

WHERE DOES COMPASSION COME FROM?

“Be compassionate as your Father is compassionate”

—Jesus in Matthew 6:36



**Compassion: Derived from the Latin words *Pati* and *Com*.
Meaning to suffer with.¹**

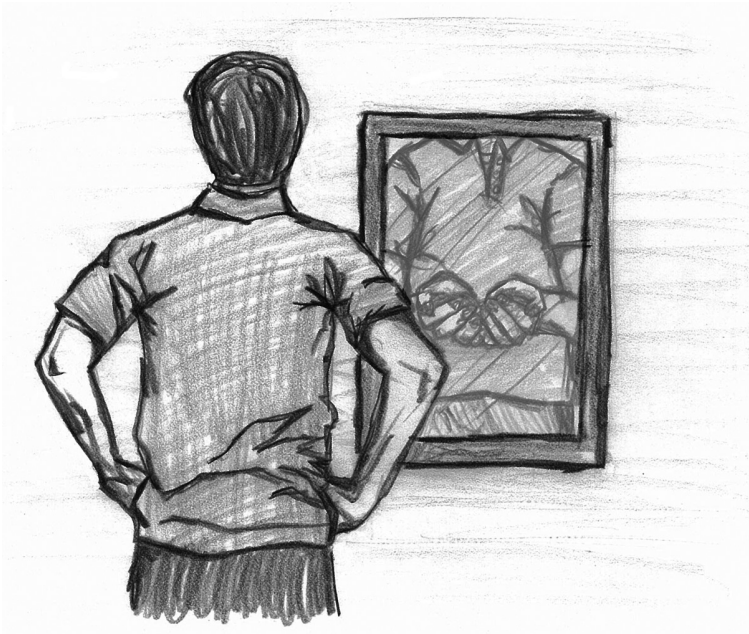
It seems like you would be hard pressed to find somebody who does not want to be considered a compassionate person. The thought of compassion in many ways is intertwined with the thought of humanity.² You hear people say, “he or she is such a humanitarian” in regards to someone who does good things for others or the world. To be a humanitarian seems to be synonymous with being

1. Nouwen, Henri J. M., McNeill, Donald P. and Morrison, Douglas A., *Compassion: A Reflection on the Christian Life*, (New York: Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group Inc., 1982), 1.

2. Ibid, 1.

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compassionate. However, our society does not seem to be built on compassion; but rather on comparison and competition. So much of our lives is about comparison. We are on Facebook, Twitter and blogs to find community with other people. Yet if we are honest with ourselves, there are times we use these things to find out what others are doing and to show them what we are doing by comparison. From the time we are old enough to understand, we



are taught to compete. We are taught that the winners are the ones who get the most and the losers are the ones who can't compete with the fastest, the strongest, or the smartest. From this point of view the winners are the ones who are (supposedly) satisfied. The problem is, that doesn't always seem to be the case. In our world of competition we have seen the strongest create pain, loneliness, war, death, rape, isolation, violence, hurt feelings, suicide, ego,

pride, slavery, and so on. Death rather than satisfaction seems to be the result of those things. When we turn to the words of Jesus, we see that He said the opposite of the world's philosophy. He said if you want to live, you need to die. If you want to accumulate, you need to give away. If you want to be first, you need to be the last. If you want to win, you need to lose.

The world tells us perfection is the ideal and that our shortcomings are to be forgotten and fixed. That's why the plastic surgery industry does so well. Our world sees perfection as someone who doesn't need the help of anything or anyone. However, in God's reality, it is opposite of that. God uses our weakness to show His strength.

Jean Vanier, who founded a series of communities for handicapped people around the world called L'Arche, writes in his book *Living Gently in a Violent World*:

"I spoke some time ago in Aleppo in Syria, mainly to the Muslim community, and there was a mufti there who has since become the great mufti of Syria. When I finished he got up and said, 'If I have understood well, people with disabilities lead us to God.'

We are afraid of showing weakness. We are afraid of not succeeding. Deep inside we are afraid of not being recognized. So we pretend we are the best. We hide behind power. We hide behind all sorts of things. However, when we meet people with disabilities and reveal to them through our eyes and ears and words that they are precious, they are changed. But we too are changed. We are led to God."³

3. Vanier, Jean and Hauerwas, Stanley. *Living Gently in a Violent World: The Prophetic Witness of Weakness* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 64.

