

## PURPOSEFUL COMPASSION

*“Christ has no body on earth but yours, no hands but yours, no feet but yours. Yours are the eyes through which Christ's compassion for the world is to look out; yours are the feet with which He is to go about doing good; and yours are the hands with which He is to bless others now”*

St Teresa of Avila

### What is Compassion?

The word ‘compassion’ comes from two Latin words - ‘suffer’ and ‘with’. Therefore, to show compassion means to **suffer with** someone, to enter into a person’s negative situation and become involved in that person’s distress. Compassion is not a theoretical attitude, but a practical involvement. It involves **doing**, not just thinking or saying! *‘A compassionate response to suffering requires that (a) one be moved by the suffering of the other; (b) act to remove the immediate effects of the suffering; and (c) respond to correct the circumstances which may have given rise to the suffering itself.’* (New Dictionary of Christian Ethics).

There are two aspects of compassion. We could call them the heart and the hands of compassion. *‘Compassion involves both the **emotion** experienced when you are moved by the suffering of others, and the **act** of entering into that suffering with the purpose of relieving it.’* The first aspect, the emotion of compassion, expresses a genuine desire to relieve a person’s suffering. But compassion is more than just a desire. Emotion must lead to *action*.

## Practical Compassion

We see this practical aspect of compassion clearly in Jesus’ parable of the *Good Samaritan* (**Luke 10: 29-37**). A traveller was attacked, stripped, beaten and robbed, and left half dead beside the roadside by his assailants. Two professional religious people - a priest and a Levite - happened to be traveling down that same road later in the day. Seeing the injured victim, they refused to get involved and *‘passed by on the other side.’*

Then a Samaritan traveller - a despised person of mixed-race - came that way. When he saw the wounded man by the side of the road, ***‘he had compassion on him’*** and gave practical assistance to help the victim. Risking being attacked himself, if the robbers were still lurking nearby, the Samaritan got involved in a series of practical solutions. He bandaged the man’s wounds, put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, arranged for him to be cared for, and paid the cost of his accommodation. Notice, he provided out of his own means! Verse 34.. *“He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him.”*

Jesus’ whole point in this parable is to underline the importance of **practical compassion**. *‘Which of these three,’* Jesus asked the lawyer to whom he told the parable, *‘do you think was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?’* The lawyer replied, *‘The one who showed him mercy.’* *‘Go and do likewise,’* says Jesus.

## Christ's Compassion

Jesus' whole life demonstrated God's compassion for people. As He travelled throughout the towns and villages of Galilee, **'he had compassion'** for the crowds of people who flocked to him, *'because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd'* (Matthew 9:36). His heart went out to them. On one occasion, after the execution of John the Baptist, Jesus withdrew by boat across Lake Galilee to a deserted place by Himself. But the crowds got to hear of it, and followed on foot around the lake, interrupting his solitude.

*"When He went ashore, He saw a great crowd; and He had **compassion** for them and cured their sick."* (Matthew 14:14). Instead of grudging their intrusion into His private life, He cared for them and ministered to their needs. Then, when the disciples would have sent the crowd away so that they could go into the nearby villages to buy food, Jesus showed His concern by miraculously feeding them - a vast crowd of *'about five thousand men'*, not counting the women and children (Matthew 14:15-21).

## Compassion and Healing

On a number of occasions Jesus healed sufferers from leprosy, a highly infectious wasting disease that disfigures the flesh. It was so contagious that its victims were quarantined in lonely places away from human society (Leviticus 13:45-46). Instead of being anxious for His own safety and immunity, we see Jesus being willing to allow them near Him and even to touch them, as He laid hands on them and healed them.

Mark describes a desperate solitary leper coming to Jesus, begging Him on his knees, *'If you are willing, you can make me clean.'* **'Moved with compassion,** Jesus stretched out His hand and touched him, and said to him, **"I am willing. Be made clean!"** And immediately the leprosy left him.' (Mark 1:40-42). The man was not only healed of this dreaded disease; but in the process he was loved, valued and affirmed as a member of the community.

The verb translated *'filled with compassion'* or *'moved with pity'* (Mark 1:41) literally means *'moved in his intestines'*, or *'deeply stirred'* - it's an inward, gut reaction to another person's suffering. I believe that this element of compassion must have been a key in Jesus' miraculous healings. And you will find that He was equally at ease showing kindness to small groups of friends as He was to vast crowds of strangers. Whether a person was with just a few others or part of a large crowd, Jesus treated each one *'personally'*, showing genuine concern for each distressed individual. The miraculous follows the compassionate!

## Compassion for Sinners

Jesus' compassion was not confined to cases of physical need or suffering. He earned the nickname *'friend of sinners'* because of His tenderness towards those who were ostracized from respectable society or burdened with moral failure. Matthew owed his conversion to Jesus' personal invitation to follow him, when he was working as a despised tax collector, a symbol of the hated Roman power occupying Palestine at the time (Matthew 9:9).

And Matthew held a party to celebrate his conversion, to which he invited Jesus, along with *'many tax collectors and sinners'* - his former partners in crime. Criticized by Pharisees of the religious establishment for keeping bad company, Jesus spoke of the priority of **compassion** for the needy in society: *'Those who are well have no need of a physician, but only those who are sick. Then He added, "Now go and learn the meaning of this Scripture: 'I want you to show mercy, not offer sacrifices.' For I have come not to call those who think they are righteous, but those who know they are sinners."* (Matthew 9:12-13 - quoting Hosea 6:6).

Once the scribes and Pharisees brought a woman caught in adultery to Jesus in the temple, challenging him to uphold the law of Moses, which sanctioned stoning her to death for this offense. Jesus didn't reply, but bent down to write on the ground, humbling himself to be beside the woman in her fear and vulnerability. *'Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her', He said to the proud men gathered around to condemn her. One by one they sneaked off, leaving only Jesus and the woman. Then he straightened up and said, 'Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you? She said, 'No one, sir.' Jesus replied, 'Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.'* (John 8:2-11).

Here we see that compassion is not weakness, but associated with courage and authority. It is a life-transforming quality. Love and holiness are closely linked. *'God's righteousness is also His compassion, He embraces especially the cause of the poor and oppressed.'* It is grace in action!

Jesus' identified with this woman - even to the point of being ready to be stoned with her. Because He had shown mercy to her, He had the moral right to say to her (as she stood up), unexpectedly reprieved from death, ***'Go and live a new life, and don't sin again.'***

### **Purposeful Compassion**

Jesus didn't limit compassion to personal relationships. He left nothing to chance. His 'Nazareth Declaration', announcing His strategic plan at the very outset of His public ministry, quoted the comprehensive charter of the prophet Isaiah (61:1-2):

*The Spirit of the Lord God is upon Me,  
because the Lord has anointed Me;  
to bring good news to the oppressed,  
to bind up the broken hearted,  
to proclaim liberty to the captives,  
and release to the prisoners;  
to pronounce the year of the Lord's favour.*

Jesus' compassion had a **purpose**. It addressed both the *spiritual roots* and *social consequences* of people's problems. He brought hope, where people had abandoned hope. He declared forgiveness, where people were tormented by guilt. He brought inner release, where people were oppressed by evil spirits. He brought healing, where there was sickness. He fed the hungry, where there was hunger. Compassion is concerned for people's spiritual and social problems. In Jesus, God has shown mercy to us. We should therefore be **active** in showing **compassion** to others. This could change our world!