

5. Having Compassion

After working five years in an emergency room, Patricia Miller had grown insensitive to people and their real needs. One day as she was registering a young woman who had overdosed and attempted suicide, she grew impatient with the woman's unkept, bleary-eyed mother. The mom had been awakened in the night by police and could only speak in a whisper. When Patricia finally got all the needed information, she jumped up to copy the medical cards and then stopped in her tracks. Somehow she felt God's grief for this mother and daughter and his rebuke that "You didn't even look at her." She repented on the spot, turned and sat down by the distraught woman and covered her hands with her own. Then she looked into her eyes with all the love that God could flood through her and said, "I care. Don't give up." Then she sat and listened as the mother wept and poured out her story. When she finally stopped crying she thanked Patricia for listening.

Seeing people and Having compassion often go hand in hand, as this story illustrates. In this program, we are not seeking to be empowered merely to perform a method of outreach. Instead, we want to change the world like Jesus, and so we must truly care. He reached out in genuine compassion. An impersonal method of outreach that is memorized and "used" on people is counter to the way of the kingdom.

This week we will explore the second part of the SHARE acronym, **H**aving compassion. (Can you remember what the other letters stand for?—see pp 31-32). Before we delve in, turn to the end of this lesson and take a look at the applications. That will orient you to what we are working toward and give you the opportunity to set a time when you can do them. Remember, this is training and we learn by doing.

The Need for Compassion

God is "the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort" (2 Corinthians 1:3). He is like the Father in the parable of the prodigal son, who saw his sinful son returning home from the far country and was "filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him" (Luke 15:20).

Jesus, too, was characterized by compassion. Our key passage describes him that way, and it was a key motivation for his ministry (Matthew 9:36). Elsewhere we see him having compassion for crowds in which many were sick or were lacking food, blind men who called out for help, a leper who came before him, a father whose son was being destroyed by a spirit, and a widow whose only son had recently died (Matthew 14:14;

15:32; 20:34; Mark 1:41; 9:22; Luke 7:13). I believe Jesus has compassion still today on people who are vexed by Satan with all sorts of troubles, and it is right for us to tell them that Jesus cares for them.

That is not enough, however. Jesus' example of compassion also calls us to be compassionate to others in his name. In other places, his word directly urges us to be compassionate (Ephesians 4:32; Colossians 3:12; 1 Peter 3:8). We need to be compassionate toward people because God and Jesus are and because other Scriptures directly call us to it.

Compassion is also something people need. No one really wants to be treated a doctor who has all the answers but no bedside manner. In fact, my wife refuses to go to any doctor who doesn't listen and care. People are mind, body, soul and spirit, and need help that addresses all these things. Compassion is an important part of that help.

1. What effect do you think it has on people when we show them genuine compassion?

The Feeling of Compassion

The verb for compassion means to show pity or feel tenderness toward someone. It does not have the negative connotation that pity sometimes has today, like when someone says they pity someone in a condescending way. Rather, it is to genuinely care about someone's trouble or pain. I like the NIV translation of Luke 7:13, "his heart went out to her."

Leonard Sweet tells the story of visiting a little girl who was dying of cancer. Her body was disfigured by her disease and the treatment. She was in pain constantly. Sweet was overcome by her suffering. But even more overpowering was the presence of the girl's grandmother lying in bed beside her with her huge body embracing that precious eight-year-old. Her great, gentle arms were wrapped around the girl. She never spoke but simply held her, participating in suffering that she could not relieve. Words cannot express the magnitude of her love and compassion.

The noun for compassion literally means intestines or bowels, but it is used primarily to refer to the heart, affections, or tender affections of someone. Compassion is something we feel in our gut toward people who are hurting or in need. Some examples are the tender, *affectionate* mercy of God toward us (Luke 1:78), the *affection* that Christ has (Philippians 2:1) and that Paul learned and showed toward the Philippians (Philippians 1:8), and the *pity* we have on brothers and sisters in need (1 John 3:17).

Compassion, then, is a feeling first of all. Though Christians sometimes downplay the importance of feelings, compassion is definitely something that is felt. We feel the pity, tenderness or affection. Our hearts go out to people (Luke 7:13). Alternately, we stifle compassion when we close our hearts to people. The word Paul uses for this is “restrict” (2 Corinthians 6:12). In that case, instead of opening our “guts” or hearts to hurting people, we restrict and narrow any feeling. Understanding that compassion is a feeling helps us avoid restricting the feeling.

The Doing of Compassion

In addition to this feeling, however, compassion is also demonstrated in action. When the good Samaritan saw the man who had been robbed, he “took pity on him” (Luke 10:33, NIV). The word is the usual word for “compassion” (see ESV). The feeling he felt led him to action—treating his wounds with oil, wine, and bandages, taking him to an inn and paying for his room plus running his credit card through for additional expenses (so to speak, v. 35). His compassion included both feeling and action.

In the case of Jesus, every time he is said to have compassion, it is followed by some kind of action. In the examples given above, he not only saw and felt compassion for those people, he also showed compassion by healing the sick and lepers, feeding the crowds, opening the eyes of the blind, casting out the demon and raising the widow’s son from the dead. Similarly in the example mentioned from 1 John 3:17, if we see a brother or sister in need and have the means to help them, we must not close our affection toward them. Rather, we are to lay our lives down for them (v. 16) and love them in deed and truth (v. 18).

