

Building Hearts of Compassion

More than Words, P3; 10-18-15

As I look back through my life a bit, there are definitely a few, "*If only I'd known it was you*" moments that I wish had never happened.

- For example, I was invited for a meal at an acquaintance's house while living in Central Asia...
- And didn't discover till the next day that I was sitting next to one of the most feared terrorists in the country.
- I mean, if I had known it was him, I would've acted a little more polite... giving a little more attention to not offending him!!

One time **I was in line at Cinnabons** and, for whatever reason, women kept stopping to look at me.

- I was confused... but thought, "*maybe my time has come... maybe 'overweight redhead' is the new, hot look!*"
- Turns out, the guy wearing grey sweatpants and a t-shirt in front of me **was Kenny Rogers**.
- I mean, if I had known it was him, I would've at least said hello.
- Who knows... maybe Kenny Rogers would've bought me a Cinnamon Bun!

But there are tons of moments in life that would fall in the "*If only I had known it was you*" category.

- When Toyota rejected a young engineer's job application, **Soichiro Honda**, decided to start his own business.
- If only Toyota knew that Honda could have worked for him!
- As a young man, **Walter Disney** was fired by a news editor who said that he, "*lacked imagination!*"
- Undeterred, Disney would go on to create a Magical Kingdom that earned him billions!

If only **Alexander Sinclair**, from RSO records really had known who had rejected when he told the teen band U2

- that their music wasn't "suitable for us at present" just six months before their debut album changed rock-n-roll history!
- I think, in one way or another, we've all had those "*If only I had known it was you*" moments in life.

But I think that the ultimate “*If I had only known it was you*” story is one that Jesus told 2,000 years ago.

- In fact, this story from **Matthew 25** might just be the single most sobering story Jesus ever told.
- While talking to a crowd of people, Jesus began sharing about how He will one day return to earth in all of His glory.

No longer is there an image of a little baby boy being born in a humble animal pen in some obscure village...

- **but of a King coming in power and authority to judge humanity...**
- Where He'll **separate all human beings the way that a shepherd would separate the sheep from the goats**—the sheep on his right, the goats on his left.

And when that happens, Jesus will say to those who are **on his right**, “*Come, you who are blessed by my Father. Take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you from the creation of the world, because...*”

- I was **hungry**, and you gave me something to eat.
- I was **illiterate**, and you taught me how to read.
- I was a **successful executive** in a broken marriage getting lost in alcohol... and you helped me find my way.
- I had **no work**. I didn't have a job, and you helped me get training.
- I was **old & sick** and alone in a nursing home, and you used to come and visit me.
- I was **on the streets**, and you helped me find a place to live.
- I was a **teenager pretending to have it all together** but riddled with fear and you took the time to notice and reach out.”
- I was a **single mom giving everything I had** just to keep food on the table... till you stood with me and shared my burden.

Then Jesus describes how He will then turn to those **on his left**, and say, “*Depart from me you... for I never knew you.*”

- For I **didn't have enough food**, and you knew it, but you looked the other way and pretended like you didn't see.

- I was hopelessly **illiterate**, and you didn't lift a finger to help me learn how to read.

I was **living all alone here as an immigrant**, trying to find work just to keep my family alive back home... I was so alone and poor but you didn't care.

- I was **without work**, but all you really cared about was your own career.
- I **wasn't even out of high school**... but even though I'm **living on the streets** you wouldn't even turn your head to look at me each day as you passed by.

But those **on His left** appealed to Him saying, "*When did we see you like that?*" *I don't remember that ever happening even once. When did we ever treat you like that?"*

- **If only we had known it was you!** If only we had known that helping others was the same as helping Jesus.
- If only we had **known that serving others was serving Christ... How differently we would have lived our lives!**
- And Jesus will say, "***⁴⁰I assure you, when you did it to one of the least of these... you were doing it to me. ⁴⁵And when you refused to help the least of these, you were refusing to help Me.***"

Now, keep in mind that when Jesus speaks to those on His right, saying, "Come you who are blessed by My Father..."

