



Tender Mercies

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Philippians 1:24-2:9

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“Love the Lord, love the people. Serve the Lord, serve the people.” I know this is a much-loved phrase for so many of you. That’s how former pastor Pete James sent us out at the end of each worship service. I remember the first time I preached here and used a different blessing at the end of the service—because that was Pete’s phrase, I didn’t have any claim to it—and somebody walked up to me and said, “If the service doesn’t end with ‘Love the Lord, love the people. Serve the Lord, serve the people,’ then something is missing. The whole thing doesn’t do it for me.” Whoa! OK! I talked to a few others—same thing. This has come to be really important to some people, maybe a lot of people! So, that’s what I’ve said since. The first time I used it, I felt like I should have said, “Well, as Pastor Pete always says...” because it’s a borrowed phrase, and I want to attribute material that comes from others to them, but that would have made no sense in that spot in the service. I thought: “OK, it’s God’s sending words,” and I’m not speaking for Pete, I’m speaking for God! And, really, it *is* a great charge to bring, and to keep, when leaving worship.

What I personally love about the phrase is that our work of loving the people, serving the people is rooted in the work of the Lord who first loves people and serves people, and that our love of and service to people is grounded in our love for the Lord and as service *to* the Lord. Yet, let’s think a bit deeper for a moment. When our desire is to serve the Lord by serving people, along with the Lord, where might that desire originate? Compassion, which is also rooted in the Lord.

That’s how Paul sets up his understanding of compassion and service in his letter to the Philippian Christians: “For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ... to believe in him...” (Philippians 1:29). Your faith in Christ is a gift of the Holy Spirit. Chapter 2, v. 1 reads: “If (better translated, *since*) you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with his Spirit,” then “tenderness and compassion” will grow in you and overflow out of you. From “love the Lord” comes “love the people.” To “serve the Lord,” is to want “to serve the people” and to actually do service for people—all of which comes by the blessing of God, “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit” abiding in us always. **Compassion** was once a verb meaning “to suffer with” or “to undergo with”—in the sense that we would go along on a journey with someone in a certain situation to bring them through and out of that situation—to meet the need, solve the problem, rid the pain, not *for* them, but *with* them.

The interesting thing about compassion is that I can’t find a single instance in the Bible where it is commanded. Compassion is of the heart—it has to do with the condition of your heart—no one can command a heart to *do*. Paul writes of “tenderness” and “compassion.” The Greek word for “tenderness” is literally, bowels—it’s the feeling that you have in your gut for someone and their situation that leads to action, because of the condition of your heart. So, compassion is never commanded, but it is *commended*—to those whose heart and gut has been changed by Jesus Christ. Be who you are!

“Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with *compassion*, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience” (Colossians 3:12)—because you can! And so you will! It’s who you are now!

So, what is Compassion? What are the components of true compassion? Let me point out first what it is not:

1. It is not sentimentality: “Awww...that’s too bad;”
2. It’s not sympathy: you feel badly;
3. It’s not even empathy, where you feel like you can really relate to someone’s situation: “I feel your pain;”
4. It’s not stoicism either: “Hey, buck-up, get tough, pull yourselves up by your bootstraps, keep a stiff upper lip, give it time.”

Real Compassion is getting personally involved—“suffering alongside,” “undergoing with.” It is a verb! It’s taking action, not just feeling something.

No one says this is easy. Just because we can do something doesn’t make it easy. So what gets in the way sometimes of being truly compassionate?

1. Sometimes people whose problem you’d really like to help with are simply exasperating. They might be arrogant, or might not even think they need help. They might be the opposite, wishy-washy, weak, whatever. Basically, truth be told, we just don’t like them much. There’s a personality block—they just rub us the wrong way.
2. Some people who need to be helped are intelligent, powerful, rich, or even famous—in a society where all those things are too highly valued. It’s hard to be compassionate. Yet, look how many of these kinds of people kill themselves—they have nobody—and we just don’t get it. Seemingly, they had it all, but they really didn’t. They were missing one person to walk with them.
3. Another obstacle to compassion is when we believe someone’s problem to be self-inflicted; “they did this to themselves, it was a choice, they’re just being stupid.” That might be true, but do we know why? Except for the severely mentally ill, most people do what they do for a reason. Can we try to get a handle on the reason? Even if we can’t, might we still not help, somehow, some way? The need is still real.
4. Sometimes, there are problems to which we just cannot relate. We have never been in those circumstances, we never would. We can’t imagine how anyone gets there. Again, ask yourself, why? Ultimately, if you can’t help there, is there another person, or other problem, where you can be supportive?
5. Sometimes people are pushy, aggressive, or weak and slow to move. That just turns us off. Why are they what they are? Maybe more importantly, why does someone turn us off? It could be more about us.
6. Sometimes, it’s sheer distance: you see news footage of starving children in Sudan. It’s far away, what can I do? The hurricane or tornado victims? I can’t just take time off from my job and go there. I don’t know what they need. I don’t know who to send money to.
7. Sometimes fear is an obstacle. I’d like to pick up the hitchhiker but they might be an axe murderer; I could help fix the car on the side of the road, but I might get mugged and robbed; I’d like to help people with AIDS, but I might get sick myself. I can’t write a check; I have bills, too. Yes, much wisdom is required, but sometimes, we may be over-thinking it.

8. Sometimes, we objectify people: all hitchhikers are axe murderers; all those who call the church for help with a bill are scam artists; all Muslims are terrorists; all homeless people are lazy. And more!
9. Sometimes, it's simply, that we're too busy; we think that we don't have time.
10. And sometimes, it's because we're self-centered. Sometimes that's why we don't help, can't help, or won't help. It's all about ME. My time. My talents. My money. My stuff. That might even be why we're so busy.