Jim Johnson and his young son, Jordan, were working with hammers and chisels when Jordan accidentally pounded his finger. He screamed in pain and held back tears, running toward the house to get some ice. Jim followed him to help. He tried to calm down his deeply agitated son and get some ice on his finger. But Jordan hated the ice as much as the wound itself, and he refused to be comforted. Finally, Jim put some ice in a bowl and filled it with water. Jordan agreed to put his hand in the bowl as long as Jim would

put his hand in the bowl also. So the two of them sat there on the cold tile kitchen floor with both of their hands in the ice water, taking them out occasionally to allow the feeling to return. After several minutes Jordan started to feel better and said to his dad, "I'm glad you're here." Even if we can't undo people's problems, understanding and being present with them in their pain helps a good bit. We may not always be able to make the hurt go away, but we let our hearts go out to people and then do the best we can. Compassion is both feeling what others feel and action to help.

2. Which is harder for you, the *feeling* of compassion or the *doing* of compassion? How can you address this?

Hindrances to Compassion

Gordon MacDonald tells about flying to Minneapolis to speak at a conference in the Convention Center. When his taxi stopped at an intersection near downtown, MacDonald noticed a homeless man lurching between the cars in the middle of the street. When the man got right in front of MacDonald's taxi, he fell and landed on his chin, splitting it open and shooting blood all over the place. MacDonald stepped out of his cab and looked at the man only six feet away from him. He remembers four distinct thoughts passing through his mind: I have a brand new suit on that my wife just bought me and can't afford to mess up, I have to get to the convention center to speak fifteen minutes from now, I'm in a strange city where I don't know anyone or know what to do, and I don't have any medical training to know how to help him. Later MacDonald wondered if he also had a deeper thought buried in his heart: if you're dumb enough to get that drunk, why should someone stop and help you? Those thoughts occupied him for long enough that others came rushing to the man's aid. MacDonald got back into his taxi, arrived at the convention center and gave his speech about *sensitivity and caring for the needs of others*. Clearly the morale of the story is not "be like Gordon." Upon reflection MacDonald's own take on the event was, "Isn't that stupid?"

This story raises the question for us, What sort of thoughts and feelings keep us from having compassion on other people? Let's note some barriers, keeping in mind that we are called to have compassion on all kinds of people, including but not limited to those who are the most down and out.

An arrogant, self-sufficient business person who is destroying their health and family by working exceeding long hours also needs compassion.

One major barrier to compassion is judging. If a person is in a bad way and we think they had anything to do with getting themselves there, we may judge instead of feeling compassion. Criticizing, looking down on them, patronizing, and stereotyping are all very similar to judging. We may not be consciously aware of it, but all these things are ways of making ourselves feel superior to them and bolstering our own egos.

Other times we may stifle our compassion because we feel inadequate or overwhelmed. I sometimes think I have to solve all a person's problems if I show any concern for them at all. This is not possible, of course, nor is it necessary. We are not expected to do more than we are able to do.

Another feeling that hinders compassion is fear. We may be afraid that the person will harm us, especially if they are in a condition or situation that seems extremely foreign to us. We may also fear that engaging with them will trigger a long term dependency that we don't want or don't think we can handle. When we are afraid, our desire to protect ourselves may stifle our compassion.

Another hindrance to compassion is not feeling anything at all. When I lived in Philadelphia I was visited by some upper middle class church leaders from a suburb in another part of the country. I don't think they were used to seeing homeless people where they lived. I still remember the comment one church leader made when they began to discuss the homeless people they saw in the city of Philadelphia. "Life is a series of choices," he said. I think he meant that all those homeless people had made bad choices in their lives that ended them up on the streets. There was not a hint of compassion in his statement. I'm pretty sure it wasn't even true, since people become homeless for many different reasons. But even when someone is on the street because of their own choices, we are not excused from compassion. I don't want to be too hard on that man, because I have never been known as "Mr. Compassion," and at that time I was even worse than now. But I do recognize now that the way of Jesus is to let our hearts go out to people.

Compassion is also hindered when we want something from a person or seek to use them in some way. I think we are more likely to do this if the person is not in obvious pain or need, unless it is something that we feel we could take advantage of. We might think we could get something from them, lust for them, compare ourselves to them to make ourselves feel superior, compete with them or even seek to "fix" them for the purpose of making ourselves feel better. All such sinful motivations hinder true compassion.

Sandra Wilson has reminded us that "Hurt People Hurt People." Those who have been hurt sometimes act out in ways that are off-putting, and this can make it hard for us to feel compassion for them. When I lived in Philadelphia I met a man called "Rock." He had a heart and outer shell that were as hard as rock. He was cold, outspoken, blunt and angry. When a young woman in our church persisted in kindness long enough that we finally got to know him a little bit, however, we saw that underneath his shell was pain. The tough exterior was designed to protect him from further hurt. In fact, based on many years of observation, I now believe that when people behave in obnoxious or rude ways to us, it is usually a sign that there is brokenness present somewhere in their lives.

