

The Compassion of Christ

Hosea 6:1–6, Luke 10:25–37

The title of this message is “The Compassion of Christ.” *Compassion* is a beautiful word; it comes from Latin roots meaning *to suffer with*. In the pre-Fall world there was no suffering. Man was placed in a perfect environment, the Garden of Eden. There was no decay, disease or death; there was perfect harmony and happiness; all the elements of the physical world were in perfect balance. But Adam’s sin brought God’s curse. Now, there is struggle, toil, decay and death. One day the curse will be lifted, but for now, all of us experience suffering and misery. God never intended that we should suffer alone. He has given us his Spirit, who helps us in our weakness. And he has given us the body of Christ. As his members, we are to be of mutual help to one another. And one of the ways that we help each other is through a ministry of compassion. Compassion is showing sympathy and a desire to help.

In our text this morning we hear the familiar story of the good Samaritan. When traveling down a road he comes upon a man who had been beaten, robbed and left for dead. Two religious leaders had heartlessly passed by on the other side, but when the Samaritan came upon the man bloodied at the side of the road, “he had *compassion*.” Here was a man who did not avert his eyes but stopped and got involved. He attended to the sufferer’s need and probably saved his life.

The phrase “good Samaritan” has entered into our vocabulary as a person who is compassionate and helpful to a person in distress, who voluntarily gives aid to him, although under no legal obligation to do so. Would that all of us would be good Samaritans! Our world would be a much happier place to be! Let’s take a look at the story. First,

1. The background: the law of love

A certain “lawyer”—an expert in the law of Moses and the rabbinical interpretations—stood up to test Jesus. The lawyer isn’t named, and that is fitting, for he represents the attitude of people in every generation. People hear the gospel, they sense that there is something special about Jesus. They might have heard that he was a great teacher, and that by his death he became the Savior of the world. Yet within the heart of man there arises a need to justify ourselves, to show that we are better than our fellows, that we are actually pretty good people, that there is nothing inherently wrong with us, that we might have made a few minor mistakes and misjudgments along the way, but nothing that we cannot reform with a little self-effort. Just who is this Jesus that dares to tell us that we are all sinners and fall short of God’s standard of absolute perfection? What nerve! This unnamed expert in the Jewish law stands up to test the Savior. Clearly, his desire is not to learn from Jesus but to entrap him—to expose him as a fraud and vilify him. But he doesn’t want to show his hand. He says to him, “Teacher, what shall I do to inherit

eternal life?” He addresses him respectfully, calling him “Teacher.” He recognizes that the man he is talking to is no dummy, but actually an intellectual heavyweight, a recognized expert, a force to be reckoned with. The Jews in the first century loved to quote the teachings of the rabbis: “Rabbi Hillel says this,” “Rabbi Simeon says this.” Their opinions might be in conflict, with no coherent resolution. What is truth, anyway? But people are following Jesus. Is he for real? So this lawyer stands up to challenge him. “Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?”

Jesus answers him with another question: “What is written in the law? What is your reading of it?” The man responds by citing Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18: “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind,’ and ‘your neighbor as yourself.’”

This was a good response. How many of us could have done that? How many of us know the law of Moses that well? To his credit, this lawyer didn’t cite the oral tradition of the rabbis, he went right back to the inspired Scriptures. Here are two commands, both requiring perfect love: to love God with all our heart, and to love our neighbor. These are God’s high and holy requirements for every person on the face of the earth. Five weeks ago I touched upon the first of these in my sermon entitled “Love God with All Your Mind.” Here is humanity’s fundamental duty: not only to *obey* God but to *love* him, to desire fellowship with him, to worship him. Each one of us should seriously ask ourselves, do I *love* God? Do I obey him, not just out of fear of being caught, but because I truly love him? Psalm 18 begins with the words, “I will love thee, O Lord, my strength.” This was the Psalmist’s heart. Is it our heart as well? This afternoon I will preach from that text; my sermon will be titled “I Will Love You.” That ought to be the attitude of your heart, of my heart.

