

Russell Kelfer

What is Compassion?

535-A

Series: The Beatitudes



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INTO HIS LIKENESS RADIO

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Note: Russell wrote each of these lessons in a manner that would enable him to clearly communicate them to his weekly class. The grammar or punctuation you encounter may not be technically perfect, but you will certainly “hear” his unique gift for making the message applicable to the common man in everyday situations.

It’s been said of him that he was really a writer who read his stuff. And that’s a very accurate statement!

May you be richly blessed as you “hear” as you read.

What is Compassion?

In our last lesson we learned that Christians alone can show true mercy, because mercy is a gift from the Holy Spirit to those who respond to the Word and receive Jesus Christ. Mercy is to be shown by Christians to unbelievers and even more so to believers, especially to those who are of the household of faith. Even showing mercy to fellow believers is to be a testimony to the unbeliever. Paul tells us this is to demonstrate the grace of God. Mercy is to be shown especially to those who need it. The more they need it, the more we show it. Lastly, mercy should be shown in proportion to a person's awareness that he needs it. Thus, this gives him the ability to receive it.

Most important of all in the last lesson, we closed with the truth that man's real problem is spiritual. He has a heart problem. As a primary essential for Christians, in the meeting of physical and emotional needs, we need to have as a root purpose the leading of men and women to the realization of their spiritual need. This can be met only in Jesus Christ. In other words, you and I are God's R.N.'s, Registered Neighbors. Our responsibility is to be an assistant to a heart specialist.

Showing mercy is an activity whose objective is spiritual. We see needs and in obedience we meet those needs. In doing so, we are extending mercy. Now I suppose we could stop here in our study of mercy and go on to the next Beatitude; but I think if we did that, we would circumvent the real crux of the matter. We would be obedient perhaps, even merciful Christians, but I wonder if we would not be without compassion. I believe mercy can be subdivided into five basic aspects.

ASPECTS OF MERCY

You see with the mind. You sense, you search and you suffer with the heart. Then you serve with the will. We have mind,

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emotion and will. For the last two lessons we have basically dealt with the mind and the will. You see a person's need, and you become aware of it. By an act of the will, you choose to meet that need through mercy by showing them the love of God when you tangibly meet their needs. What I want to share with you is that in doing that, there is something lacking. It is cold. It is factual and to a degree, it may be effectual; but I believe both we and the objects of that mercy miss the point. It is the act of the emotion, entering in, that we will define as compassion, that turns an act of mercy into fruitfulness and gives the glory of God.

We see a person in need. Then we sense his heart's desire, his real heart's need. We then search our own hearts for the capacity to identify with that need. We suffer emotionally, if necessary, with him in his need. Then, having become compassionate, we have the ability to serve with mind, emotion and will. In other words, to really exhibit mercy, we must experience compassion.

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Cruden defines compassion as: "literally suffering with another." Bullock describes it: "to feel the bowels yearn, to have pity in the inward parts, the seat of one's feelings and affections". In other words, compassion is to be turned inside out by experiencing another's torment. That is compassion. It is, in essence, experientially entering into the perspective of one who is in need, until you share his hurt or his loneliness or his fears with him.

I was trying to get a handle on it as I prepared this lesson, and I just couldn't do it. Some friends were down at our business having their car worked on. While they were there, lunch time came around. The husband suggested going down to an elegant diner a few doors away to try the Blue Plate Special. We walked down the street to the restaurant and gorged ourselves. As we walked back, I felt my foot come down on something that didn't feel like sidewalk. When I lifted my foot, there was a tiny sparrow on the concrete. I hadn't squashed him, because I had lifted my foot up in time. He was looking a bit bewildered and obviously couldn't fly. I said

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something to my friends, and my wife and I walked on. We looked back and the husband was not with us. He had picked up this little sparrow and had nursed it and taken it to some high shrubs next to a telephone pole so that if there was any way it could make its way to fly, it would be safe. The wife turned to me and said, “That is his mercy.”

This example kept coming back through my mind all week. I was totally concerned for the sake of my conscience whether I had killed the bird or not, but I wasn't really concerned about the bird. I can't speak for the wife, but the husband had a compassion for that bird. A great concept kept rolling through my mind, that the Scripture tells us that not a sparrow falls, but that the God of eternity stops what He is doing, stoops down and makes note of it. The husband gave me a real picture of that. That is compassion. It is reaching out to the sparrows of this world, who maybe aren't so important, who are wounded, falling, and unable to fly on their own, and helping to put them somehow into the shelter of the one who can protect and perhaps heal them. In all cases, we must love them. That is compassion.

