

CHARACTER MATTERS

Week Nine | March 3, 2019 | Compassion: Revealing the Gospel with Our Actions

PREPARATION

GETTING READY

Before your group meets next time, spend some time alone in God's Word reading through this week's texts. Pray that God, through His Spirit, would bring to life the truth of this text and how it applies to your life.

THIS WEEK

KEY BIBLICAL TRUTH

Christians are called to have compassion on others in need because Jesus showed compassion on us when we were dead in our transgressions and sins.

THEOLOGY APPLIED

Being compassionate to others helps us put the gospel on display in tangible ways.

MEDITATE

"To the contrary: 'If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. For by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.' Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (Romans 12:20–21).

GETTING STARTED

+ Use this section to prepare your heart and mind for the truths of this week. This section will help to introduce the focus of this week's lesson.

Character matters because it is our character and behavior that put on display what we believe. The gospel is at its essence “good news.” Good news is announced. It is declared and spoken. It’s a verbal proclamation of an event that has occurred. But good news never exists by itself. It doesn’t leave you the same way you were before. Good news changes you. It changes your mood, your behavior, your emotions.

Character matters because the truths and theology and doctrines of Christianity are declared, revealed, and manifested through your character. The question, “How should I live?” is answered by considering “What do I believe?” Your lifestyle choices and decisions are shaped by the system of beliefs you adhere to, whether you consciously realize it or not.

Francis Schaeffer’s observation that “biblical orthodoxy without compassion is surely the ugliest thing in the world” is powerful, yet so simple. How can you not be compassionate if you believe in the gospel? At its core, the gospel is about how God looked at us in our helpless and undeserving state, dead in our trespasses and sins, and He made us alive in Christ because of His great mercy and love (Ephesians 2:4–5). God was compassionate to us. He had sympathy and concern for us in the midst of our helplessness. He acted on our behalf and for our good with no benefit, but instead only loss, to Himself. Ultimately, the gospel message is a truth centered on a compassion that necessitates actions of compassion in response.

Despite the fact that it is at the core of Christianity, compassion is foundationally difficult. Loving other people is hard work. In our day and age, simply knowing and being known by our neighbors can be challenging. It’s normal and natural to gravitate towards people more like ourselves. We prefer, subconsciously, to spend time with people who look like us, dress like us, vote like us, and believe like us.

G. K. Chesterton said, “We make our friends; we make our enemies; but God makes our next-door neighbor.” In a society and culture that affords us so much power to personally choose and cater to our own preferences and likes, we have little control over our neighbors. Perhaps God places our neighbors in our midst not so that we can like and befriend them, but so we can love them unconditionally and show the same compassion toward them that God showed to us. We have no opportunity to exercise compassion if we are never around people who are in need of it. Our interactions with our neighbors provide us with opportunities to show the importance of biblical compassion by allowing our character to demonstrate what it is that we believe in.

Q: *In what other ways does compassion embody the gospel message? How does God saving us in Christ show what compassion is about?*

Q: *Who are your [figurative] neighbors? How well do you know them? Do you have*

people in your life who are in need of compassion? If not, what steps can you take to build relationships with your neighbors?

❏ UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

The parable of the good Samaritan in Luke 10 is undoubtedly one of Jesus's most famous parables. It is another classic case of someone trying to put Jesus to the test, and Jesus is well prepared to answer and challenge any question He is given. The entire parable's meaning shifts when two things are remembered. First, Jews and Samaritans did not like each other, so the fact that a Samaritan was the one willing to help this injured man is astounding and remarkable. Second, Jesus tells this parable as He is headed to the cross. He tells His listeners to love and care for undeserving people just as He is making final preparations to die a death He did not deserve for the sake of a people who did not deserve His sacrifice. Jesus is the ultimate Good Samaritan who showed mercy to strangers and then welcomed them in as family.

1. SHOWING COMPASSION—WHY
2. SHOWING COMPASSION—WHO
3. SHOWING COMPASSION—HOW
4. SHOWING COMPASSION—WHEN

GOING DEEPER

+ This next section will help show what God's Word says about this week's particular focus. Read through the Scripture passages and connect the text to this week's biblical truth.

SHOWING COMPASSION—WHY

❏ LUKE 10:27-28

Q: *In your own words, how would you answer the question posed to Jesus in Luke 10:25, “What shall I do to inherit eternal life?”*

Q: *Jesus gives an interesting response suggesting that if we hope to have eternal life by keeping the commands to love God with our whole person and our neighbor as ourselves, then we must keep these and every other commandment perfectly. Why is His answer more tongue-in-cheek than actual? How does being on the other side of the cross, historically, help in understanding this?*

In the parable of the good Samaritan, Jesus is connecting how He, as the embodiment of the new covenant, is here to fulfill the old covenant. Jesus Himself said He came not to abolish the law, but to fulfill it (Matthew 5:17). The Old Testament law said if you loved God and loved your neighbor, you would have eternal life. The Great Commandment, as it is known, is the essence of what it meant from the very beginning to be part of the family of God.

