively while women listened in their own synagogue compartments.

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*The double standard of Jesus' day was even greater than the double standard of our own.*

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As a rule they were not taught the Torah as boys were. Some rabbis went so far as to declare, "Let the words of the law be burned rather than committed to women. . . . If a man teaches his daughter the Law, it is as though he taught her lechery." Ten men had to be present for a service to be held. Nine men plus one woman would not do!

Jesus, however, was sensitive to the needs of all people whether male or female. He exhibited an all-inclusive compassion that broke through the traditional gender restrictions and taboos. In order to heal, He allowed Himself to be touched by a woman without a shuddering reaction and without following the prescribed routine for cleansing.

Luke told about a woman who for 12 years had an issue of blood (evidently some menstrual dysfunction). She stretched out her fingers and brushed the fringe of Jesus' garment. Instead of condemning her for such a male-contaminating act, Jesus gently led her to understand the difference between a belief in a kind of magical contact and a saving faith in divine grace (Lk. 8:42-48).

Another woman, in this case a defiled prostitute,

poured precious ointment on the Savior's feet and washed them with her tears while Jesus was eating in a Pharisee's house. Compassionately, our Lord, who knew her penitence and faith, defended that bold, extravagant action and sent her away with a benediction of peace (Lk. 7:36-50).

Jesus again disclosed His compassionate attitude toward women, and particularly those who were marginalized by their own sin, when He refused to engage in the stoning of an adulteress caught in the very act. Leaving aside the question of why her accusers didn't drag the male offender as well to the feet of Jesus, we watch our Lord, who with pitying tactfulness handled this sordid situation righteously yet forgivingly. He absolved this transgressor of her guilt, warned her against future temptation, and sent her away to live a changed

life (Jn. 8:1-11). He didn't condone sin. Not in the least! Yet lovingly He offered pardon and hope to those women whom society pushed aside as moral refuse.

Widows especially elicited our Savior's compassionate help. The Old Testament laid down specific commands that widows were to be treated with kindness and respect (Dt. 14:28-29; 24:19-21; 26:12-13; Isa. 1:17; Zech. 7:10). In all likelihood, then as now, some families may have nevertheless neglected to provide sufficient companionship and care for these second-class women. Often, then as now, they may have moved to the outskirts of the family orbit.

A typical example of our Lord's attitude toward these marginalized women was His encounter with a funeral procession outside the city of Nain. A young man had

died. He was the only child of his grief-stricken mother. She was facing loneliness and in all probability destitution. When Jesus saw the funeral procession and heard the mother sobbing, He was moved with compassion. "His heart went out to her" (Lk. 7:13). He didn't wait for any appeal. He acted. He touched the coffin, risking ritual contamination, and He commanded the corpse to arise. Miraculously, the son obeyed as life returned to his body. Imagine the mother's gratitude as uncontrollable joy replaced inconsolable sorrow! (vv.11-17).

In Jesus' sermon in Nazareth as He inaugurated His public ministry, He referred to a widow (an alien from pagan Sidon) as an object of God's saving grace. That reference, made intentionally not casually, contradicted the prejudices of His audience (Lk. 4:25-

26). The Sidon widow was not the only bereft widow whom Jesus used as an example to challenge His contemporaries and present-day readers of the Gospels.

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***Jesus cared for women, who all too often experienced little more than neglect, contempt, and rejection.***

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In Jesus' day, men had only a meager knowledge of God and a superficial fellowship with Him. The plight of women was far worse. Therefore Jesus, in defiance of tradition, allowed them to be among His followers and actually engage in the service and support of His itinerant mission (Lk. 8:1-3). Women together with men were being taught about God's grace that rules out

gender distinction. With compassion, our Lord told women, individually as well as collectively, the truth about God and His kingdom. He took time to instruct Mary of Bethany (Lk. 10:39). Significantly, He gently rebuked Martha the sister of Mary, counseling her that it was better for a woman to learn about God than to be preoccupied with household chores like preparing a meal. In so saying, He was turning the traditional role of women upside down.

Once again, at Jacob's well, He gave a brief course in basic theology to a Samaritan woman. No wonder His tradition-bound companions were astonished. He was talking to a woman in public! He was talking to her alone! He was talking to a despised Samaritan woman, someone of a race that pious Jews viewed as heretics! (Jn. 4:1-30).

