



"What 90% of depressed people need is a compassionate human being to talk to instead of a prescription."

—Harold Bloomfield, M.D.

06-Jan-17

Compassion (Part One)

The apostle Paul instructs us in [Colossians 3:12](#) (New International Version), "Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion." We all like to think that we are tender-hearted, but sometimes we simply fail to appreciate what others are really going through. We think that having a tender-hearted feeling is what compassion is all about.

Helen, a maternity ward nurse at the hospital where I work, had been given a letter of commendation from a patient. In the letter, the patient praised Helen's knowledge, confidence, skill, and demeanor. Her answers to the patient's unspoken questions comforted her throughout the entire birthing process. She told her when to rest, when to drink water, and when to change positions to facilitate a more comfortable birth. She communicated clearly what was happening, what the plan was, and stayed in touch with the patient's doctor throughout the night.

The patient's letter concluded by stating that Helen was straightforward, fun, and attentive. She added that based on her experience, Helen should be recognized for her abundant knowledge, pleasant interpersonal skills, and compassion.

We often think of compassion as doing nice things for people who are not as advantaged as we are. This is certainly not wrong. It is, in fact, an excellent example of the Golden Rule: doing to others what we would want them to do to us ([Matthew 7:12](#)). But the compassion of [God](#) involves so much more.

The word "compassion" appears 47 times in the New King James Version (NKJV) of the Bible. Two Hebrew words are used in the Old Testament to describe the virtue of compassion: *ra?am* and *?amal*. *Ra?am* means "mercy" and "tender love." This word appears in [Exodus 33:19](#): "[God] will have compassion on whom He will have compassion." The King James Version (KJV) uses the word "mercy" instead of "compassion," showing the underlying nature of this kind of compassion.

The compassion described by *ra?am* has been compared to the love of a mother or father. [Psalm 86:15](#) says of God, "But You, O LORD, are a God full of compassion, and gracious, [longsuffering](#) and

abundant in mercy and truth." The word translated here as "full of compassion" is *ra?ûm*, a adjective derived from *ra?am*. It is used almost exclusively of God throughout the Old Testament.

[Lamentations 3:22-23](#) informs us that our Maker's compassions are renewed every morning, which is comforting to realize when we are undergoing a heavy trial. God keeps a close watch on us, for He cares deeply for His people and wants to help them. In [Exodus 3:7](#), God tells [Moses](#), "I have surely seen the oppression of My people who are in Egypt, and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters, for I know their sorrows." As our Creator, God knows our feelings, just as a good parent would understand his or her children's state of mind.

The other Hebrew word used for compassion, *?mal*, generally means "to commiserate; have compassion and pity." Pharaoh's daughter felt this kind of compassion or pity when she saw the infant Moses in the basket ([Exodus 2:6](#)). [Joel 2:18](#) says that when the Israelites [repent](#) and return to Him, "the LORD will be zealous for His land, and pity [*?mal*] His people." In more figurative contexts, *?mal* can mean "to spare," "to feel sympathy," and "to be moved with compassion."

In the New Testament, several Greek words are translated as "compassion," but we will focus on *splanchnizomai*, a verb meaning "to have or show compassion." It literally describes being moved in one's inner parts, that is, in one's entrails. *Strong's Concordance* states that it means "to be moved as to one's bowels, hence to be moved with compassion." When we have this kind compassion for a person who is suffering, we feel something inside—our innards may churn or tighten, a pit may open in our stomach, a twinge of sympathetic pain may course through our abdomen, etc. We have what is called a visceral reaction.

In Scripture, this stomach-wrenching compassion is found only in Matthew, Mark, and Luke describing the compassion of our Savior when He saw people suffering hardships. For instance, [Matthew 14:14](#) reads, "And when Jesus went out He saw a great multitude, and He was moved with compassion for them, and healed their sick." Before feeding the four thousand, He tells His disciples, "I have compassion on the multitude, because they have now continued with Me three days and have nothing to eat" ([Mark 8:2](#)). Seeing the widow of Nain, who had just lost her only son, "He had compassion on her and said to her, 'Do not weep'" ([Luke 7:13](#)).

The English word "compassion" is composed of two parts. The first part is *com-*, a prefix that means "together." To get its sense, we need only to look at other words with a similar prefix, such as *compact*, an agreement between two or more people; *communication*, a conversation between two or more parties; *common*, as in sharing what we have jointly with another person; or *combination*, when two or more things are put together and made one.

The second part of the word is *-passion*. We have all heard of the 2004 movie, *The Passion of the Christ*. In this case, "passion" does not mean what may first come to mind—a strong and barely controlled emotion like romantic passion. *Passion*, as used in the KJV, means "suffering," and it is translated as such in the NKJV.

Putting the two halves of the word together, then, *compassion* means "suffering together," sharing in the suffering of another person. As Wikipedia notes, it literally means "co-suffering." When we have the same kind of compassion as Jesus practiced, we bring the suffering of others within ourselves—that is, we truly feel another's pain.

In Part Two, we will focus further on the compassion of our Lord and Example, [Jesus Christ](#).

From the Archives: Featured Sermon

[His Compassions Fail Not- But How about Ours?](#)

by Bill Onisick

Bill Onisick, focusing upon the parable of the Prodigal Son, as recorded in Luke 15:11-17, suggests that Christ specifically targeted a group of supercilious Pharisees, who would have had an intolerant, condemnatory attitude to this cheeky, young son who had demanded that his father convert one-third of his property into liquid assets. This behavior in that culture would have brought severe repercussions. As the son begins to reap what he sowed, ending up eating pods with the swine, the Pharisees welcomed the impending demise of this rash young man. However, when the wronged father lavishes compassion on his repentant son, treating him with love and forgiveness, the Pharisees are dumbfounded, mirroring the attitude of the grumbling older brother, whom Christ intended as a symbol of the intolerant Pharisees, contrasting them with the compassionate father, symbolic of our Heavenly Father, who is ready and willing to forgive repentant sinners who have come to their senses, willing to humble themselves. We are mandated to exercise the kind of compassion exercised by the father of the prodigal son.

From the Archives: Featured Article

[The Beatitudes, Part 5: Blessed Are the Merciful](#)

by John W. Ritenbaugh

Mercy is a virtue that has gone out of vogue lately, though it is much admired. Jesus, however, places it among the most vital His followers should possess. John Ritenbaugh explains this often misunderstood beatitude.

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