

The Compassionate Life

1 Peter 4:7-11

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Albania is a little country northwest of Greece. From 1945 to 1990, it was under communist rule and was the only country in the world that prohibited all practice of religion. After communism collapsed, Greek Orthodox Archbishop Anastasios was sent to survey and report on the country's religious situation. He found 1600 churches destroyed and only twenty-two elderly priests still alive of the 440 who had served there before communism. Yet Albanians were so desperate for religious freedom that many gathered for services in fields where nothing remained of their former churches but broken bells.

Anastasios was asked to remain and rebuild the Orthodox Church himself. He was 61 at the time. He'd had bouts of malaria that had forced him to leave missionary work in Africa. He was a scholar and author. But despite not being the most likely candidate for this work and despite the hardship and obstacles, he stayed. And over the next decade God used him to overcome centuries of ethnic and religious hostility and to establish a new church throughout the nation. He rebuilt church buildings, monasteries, and a seminary. He was also committed to serving all Albanians by building schools, medical clinics, youth centers, children's homes, nurseries, and camps. All of those services were open to everyone—Christians, Muslims, and nonbelievers.

During those years of chaos, Anastasios and the church endured political opposition and violent uprisings in the nation. International aid workers fled, so the church, including the archbishop, delivered food to needy families, sometimes driving eight hours to deliver it. Anastasios says, "It proved that we're not here just to play good Samaritans but to live with them, share the risks they face and show that, in the worst of times, there is always hope." They also helped when thousands of refugees from Kosovo poured in to Albania.

The archbishop's name, Anastasios, means "resurrection." That's the word used most often to describe the church in Albania. The archbishop

uses a symbol of the Cross surrounded by two sheaves of wheat. It represents Jesus' saying, "Unless the grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it cannot bring forth new life" (John 12:24). Anastasios says, "The Resurrection is not behind the Cross but in the Cross." (Nicholas Gage, "We Must not Waste a Single Day," *Parade Magazine*, July 27, 2003, 4-6; Jim Forest, *Albanian Resurrection*, <http://touchstonemag.com/docs/issues/14.6docs/14-6pg26.html>, accessed 8/7/03)

Today we're looking at *the Compassionate Life*. The core values of the church that we're exploring overlap and support each other. We see in Jesus the example of compassion and service that touches people where they are. The Bible is filled with examples of compassion and service as well as instructions to live this way. As we pray for people, we love them more and want to do more for them. That leads to service and working to meet needs. The power of the Holy Spirit is available to enable this kind of work. God doesn't give that tremendous power just for our benefit, but to work through us to meet the needs of others. The Incarnational Stream, where we try to live with an awareness of God in all of life, finds special focus as we move with compassion to impact all of life with the gospel and the grace of God.

All of this leads us into areas that we might prefer to stay out of. Anastasios didn't want to go to Albania. Then he didn't want to stay. But he thought, "Who's going to help these people? Who's going to give them hope?" He said to himself, "If you have faith, stay and struggle; if you don't, go home." He stayed. Jesus calls us out of our comfort zones and into ministry, into the needs around and beyond us.

Richard Foster summarizes the compassionate life this way:

[It is] a life committed to compassion and justice for all peoples.
...through it God develops in us the compassion to love our neighbor freely and develops in our world a place where justice and righteousness prevail.

God calls us to a life of social justice [that embraces the] personal, social, and institutional [areas of life]. It is a life that receives all

peoples: enemies and friends, poor and rich, illiterate and educated, whomever and whomever. It is a life that engages in outward conflict with all social, economic, and civil injustices of society, judging down wickedness and building up the good, the true, and the beautiful. (*Streams of Living Water* 182)

This compassionate life involves us in serving—both within the church and as we go out from the church. God’s people being engaged in compassionate service is essential to a healthy church. We want to be a lively, healthy, vibrant church. So we need to do more than rehearse what we believe. Our fellowship has to be more than warm feelings we have when we get together. The caring community needs to open up and reach out.

If you recall something of the geography of Israel, you remember that the Jordan River flows into Lake Galilee and then on to the Dead Sea. Galilee is full of fresh water, fish and life. The Dead Sea is really dead—nothing lives in it. The difference is that Lake Galilee has an outlet. The Dead Sea doesn’t. It simply takes in water and sediment and minerals. It’s so full of those things that nothing can live in it.

An individual Christian or a church that simply takes in and has no outlet of service becomes a “dead sea.” Our spirituality stagnates and dies. We want God’s blessing and power and life not only to flow into us, but through us. As God uses us in ministry to others, we’re more alive.