What motivated

such behavior by Christ? Compassion. He saw people in the whole gamut of their need. He saw people not in abstract categories such as males and females, Jews and Gentiles, aliens and citizens, adults and children. Jesus saw people as individuals, each made in God's image, each a member of God's human family and a potential member of God's spiritual family.

## **JESUS' COMPASSION FOR OTHER MARGINALIZED MEMBERS OF SOCIETY**

As Jesus was compassionate toward women and children, so He was toward other fringe groups on the edges of society. He was a liberating radical who had come, according to His own assertion, in order that any and all sinful humans might have abundant life in this

world, and beyond this world might have life everlasting (Jn. 3:16; 10:10).

In first-century Israel, tax collectors and publicans were understandably despised and hated. They were Jews who acted as agents of the Roman government. Their task was that of gathering a specified amount of money from their own fellow-Israelites no matter how much hardship that might cause. If they could extort anything beyond what was due to the imperial officials, they could pocket that for themselves. So when Jesus wanted to bring out the seriousness of excluding an unrepentant person from the Christian in-group, He taught His disciples to treat that transgressor as if he were a tax collector (Mt. 18:17).

How scandalized, then, people must have been when our Lord had table fellowship with those quislings, as they might be called today. And He even invited one of them

to become an inner-circle disciple! (Mk. 2:13-17).

How Jesus must have upset His fellow Jews when He invited a notorious publican named Zacchaeus, who was wealthy because of his ruthless exploitation, to enter into the orbit of God's redeeming, forgiving mercy! (Lk. 19:1-10).

How Jesus must have perplexed and angered good Jews when, in one of His parables, He made a tax collector rather than a Pharisee the recipient of God's justifying grace! (Lk. 18:9-14).

Worse still, how infuriating it must have been for this friend of tax collectors and sinners (Lk. 7:34) to declare that the tax collectors and prostitutes who had responded repentantly to the preaching of John the Baptist would enter into God's kingdom in advance of the self-righteous religious

leaders! (Mt. 21:31-32).

According to Jesus, divine compassion could and would change members of the ostracized out-group into welcomed members of God's in-group.

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***The scandal  
surrounding Jesus  
was that He  
violated the ethics  
of a society that  
was sadly deficient  
in compassion.***

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In His saving pity, Jesus also broke through the barriers erected by separatistic traditions. He had no hesitancy in touching lepers who had been compelled to avoid all human contact (Mt. 8:1-4; Mk. 1:40-44). Think of what His touch must have meant to these pathetic untouchables. He exercised

His power on behalf of needy individuals regardless of their race. He healed the son of a centurion, an officer in Rome's oppressive army (Mt. 8:5-13). He likewise healed the daughter of a pagan, a Canaanite woman (Mt. 15:21-24). He didn't hesitate to talk with a Samaritan woman and share with her the liberating truth about God and the worship pleasing to God (Jn. 4). The prevailing attitude toward that race by Jews is starkly disclosed in the criticism leveled against Jesus Himself, "You are a Samaritan and demon-possessed" (Jn. 8:48).

Yet when Jesus challenged the mercy-stifling behavior of the religious hierarchy of His day, He chose a Samaritan as a model of God's own compassion—a Samaritan who had compassion on a victim of theft and violence (Lk. 10). Could He have more dramatically revealed

that His own heart was beating as one with the heart of His Father?

Jesus never spurned the common people who gladly listened to Him (Mk. 12:37). The Jewish hierarchy looked down on the people contemptuously because they were religiously illiterate. They said, "This mob that knows nothing of the law—there is a curse on them" (Jn. 7:49). But instead Jesus, who was moved with compassion, taught the mob. He fed its members repeatedly. He healed their sick, and He freed those who were possessed by demons (Mk. 5:1-17; 8:1-10).

Jesus' pity toward the poor in their sickness, in their hunger, and in their suffering emerges strikingly in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Lk. 16:19-31). It emerges again in His awe-inspiring vision of judgment that highlights His concern for the most needy members

of society (Mt. 25:31-46). His heart and His arms were open wide, as they still are, to the lowest, the least, and the lost (Lk. 15).

