

The Marks of Biblical Compassion

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- [0 : 0 0] Well, if we were to ask Jesus to describe in a single word what it looks like to love our neighbor as ourself, how do you think he would answer?
- Well, we can't know for certain because he wasn't asked that question quite so directly anywhere in recorded scripture. But if we were going to go by our text for this morning, we might guess that Jesus would say that in a word, love for neighbor looks like compassion.
- Verse 33, but a Samaritan as he journeyed came to where he was and when he saw him, he had compassion. Now, I want to suggest to you that when it comes to compassion, we're a little bit like six month old infants.
- And you're thinking, oh, Sean, this is great. You invite a guest preacher in here and he insults us in the first five minutes. I'm not saying that to insult you. In fact, I said we, I hope you heard. I'm including myself in that assessment of the human condition and how we respond to the conditions around us.
- Here's what I mean when I say we're a lot like infants. I happen to be someone who's really fascinated by child development. Sean mentioned I have three girls. I remember when they were young in our home, now we have six grandchildren.
- [1 : 1 9] By the way, now's when you say, well, you look far too young to have six grandchildren. Oh, thank you for saying that. But watching children develop both physically and especially mentally, intellectually as their brain develops is so fascinating.
- And there's a game you can play with a young infant to determine whether they've reached this particular milestone that I'm talking about. You can hold a bright colored toy. Maybe it makes some noise. You hold that in front of an infant maybe between six and 12 months of age. And toward the sixth month end, they will typically just lock in on that toy. They'll pay all their attention to it. They'll get excited about it. Then you put it behind your back. And most likely, they will just look for the next thing to stimulate their attention. They've got no other reaction to it.
- A child between nine and 12 months of age, let's say, if you do that, they will look for that toy. Maybe even if they're mobile, they'll crawl around behind your back trying to find it.
- [2 : 2 0] And that's because by the age of six to nine or nine to 12 months, most children have typically reached the developmental milestone known as object permanence.
- And object permanence is simply the understanding that objects continue to exist even when they're outside our field of vision. Prior to object permanence, it is quite literally out of sight, out of mind.
- Well, we are often just like infants when it comes to the things that surround us in the world. When things are outside our field of vision, we can often move on just as if they don't even exist.
- Gary Hogan, in his excellent book, Good News About Injustice, uses this concept of object permanence to develop a concept he calls compassion permanence.
- And he defines compassion permanence as a courageous and generous capacity to remember the needs of an unjust world, even when they're out of our immediate sight.

[3 : 25] Well, I want to submit to you this morning that we must develop compassion permanence for the orphans of the world, who are often so far out of our sight in our affluent society, but whose cause the Lord has called us to take up as his disciples.

And as we develop compassion permanence, we also need to accurately define what compassion is as it's portrayed for us in Scripture. Compassion is fashionable in our culture.

Everyone wants to say that they're compassionate. Nobody wants to be thought of as uncompassionate. But if you dig down into the conversation, you'll discover that we define compassion very differently in many cases.

So when the definition of a term or a concept is up for grabs in that way in our culture, it is all the more reason for us to ask the question, how does the Bible define compassion?

How does Jesus define compassion? And this is an important question for us, not simply because Jesus is our moral guide and he's bound to have some words of wisdom for us on the topic, but much more fundamentally because Jesus is himself the very definition of compassion.

[4 : 42] His life and ministry, leaving behind the glories of heaven, coming to earth to seek and save lost sinners like you and me, giving his life on the cross so that we can receive grace and forgiveness.

This is the embodiment of biblical compassion. See, Jesus isn't just a great moral teacher here. Jesus is exhibit A in the compassion of God.

And if you're here today and you're not a Christian, maybe you're exploring what the claims of Christ, you're exploring what the Christian faith is all about, I want to be abundantly clear from the beginning.

You are not to hear, you're not about to hear a moral lesson about what it looks like to get your act together so that you can make yourself presentable and acceptable to God.

Your only hope for acceptance before God is through faith in his son, believing that the death and resurrection of Jesus are sufficient to cover the penalty for your sins and restore your relationship with God.

[5 : 44] And that's why any definition of compassion that doesn't include Jesus is incomplete. The greatest mercy we have to offer anyone is Christ and the forgiveness of sins through faith in his name.

And I'm so thrilled to hear about the evangelistic efforts that you are engaging in as a church. But, brothers and sisters, we also know that the story doesn't end there.

The story doesn't end when we get saved. Did you notice that the Lord didn't just sweep us away to heaven the moment we believed? God has given us a role to play in his unfolding redemptive plan.

And as the body of Christ, saved by his great act of compassion toward us, we are now called to embody that compassion to others in a lost and dying world.