A helpful way of describing this same phenomenon is that Satan can vex a person to the point that they become vexing to others. We usually describe such people as annoying, which is a legitimate translation of "harassed" (see section 4. above). So when a person is hurt to the point that they become annoying, Satan is multiplying his efforts, harassing someone to the point that they harass others. If we are preoccupied with ourselves, we may well respond in a way that continues the damage (Romans 12:21). But if we know that Satan lies behind people's vexations and troubles, we may be able to have the compassion Jesus had.

3. Does it help you feel compassion when you realize people's problems and even their sometimes annoying treatment of you can ultimately be traced back to the Devil? How can you assimilate this perspective into your thinking?

Along this line it is important to notice that the brokenness of people was the very occasion of Jesus' compassion for them. Being a Christ-follower doesn't mean you have compassion on people unless they have problems that make them act out toward us. Jesus "had compassion on them, *because* they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd" (Matthew 9:36). He didn't let those things cause him to harden his heart or become restricted in his affections. Rather, his heart went out to them. If we remember that the brokenness can ultimately be traced back to the Evil One, it will help a lot. We need to deny ourselves enough to get past any affront we may feel from people so that our hearts can go out to them.

Resources for Growing Compassion

In this chapter we have noticed Jesus' example of compassion. Jesus is a first and powerful motivation for us to be compassionate.

A second resource that empowers compassion in us is self-awareness. Anytime I think about annoying people, I try to remember that I am someone else's annoying person. I know my mother wouldn't have believed that, but I do. If we are developing humility in Christ, we will better see and more readily admit our own weaknesses and sins. As with the high priests in the Old Covenant, this self-awareness will help us "deal gently with those who are ignorant and going astray," since we, too, are "subject to weakness" (Hebrews 5:2).

Along that line, scientist, inventor and Christian, George Washington Carver, advised, "Resolve to be tender with the young, compassionate with the aged, sympathetic with the striving, and tolerant of the weak and the wrong. Sometime in life you will have been all of these."

8. Think of a time when you were in a bad way and someone had genuine compassion for you. How did it make you feel? Did it have any other effect on you?

A third resource we have for developing compassion is the power of the Holy Spirit. Compassion is not specifically mentioned as part of the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5, but I think it is (cf. Philippians 2:1). After all, the desire of the Spirit is to make us like Jesus. If we keep in step with the Spirit, allowing him to lead us, he will make us compassionate like Jesus. So, in addition to the powerful example of Jesus we have the power of the Spirit of God inside us to mold us into his image. Because of this, prayer and simply choosing to open our hearts to people's needs are ways we can cooperate with the Spirit and so grow in compassion.

9. How would you apply each of the three resources mentioned on the previous page? That is, what are some tangible ways you could benefit from Jesus' example, from awareness of your own weaknesses and sins, and from the power of the Spirit to change us?
10. Which of the three resources do you think is or can be most helpful to you?
11. We've been thinking about compassion mostly in terms of helping people with their hurts and needs. But Jesus' compassion sometimes led him to teach (Mark 6:34). What is the role and the importance of compassion when we share the good news with others?

So, we can get involved in changing the world like Jesus by **Seeing** people and **Having** compassion on them. It is not enough, however, to agree with this. We must actually do something.

For Prayer and Application (exercises)

1. Continue to pray about matters we have mentioned previously (you should have a sheet in the front of your notebook) and also add to your regular prayers a request that God would help you to **See** people and **Have** more compassion for them. You may also want to pray that he will help you with self-denial or other specific things that may be hindering your compassion. Then, be sure to "keep in step" with the Spirit by choosing to open your heart to others when you have the opportunity.

2. Go back to the airport or mall or wherever you went last week to see people, only now spend some more time consciously allowing yourself to *feel compassion* for them. You may not know a thing about them or you may be able to pick up on some things. Regardless, make sure you don't restrict your compassion by judging them or doing any of the other things that hinder compassion. Try to consciously see and feel compassion for people at church this week as well.
3. Anytime you see or hear about bad things happening to people through media or conversation, listen. Let it soak in. Have compassion. Let yourself feel their pain. Again, don't judge or explain, even if the people brought some of the trouble on themselves.
4. Add compassion to your briefing for the special mission you are undertaking whenever you venture out of your home to shop or go to work or whatever. Know that you are called not only **See** the people and assess them as Jesus did but also to **Have** compassion on them. If your compassion moves you to do something to help someone, go ahead!
5. Jot down a few notes or reflections on these experiences.

My guess is that some of these exercises will be uncomfortable at least and perhaps even painful. They are for me. If we see people who are broken and hurting and allow ourselves to feel compassion, we will hurt for them or with them, and that isn't usually pleasant. We may also feel uncomfortable because we don't know what to do or feel helpless. Even though all these feelings are uncomfortable, they are godly (Matthew 8:16-17), so we are doing the right thing by refusing to harden our hearts. Hopefully these feelings will also lead us back here to see what else Jesus calls us to do. But no fudging! For now, stay focused on learning to **Seeing** people and **Having** compassion.