## **JESUS' COMPASSION FOR THE SPIRITUALLY NEEDY**

Concerned as He was about hunger, disease, and injustice, our Lord was concerned immeasurably more about people's relationship to God and their destiny in the world to come. When He laid down the manifesto of His kingdom in the sermon preached in the synagogue at Nazareth, He quoted this passage from Isaiah 61:

*The Spirit of the Lord is on Me, because He has anointed Me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent Me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the*

*year of the Lord's favor (Lk. 4:18-19).*

By quoting this passage from Isaiah, Jesus was announcing a twofold mission. On the one hand, He would literally help restore sight, give comfort, and liberate those in bondage to destructive habits and addictive behavior. On the other hand, His ministry would be a spiritual one, enlightening the spiritually blind (Jn. 6), liberating the spiritually shackled, comforting the spiritually guilt-ridden and distressed. Indeed, the miracles He was going to perform, His supernatural acts of power and compassion, would be dramatic vignettes of the very nature of the kingdom He had come to inaugurate.

While His pity took in the whole gamut of human affliction, His primary concern was spiritual. His society was permeated with religion, but the religion

established by God for the blessing of His people had degenerated into a legalistic straightjacket. So He denounced, with fiercest vehemence, the Pharisaic traditionalism that took away

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*The compassion  
Jesus had for  
people's physical  
needs was a sign of  
His concern for the  
greater needs of  
their hearts.*

---

the "key to knowledge" (Lk. 11:52) and left its soul-empty adherents in ignorance of God. Wrathfully He castigated proselytizing zealots who traveled far and wide to win a single convert and in doing so made that individual "twice as much a son of hell" (Mt. 23:15). Aliens themselves from the abundant life of heaven's

kingdom, those watchdogs of tradition prevented God-hungry seekers from entering into its "righteousness, peace, and joy" (Rom. 14:17). How the hardheartedness of those "blind leaders of the blind" troubled Jesus' own loving heart!

The Gospels tell us that Jesus wept (Lk. 19:41; Jn. 11:35). Once as He approached Jerusalem just prior to His arrest and crucifixion, He gazed at that doomed city and could not keep from sobbing. He foresaw the terrible destruction awaiting the sacred footstool of Jehovah (Ps. 99:5), and He broke down emotionally. Earlier in His ministry He had been unable to restrain His sorrow as He foresaw the savage sacking of Israel's capital.

*O Jerusalem, Jerusalem,  
you who kill the prophets  
and stone those sent to  
you, how often I have  
longed to gather your*

*children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!* (Lk. 13:34).

Even on His way to Calvary, bearing the burden of His cross, Jesus forgot His own misery. Grief-stricken, He predicted the misery that women especially would endure (Lk. 23:27-31).

But the deepest cause of His grief was not the travail His own people would suffer in this world. He was shaken to the center of His being by His vision of their fate in eternity—exiled from the light, the love, and the life of God in darkness and despair forever. Again and again He had entreated the crowds around Him to flee from the wrath to come. He had spoken with a heart-melting eloquence, using the most vivid imagery to jolt the complacent, the indifferent, and the unrepentant out of their apathy.

- Don't stumble zombie-

like into a destiny worse than the judgment poured out on Sodom and Gomorrah (Mt. 11:24).

- Don't refuse the grace of the pardon-offering God who can destroy both body and soul in hell (Mt. 10:28).

Such a terrifying prospect harrowed Jesus emotionally, filling His compassionate heart with grief.

Even though Jesus ate and drank with sinners, and even though He shared in the happiness of wedding feasts, He never lost sight of “the dark line on God's face.” He had entered our world as the embodiment of mercy, willing to die in order that lost sinners might not perish but have everlasting life. *Perish*—that was and is the dark line on God's face. *Perish*—that word expresses the hopelessness and horror, the despair from which He had come to save sinners. In

His compassion He stooped  
from glory to Golgotha.  
Motivated by infinite pity,  
He had taken on our flesh  
and blood, exchanging  
heaven's throne to be  
impaled on Calvary's tree.  
He had humbled Himself,  
abandoning heaven's highest  
height and descending to  
earth's lowest depths, dying  
by crucifixion in agony and  
ignominy on a Roman cross,  
the death reserved for the  
worst of criminals. Why had  
He done this? He said very  
simply that it was to save  
the lost (Lk. 19:10).

*Lost!* All of humanity's  
horrific peril and fathomless  
need scream out in that  
word that re-echoes another  
terrifying word—*perish*.  
Those two dreadful words  
clang out a terrible antiphony.  
The perishing are the lost, the  
lost are the perishing.

*Lost!* The sobbing,  
heartbreaking, bewildering  
distress of a child who has  
strayed from the safety and

warmth of the ski resort and  
is freezing alone at night in  
the snow-covered forest.