JESUS, OUR EXAMPLE

The compassion of Jesus may have been the most remarkable characteristic to the people of His day. Barclay tells us in his commentary:

“God’s compassion to the world must have been a staggering thing. The noblest faith in antiquity was that of stoicism. The Stoics believed that the primary characteristic of God was apathy. By apathy, they meant the incapability of feeling. If someone can make another one sad or glad or joyful, it means, at least for that moment, that they can influence another person. The Stoic felt that if he could influence anyone for that second or even for that moment, he is greater than or superior to the one he influences. Therefore, their reasoning went on, no one can influence God, so God must be incapable of feeling. Into this philosophy men were presented with the amazing concept of one who was the Son of

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God and yet was moved with compassion, moved to the depth of His being, again and again and again. For many that is the most precious thing about God.”

What kind of concept of God do you have? Have you ever stopped to think about it? Do you see Him as cold, factual, uncaring, even vindictive? If you see God in that light, you do not know the God of Scripture. Look at Psalm 145:8-9 sometime and diagram it. You will get a picture of the God of compassion. Draw a triangle to represent God. From that triangle, draw out at least five circles. In those circles, put the demonstrated characteristics of God. Through the week, concentrate and focus on these characteristics and identify them by using a concordance or Bible dictionary. You will be amazed. Psalm 145:8-9 says that,

The Lord is gracious, full of compassion; slow to anger, and of great mercy.

The Lord is good to all: and his tender mercies are over all of his works. (Psalm 145:8,9)

Watch that unfold sometime and you will see who God is and what God is like and how He feels about you and about me.

In this lesson we are going to follow Jesus. We will superimpose our circumstances upon His responses and see if in some supernatural way God might communicate to us the essence of compassion, that inner emotion that motivates the Christian to act in mercy. First of all, we will walk with Jesus as He had compassion on those who crossed His path in His regular, day to day life. As Jesus walked, He preached. Consider your life as a housewife, a salesman, a clerk, a manager, a laborer or whatever walk of life you have. Visualize Jesus' response in specific situations. We will try to grasp what the word compassion really means.

Before we begin in Matthew 20:30-34, I want to give you a little backdrop by looking at the context of the passage. In verses 17-19, Jesus had called His disciples aside and cautioned them that He was about to be betrayed, tried and crucified. Have you ever stopped to realize how heavy the heart of Jesus must have been about this time? Think of His unfinished business

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from man's perspective: the establishing of the church, the discipling of His followers, the preaching of the principles. There was so much to be done and so little time remained. By now, we would have imagined that His followers would have such a burden for souls that they couldn't stand it.

In verses 20-24, we read of the absence of sensitivity of those who were closest to Him. James and John's mother approaches Jesus to ask if her sons could have reserved seats in heaven, the best in the house. I don't know how Jesus felt about that, but have you ever had your children or those you were discipling, finally get a handle on humility and spiritual things, then they come up with the question, "What's in it for me?" You just sigh in disbelief and think, "Oh, I thought they had the picture." But you see, we all suffer from the same self-centeredness.

In verse 22, Jesus rebukes and corrects the disciples, and they argue with Him. He says, "Do you think you can drink from the same cup I can?" They respond, "You bet, Lord, we're the ones who can. Don't tell us what we can't do." The Lord said, "No you can't, you don't even understand the question, how can you give Me an answer." He goes on to explain the reverse order of the Kingdom one more time. He says that the lower you get, the greater you are. The more you serve, the higher you go. The more you reach and claw for the top, the lower you go. It is a reverse order of spirituality. He that wants to be at the top must begin at the bottom. He that would be greatest among others must be a servant. That is Christianity.

After this, Jesus and His disciples started walking that treacherous walk from Jericho to Jerusalem. It was one of the most dangerous journeys in the Middle East because of the looters, bandits and wild animals. As they journeyed, as always, a crowd had formed that was pushing and shoving. Try to imagine what it would be like. Celebrities have experienced this as they try to go about their daily lives with people pushing and shoving to get their autographs, or touch them or get their picture. They experience photographers with their professional flash bulbs glaring in their faces. They never have a moment of peace or quiet. Visualize the shoving and clamoring to be heard. People were wanting to just touch Him

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or to be heard.