- He's **not speaking to some of the sheep... but to all the sheep**... to all of those who are His children.
- And when He says to those on His left, "***Depart from Me, for I never knew you,***" He's speaking to those whom He claims to have never known.

You see, some people want to understand this passage to say that Jesus is separating compassionate Christians from uncompassionate ones.

- **But, He's speaking to those on His right who are in His Kingdom**, who can be identified by their compassion... and those who are **not in His Kingdom**.

- expressed it, what He is saying that **in His judgment of humanity**,
- **what He expects** to characterize His people, are hearts of compassion... For Him, that's the **ultimate expression** of a transformed life...

That of all the values embraced within the Kingdom of God-- **love**, **mercy**, and **compassion** are the most important...

- In every respect, they **authenticate our faith** and **identify us** as His people....
- They **demonstrate & validate** that life we receive solely by His grace as we believe in Jesus.

You see, the **kind of compassion** that we're meant to walk in as we live out our day-to-day lives...

- isn't just that we feel bad for the **lost** or the **poor** or the **victims of injustice** or the **sick**, for example;
- Instead, the compassion we're meant to have is one that truly **reflects the Father's heart & ministry** toward those around Him.
- This is important... because so many people **confuse a heart of compassion for pity**.

And yet, ***pity*** is what you have when you feel sorry for someone in need, **but do nothing to help**.

- Compassion, on the other hand, is something that grips you deep inside.
- In fact, it grabs you so deeply that, **even in the face of risk and loss, you know that you need to do something** to help those who are suffering... whether they deserve it or not.

All through the New Testament, we're told that Jesus, ***"being moved with compassion,"***

- **preached the Gospel**, **fed the hungry**... **identified & touched the lepers**, **set the captives free**, **healed the sick**,
- and **challenged the structures of injustice** with a powerful counter-cultural message of love & grace.

Jesus didn't walk around feeling bad for people. He **walked around seeing the Father's heart** for those around Him...

- and **reflected that compassion through tangible ministry** rooted in love & mercy.
- That's why, in talking about who God has called us to be as a church, I've spoken about not only being a **People of His Presence** and a **People of Community**...
- but about being a **People of Compassion**.

As I've been saying over the past two weeks: whenever we see another human being in need, we have a choice.

- **We can extend our hand.** We can notice. We can see. We can feel. We can hear. We can pray. We can care. We can serve.
- We can **extend** ourselves
- **OR...** We can avoid. We can withdraw. We can look the other way. It's up to us.

And yet, to those who chose to live only for their own comfort and gain, Jesus says this in verse 45, ***"I assure you, when you refused to help the least of these... you were refusing to help me."***

And I'll tell you one of the most sobering parts of this story to me. He **didn't confront** those listening for having oppressed the "least of these."

- He **doesn't confront** them for putting their comfort & pleasure before the needs of the desperate.
- He doesn't confront them for their abusive authority over the poor. He doesn't say, *"You did bad things,"* at all.
- **He just says, "You did nothing. You simply looked away."**

"You decided that having more and more things was worth your working hard... but helping those in need around you wasn't worth lifting a finger."

You decided that you had more important things to do, but you were wrong. And so you left me hungry and unclothed and uneducated and unloved... uncared for when I was alone and sick and hopeless."

If only I had know it was you, Jesus!

After Mother Theresa's death in 1997, the **Bishop of Calcutta** was asked about what it was that moved her to do all she did.

- He said, *"It wasn't the plight of humanity that drove Mother Theresa into the streets, it wasn't the poor, the dying, the lost... it was Jesus."*
- Throughout her indescribable life of compassion, she was really ultimately **only ministering to one person... Jesus...**

For every **woman nurtured through their grief**, she was **ministering to Jesus...**

- For every **man she cared for in distress**, she was ministering to Jesus.
- Every time you **consider the well being** of another person beyond your own well-being, you're **caring** for Jesus...

Every time you choose to **listen and pray** for someone rather than do what would be most relaxing for you... you're **ministering** to Jesus.