We're called to love not only in word, but in deed and in truth. We're called to do good to all, especially the household of faith. And we're called to spur one another on toward love and good deeds so that we all grow up in every way into him who is our head, Jesus Christ.

[6 : 59] So as Jesus defines biblical compassion for us this morning, let's remember that he's defining in words that which he has already embodied toward us.

And he's defining what we are therefore called to grow up into, to mature into as his disciples and to personify as the body of Christ in our world.

Now, let's catch ourselves up on our story because we need to remember the background, how this story of the Good Samaritan comes forth, has a lot to say about what Jesus is trying to communicate to us as a takeaway.

And we're so familiar with it that sometimes we can miss some of those things. An expert in the law is said here to be testing Jesus. Now, this is a bad idea, and this guy apparently has not read the Gospels.

Because Jesus will characteristically turn the tables on these guys who come to him trying to test him. And that's exactly what happens here. Before you know it, you're the one that's on the examination table.

[8 : 06] So this man comes to Jesus and says, What must I do, teacher, to inherit eternal life? Jesus says, Well, what do you mean? Why are you asking me? You're the expert in the law.

What does the law say? How do you read it? And the man answers astutely. He says, You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and your neighbor as yourself.

Jesus affirms his answer. And it shouldn't be any surprise to us that Jesus would affirm his answer. Because elsewhere, in Matthew 22, when Jesus is asked, What's the greatest of all the commandments?

Jesus answered, You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. And the second is like unto it, You must love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments, all the law and the prophets depend.

Now, that's an astounding statement that is worthy of a whole other sermon. All the law and the prophets depend on these two commands together.

[9 : 07] But for our purposes this morning, let's just recognize that Jesus affirms this lawyer's answer. And he says, in a voice that I like to imagine with kind of an Old Testament Deuteronomic ring to it, he says to this lawyer, Do this, and you will live.

Well, Jesus' answer seems to create some dissonance in this man's soul. He'd like to believe that he has loved the Lord with all his heart, soul, mind, and strength. But he's a little more troubled about this neighbor question.

So, like any good defense attorney would do, and I've heard there's a good law school in the neighborhood. Like any good defense attorney would do, immediately this lawyer begins trying to whittle down the implications of the law.

Maybe if I can narrow the implications. Maybe if I can define my neighbor as only my family or my clan or my ethnic group, my religious group, my national group, maybe then I can claim that I've really loved my neighbor just as I love myself.

And so Luke tells us it's in a spirit of self-justification that he asked Jesus the question, and who is my neighbor? Well, this is the moment Jesus has been waiting for.

[10 : 24] This really sets the stage for Jesus to define the neighborhood, if you will, about as broadly as he possibly could. And in the process, he also defines what love for neighbor looks like.

And he defines it in a way that spotlights compassion as a central feature of this love. So in the balance of our time in the word, I just want to look at three characteristics of biblical compassion, three marks of biblical compassion that are displayed for us in this parable, remembering all the while that Jesus is painting a portrait for us of what it looks like to love our neighbor just as we love ourselves, to what it looks like to obey this great dual command on which all the law and the prophets depend.

So the first characteristic of biblical compassion is that it's active. Biblical compassion is active. Now, we often speak of compassion.

We speak of feeling compassion as if it's purely an emotion. It's not wrong for us to speak in those terms. That's just the way the words are rendered in our vernacular.

But that phrase doesn't quite do justice to the full meaning of biblical compassion because compassion is not something that we merely feel. Compassion is something that we do.

[11 : 51] The way I like to say it that's kind of memorable for me is compassion is a verb. It's a verb. It's an action word. Now, the biblical concept is rightly thought of as an emotion, but it's a deep, guttural emotion that must result in action.

We can liken it to love in this sense, right? We would say the same about love. I'm the father of three daughters, two of whom are now married. I'm glad, young man, that your heart flutters when you hold her hand.

That's not everything I need to see to know that you love my daughter. We would all say that love must be acted out or it is not truly love. Well, it's the same with compassion.

It's not the same thing as empathy. Empathy has become a bit of a buzzword in our culture, say, the last 10 years or so. Empathy can be a very good first step toward compassion.

Empathy, by the way, is just the ability to identify with someone else, to kind of put yourself in their shoes and feel their pain. That can be a good first step on the way toward compassion.

[12 : 59] But empathy is rarely, if ever, the end goal. Empathy should move us toward action that would alleviate the suffering of the individual.

Compassion isn't something we merely feel. Compassion is something we do. And a closer look at the Good Samaritan will demonstrate this. Immediately in verse 33, after he said to have compassion, we have a list of things that his compassion led him to do.