This morning we will focus on the second requirement, love for neighbor. Leviticus 19:18 plainly says, “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself: I am the LORD.” This is the second great commandment. The phrase “I am the LORD” is clearly added to get people’s attention. Here is the Lawgiver. He refers to himself by his personal name: “I am the LORD”—Yahweh, the God who *is*, and “there is none beside me,” the God who judges hearts, the God before whom every human person from every age, every family, every culture, every tradition will one day stand. God is announcing: “Here is my high and holy requirement; get ready for judgment day. How do you measure up?” Do you love your neighbor as yourself? *Do you?*

We have already observed that the lawyer’s purpose was to challenge Christ, to test him, to entrap him, to discredit him. The lawyer was not sincere. Nevertheless, he gave a good answer, and Jesus commends him: “You have answered rightly; do this and you will live”: What you have said is true. God rightly requires you and every other human being to love him with your whole heart, and to love your

neighbor truly. “You have answered rightly; *do this* and you will *live*.” Was Jesus teaching salvation by works?

The word for “do” is imperative, a command. That much is evident in the translation. But there are two ways to say this in the biblical Greek: there is the simple command in the aorist tense, but the word used in our text is *emphatic—present imperative*.¹ The sense is *keep on doing this, do this continuously, do it as a habit*. What Jesus is saying is “Don’t be content to do this once, and then feel that you have done your duty. Love your neighbor, treat him as you would treat yourself; do this every day of your life, not just when it is convenient, but all the time.” With a little reflection it ought to be evident that every single human being falls short of this. Salvation by works is impossible because every son and daughter of Adam, descending from him by ordinary generation, falls short. There is no way that we can inherit eternal life by loving our neighbor, even if we do it perfectly from this moment forward, because the plain fact is that in the past we have failed to love our neighbor perfectly. Jesus’ reply, “Do this, and you will live,” is technically true, but there is only one person in history who has ever done this, and that is Jesus himself, God’s anointed one. He is the sinless one who always and only and perfectly loved his neighbor. In fact, he loved his neighbor to the point of death. He died for unworthy sinners. But let’s move on to point two,

2. The question: who is my neighbor?

We read in verse 29, “But he, wanting to justify himself, said to Jesus, ‘And who is my neighbor?’” Again, the lawyer’s question was not sincere. He asked it, wanting to *justify* himself. He was not truly wanting to love his fellow man. He was only interested in establishing his own innocence before God. Jesus could have easily dismissed him. He could have said, “Now listen, buddy, you are not sincere. You are not really interested in knowing who is your neighbor. You are only interested in justifying yourself. I’m not going to let you go down that road. Get out of my sight. You’re not worth the time of day.” If he had done so, Jesus would have been perfectly justified. He would have called out the man’s hypocrisy and shown him to be insincere.

Verse 30 begins with the words, “Then Jesus *answered* and said.” The word translated “answered” literally means *take up*.² In spite of the lawyer’s insincerity of heart, Jesus went out of his way to treat his question seriously. The question “Who is my neighbor?” is an important question, and Jesus wanted it recorded for all time for his people’s benefit. The answer to “Who is my neighbor?” may

¹ ποίει (v. 28) is present imperative. The undifferentiated command (the default) is aorist. The present imperative is emphatic.