- When you **visit a neighbor** who is sick or an **elderly man living alone** in your development... you are **consoling** Jesus.
- You see, it blesses God when we give away to others the way we've received from Him.

When we **listen to one another** as we have been listened to...

- When we **serve** one another sacrificially as we have been served
- When we **forgive** one another as we have been forgiven
- When we've **given generously** the way we've been generously given to...
- When we **enter into the lives** of even the most difficult people just as He has chosen to enter into our lives
- When we **love with hearts of mercy & compassion** the way we've been loved by Jesus.

And yet, so much of our faith is focused on so much less that.

Sometimes **we view our Christian life as no more than some self-help endeavor...** intended simply to make our own lives better.

- And by doing this, we are making Christianity into **something that serves us rather than us serving the king of Kings** and the lord of Lords.
- **So how do we change this?** How can we develop a more compassionate heart? Where do we start?

I think we start by doing what Jim Wallace suggests in his book, “Faith Works.” We start by **getting out of the house** more often...

- As we step **out of our own little slice of the world**... and into the lives of others who need to experience *for themselves* the Father’s love & compassion.
- You see, we all tend to live in a little slice of the world where we go to **school**, we **shop**, we **work**, we **go to church**...
- where we **connect with others** who **just so happen to live in the same slice of the world** as we do...typically people most like us.

You see, here’s why it is so important to get out of the proverbial “house” more often...

- At least in my own life, I’ve discovered an **amazing capacity to convince myself** that I’m compassionate simply because I have compassionate feelings sometimes. □□
- I’ve shared this before... how I can look at an ad in a magazine for a relief agency; **see a picture of a hungry child** and feel really sorry for that child.
- I can think that makes me a compassionate person because I feel sorrow even though I’m not doing anything. It’s just pity.

I can **hear somebody else express prejudice** and think to myself, “*I’m not like that. I think everybody is of equal worth. I feel real strongly about that. I’m pretty enlightened.*”

- I can think of myself as a compassionate person even though I may not be doing anything to **work for justice**. □□
- But, again, all of that is just pity. But **God hasn’t called us to pity** the world around us...
- but to **courageously love** the world around us as He has.

But, when you start actually “doing compassion,” you get involved with **real people living beyond your own slice** of the world.

- You see, whenever the writers of Scripture offer commands **about loving**, about **being compassionate**, especially with the poor...
- We need to understand that these aren't commands to *feel* a certain way. But rather, they're **fundamental calls to action**.

And so, when we read about God's calling on us from the Book of Leviticus 19:18 to “*love your neighbor as yourself*”,

- we're being **called to far more than warm fuzzy feelings** for one another.
- In fact, whenever the Bible talks about loving people, especially loving the poor, **it's a call to do** something.

It's good to feel good feelings toward your neighbors or toward the poor. And yet the ultimate call here to love...

- is a call to **expend energy**, give **assistance**, to **do something**, to **be Christ** to them!
- You see, **we can't be the hands and feet of Jesus to the world around us** if we don't get off the couch and get outside of our little slice of the world.

Listen... every person in this room has the capacity to be an agent of compassion. Whether you are a **thinker or feeler**...

- whether you have **lots of resources or few**... whether you're **introverted or extraverted, young or old**, it doesn't matter...
- **You can be used** to reflect & extend the compassion of God.

□ □

The real question this morning is “*What provisions have I made to ensure that I embrace compassion as a daily part of how I live out my life?*”

I want to challenge you to hold on to that question... to take it home with you and really think about how you might answer it...

- Not because somebody is trying to **make you do something you may not want to do**;

- Or, because **I want you to feel guilty**... But because it honors our God.
- It's intricately woven into the kind of **meaningful Kingdom** life God wants us to live... the kind of life He's called us to live.

Truth is... if you don't take that step, if you don't get out of the house... over time, your **heart will grow colder** to the plight of those around you...

- You'll start **marginalizing** people as a way of turning away from their suffering...
- **A woman who was raped was here illegally.** Well, she shouldn't have been here in the first place (Is that how Jesus would see it?).
- That **homeless guy** is probably a deadbeat dad who refuses to put in an honest days work (you don't know that).