*Lost!* The passengers on  
the Titanic are plunged from  
opulence and gaiety into the  
icy waters of the Atlantic  
Ocean, sinking down under  
the merciless waves.

*Lost!* The grief of a  
wife as the weary surgeon  
emerges from the operating  
room to report that the  
medical team has lost the  
patient, her husband.

*Lost!* Souls wandering  
“for whom blackest darkness  
has been reserved forever”  
(Jude 13).

*Lost!* Souls tormented by  
the pangs of regret for the  
self-inflicted forfeiture of  
hope and joy and peace.

*Lost!* Souls bewailing the  
memory of opportunities for  
a glorious fulfillment gone  
eternally.

The spiritual plight of lost  
and perishing souls is what  
stirred Jesus' compassionate  
heart to its deepest depths.

## EXAMPLES OF CHRISTLIKE COMPASSION

**D**uring His years here on earth, our Lord went about doing good (Acts 10:38). His compassion was not inactive sentimentalism which, as Samuel Taylor Coleridge bitingly wrote, “Sighs for wretchedness but shuns the wretched.” As our study of Jesus’ ministry has shown, whenever He encountered a need in individuals or multitudes, His emotional reaction of intense concern motivated immediate action. He fed, healed, taught, calmed turbulent seas, cast out demons, and even raised the dead. In all He did and said, He set an example for His disciples to follow through the ages (1 Pet. 2:21). They, like Jesus, were to be agents of compassion communicating by word and deed the message of God’s

redemptive grace. They were to serve as conduits for the outflow of Spirit-empowered helpfulness.

Consider, for example, the centuries immediately following our Savior’s sojourn on earth. Christian compassion, operating through His disciples, challenged and changed the cruel, calloused society of the Caesars. Infant killing, often by heartless exposure to the elements and even animals; the blood baths of the gladiatorial spectacles; the crucifixion of criminals; the brutal treatment of slaves; the degradation of women—such practices Christians bravely opposed in the name of the compassionate Jesus.

But the best way to appreciate how the example of our Lord’s compassion has impacted history is to consider the lives of individuals who have served as conduits of His caring love. They have been salt

in the otherwise tasteless dough of civilization. They have been light in the gross darkness of depraved culture. They have been voices pleading for mercy and kindness wherever there have been eruptions of barbarism, even in advanced nations. Here are just two illustrations of Christlike compassion.

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*Because Christ is  
compassionate,  
He fills with  
compassion  
those who are  
filled with Him.*

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**Jackie Polinger**, who was born and reared in Great Britain, was a musician by vocation and a Christian by conviction. From the age of 5 she felt that God was directing her into missionary

service. But where and under what agency? She consulted her pastor who advised her to start out in faith and let God providentially lead. Jackie followed his advice and eventually found herself in Hong Kong.

All alone, she began a compassionate work of witness in the notorious Walled City, where more than 50,000 people were crowded into a mere 6½ acres. It was a refuge for criminals of every kind—thieves, drug dealers, murderers, and prostitutes. Its streets were lined with heroin dens and opium dives, to say nothing of the pornographic theaters. The Walled City was a rat-infested horror of filth, ruled by ruthless gangs. Every morning the bodies of pathetic wretches who had overdosed and died during the night were simply dragged outside its walls and left unburied.

Jackie was only 20 years old, untrained and unprotected, when she moved into that nightmare and started as a conduit of Christ's compassion to share the good news of His forgiveness and love. She met with violent hostility. Windows and furniture were smashed in the Youth Club she opened, and it was smeared with excrement by the followers of a drug lord. But he was so impressed by Jackie and her message of God's forgiveness that he ordered his guilty gang members to go and apologize to her. They did and, true to her message, Jackie forgave them.

Slowly a change took place through Jackie's unfaltering compassion, dauntless bravery, and Christ-centered preaching. Hundreds of men and women—drug-enslaved, vice-fettered, lifelong addicts and drunkards—were liberated.

Jackie's compassion was not an impotent sentimentalism. Motivated by Calvary, her ministry was dynamic and transforming. Indeed it was the very power of God unto salvation. Jesus through Jackie continued His work of compassion.

**Mary Reed**, born in Ohio in 1858, was another conduit of Christlike compassion. Hearing about the plight of lepers in India, she decided to do what she could to alleviate their distressful lot and share with them the good news of God's love. How apparently futile it was for one Christian woman to expect that she could bring about any significant change in the lives of such sorely afflicted people in an alien society.