This passage in 1 Peter is part of a word of encouragement to the readers to be holy and to serve. He wants them to be alert, clear-headed, and prayerful. We think and we pray. We have a mental alertness that sees life correctly in light of what God is doing. I like the description of one of Israel’s tribes in 1 Chronicles 12:32, “...men who understood the times and knew what Israel should do.” I want to be like that and I hope more of us will be that kind of people. Peter also reminds everyone to use our gifts to serve others. The gifts are expressions of God’s grace. God supplies strength for service. And God is glorified in our serving.

What motivates us to serve? The obvious motive for the compassionate life is compassion, the love that God puts in us for other

people and for all of creation. Also, if we're truly Word-Centered, the Bible has a lot to say about social justice and righteousness, mercy and compassion. Go through the various sections of the Scriptures sometime and look for references to caring for the stranger, the alien, the orphans and widows, the poor and oppressed. You'll find it in the Law, in the other writings, and all over the prophets. You'll see it in the message of Jesus, in the early church in Acts, and in Paul's letters. It's very strong in James and the other letters as well.

What resources do we have for living a compassionate life? Peter says that each one in the church should use whatever gift he or she has received *to serve others as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms*. God's grace is many-sided. It has various facets and forms and expressions. God gives a variety of gifts in order to express the fullness of his grace.

God has created each of us to bear his image in a unique way. Look at your fingerprints and realize that no one else is exactly like you. In the new creation, God equips each of us uniquely for service. Each of us has the gift or gifts we need to do what God calls us to do. And all of us together have all the gifts needed to express God's grace and to minister to the needs around us. God's plan for the church is not that one of us does everything, but that we put our gifts together and join together in service and outreach.

The New Testament includes several lists of spiritual gifts, gifts of the Holy Spirit, that God gives to people in the church to enable ministry and service. Those are *examples* of spiritual gifts that show the range of God's gifts in the church.

We discover our gifts as we serve. Don't wait to serve God until you find out what gift you have. Get involved in serving and the gifts you need will surface.

Our call to service and ministry is at the intersection of God's grace and the needs of the people around us. Here's a definition of Christian service: God's resources touching and meeting human needs through God's people, the Body of Christ, the Church, us.

Specifically church-related activities are not the only places we can show compassion and serve and work for justice. Your everyday work is a

wonderful arena for service. I once heard a man give a testimony about a dynamic spiritual experience he had. He wanted to stay in the setting where that happened. But he knew God's will was in mission and service and not contained in his experience. His pastor told him that he was called to be in the oil field and represent God there. Because he is one of them he can represent other oil workers to God as well. He's more effective there than most pastors would be. Can you see yourself as God's representative in your profession? In our everyday lives can we help meet the needs of the people around us?

There are needs in our community. And there are some things we can do. We already do some of this through Families Feeding Families and the Ministerial Alliance and other service organizations in town. The Prom Closet our church sponsored this week is a great example. Can you think of other needs that aren't being met? Maybe there's one need in our community we want to focus on. There could be several. I envision us being more involved in community ministry in some form that's right for our church and our community. Maybe it'll be in connection with other churches in our town or in our district. Let's look beyond ourselves and identify needs. Let's pray that God will show us what he wants us to do about it.

Service is not something we have to do on our own. Look at verse 11: Whoever speaks should do it as one speaking the very words of God. In any opportunity for witness, testimony or proclamation, we depend on God for the message to speak.

Peter goes on, "Whoever serves should do it with the strength that God provides." The word translated "provides" here carries the idea of lavish support. Our serving is made possible by God's abundant supply of strength.

Yate's Pool is a great oil field in Texas. It was originally a sheep ranch. The owner, Ira Yates, traded a grocery store for the ranch. The ranch kept losing money. Yates was in debt, he was struggling through the Depression, he went on welfare, and the bank was foreclosing. Then oil was discovered on Yate's ranch. The first well drilled on his place produced 80,000 barrels a day. A dozen more wells were drilled. After thirty years, the field was still

capable of 180,000 barrels a day. Yates owned the oil and mineral rights. He owned it all. He had been living on relief, but he was rich. He lived like a miser, but he was a millionaire. He had many resources, but he didn't know it (Jim Buskirk, *The Holy Spirit in Ministry* tape, 11/8/91).

Could something like that be true of us? Are we trying to serve God, to witness, to be the church, out of our own resources? God has given an inexhaustible supply through the Holy Spirit who is in us. Will we believe it? Will we trust God's provision?

I have to keep relearning that lesson. It's easy to drift into self-dependence. But I'm often humbled and renewed in my dependence on God's power for life and ministry. Let's pray for each other to keep depending on God's Spirit instead of our own resources and ability. We'll run out. We'll start coasting on our own. And God has better plans than that for this church and for our ministry together here.

Finally, service is not to call attention to ourselves. It's for God's praise and glory. Peter says that we should serve with God's strength so that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ.

God gets the glory for all that's accomplished when we serve, because God gives the resources and works with us and through us. We're careful to praise God and make sure attention is directed to our glorious God.