

Cultivating a Heart of Compassion

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[0 : 0 0] And when I was first asked to speak on cultivating a heart of compassion, I thought, what a strange passage to put with it. Because as we read about the sheep and the goats, it seems to me to be more about the consequences of not having compassion than it does to be about actually cultivating compassion.

However, as I prepared for the word this morning, I discovered something that, to me, seems like it could actually be the key to cultivating compassion.

But first of all, let's just have a brief look at what compassion actually is. When we think of compassion, we often think of character traits such as kindness and sympathy towards others, don't we?

But there is something deeper and more profound in its meaning than that. The word compassion actually comes from the Latin word *compati*, which means to suffer with.

Compassion means that someone else's suffering becomes your suffering, which isn't a very pleasant thought, is it? Maybe at times that's why we close our heart to compassion.

[1 : 3 0] But today we're looking at cultivating our heart toward compassion. So, suffering, meaning someone else's compassion, excuse me, meaning someone else's suffering becomes your suffering, is why when the sheep say to the Lord, why did we ever do these things for you, Lord?

Jesus is able to reply to them, whenever you did it for the least one of these, you did it for me, because he has entered into the suffering of his children, his brothers and sisters, his people.

He had compassion on them, and he entered into their suffering. He has compassion on us, and he enters into our suffering with us, doesn't he?

Jesus sees the need. Now, someone that is very acquainted with suffering is Job.

And Job struggled to see where God was in his suffering. And yet, he was able to say, in the midst of his suffering, when he couldn't actually see God, Job was able to declare, but God knows the way that I take.

[2 : 5 7] God sees us in our suffering, even when we can't see him. And Jesus, all through the Gospels, noticed the people around him, and he had compassion on them.

We read countless occasions where Jesus noticed needs that the disciples had completely missed and overlooked. Jesus had compassion on the crowds, and he fed them when they were hungry.

He taught them when they had no one to shepherd them. He healed them when they were sick. And he had compassion on individuals, and he noticed individual needs.

He noticed women, whom he healed both physically and emotionally, women who were generally invisible in that society. He noticed the outcasts, and he had compassion on them when they were blind or when they were lepers, and he touched them.

He had compassion on sinners, and he noticed them when he visited with them, and he gave them a sense of worth, like Zacchaeus and the tax collectors who he sat and ate with.

[4 : 13] But notice that Jesus didn't just see people or have a warm, mushy feeling of compassion. He acted on it. And once he'd noticed people and their needs, he responded to that person and to that need with compassion.

He didn't prioritise his own agenda or the task that lay ahead of him over the needs of the people that he encountered. He allowed his compassion to motivate his action.

If compassion is just a mushy feeling, then that's actually pity, isn't it? We can feel pity for someone.

Pity doesn't motivate us to meet their need or to help them change their circumstances, but compassion does. Compassion, according to the dictionary, is a feeling of deep sympathy and sorrow for one another who is stricken by misfortune, accompanied by a strong desire to alleviate the suffering.

[5 : 32] Compassion leads to mercy and acts of mercy, and Jean testified to that fact as the food bank has cultivated a heart of compassion in the lives of people in Clevedon and the surrounding areas.

It's made people notice the need and the people that are in need, and it's motivated them to do something about it. And we're constantly exhorted and encouraged throughout Scripture to be compassionate.

Paul, in his epistles, exhorts us to clothe ourselves with compassion, to carry each other's burdens, to comfort those in trouble like we ourselves have been comforted, to be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other just as God has forgiven us.

And the Psalms promise us that even in darkness light dawns for the upright, for those who are gracious and compassionate and righteous.

So the question remains, if we understand that biblically we are encouraged to be compassionate and Jesus has set us an example of what a compassionate life looks like, then the question remains, how do we cultivate that heart of compassion?

[7 : 09] And this is where the passage that we read comes into play, I think. So, as I was praying and preparing, I feel like the Lord gave me three L's to help us to remember to cultivate compassion.

And the first one is look. We need to take the time to stop and notice where and for whom compassion is needed.

Often we fail to notice other people's needs and the situation therein because we're consumed with our own needs, our own circumstances, our own problems or worries or even our desires, our wishes and our hopes.