However, for the person “united with Christ,” who has been “given to believe” (who otherwise would not) and who finds “comfort in his love,” and “fellowship with his Spirit,” we are the recipients of “tenderness and *compassion*,” of the action of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. If not for His grace, where am I? Furthermore, any strengths we have, as well as physical, financial, and material resources, any abilities, any wisdom—it's all grace. We have to think when we are faced with something and someone who needs us that if it wasn't for this/that, that/this—which was all a gift—I could be where they are.

Grace is who my parents were if they were good. Grace is my upbringing. Grace is my extended family. Grace is my I.Q. Grace is even my ability to exercise my I.Q. Grace is the opportunities I was given. Grace is my citizenship. Grace is my neighborhood, if it was a good one. Grace is my schools, my teachers, if they were solid. Grace is my health. Add to all of that and more—grace is my faith in the Giver of all that and the Giver of my eternal salvation and the very ability to believe He did it for me. From top to bottom and back again—it's all grace. If you change any of that, you're not who you are today. You change half of that and you're not even recognizable. You make it negative and dysfunctional, worldly and full of folly, and all bets are off.

If I have strengths/money/talent/time that helps you—it's because of the grace of God in my life. Not that I'm better than you are, or you're inferior to me. Not that I was more deserving and you less so, or that you're somehow being punished. With a deep sense of grace, we can find a sense of commonality with those in need that leads to real compassion. Again, Jesus is our example. Through the incarnation, he became one of us; he was “Immanuel, God with us.” What could he have done for us unless he had become one of us? Next to nothing.

How can we get started? Look at Philippians 2:3-4. There are four actions written of here—two are couched in the negative, two are couched as positives. The two negatives are *commanded*, the two positives are *commended*.

Negative Command #1: “Do nothing out of selfish ambition.”

Negative Command #2: “Each of you should look not only to your own interests.”

Positively Commended #1: “In humility, consider others better than yourselves.”

Positively Commended #2: Each of you, then, should look “also to the interests of others.”

Heed these four things and you will be led to do acts of compassion.

I think it's significant that Paul writes in verse 5, “Your *attitude* should be the same as Christ Jesus,” and then what does he write about? Actions. From good attitudes, real actions. Read on

and you see how Jesus, out of his own “tenderness and compassion,” lived out each of these four things—on our behalf—with action:

1. He “did not consider equality with God something to be grasped; he made himself nothing”—no selfish ambitions or vain conceit;
2. “Taking the very nature of a servant” of God, of human beings—looking not just to his own interests;
3. He “humbled himself and became obedient to death, even death on a cross”—for whom? Us! Looking to the interests of others;
4. It’s hard for me to grasp that Jesus considered others better than himself—I mean, he who was perfect in every way—how can we be better than that? It’s not that we’re really better, but that he is so deeply loving. “Tenderness goes before compassion.” Why else would he have gone all the way to the cross, but out of love?

He “suffered alongside,” he “underwent” sin for us, with us. For people who by their sin had made themselves the enemy of God, his enemy. That’s compassion. Isaiah 53 states, “...by his wounds we are healed.” It doesn’t say by his feelings, by his sympathy, by his empathy, by his pep talks, etc. Read the gospels, “When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them.” “He had compassion and healed their sick.” Jesus had compassion on them (two blind men) and touched them.” “[W]ith compassion Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man”—a leper. Attitude into action. He identified with them and out of his strength helped them. Tenderness, love for another, goes before compassion. Compassion works itself out in real acts—actions—of service that make an actual difference. Real compassion is actually *doing* something with our God-given, grace-breathed strengths, talents, resources, and time.

Marvin Olasky, one of the editors of World Magazine, tells the “Texas story” about a man who drove his car into a ditch in a desolate area. A local rancher came by to help with his big, strong horse named Buddy. He hitched Buddy to the car and then yelled, “Pull, Nellie, pull!” Nothing happened. Then the rancher yelled, “Pull, Buster, pull!” Again, nothing. Once more, the rancher yelled. “Pull, Pokey, pull!” Nothing. Finally, the rancher shouted, “Pull, Buddy, pull!” The big horse easily dragged the car out of the ditch.

Obviously, the motorist was grateful, but also curious. “Why,” he asked, “did you call the horse by the wrong name three times?” The rancher said, “Oh, Buddy is blind and if he thought he was the only one pulling, he wouldn’t even try.”

Here’s the thing: 1. Buddy was strong enough to pull the car out by himself. He just didn’t think so. *Each* of us can make a far bigger difference than we think; we just need to pull. 2. *Yet*, it was nice for Buddy to think that he wasn’t pulling alone—and so it is for us. Maybe more of us would pull and pull harder if we knew that other people are pulling along with us.

Who is God inviting you to “suffer with,” to “undergo with,” to come alongside for as long as it takes? To be part of their solution? Who is the person, what is the cause, that out of love for the Lord, you can love the people, thus serving the Lord by serving the people?

I remember one of the speakers at the Willow Creek conference we hosted a few years back saying that our calling is to add value to every person we encounter, so that everyone we meet knows that they are valued, that they have value in our eyes, and in our hearts. None of us can change the world—that's a myth. But one person at a time, one situation or circumstance at a time, with those people and things that God puts into our path, we can make a difference for that one. We can add value to that one.

Let us live I John 3:18-19: “Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with *actions* and in truth. This, then, is how we know that we belong to the truth....”