You see, our hearts can grow callous and cold not so much because of the wrong things we've done... **but for all the wonderful things we didn't do.**

- It's hard. It's hard to say... and it's hard to hear. But I'm saying it... and you're hearing it... because **He's worth it!**
- **He's worth** any implication this may have on our lives...

And because what we do for the least of those around us... those with the **least options**;

- those who face the **greatest injustice**; those with the **least amount of hope**...
- What we do for them... we do for Jesus. **What we do for them... we do for Jesus!**

As Isaiah looks at the state of the world around him, he writes, in **Isaiah 59:8-9** that...

- **"They don't know where to find peace or what it means to be just and good... there's no justice among us."**
- He continues in **verse 14**, crying out that **"justice is nowhere to be found."**

We're then told that "*The Lord looked and was displeased to find there was no justice.*"

- In other words, God looked at the world around us... and time again **He saw justice and truth being trampled on in the streets...**
- seeing the **vulnerable** being **abused** and the **weak forsaken**.
- And yet, the injustices all around us isn't what amazes God.

Instead, in **verse 16**, we're told that **"He was amazed to see that no one intervened to help the oppressed."**

- In all He saw, what causes God to be astonished? It was that **no one** was there to **stand in the gap** between the weak & the strong...
- That **no one** was there to **put themselves in the way of those who would hurt & abuse**.
- That **no one** was **expressing His love & mercy & compassion** to those around them.

And I wonder, as God looks over the landscape around us today **will He find His church**, will He find us **caring for, loving, & embracing those around us**?

- Will He find us standing up for those with **no means and no voice**?
- Will He find **me** standing up for those who need what little I feel I have to give?

I'd like to share quick story with you that I've shared before... about a young guy named Toby who got out of the house.

- When Toby was in high school, he **wrote an essay on world hunger**. And apparently so impressed the judges...
- that he ended up winning an **opportunity to travel with World Vision to Africa to assist in one of their development projects**.

One day, they were at a food distribution center where a lot of kids liked hanging around the World Vision folks that would pass by.

- There was a boy, maybe 11 years old, who seemed taken by Toby... and stuck pretty close him.

- But when it was time for the World Vision people to go, this kid tugged at Toby's shirt.

And although there was a language barrier, Toby came to understand this little boy was asking if he could have his shirt.

- It was just a T-shirt, but this kid was in rags. It was obvious that he never had a shirt like that.
- But there was **no time to think it through**. Toby had no other shirt with him, so he just shrugged "no" and got on the bus.

They drove off and Toby watched as all the kids ran behind after the bus and waved goodbye to them. He'd never see them again.

- But **he couldn't shake this feeling inside**. He opened up his Bible and started reading it, and he read this story in **Matthew 25**.
- *"I needed clothing and you clothed me. Whatever you did for the least of these..."* It was like **it punched him in the stomach**.

They went back to the compound where they stayed that night. Toby waited until everybody else was asleep, and he got up to be alone with God just wept.

- Those words broke him up inside— *"Whatever you did not do to the least of these..." God... if only I had known it was you."*
- He finished this tour with World Vision and went back home to Michigan. But he couldn't get that 11-year old kid off his mind.

So **he got up one night around 1:00 in the morning**, and said to himself, **"I've got to do something... I've got to get out of the house."**

- So he had an idea. Toby said to himself, *"I was in Ethiopia. Here's a country where a kid would be thrilled just to get a T-shirt. And I live in America where everyone has lots of t-shirts"*
- I mean, is there anyone here who doesn't have few extra t-shirts in your drawers?
- I have so many T-shirts it's like they mate with each other make new t-shirts.

So Toby thought to himself, *"Maybe I could collect some T-shirts here and send them over to Africa."*

- So he started going door to door. He was a high school kid, knocking on people's doors, "*Got any T-shirts?*"
- And he started a kind of a campaign. He called it "**Give the Shirt Off Your Back**" campaign.
- And newspapers picked it up. News services and television stations started carrying the story. **7-11** put bins in their stores to collect T-shirts, "Give the shirt off your back."