Jesus says the same thing in Luke 18 in the parable of the rich young ruler, who asks the same question of Jesus—“What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus answers that if he kept all of the commandments and obeyed fully, then he would be saved. The man was prevented from coming to Jesus, however, because he loved his wealth more than he loved God, and he wasn’t willing to give it up. He didn’t love God with all his heart, soul, and strength, because his love for money was in the way.

Jesus, in His perfect life and sacrificial death on the cross, demonstrates what life in and under the new covenant is all about. The point of both of these parables is that no one is able to love God and love people fully and perfectly. No one is able to keep all of the commandments perfectly and thereby remove every barrier and hindrance to coming to Jesus. All of us have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23). No one is righteous, not even one of us (Psalm 53:3).

The means of inheriting eternal life and having a relationship with God is based on what Jesus has done for us, not on anything we could do on our own. We can’t work our way up to God, so God came down to us through the incarnation of Christ. We are saved, we inherit eternal life, and we are brought into relationship with God through the forgiveness of our sins that Jesus accomplished with His death on the cross for us. Jesus’s death and our forgiveness were completely undeserved and unearned. They were acts of complete and utter grace. God showed compassion on us by sending His Son in the likeness of sinful man to be sin for us so we might

become the righteousness of God (2 Corinthians 5:21).

Why do we show compassion? Because we have been shown compassion. We love, rescue, and are merciful to undeserving people because we were in the same state before Christ came to our rescue. Showing compassion toward others is one of the clearest ways to prove we understand the gospel message and the compassion we have been shown. Showing compassion is one of the clearest ways to visually, tangibly, and powerfully put the gospel message of good news on display. Our acts of compassion declare, “This is what God has done for me!”

Q: *How are you still prone to believe, follow, and live under the old covenant (trying to adhere to the law) rather than the new covenant of grace?*

Q: *If the first part of understanding the gospel is understanding our sinful state, how does the image of compassion help illustrate where our sin kept us before Christ intervened and saved us?*

SHOWING COMPASSION—WHO

■ **LUKE 10:29; LUKE 10:36–37**

Q: *Why do you think this man was trying to justify himself by asking the question, “And who is my neighbor?” How do you try to justify yourself to God?*

Q: *Why can we not properly answer the question, “Who is my neighbor,” until we get to the end of the parable? Jesus redefines “neighbor.” How does this change your thinking about who you consider to be your neighbors?*

When most of us think of our neighbors, we would probably think of the retired couple to the left of us, that young family on the right, and maybe the crazy family across the street with the dog that barks all the time. In our thinking,

we would likely limit our neighbors to the people who live within a small radius of us. And it might be a little unusual to be able to identify or have relationships with specific neighbors, since only 31 percent of Americans say they know all or most of their neighbors.

It's really hard to show love and compassion to your neighbors if you don't even know them. So, one of the first steps of showing compassion and being compassionate is figuring out who those people are—those present in your life for you to show compassion to.

Of course, compassion should be shown to your actual neighbors. How could your neighborhood change if you simply loved, practiced hospitality toward, and were compassionate to the people around you? What Jesus is getting at in the parable of the good Samaritan is clearly more than simply being compassionate to the people in close proximity to you, but it certainly isn't less. If showing compassion is a step you need to take, then the easiest and most plausible place to start is literally right next door.

But Jesus answers the “who is my neighbor” question a second way in Luke 10. The neighbor is also the one who shows mercy (Luke 10:37). Jesus says a neighbor is anyone who is able to serve and help and care for someone in need. We see this in the fact that both a priest and Levite pass by this man on the road, while a Samaritan man was willing to stop and help. The two most likely people to help—based on race, social status, profession, or nationality—did not. The man least likely to help, based on those things, was the one who did. The parable of the good Samaritan illustrates what practicing biblical compassion is all about—unlikely people unexpectedly doing unremarkable things for undeserving people.

Acts of compassion are never the central thing, in and of themselves. Compassion is simply doing things like bandaging a wound, fixing a tire, or providing a meal. They're generally practical, normal, necessary things. What makes compassion astounding is how unlikely the relationship is between the giver of compassion and the receiver of it.

Jews weren't even to be in the same room as Samaritans, much less talk to or touch them. For a Samaritan man to care for a Jewish man and give money to see to it that he was cared for was extremely unlikely and unexpected. And this is who Jesus says is our neighbor. Anyone you see, anywhere you go, who is in need of anything. Compassionate people show mercy and meet needs tangibly, practically, and willingly.

Q: *What is your biggest barrier to regularly engaging people with compassion—the unexpectedness of it, the fact that it's normally unremarkable, or that it's for*

undeserving people?

♀: *What practical step[s] can you take to get to know the people who live near you? If you already know most of them, what could you do to deepen one of those relationships?*

SHOWING COMPASSION—HOW

☞ LUKE 10:30–35

♀: *Why did the priest or the Levite not offer to help the wounded man? Put yourself in their shoes to gain perspective.*

♀: *What would keep you from being like the Samaritan? What did the Samaritan risk by being willing to help, serve, and love?*

We show compassion because we are people who have been redeemed and loved and shown compassion by Christ. We show compassion to anyone we see who is in need of mercy and our help. But how do we do it? Do we look for people of different nationalities or ethnicities who have a physical injury that needs caring for? That is certainly one way to show compassion.