He comes over to the man, in contrast to the others who've passed by on the other side of the road. He bandages his wounds. He lifts him onto his own animal.

He takes him to an inn where he cares for him personally, and he pays for that care out of his own pocket. Compassion, as biblically defined, always has specific action associated with it.

Compassion really is a verb. And by the way, that's not just a clever way to remember a point. The word compassion in our English New Testament actually is a verb in the Greek New Testament.

[14 : 07] And it's an easy word to take a look at and all the occurrence. It only occurs 12 times in the New Testament. And it's fascinating what you can observe just by looking at those 12 occurrences.

Three times, Jesus uses the word in his parables. So the Good Samaritan being one of those. One time, Jesus is, this word is used by a man who's pleading with Jesus to have compassion on him.

And listen to this. The other eight times that this verb is used are all in the Gospels and are all in reference to the activities of Jesus.

Now that in itself is instructive for us, isn't it? When this verb is used by biblical authors, it is used almost exclusively as a descriptor of Jesus' actions in relation to his fellow man.

And here's what I want you to remember about this. If you took one thing home today, I'd want you to remember this. Every time Jesus is said to have compassion or feel compassion or be moved with compassion or filled with compassion, that statement is immediately followed by some kind of merciful action on the part of the Lord.

[15 : 27] You can jot down these references if you'd like to take a look at them this week and maybe meditate on them. Matthew 14, 14. He had compassion on them and he healed their sick.

Matthew 20, 34. Moved with compassion, Jesus touched their eyes and immediately they regained their sight. Mark 1, 41. Moved with compassion, Jesus stretches out his hand and heals a leper.

Mark 6, 34 is perhaps my favorite to meditate on. This is where Jesus and the disciples are trying to get away for a little rest after a long day of ministering.

I imagine a week of ministering to people. They're trying to get on the boat, get to the other side of the lake and get a little bit of rest and restoration. Remember, Jesus feels the effects of fatigue just like we do.

Jesus is fully God, but he's fully human as well. He feels the effect of fatigue. He's tempted in every way just as we are. And so when this crowd, they discover, they get to the other side of the lake and this crowd has figured out where they're going and they're waiting for them on the other side.

[16 : 33] I can tell you what I would be tempted to do in that moment. I'd be tempted to take that boat right out to the middle of the lake. Let's drop anchor here. We're going to get our rest. These people are inconsiderate. They don't understand that we have needs too.

Well, not Jesus. This is where scripture says that Jesus had compassion on them because they were like sheep without a shepherd. And he taught them despite his fatigue.

And this is also where he fed the 5,000 miraculously in recognition of their physical needs. They were hungry as well. Luke 7.13 is another one.

Jesus had compassion on a grieving widow and he raises her son from the dead. Without exception, where Jesus is said to have compassion on people, that statement is coupled with some kind of merciful action like healing or casting out of demons or feeding hungry people or raising of the dead or teaching lost sheep.

Jesus doesn't merely feel compassion. He does something to alleviate their suffering. Jesus' compassion, biblical compassion, is active.

[17 : 43] Well, secondly, biblical compassion is costly. It's costly. Jesus' original hearers would have understood immediately that this traveler walking along the road would have had to tear his own clothing to bind up the wounds of this stranger that he's encountered.

He pours oil and wine into the wounds. Oil for soothing. Wine for disinfecting. That means he probably deprived himself of refreshment later in his journey because it was more important to him that this stranger's wounds be dressed.

Loading this man onto his own animal probably means that he walks for the remainder of the journey. He takes him to an inn where he not only foots the bill for over three weeks room and board.

That's how much the two denarii would have covered. But he also states emphatically that he will pay for any additional costs incurred. He not only doesn't want to pass it off to the innkeeper, pass it off to some kind of government agency.

No, he wants to come back and complete this uncommon act of generosity. It really raises the question for us. Are we willing to give out of the abundance that God has given us?

[19 : 02] The abundance of money and possessions and time and gifts in order to extend the love of God to others. And it also raises the question, are we willing to take risks?

There are costs we can count in advance and I commend the idea of budgeted generosity. Let's look at the resources that the Lord has given us. Our financial resources, our resources of time and human capacity.

Budget those things out to be as generous as possible and plan that in advance. But there are also risks that we must take for unanticipated costs that may be incurred along the road of compassion.

This road from Jerusalem to Jericho had a reputation for being extremely dangerous. It was about 17 miles in length and it wound through rocky areas that provided excellent hideouts for thieves to be laying in wait.

Jesus' original hearers would have immediately recognized this as the bad part of town. So you think of that part of the city that you don't want to drive through at night. You would be very careful walking through.