Toby ended up with 18,000 T-shirts. He had to sort through them and get rid of all the ones with holes and stains...

- But he's **still got 10,000 like-new T-shirts**. Now he's got a new problem. "How am I going to get them to Africa?"
- So he spent three months calling every relief organization in the book. "Could you get 10,000 T-shirts to Africa?"
- But he couldn't find anyone who did that kind of thing... not without a lot of money.

So Toby started to pray, "*God, you got all these T-shirts together. Now...how are you going to get them to Africa?*"

- Well, out of nowhere, Toby got a phone call from CNN who found a relief agency willing to ship his t-shirts to somewhere in Africa.
- They didn't know where they would go... but definitely where there was need.
- Turn out that of all the countries of Africa... **those 10,000 shirts landed in Ethiopia!**

That's one story of one high school kid who got out of the house and let somebody else's needs **get under his skin**. "*I needed clothing, and you clothed me.*"

- And he realized that **what he did to the least of these is what matters most of all**.
- You see, guys... something happens when you get out of the house... when you choose to **step outside** of your own slice of the world and **into someone else's shoes**.

Because when you take the time to feel in ***your heart*** what God feels in ***His heart*** for the poor around you... than suddenly we find new life blooming inside of us.

- Because, as we **discover the single mom struggling to take care of her family on minimum wage...**
- Or the woman in the battered women's shelter a few miles from here...
- or the young boy in the youth detention center or the **teen girl in the youth shelter** both just a mile from here...
- As we extend our hand to them... **we might just discover** that, beyond what our eyes can see... we've just extended our hands toward Jesus.

There a scene from the Passion movie where **a woman runs to Jesus as He is carrying His Cross** down the Via Dolorosa.

- And **as Jesus falls to the ground** from the weight of the cross, she comes to him with a cup of water & a towel to wipe his face.
- For some reason, that scene was very powerful to me. It's just that **I wish I could have been there for Jesus** like that.

But guys... **there is hardly a day in our lives** when we don't have the **opportunity of serving Jesus that same cup of water...**

- As we address the **real needs around us** in a way that instills a greater sense of **dignity, strength, respect, and honor** to everyone we touch...
- Because **what we do to the least of these...** we do to unto Him.

I've shared a story once before about a young woman who began ministering to the poor in India as part of Mother Theresa's Missionaries of Charity order.

- Well one day she began caring for a dying man who had sores all over his body.
- According to this young nun, Mother Theresa came up to her and said,
- *"You be very careful. You be very loving as you touch him for there is Jesus under that distressing disguise."*

I promise you that in spite of its cost on you, at the end of your life, you will not regret one **act of compassion**.

- You will **not regret one moment** that you spent; one **dollar that you gave**; one **tear** that you shed.
- You won't regret any of it because getting out of the house and extending our hands is **Jesus' way of life**.

Think about it... Jesus lived at the right hand of God in unspeakable glory and splendor.

- And yet, in seeing the physical and spiritual poverty on earth, He said to himself, "*I've got to get out of the house.*"
- And He **crossed every barrier and boundary** to extend himself in love to every human being who would receive him.

He came to us... He extended His hand and gave us life. And now He asks us, "*Will you do what I do?*"

- *Will you commit yourself to building a compassionate heart? Will you be part of my team?"*
- We see from this passage that those who reach the end of their lives with the greatest amount of regret will be those people who say, "*If only I'd known it was you.*"

Ask yourself... "*What provisions have I made to ensure that I embrace compassion as a daily part of how I live out my life?"*"

- Will you go for it? Will you say "yes" to **His calling** on you to extend His compassion and love to the world around you?
- Will you reach out your hand and **take a risk; see a face you wouldn't normally see; learn a name you wouldn't normally learn?**

Would you say a prayer for them; **shed a tear**... BUT THEN, be part of changing a slice of the world beyond just your own.