Our character is so important and significant to our spiritual lives because it is an indication of how we practically and regularly practice what we believe. It is through our character that we are able to connect the orthodoxy and truth that we hear on Sundays to living it out through the rest of the week.

Compassion can't be done on our own terms. Compassion is about meeting other people's needs. It's about not taking someone's background into account and focusing instead on the need at hand. It is based on other people's agendas rather than our own. The minute the Good Samaritan saw this wounded man, he had compassion on him (Luke 10:33). He didn't have to be coerced or begged to show compassion. It was a natural response. The only thing that mattered in that moment was that this man was in need.

The parable of the good Samaritan gives at least six helpful reminders of how best to show compassion:

- A willingness to be inconvenienced
- An awareness of present and urgent needs
- An acceptance of our own personal loss in meeting a need
- A disregard for prejudice or discrimination
- A love for anyone and everyone
- A providential trust in the Holy Spirit

You cannot regularly show compassion until you practice doing these things. Showing compassion can be costly, in terms of both time and money. Showing compassion happens by being aware of the people you encounter and by following and trusting the Holy Spirit as He puts people and opportunities in your path.

♀: *Which of the six reminders above is the hardest for you to practice?*

♀: *What are you most scared of losing by showing compassion to your neighbor? Is it your reputation, your money, your time, your comfort?*

SHOWING COMPASSION—WHEN

☒ LUKE 10:33–37

♀: *Are most of your compassionate acts scheduled and planned in advance, or are they random and organic as needs and opportunities arise?*

♀: *Do you think the priest and Levite didn't want to help the wounded man? What most likely kept them from showing compassion? How can you relate?*

One of the main observations from the parable of the good Samaritan is that regular acts of compassion cannot be planned or scheduled. We show compassion simply by being aware of the needs and opportunities around us. This doesn't mean that some compassion can't be organized and planned. You are most certainly showing compassion if you serve dinner to homeless people every Thursday night at 6:00 p.m. That is meeting a tangible and practical need and showing concern for the misfortune of others. But the Good Samaritan's act of compassion occurred "as he journeyed" (Luke 10:33). He had built margin in his budget and his schedule to allow for meeting needs he saw as he went. The Good Samaritan had adopted a lifestyle of compassion. It wasn't just a service opportunity he had signed up for.

The Great Commission Jesus gave was a charge to make disciples as you go (Matthew 28:19). It wasn't intended to be a special or extraordinary event, but a mindset and regular part of life. Similarly, right after Jesus talks about the Great Commandment with the lawyer at the beginning of the parable, he concludes by telling people to show mercy and give compassion as they go (Luke 10:37). Fulfilling the Great Commission and following the Great Commandment both happen as you go about the normal affairs and rhythms of life. Neither is intended to be a special addition to the Christian life, but rather both are to be regular parts of it.

Just as Jesus shows us that our neighbor is anyone and everyone who is in need of mercy, He also shows that compassion is to be lived out anywhere and everywhere. It is a lifestyle you adopt, not just an action you occasionally perform.

- 🔗: *Have you built margin into your budget and schedule in order to be ready to respond to the needs of others? How so? If not, what practical steps can you take to build margin in those areas of your life?*
- 🔗: *How can beginning to engage in acts of compassion programmatically help you develop it as a lifestyle you can practice organically?*

NEXT STEPS

+ *Connect the truths from God's Word to your daily life. Process how what you've learned this week will impact the way you live beyond today and into the future.*

- ♀: *What ministry in the church could you get involved with (or perhaps start) that would allow you and others an opportunity to practice mercy and compassion to those in need in your community?*
- ♀: *How can you adjust or change your schedule and/or your budget to create margin in your time and resources so you can respond in compassion to the needs of people “as you are going?”*
- ♀: *Who is someone so radically different than you (like the Jew-Samaritan relationship) that you could show compassion to this week in a way that would be astounding to the outside world?*

PRAY

+ *Use these prayer points to connect your time in prayer to this week’s focus.*

Our most gracious heavenly Father:

- Thank you for showing compassion to me by sending your Son to die in my place, forgiving my sins, and making me alive in Christ.
- Your love for me was completely undeserved and unearned. It was all an act of grace. By your Holy Spirit, make me compassionate and gracious to those around me, just as You have been to me.
- Give me the wisdom and discernment to see people the way you do. May I not exclude or disregard anyone I come across who is in need of my help, love, or care.
- By Your Spirit, help me build margin into my life so I can meet the needs of people I encounter. I don’t ever want to be too busy to help someone in need.
- Would You give me a love and compassionate heart for all people—for the people who live next door to me and for people I meet who are nothing like me, but need your love and truth displayed to them.

Two great books that consider the question, “Who is my neighbor?” and how to practically serve your neighbor:

- *The Art of Neighboring: Building Genuine Relationships Right Outside Your Door*, Jay Pathak and Dave Runyon
- *The Gospel Comes with a House Key: Practicing Radically Ordinary Hospitality in a Post-Christian World*, Rosaria Butterfield