[20 : 16] That is this road from Jerusalem to Jericho. Now this man is carrying oil. He's carrying money. He's carrying enough money to cover three weeks room and board at the local inn.

And he's carrying oil and wine, very costly items. Many people would call him foolish for stopping and making himself vulnerable to attack.

Think about it. He's just encountered a half-dead man on the side of the road who's been beaten and robbed. If he wasn't aware already that he was in the bad part of town, he's aware of it now.

But his compassion is not stifled by the requirement that he put himself in a precarious position. Unlike the others who've passed by, he stops. And remember, this is a story that was created by Jesus.

Yes, this just spun from his imagination. But the details of this story are meant to show us what love for neighbor looks like. Now this can be a hard pill for comfortable American Christians to swallow.

[21 : 20] And I think John Piper has some excellent words to challenge us in this area. Dr. Piper says, There's a mindset in the prosperous West that we deserve a pain-free, trouble-free existence.

When life deals us the opposite, we have a right not only to blame somebody or some system and to feel sorry for ourselves, but also to devote most of our time to coping so that we have no time or energy left over for serving others.

This mindset gives a trajectory to life that is almost universal, namely away from stress and toward comfort and safety and relief.

Then within that very natural trajectory, some people begin to think of ministry and find ways of serving God inside the boundaries set by the aims of self-protection. And it never occurs to anyone that choosing discomfort, stress, and danger might be the right thing, even the normal biblical thing, to do.

Being a Christian should mean that our trajectory is toward need, regardless of danger and discomfort and stress. In other words, Christians characteristically will make life choices that involve putting themselves and their families at temporal risk while enjoying eternal security.

[22 : 44] Now, there are many ways we could qualify that challenge, and I just want to be silent on all those qualifications, because I think this is a word that we need to allow to challenge us.

This is a challenge we desperately need today. Our willingness to embrace cost and risk are the very thing that should set us apart from the world in this.

It's common today to engage in cheap expressions of empathy that really cost us nothing. They make us feel compassionate, but they have no real cost associated with them.

It's so common that we actually have a word for it. You've probably heard it. It's called slacktivism. And by the way, I can't say this with certainty, but legend has it that the priest and the Levite in Jesus' parable got home that afternoon and they tweeted about how bad things have gotten out on the road between Jerusalem and Jericho.

Or it was, yeah, you're thinking, no, they posted on X, but it was called Twitter back then. Listen, I'm having some fun with this idea of slacktivism, but here's the point.

[23 : 55] Jesus is calling us to so much more than that here. He is calling us, he wants us to see the glory and experience the joy of compassionate, sacrificial, risk-taking love for neighbor that is only possible because of faith.

Only possible because we have staked our lives on the one who, though he was rich, yet for our sakes became poor so that we, by his poverty, might become rich.

Biblical compassion is costly, and sometimes it embraces risks that would seem foolish apart from faith. Thirdly, and very briefly, biblical compassion is required.

It's required. Jesus concludes his parable in verse 37 with the words, You go and do likewise. The disciple of Jesus has no opt-out clause when it comes to biblical compassion.

This isn't just for people with the gift of mercy. There is such a thing as the gift of mercy. It's one of the gifts that the Holy Spirit dispenses for the edification of the church.

[25 : 12] But this is not for the people with the gift of mercy. This is for everyone who wants to obey the great dual commandment to love God and love neighbor.

Now, we might be tempted to think, well, that's a beautiful portrait that Jesus has painted, but that's not the world I live in. I don't step out of my home every morning and encounter half-dead strangers on the road.

I don't step out of my home every morning and encounter children scrabbling through the dump to find a scrap of food to eat. And as a result, we can very easily live our lives unaware of a world that is groaning under the curse of sin and disease and fatherlessness.

And this is where we need to come back around to that concept of compassion permanence. The Lord would remind us this morning that that is the world that we live in, whether it's part of our daily experience or not.

And it's part of our calling as his disciples to go and do likewise, to cross over to the other side of the road, to take initiative toward that need as a means of expressing the compassion of Jesus Christ to the lost and the suffering.

[26 : 30] Regardless of whether you decide to join hands specifically with Covenant Mercies today, may we all grow as disciples who love to take initiative toward those who are in need, embracing the costs and the risks associated with biblical compassion, all in worship to the one who embraced the greatest cost for us when he came to seek and save the lost.

Let's pray. Father, we thank you that first and foremost, we are objects of your mercy. Lord, we care about the poor of this world.

We care about those who are suffering because you came out of love for us and you gave your life as the greatest sacrifice for us. So, Lord, we thank you for that.

We worship you. And we pray that you would lead us and guide us and shape us into the disciples that you want us to be. In Jesus' name, amen.