

Compassion: Comfort My People Says the Lord

II Corinthians 1:3-7 Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God. For just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, so also our comfort abounds through Christ. If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation; if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer. And our hope for you is firm, because we know that just as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our comfort.

-Passage highlights the way that suffering and comfort unite Paul, the people of Corinth and God.

Definition

Lit = to suffer with

Compassion is seeing and responding to another person's suffering, or lack, in loving fellowship.

Robert C. Roberts

Anatomy of Compassion

- Suffering and/or Lack
- Proximity
- Identification
- Vulnerability
- Action

Suffering or Lack/Weakness

Suffering

Physical – Disease, chronic pain, childbirth...

Emotional- Effects of trauma, depression...

Relational – Betrayal, divorce, loss of reputation, death of loved ones...

Spiritual- Doubt, isolation...

Weakness/Lack

Physical – Blindness, deafness, deterioration of the body with age, lowered energy...

Emotional- Predisposition to depression, anxiety...

Relational – Immaturity, lack of social graces...

Spiritual- lack of knowledge, poor doctrine...

There is a natural flow:

Proximity → Identification → Vulnerability → Action

Proximity

-Proximity allows for connection

Although we may feel badly for people when we hear about their suffering, it is another thing entirely to *see* their suffering right before our eyes.

Ministry of Jesus

There is a pattern in the gospels when we read about Jesus ministry:

Matt 20:34 “And Jesus *in pity touched their eyes*, and immediately they recovered their sight and followed him.”

Matt 9:36 “*When he saw the crowds*, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.”

Luke 7:13 Widow with the dead son “*And when the Lord saw her*, he had compassion on her and said to her, “Do not weep.”

Feeding the 5000 Matt 14:14 “*When he went ashore he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion on them* and healed their sick.”

Feeding the 4000 Matt 15:31 Then Jesus called his disciples to him and said, “*I have compassion on the crowd because they have been with me* now three days and have nothing to eat. And I am unwilling to send them away hungry, lest they faint on the way.”

The Face

The Dictionary of Biblical Imagery begins its entry on the face by stating, “One’s face is one’s true self.”

Seeing the face of another person can have a profound effect.

Dave Grossman has documented multiple accounts where combatants meet one another on the field of battle, only to run away when they see the face of their enemy. Once they see the face of

their enemy, they realize their enemy is human. A young man with a family, full of fear, and not wanting to kill either.

Pull Back

When faced with suffering of others, we may pull back:

- Physically leave
- Distract ourselves
- Focus on our own suffering
- Don't look/avoid eye-contact (i.e. when passing by a homeless person)

Identification

God has designed us for connection. Empathy/compassion involves almost every system of our brain working together in an integrated manner.

Luke 18:9-14: To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable: “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.’

“But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner.’

“I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God.

We tend to have compassion on those we identify with, and struggle to with those we do not.

Distancing

- Blame or judge others
- Moral distancing. “I’d never...”
- Highlight differences (race, gender, socioeconomic etc.)

Vulnerability

Once we have made ourselves proximate, and identified with another person, we have a decision to be vulnerable or not.

Christ made himself vulnerable. We know this because he wept.

This is the “suffering with” aspect of compassion. When we resist the urge to distance, we suffer with those we identify with. This can be reflexive, but it can also be a choice.

-Union with Christ – our suffering is his, and his suffering is ours. This union with others occurs as well.

Action

James 2:15-17

Paraphrase “If you see that someone is suffering or in need, and you try get rid of them by saying “go in peace” but don’t help them, you have misunderstood what faith is.”

-If there isn’t action of some kind, then it is not compassion.

-If you own hand is in a fire, you pull it out. When someone else’s pain is yours, you pull out their hand or put out the fire.

The Compassion of God

Proximity → Emmanuel: God with us – made himself proximate in every sense of the work – physically, emotionally, experientially.

Identification → Union with Christ: we have a high priest who now sympathizes with our weakness – he became sin, who knew no sin.

Vulnerable → The incarnation: ate, slept, wept, was hunted down, and crucified.

Action → He healed, he spoke words of comfort and truth, and sent his Spirit, and now intercedes for us at the right hand of God.

The God Who Stoops

God’s compassion is different than ours because God has stooped to be united with us. We don’t stoop, and if we think we are, then we’re mistaken. (Robert C. Roberts)

Pity: People tend to not want pity, because there is a sense that it is condescending. God has pity while we are beggars helping fellow beggars.

Compassion and Innocence

Book *Empathy Gap*, cites a study that identifies the homeless as the people who receive the least amount of compassion/empathy. When trying to understand why, researchers hypothesized that it is because people tend to assume that the homeless are at fault (i.e. don’t want to get better, lazy etc.) for their homelessness and therefore unworthy of compassion.

The Prodigal Son

“While he was still far off, his father, seeing him, was filled with compassion and ran towards him...”

If innocence is the criteria for compassion, the son would have been made a servant when he returned to his father.

Christopher J.H. Wright *Old Testament Ethics and the People of God* – God saved Israel *first* and *then* gave them the law.

Cultivating Compassion

Study of seminary students at Princeton Theological Seminary. Student walked passed someone in distress on their way to preach about the Good Samaritan. Thinking about compassion is not enough to cultivate compassion within our hearts.

Practice Proximity

Ivan Ilyich – Ivan has been successful until mid-life when he becomes very ill. Family and friends stay away from him, and are even annoyed by his pain. Young man offers his presence and it is the greatest gift to Ivan.

Acquaint Yourself with the Man of Sorrows

-Get to know the grief, and suffering of God. We tend to highlight the guilt of Israel, Egypt, Babylon, but we rarely think on God's suffering his grief, his sense of loss. What is his emotional register?

-Bring your own pain to Jesus and to others in the body of Christ.

Vulnerability

- Start small

- Share with others in a small group

-Accept and ask for help. If you haven't, you won't know how to protect the dignity of those you help.

-See a counselor

Action

-Make eye-contact with other people

-Are their immediate needs that you can address in a way that preserves dignity?

-Express the emotions you are experiencing.

-Give space. Join, *then* act

-Connecting with others who are already acting.