We learn from this and other passages that all of this annoyed His disciples. They resented the crowd as an intrusion on their privacy. Some of these people were just curious, as if they were going to a circus, waiting to see who Jesus would heal next. Some were evil men seeking a way to trap Him in a contradiction. They were as cunning as the religious Mafia. Some of them were dirty, lame, blind and helpless. They were unlovely and unlovable outcasts. They slowed Jesus down. They called out to Him while others were trying to hear. The disciples were nauseated at their gall.

Two such men were sitting by the roadside on this occasion. The Scripture tells us,

Behold, two blind men who were sitting by the wayside.
(Matthew 20:30a)

Here the men were. They heard that Jesus was passing by. We read in Luke and in Mark that probably one of these men was Bartamaeus. Maybe he was someone of more noble birth. Maybe he was someone more important than the second one, because we don't read about him anywhere else. Regardless, two blind men were sitting there. The Scripture tells us that they cried out,

Have mercy on us oh Son of David! (Matthew 20:30b)

They knew who He was. They called Him the Messiah. They were desperate to be helped.

Let's look at the compassion of this crowd. We read in the next verse,

The multitude rebuked them. (Matthew 20:31a)

The people said, "Keep still! We can't hear the message." Next we read that they just cried louder,

Have mercy on us, oh Lord, Thou Son of David!
(Matthew 20:31b)

By now, the crowd must have been ruthless. The disciples were still, no doubt, irritated over their recent power struggle. They were not too perceptive of needs of others anyway. They

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were no doubt saying, “Hush those blind men. We want to hear the Master.”

Now here is the key to the whole experience. The next sentence says,

And Jesus stood still. (Matthew 20:32a)

The God of the universe stopped dead in His tracks. What was He going to do? Would He have them flogged for disrespect? Would He speak a word and strike them dead? What insensitivity they had to cry out to the God of heaven. Jesus stopped. Now this wasn't the governor of Jerusalem or the head of the Sanhedrin that Jesus stopped for, this was two blind beggars, sparrows, if you will, and Jesus stopped cold.

I want to ask you a question before we go on. Would you have stopped? You have a ministry to perform to all of the people around you who are just feeding on every word you say. A couple of social outcasts sitting over in the corner are screaming at the top of their lungs, “Have mercy! Have mercy!” What would you have done? You and I would probably walk faster. What about you? You may have encountered people who have been blinded in a spiritual sense and are all but crying out for help. Or there may have been people who are suffering or lonely or sick. Did you stop, or were you late to the grocery store? Late to Bible study?

Jesus stood still. God always stands still when people cry out for mercy. The next verse tells us that He called them. Having stopped, He looked at them, focused His penetrating eyes on them and addressed His voice of authority to them and said, “What can I do for you?” That is the literal translation of that passage. “What can I do for you?” By now the crowd must have stilled to a whisper. “What need do you have that I can meet?” said Jesus. You can almost hear them cry out in unison, “We want to see!” In verse 34 we read,

So Jesus had compassion on them. (Matthew 20:34a)

The literal translation of that is, His heart broke and there welled up within Him what it might feel like to be blind, begging for all you can get, being made fun of, being neither useful nor productive. This broke His heart. Jesus, just for a

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moment, experienced the agony of blindness. Have you ever done that? Jesus did what He could do. He touched their eyes. They received their sight and followed Him.

Now let me ask you, have you tried spending a day with both eyes taped shut just so you could learn how a blind person really feels so you could minister to them better? Have you ever spent a day in a wheelchair just to experience the immobility, the frustration or the dependence of those who are lame? Have you ever gone even 3 days without food just so you can find out what a starving beggar really feels like? Have you ever gone into isolation and cut yourself off from everyone just for the purpose of understanding the heart of those who are emotionally lame, crippled in mind, depressed or unable to cope. Let me tell you that is how you develop compassion. That is why those who have a disease have so much mercy toward those who get it after them. They have been there. It means emotionally taking on their affliction. Jesus had compassion, and He exercised mercy. The end result is the same as it always is, the blind men who had received their sight followed Him.