² “Take up what is said=reply ... ὑπολαβὼν ὁ Ἰησοῦς εἶπεν Lk 10:30,” Bauer, Arndt and Gingrich lexicon, art. on ὑπολαμβάνω

surprise you. In answer to this question Jesus told the parable of the good Samaritan. It begins: “A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among thieves, who stripped him of his clothing, wounded him, and departed, leaving him half dead.” There is a real economy of language here, but enough is said to give us an understanding of the situation. A traveler is on his way down from Jerusalem to Jericho. It is a lonely stretch of road and it *does* go down. The first time I traveled this route I was in a brand-new Mercedes-Benz tour bus; it had recently been purchased by the tour operator, and it was literally the first tour it had ever taken. It still had that “new car” smell about it. It was on a Sunday, and our tour group had celebrated the Lord’s supper under a shady tree in Jericho. After looking around town, we climbed into our new tour bus and headed up to Jerusalem. I was struck by how the bus’s diesel engine labored to climb up that road. Jericho is 846 feet *below* sea level; it is the lowest city in the world. Jerusalem, on the other hand, is about 2,500 feet *above* sea level, a 3,300-foot climb. Along the way there is a turn-off with a stone marker marking sea level. You can stand in front of this marker and have your picture taken below sea level.

So here in our story was a traveler going *down* from Jerusalem to Jericho. Perhaps he would have been a merchant going there to buy the dates that grow in the lush Jordan valley. But he “fell among” thieves. It is a lonely, desert road with plenty of rocks for bad guys to hide behind. Actually, the word “thieves” would be more accurately translated *robbers*—highwaymen who use force and violence in the commission of their crimes. Robbery, like theft, is the act of taking something that does not belong to you without the permission of its owner. But robbery has an extra element of force. In order for someone to be charged with the crime of robbery, that person must have threatened his victim with force.³ Clearly, in the present case, the traveler was not just threatened, but actually assaulted. The bandits “stripped him of his clothing, wounded him, and departed, leaving him half dead.” Here, then, was a victim of a crime, bruised, bloodied and lying naked at the side of the road—an innocent victim, a fellow image-bearer who should have been treated with kindness, respect and love, as the law of God implicitly required—“Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself”—victimized, cruelly treated.

Just the other night Norma and I read together the tragic story of the Levite’s concubine who was sexually abused, ravished and murdered by the wicked men of Gibeah (Judg. 19). Such are the depths to which fallen human nature is capable, and it is horrifying. No human being should ever be brutalized. The sixth commandment (“Thou shalt not kill”) requires kindness (“Be ye kind one to another”). Brothers and sisters, we of all people, who have been enlightened by the Spirit of God, ought to understand this. We ought to treat all people with kindness.

³ <https://www.thebusseylawfirm.com/crime-blog/theft-crimes/do-you-know-the-difference-between-theft-and-robbery/>

Here in Jesus' story was a fellow human person, a fellow image-bearer, suffering alone. The phrase "half dead" is arresting, and ought to make us weep at the depths of human depravity.

But along come two men. When we see who these men are, it gives us hope. The first is a priest, a descendant of Aaron, brother of Moses, a man ordained by God to offer sacrifices in his temple. Here is a man who has studied the law and knows of God's requirements. Surely he knows the text "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself"! Surely he will stop and help! But he does not. Rather, he averts his eyes and passes by on the other side. The wounded man's hopes are dashed. Again, he is alone, with no one to care for him. By and by he hears footsteps. This time it is a Levite. The Levites were men ordained by God to assist the priests in offering sacrifices. Many of the Levites were teachers of the law; they were men who knew God's law and instructed judges in principles of justice. Would he stop? No! He, too, averts his eyes and passes by on the other side. For a second time the wounded man's hopes are dashed. Still he lies in the hot sun in a pool of his own blood. The Levite is in a hurry to get to his destination. Perhaps he is afraid that if he stops to help he will incur the ire of the band of highwaymen, and they will attack *him*. Or perhaps he is just busy; he has appointments to keep, people to meet. Or perhaps he thinks that it is beneath his dignity and rank to get himself dirty to care for another human being. He considers himself more important than other people.