And in failing to see the needs of others, we miss the opportunities that God gives us to respond with compassion and to be able to serve him by serving others.

Jesus had the greatest reason I can ever think of to be consumed with his own need. He knew what he had come to do and he knew that the road he was on was leading to Calvary.

[8 : 32] He knew what was going to happen to him. But he didn't allow that anxiety or worry or understanding that awareness of his own circumstances to prevent him from noticing other people and feeling compassion toward them.

he stopped and he noticed as he looked at the lives of those around him. So I encourage you look at the people around you and when you've noticed them then listen.

Once you've noticed people and their situations maybe we need to then see if we can imagine ourselves in their shoes and ask ourselves what would life be like for me if I was in their circumstances?

What would I need? But we know don't we that everyone's different not everyone's the same and not everyone responds in the same way so perhaps the next step in cultivating a compassionate heart is to actually take the time to listen to those people allow them to express their needs and their desires?

Even Jesus didn't assume that he knew what someone needed or wanted. He asked the blind man what do you want me to do for you?

[10:08] And that seems crazy doesn't it? When I very first read that I thought what a ridiculous question but Jesus didn't assume that the man wanted his sight restored he took the time to stop and ask him what is it that you want?

He listened and the last thing maybe we can do after we've looked and noticed those needs after we've listened to people and what they actually need or want then we need to love and this point takes us back to the teaching on the sheep and the goats there's a lot I could say about the passage of the sheep and the goats the significance of the left and the right and all sorts of things but I want to simply draw one point and I think this really is the key to being a compassionate people and Clive's comments illustration at the beginning about when he did his even song and there were four people on the one side and one on the other just beautifully illustrates and he had no idea what I was speaking what I was going to say illustrates what I discovered as I researched sheep and goats because initially

I thought why sheep and why goats what's the difference so I thought well I'll look it up and find out and the thing I discovered the most the biggest difference between sheep and goats is that goats are fiercely independent creatures they prefer to be on their own they like to go off and do their own thing they like to go their own way and find their own path like the one sitting on their own sheep on the other hand prefer to stay with the flock they like eating together playing together living together they love each other and not just in that mushy kind of always and everybody wonderful kind of way because I don't know if you've been around sheep lately but they stink they really stink they choose to love each other even though they stink and the reason I make that point is because us being sheep and being in a flock together doesn't mean that we're necessarily going to find every member of that flock attractive and appealing we might think some people really stink you might be the person that stinks

I might be but they choose to love each other because they're part of one another's flock and in the passage that we read the sheep notice the needs that are there don't they they notice that someone's sick and needs visiting or someone's missing and they're in prison they notice that another person is hungry or someone else can't clothe themselves and this compassion leads to acts of mercy and they begin to meet those needs but what struck me was that it wasn't one sheep meeting the need of every person the flock collectively met the needs that were arising the sheep weren't off doing their own thing they were aware of the needs and they were meeting the needs together so one sheep said well I'll go and visit those in prison and another sheep said well I'll collect some clothes for those that need to be clothed and another one said well I can cook a meal and feed the hungry collectively the sheep because they stay together in the flock they have the support and the resources to look and be aware of the need to take the time to stop and listen because if one of you is listening to a need someone else can be off doing a job and they have enough love amongst the flock to meet those needs because together there is support and resources amongst the flock so it seems to me that the key to developing a heart of compassion is to be a sheep not a goat to stay in fellowship with the flock and not be a goat going off going on your own thinking you know better than everybody else or wanting to carve your own path and be independent or maybe deciding that they all stink too much

I want to go away from that smell but actually having the time and the resources to meet each other's needs because you've chosen to be part of this flock you've chosen to do life with these sheep so in closing just ask yourself are you a sheep or are you a goat but don't decide according to how many needs you've gone off and met individually this isn't a comparison contest it's not about tallying up I've met ten needs you've only met two rather I think we should measure if we're a sheep or if we're a goat according to whether we prefer to just go off on our own or whether we want to stay in close fellowship with one another with the other members of our flock where collectively we can work together to do for the least of these whatever is needed and in doing so know that we together are serving the Lord the good shepherd of our flock all like have gathered together to do the session