Vanier understands that it is hard to look at pain, dysfunction, and imperfection in the eye. Partly because looking at our pain takes us to a deeper place . . . that is not always easy. When we truly sit with the painful realities of this world we find real change. To wrestle through our brokenness is to find Christ, the one who heals in compassion. Only when we have found that healing can we offer it to someone else. This is not an easy or quick process. The word *pati*, which compassion is derived from, is also the same root word for patience.⁴ The act of patience is what keeps us from running away when things are awkward or hard. There is a story in the Gospels (John 11) about Jesus' friend, Lazarus. When Jesus and His disciples were on their way to Lazarus, Jesus told them that Lazarus had fallen asleep, but He was going there to wake him up. When Jesus arrived on the scene He saw the intense sadness going on around Him. (If you've ever witnessed people from the Middle East when they mourn a tragedy such as a death, you would realize that when Jesus arrived on the scene it was most likely a lot of loud weeping.) Jesus joins their sadness. Their sadness becomes His. Jesus wept. Jesus entered and, with patience, sat with friends and embraced the moment with them fully. We don't know how long Jesus wept, but we know that He heard the cries and pain of His friends and family and took on that pain himself.

God was, is, and will always be the first to do this. The relationship between God and humanity is found in the ever presentness of Jesus' all knowing and compassionate embrace. King David talks about this embrace in the Psalms when he calls on God in Psalm 139 to know him completely, to search his heart. In it

4. Nouwen, et al, *Compassion*, 89.

David reminds himself that even the darkness cannot be dark to God—the source of light. Why do you think this was important?

Take a moment and read through Psalm 139. Where do you see the compassion of Jesus in the questions and answers that David proposes?



PSALM 139

**O LORD, you have searched me
and you know me.**

**You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my
thoughts from afar.**

**You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar
with all my ways.**

**Before a word is on my tongue you know it completely, O LORD.
You hem me in—behind and before; you have laid your hand
upon me.**

**Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too lofty for me to
attain.**

**Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your
presence?**

**If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in
the depths, you are there.**

**If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of
the sea,**

**even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold
me fast.**

**If I say, “Surely the darkness will hide me and the light
become night around me,”**

**even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine
like the day, for darkness is as light to you.**

For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb.

I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well.

My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place. When I was woven together in the depths of the earth, your eyes saw my unformed body. All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.

How precious to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them!

Were I to count them, they would outnumber the grains of sand. When I awake, I am still with you.

If only you would slay the wicked, O God! Away from me, you bloodthirsty men!

They speak of you with evil intent; your adversaries misuse your name.

Do I not hate those who hate you, O LORD, and abhor those who rise up against you?

I have nothing but hatred for them; I count them my enemies. Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts.

See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.



David was asking God to be with him in his pain. He needed God to look directly into the depths of his soul and show him where the compassion of God was so desperately needed. He was reminding himself he did not need to fear darkness because God was sitting there with him—completely. When our posture is the same as the psalmist, we come to God open and in touch with our

own deep-seated need for His compassion. In that moment when we enter into the healing of Jesus, we become vessels of healing for others.