Finally, a certain Samaritan came along, and when he saw the traumatized wayfarer, he had compassion. He went up to the man, bandaged his wounds, poured on oil and wine to cleanse and soften the skin to promote healing. He set him on his own beast of burden, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. That brings us to point three,

3. The requirement: compassion

Notice particularly the words "when he saw him, he had *compassion*." The word rendered "he had compassion" refers to the bowels.⁴ To be moved with compassion is to be affected down to the inner core of one's being. We might say, "My heart goes out to you"; the people of Jesus' day would have said, "Your pitiful situation moves me right down to my bowels."

This word "compassion" is the heart of Jesus' parable. He is not simply telling us that the good Samaritan was compassionate; he is telling us that *we, too, are to be compassionate*, that if we fail to be compassionate, we are sinning. This shows us the far-reaching demands of God's holy law.

⁴ σπλαγχνίζομαι (*splangnizomai*), to have pity, feel sympathy for someone, be moved with compassion, lit., to be moved in one's bowels (the bowels were thought to be the seat of love and pity); the Greek word is related to our word *spleen*.

But in telling the story of the good Samaritan, Jesus is actually telling us something about himself. *He* is the compassionate Savior! He is the one who saw us in our need and came to do something about it. He didn't just piously say, "I will pray for you, brother"—and then forget his promise. He got involved. He left the glories of heaven and came to this sin-cursed earth. He got involved with sinful, less-than-perfect creatures. He got down and dirty and showed us the way of compassion—the way of love. He went to the cross for us; this was the ultimate demonstration of compassion in all of history.

Jesus ended his parable with a question: "Which of these three do you think was neighbor to him who fell among the thieves?" He wanted to get the lawyer to think—and he wants to get *us* to think. God is absolutely sovereign. At all times he is working all things out according to the counsel of his will. With advances in communication and in travel, there is a sense in which everyone in the whole world is our neighbor. But we cannot expend our efforts on seven and a half billion people all at once. In the final analysis our neighbor is the person who God brings into our life, that we can help at a particular time.

Which one was neighbor? The lawyer answered, "He who showed mercy on him"—and he was right. "Mercy" is a synonym for *compassion*. God wants us to be merciful. "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy" (Matt. 5:7). In our Old Testament text God says, "I desire *mercy* and not sacrifice, and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings" (Hosea 6:6). Ultimately, the one who perfectly shows mercy and compassion is the Lord Jesus Christ. "*Jesus, thou art all compassion, pure, unbounded love thou art; visit us with thy salvation, enter every trembling heart. Breathe, O breathe thy loving Spirit into every troubled breast; let us all in thee inherit, let us find the promised rest.*"⁵

Today, many Christians celebrate Christ's resurrection. Now churches must preach everything that's in the Bible—and nothing that's *not* in the Bible. The fact is that Christ has not appointed a particular day for the church to celebrate his resurrection, so therefore the church has no authority to designate a particular Sunday as Easter Sunday. In the Bible, the first day of the week is called the Lord's day. The church celebrates Christ's resurrection fifty-two Lord's days a year! Here is the Man who perfectly exemplified compassion and mercy by going to the cross to die for his people's sin, and rising again bodily from the grave on the third day for his people's justification. Truly, Christ is the compassionate Savior. "We do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin" (Heb. 4:12).

Recently I was asked, "What can we do to enhance our love for one another?" It is an excellent question. What can we do to enrich body life, to build us up in love,

⁵ https://opc.org/hymn.html?hymn_id=449

and enhance our mutual care and concern for one another? The Bible teaches that though there are many members, yet there is one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you"; nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." God intended that the members should truly care for one another, and to recognize that "if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; or if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it" (1 Cor. 12:20ff.). Brothers and sisters, we need to think about this. I hope to develop it in a future sermon.

How can we truly love our neighbor? By not living a self-absorbed, self-centered life, by recognizing him, by paying attention to him, by witnessing to him, by stopping to talk to him, by listening to him, by seeking to understand him, by coming alongside him in his time of need, by praying for him, by showing a true concern for his welfare, as Christ did. Amen.