

LIVE OVEN WITH JESUS: Compassionate

We're talking about the life of Jesus, and how the way he lived his life can influence the way we live. Today our focus is a trait of his that we expect, given who he was, but probably need to take more seriously in the way we live.

If you have a Bible handy, turn to Matthew 9 (35-38)... So Jesus is in the field, among the people, preaching the Kingdom, pursuing his ministry. But he's doing more than that. He's not only preaching, he's healing. And he's doing more than healing. He's experiencing and expressing compassion. Take note of v.36.... A bunch of people, many of whom he had already healed, generate compassion in him, compassion that leads him to ask his disciples to pray for more workers into the fields.... which he knows are filled with confused and helpless people.

Our focus today is Jesus' compassion. The dictionary defines compassion as concern for the sufferings or misfortunes of others. Compassion produces concern in response to the needs of others. Compassion is about others, not us. Compassion is a godly characteristic because our normal human instincts are to be concerned about ourselves first. Our natural inclination is to look in the mirror before we look in the distance.

The great number of healing stories found in the Gospels make clear that Jesus' eyes were always looking out, not in; his concern was always the other, not himself. There is no better example of that, of course, than his willingness to sacrifice himself on a cross for us. Normal human instincts would have pressed him to run away from death. He ran to death, because he knew the people he would die for, like the people we just met in Matthew 9, were confused and helpless.

There's an additional characteristic about Jesus' compassion that we need to address. Matthew 15.29-31.... Another example of compassion, yes? He responds to broken, wounded people with healing. But there's more to the story, and that's what happens next. V.32.... He's just healed a bunch of people. Large crowds have gathered to benefit from his compassion. It's been a good day of healing. Lots of people in the crowd have been made whole by God's healing power through Jesus, yet Jesus' reaction to their needs is to say, I feel sorry for these people. Let's feed them. His compassion provides for their needs not once, but twice (by the way, the feeding is one we all know about, the feeding of the 5,000). He responded not only to the need immediately in front of him, but to their needs going forward. He concluded that healing them of their diseases wasn't going to do any good if they couldn't make it back to their homes. So he healed and then he provided for their journey that was to come. For Jesus compassion wasn't a one and done. It was as one and then another one and then another one and then....

So at Christmas time when you put a dollar or so in one of those Salvation Army red kettles, great! You made a difference. But that wasn't the end of your compassion. Doesn't mean you have to donate to everyone you see, but it does mean that concern for the needs of others doesn't end with your first gift.

Our Helmets of Hope ministry embodies this characteristic well. We provide 20-item supply collections to vets as they move off the streets and into their own housing. But then we also provide refill inventory to our partner agencies, so that the vets we serve can get more of anything we offer when they run out.

Our denomination has an annual special day offering called Week of Compassion. Week of Compassion offerings provide emergency relief to areas and populations struck by natural disasters - floods, earthquakes, etc. - and by political upheaval - refugees, for example. But compassion offerings don't just throw money at problems then leave. Here's how the program's mission statement puts it: "We seek to equip and empower disciples to alleviate the suffering of others through disaster response, humanitarian aid, sustainable development and the promotion of mission opportunities."

Sustainable development. Sustainable. Not just today. But today and tomorrow and into the future.

When Jesus walked around, he didn't see beggars and low lives. He saw wounded people who need help he could give. In his travels he preached and taught, but he also took time to minister to everyday needs as well as long term spiritual concerns. His compassion commanded a significant portion of his life. How do you assess your compassion? How do you assess your capacity for concern about the needs of others? Does the way you give to causes show compassion? Does your heart break in response to human need in such a way that you end up providing for that human need? Not all human need! None of us can do everything! But our concern this morning is not how many causes we give to, but whether the cause of Christ produces concern for others, and if it does, whether we show that concern by the way we live.

The friend who needs a listening ear this week, the person who just needs to vent. Chances are, he or she will benefit from a second hearing. So don't end your listening session thinking, well, she's fixed. Won't have to listen to him again!

The people in Parkland, Florida, benefitted from knowing that you prayed for them in the aftermath of this week's horrific shooting there. But the healing of their community will not be complete just because they hold the funerals for their sons and daughters and school staff and football coaches. So keep praying. Keeping pushing for reforms to our gun laws that keep slaughterhouse weapons like the AR-15 out of the hands of people who don't need them... which is just about everybody. Continue to cry out for God's spirit to fill the hearts of the heartbroken in that community.

Compassion drove Jesus' life. Let it drive yours. Demand that it drive our life as a church. Take part in, contribute to, our compassion ministries ministries - food pantry, meal site, Helmets of Hope. Jesus spent his earthly life looking out for the needs of others. Let's do that, too. Starting this month, with the Week of Compassion offering that is available today and will be available the next two Sundays.

Jesus lived with compassion for the people around him. This week, you do the same.