Let's look at a second setting as we turn to Mark 1. We see the compassion of Jesus on one who is unlovely, unclean and unwanted. Again we get a backdrop of what had been taking place by reading in verse 28. Jesus had just removed a demon from a man in the synagogue, and then healed Peter's mother-in-law. We will begin reading in verse 32,

At evening, when the sun had set, they brought to Him all who were sick and those who were demon-possessed. (Mark 1:32 NKJV)

They emptied the sanitariums and the hospitals and dumped the whole load on Jesus's doorstep. We continue,

And all the city was gathered together at the door. (Mark 1:33)

We see here that the rest were spectators. They had come to see the action. Every sick person and every person with a demon was on Jesus' doorstep waiting to be healed, and the rest of the city was standing behind them just like they had bought tickets to a circus. Verse 33 tells us that everyone in

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the city was gathered together at the door. Here is one of the most beautiful concepts of how to build a church. You meet people's needs. It doesn't say that it was visitation night. It doesn't say it was a "Bring-A-Neighbor" campaign. It simply says that Jesus was meeting the needs of people where they were. There were so many people at the door that He couldn't get out. That is how the Kingdom grows. That is how churches are built. They meet people's needs. Let's continue,

Then He healed many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and He did not allow the demons to speak, because they knew Him.

(Mark 1:34 NKJV)

A loose translation is that He told the demons to "Shut up!" They knew who He was and obeyed. Satan's troops are always paralyzed at the name of Jesus. It tells us in this passage that it is because they know who He is, and they tremble. The next verse is a beautiful passage as Jesus dealt with the priority of being alone with God,

Now in the morning, having risen a long while before daylight, He went out and departed to a solitary place; and there He prayed.

(Mark 1:35 NKJV)

We need to realize that the night before, He had been healing and dealing with sick people. He gets up early. If anyone deserved a good night's sleep, it was Jesus; but He set His alarm clock at 4:00 A.M., and then tiptoed out to a quiet place to spend time alone with His Father. He wasn't trying to be religious. He wasn't trying to be a martyr and punish His body. Jesus just had a list of priorities, and the list says that you never get tired enough or busy enough to skip priority number one, time alone with God. So He slipped out, hopefully to have time with His Father.

Let's look at the sensitive saints who were following Him.

And Simon and those who were with Him searched for Him.

When they found Him, they said to Him, "Everyone is looking for You."

(Mark 1:36,37 NKJV)

What sensitivity, what consideration? They told Him that

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He had a problem, because everyone was looking for Him. He knew that. He was just trying to take time alone to be with the Father. We see in the next verse what His response was, “Don’t interrupt My quiet time! Can’t you see I’m working on My Scripture memory? And I’ve got to preach tomorrow.” No, He didn’t say that. We see His sensitive response,

But He said to them, “Let us go into the next towns, that I may preach there also, because for this purpose I have come forth.” (Mark 1:38 NKJV)

We see in Jesus’ response that perfect balance between peace and urgency. He knew God was in control, so there was no panic. He also knew that the people had a need, and there was no time to waste. It was a perfect balance. We see in verse 39,

And He was preaching in their synagogues throughout all Galilee, and casting out demons. (Mark 1:39 NKJV)

His love continued to express itself through spiritually alleviating the afflictions of the people around Him. In verse 40, we read a startling one-liner,

Now a leper came to Him, (Mark 1:40a NKJV)

Now here was Jesus in the midst of a busy evangelistic campaign, and a leper came up to Him. We can’t pass over this verse lightly, because we must visualize what it must be like to be a leper, then we can visualize what went on in the mind of Christ and those around Him. In Matthew 10:8, Jesus sent the twelve out and said, “Heal the sick and cleanse the lepers.” In the New Testament there is no disease regarded with more terror and pity than leprosy.

There are three kinds of leprosy. The first is nodular or tubercular leprosy. It begins with an unaccountable lethargy, then unaccountable pains in the joints. The victim has a hard time moving. Then there appears symmetrical, discolored patches on the skin. On these patches little nodes form, especially in the facial area. The whole appearance of the face changes until it becomes grotesque. The victim loses his appearance as a human being. The eyes begin to stare, the

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voice changes its sound as it wheezes to the point of being indistinguishable. The hands and the feet ulcerate with growths everywhere, making it painfully impossible to walk or to work. At this time of history, leprosy took about nine years to run its course before the victim died.

The second kind is anesthetic leprosy. This initially begins with the loss of feeling in your nerve endings. The victim might get scalded with boiling water and not realize it because of the lack of feeling. Patches and blisters begin to appear on the skin. The fingers and toes begin to fall off. The victim can lose whole hands and feet. This is a slower kind of torture that often took twenty to thirty years to gnaw out its victim. This left him in total humiliation, wracked with pain, socially banned from society, emotionally scared, unclean, deformed and tormented. This is hard to talk about.