Resolutely and prayerfully, Mary volunteered for service in India. The city of Cawnpore with its overwhelming needs

was the site of her ministry. Conditions were indescribably difficult. Little wonder, then, that after 8 years of compassionate labor, she suffered a physical breakdown. So she returned home to recuperate. But did she stay home? Did she abandon the impossible task of making a really helpful impact on so desperate a situation?

No, instead of yielding to any temptation like that, Mary returned and went to Pithoraterth in the Himalayas. On one journey she came across a tragic group of 500 lepers, subsisting by themselves, with no human agency concerned about their misery. Burdened for their piteous helplessness, Mary could not forget those neglected sufferers.

After another year of intense ministry, she collapsed and was sent back to her American home.

Doctors were perplexed by her illness. What caused the tingling pain in her forefinger and that spot on her face? Mary knew before she had received a definitive diagnosis. She had contracted leprosy. Yet, rather than being horrified, she thanked God for a disease that ordinarily would have aroused reactions of dread and self-pity. She saw it as God's gift, an answer to her pleas that somehow she might be permitted to work among those lepers in the Himalayas.

Only her doctors and a sister knew the truth about her condition. When she left for India, she insisted that there be no sad farewell, though she realized she might never see her much-loved family again. Back in India, Mary went to that leper settlement where no missionary had gone before. "I have been called by God to come and help you," she

told the astonished sufferers. And there she remained as God's agent of Christlike compassion. The difficulties were indeed enormous, yet gradually in Chanbag under Mary's sacrificial leadership a new order of things developed. Even a hospital was built providing healing, help, and hope to once utterly hopeless outcasts. For 53 years she lived and served at Chanbag, dying there in 1943.

These two servants of the Lord Jesus are representative of a great host of His disciples, the majority of them unknown and unapplauded. But their names are known in heaven, and they have received the only commendation they desired and deserved, their Lord's word of approval, "Well done, good and faithful servants."

If we have named Jesus as our Redeemer and Master, we are challenged to

follow in Jackie's and Mary's footsteps, as they followed in the footsteps of Him who was compassion incarnate. As recipients of saving grace,

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named Jesus as  
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we have the privilege of letting the costly love of Calvary flow through our lives and out into the needy world. Only as we do so can some of humanity's need be met.

Historian Huston Smith, renowned professor of

religion at Syracuse University, visited with Aldous Huxley when he was a distinguished professor of the humanities at MIT. One day they were walking and talking together, and Huxley said, "You know, Huston, it's rather embarrassing to have spent one's entire lifetime pondering the human condition and to come toward its close and find that I really don't have anything more profound to pass on by way of advice than, "Try to be a little kinder."

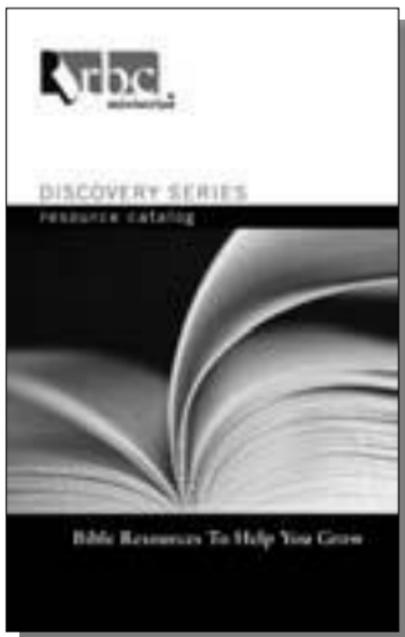
While that's true, Jesus models and motivates more than a little kindness. He models and motivates sacrificial compassion. How, though, can we become conduits of His compassionate kindness? Let Henri Nouwen instruct us:

When I pray for the endless needs of the millions, my soul expands and wants to embrace them all and

bring them into the presence of God. But in the midst of that experience I realize that compassion is not mine but God's gift to me. I cannot embrace the world, but God can. I cannot pray, but God can pray in me. When God became as we are . . . He allowed us to enter into the intimacy of the divine life. He made it possible for us to share in God's infinite compassion.

And by grace we not only share the experience of God's compassion. By His enabling grace we can become the conduits of that compassion, following in Christ's footsteps as did a host of our spiritual forbears. But if we indeed are copying Christ, as Paul urged in 1 Corinthians 11:1, our compassion will not be limited to bodily needs. It will have soul needs as its supreme priority.

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