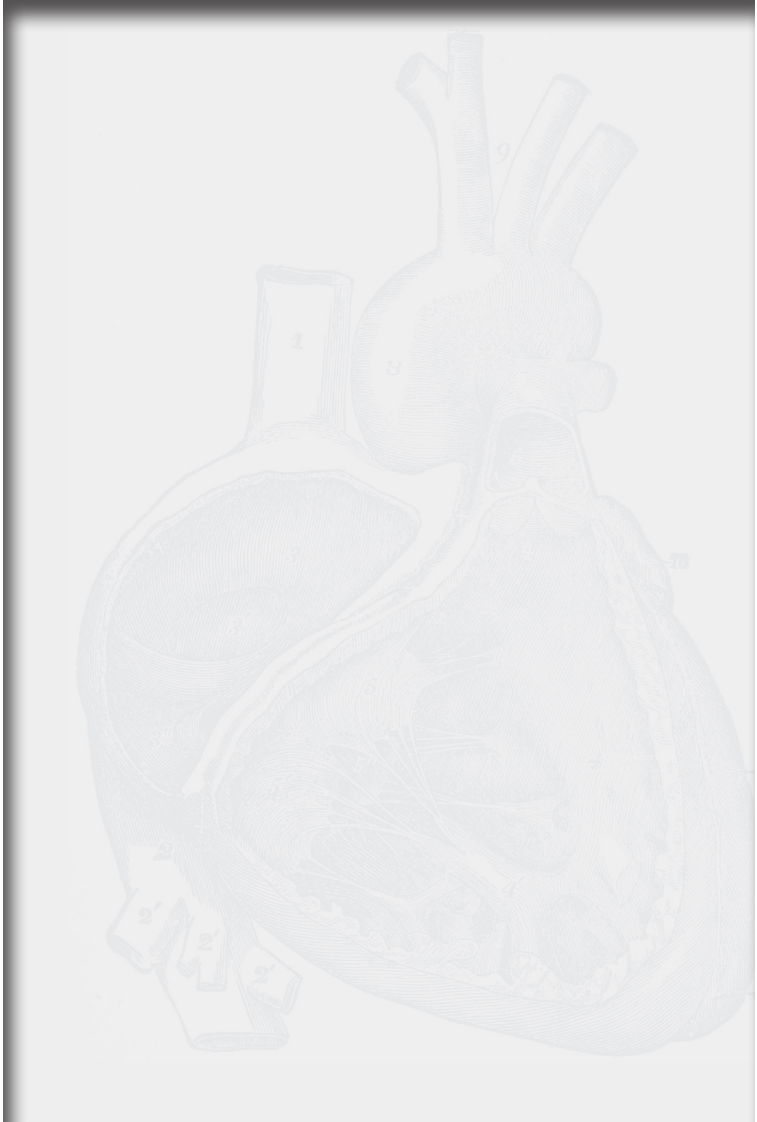
Being Present

My wife is an amazing woman. Her talents and social abilities are profound to me. This is what initially drew me to her as a friend. We are different though. Early on in our relationship I discovered that when a problem arose in her life and she told me about it, my first inclination was to map out a plan to solve the issue. The problem was Page never seemed real interested in the immediate solving of the problem. She kept saying, “I just want you to hear me!” I did not understand what she meant by that. So I kept trying to gently get her to understand the options for solving the problem. What I eventually came to realize was my wife was looking for compassion through my presence. She wasn’t interested in my problem solving abilities, for her it was therapeutic just to be heard. If I could simply sit in the problem with her and understand her pain, then almost magically it was like she could cope with the problem and figure it out herself. I have found that it is hard to do. Whether it is with my wife, a friend in crisis, or whomever. When we arrive and sit in the moment with someone, we become vulnerable and as helpless as they are. We enter into the place they are in, in order to give companionship to the loneliness of the place they are in.

Have you discovered any of this to be true in your life?

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Take a moment and think about the times you have been in crisis, or the times people you know have been. Express them here.



The example of us sitting with our friends in their time of need is only a shadow of the compassion God has for us as His creation and children. One of the names the angel announced Jesus was to be called was Immanuel, meaning God is with us (Matthew 1:21).⁵ That name marked the return of the relational intimacy between humans and God that was found in the Garden of Eden. God is with us to share in the joys, the mundaneness, and the sorrow of life. Only God is able to be with us in complete solidarity. When Jesus emptied himself and became human, God showed us His compassion in physical form. The book *Compassion* describes the compassion felt by Jesus when He was on earth.



“This is the mystery of God’s compassion as it becomes visible in the healing stories of the New Testament. When Jesus saw the crowd harassed and dejected like sheep without a shepherd, he felt with them in the center of his being (Matthew 9:36). When Jesus saw the blind, the paralyzed, and the deaf being brought to him from all directions, he trembled from within and experienced their pains in his own heart (Matthew 14:14). When he noticed that the thousands who had followed him for days were tired and hungry, Jesus said, I am moved with compassion (Mark 8:2). And so it was with the two blind men who called after him (9:27), the leper who fell to his knees in front of him (Mark 1:41), and the widow of Nain who was burying her only son (Luke 7:13). They moved Jesus, they made him feel with all his intimate sensibilities the depth of their sorrow. He became lost with the lost, hungry with the hungry, and sick with the sick.”



5. Nouwen, et al, *Compassion*, 12.

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Jesus is able to sit and weep with us in our pain, because He knows it, because He becomes it. This compassion is a gift to us. It offers us the ability to leave the places of fear and competition and to walk in the freedom of compassion and a life lived in satisfaction. The reason it is hard for us to live in the place of compassion is because it takes away our edge, our success over someone else. To be led by compassion would mean thinking of the others benefit. It is fearful to be in that place because it leaves us not sure if we'll win in the end. However, Jesus' compassion to us reassures our son and daughter-ship in God. It frees us from the need to compete and allows us to give because we have already been given to. Before we can be compassionate to others as Jesus was, we have to believe that everyone is need of compassion, starting with us.

Can our compassion bleed out of us as it did with Jesus? Absolutely! We are Jesus in the flesh. John 15 tells us if we are in Him, He is in us. Does that sound mystic and weird? It is! This journey of faith is one of mystery and bizarre circumstances. However, it is one that leads to a perfect and all satisfying relationship with God.

Have you thought about your life lately? Even in writing this, moments in my own life come to mind where I am living in fear and unable to be fully present with people; hearing what they have to say and being moved to love them completely. What is it that you are hearing from this chapter? In the next three steps take time to reflect on what's been said.

1. Take a piece of paper and create what it is that you are hearing (draw, write, collage). When you are done, put it up on your bedroom mirror or a place that you will see it regularly as a reminder of what God is teaching you.

2. Over the next 24 hours take note of all the ways your life is encouraging you to compete. Make a list. Then take a look at that list and decide if there are ways to avoid those places that encourage competition. This is difficult. We may feel isolated when we decide to leave competition. This move must be made in prayer and constant time with Jesus. Only through our intimacy with Christ will we not feel the need to compete with the world.

3. Jesus' miracles were amazing and exciting. However the reason for them, the source of them happening, was His compassion. Take a walk around your neighborhood. Your neighborhood might mean the physical streets around your home, or it might mean the communities you are involved in (school, friends, family). Where are the places that you are moved to compassion?