The third type is a combination of the two. This kind was the most prevalent in Jesus' day. Can you imagine it? In each case, the victim had to walk about with torn clothes, a bared head and a covering on his upper lip. Everywhere he went, he had to announce his presence with his own feeble cry, "Unclean, unclean, unclean." Even in the Middle Ages, it was the same. The church had a burial service and read over the victim as if he were dead though he was still alive. He had to wear black, live in a leper colony and couldn't come to the church service but had to peek through a leper's squint, a little hole cut in the wall. This was the lot of the leper. He was like a dead man, tortured, rejected, humiliated and unclean. We have seen few actual lepers in our day, but there are hoards of people whose lot in life seems just as hopeless.

It is with this in mind that we can visualize the circumstances in this passage. It says,

Now a leper came to Him, imploring Him, kneeling
down to Him and saying to Him, "If You are willing,
You can make me clean." (Mark 1:40 NKJV)

As we look at this man, we need to know that he was risking his life to speak to Jesus. Legally, he was not supposed to. Secondly, he was revealing his faith to speak to Jesus. There was no known cure for leprosy, yet somehow in his faith, he

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claimed total healing from the Master. He said, “You can do it. The question is, will You?”

Then Jesus, moved with compassion,

(Mark 1:41 NKJV)

Here is that phrase again. Locked in its context, I believe is the following unavoidable interpretation. Jesus entered into the lepers body, so to speak, in His mind’s eye, in an instant felt the pain, the reproach, the hopelessness and the helplessness of a leper. Jesus, at that moment, had His body disfigured, His face indistinguishable, His coarse voice wheezing, “Unclean, unclean, unclean.” Literally, Jesus emotionally became a leper. That is what those three words mean, moved with compassion.

Having entered emotionally in His bowels, in His deepest afflictions, into the lepers life and lot, He extended mercy. He touched him as we see in verse 41. Jesus’ pure, undefiled life, touched the untouchable, the outcast. He risked becoming unclean to heal another. He spoke to him gently and compassionately. Jesus said, “I will. I choose to heal you.” At whatever the cost, having entered into his suffering, Jesus said, “I want to be a part of his healing.” We then read, “immediately.” This is a good word to study in Scripture. It ought to take the skeptics and leave them by the wayside.

As soon as He had spoken, immediately the leprosy left him, and he was cleansed. (Mark 1:42 NKJV)

Obedying the law, Jesus ordered him to go to the priest and declare himself clean as is taught in Leviticus 13 and 14.

Now the key to this passage seems obvious. First of all, Jesus was aware that He always needed time alone with the Father. Secondly, Jesus was never too busy or too tired or too spiritually drained for people. His life was not an organization filled with planning meetings and the like. His life was people. Look at what you have written in the little boxes your calendar sometime. Do you have activities, meetings and functions, or do you have the names of people that you are meeting with, having fellowship with and ministering to? Use your time to be with people, people who need you. Men, you can use your breakfast or lunch hours or coffee breaks to be with other men who have spiritual needs and whose lives you can minister

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to. Women, don't waste the precious opportunities you have whether in person, or on the telephone, to pour your life into people.

Another key to this passage is that the social outcasts of society were Jesus' favorite people to reach out and touch. They were aware of their need, and they were usually crying for help. Jesus would always stop. He would always look. He would always listen. He would always reach out and touch them no matter what society thought and no matter what it cost Him. The source of His mercy was His compassion. When He saw a blind man, emotionally He became blind. When the leper cried out, emotionally, He became a leper, grotesque and hopeless. Then having totally identified with the person who had the need, He was moved with compassion and extended mercy.

In the next lesson, we will continue to follow Jesus. We will watch His compassion with those who had chronic needs, with those who were stricken with grief, with those who had no food and see how He viewed them. We will also see how He viewed the mob and life's unplanned interruptions.

As you go about your daily tasks, ask God to give you a spirit of compassion for the widows, the orphans, the prisoners, those who are terminally ill, those who are jobless, for that blind beggar on a downtown street corner, for the dirty addict, unshaven and friendless who is prowling the city streets like an animal. Ask God for the grace to somehow enter in experientially to that persons' life, imagine their hurt and humiliation. Ask for the grace to emotionally enter your husband, your wife or your children. We need to try to live in their world in order to know how to extend mercy and compassion. We don't appreciate one another. We don't think about one another because we don't walk in their shoes. We don't breathe their breath. We don't think about what they go through. Mercy means that you live the hurts of another in your own emotions. That is compassion. Compassion leads to mercy.

When people cross your path, if possible, stop and look at them. Having stopped, speak gently to them. Having spoken,

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listen compassionately to what their real needs are. If possible, let your life touch their life with Jesus. We have a promise, oh what bliss will be ours.

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