

“DISCOVERING THE COMPASSIONATE LIFE”

Mark 10:17-31; 2 Corinthians 9:6-15 ¹

In the year 1741, John Woolman, a young man barely twenty-one years old, set out to seek his fortune as an apprentice tailor in Mount Holly, New Jersey, not far from his home. One of John’s tasks was to serve as a legal clerk of sorts, rather like a Notary Public might do today. It happened one day that John was asked to prepare a document called an “Instrument of Slavery” to document the sale of a slave. Being a devout Christian—a Quaker, actually—John sensed a deep and profound contradiction between what he was doing and what he understood as the message of Jesus.

As years went by, John’s discomfort with slavery grew deeper. He became well-known as an abolitionist speaker, and when he was a guest in a slaveholder’s home, John insisted on paying the slaves for their services. On November 18, 1758, John preached strongly against slavery in a Quaker meeting, after which he was invited to dinner at the home of Thomas Woodward. When he arrived at Mr. Woodward’s home, John saw servants at work, and he asked whether they might be slaves. When he was told that they were, John quietly got up and left without a word. Mr. Woodward was so moved by this display of conviction that the very next morning he freed every one of his slaves.

At the Quaker Annual Meeting that year, John made an impassioned plea:

“We entreat you to examine whether the purchasing of a Negro, either born here or imported, doth not contribute to a further importation, and consequently to the upholding of all the evils above mentioned, and promoting manstealing, the only theft which by the Mosaic law was punished with death. . . . We entreat you in the bowels of gospel love, seriously to weigh the cause of detaining them in bondage. If it be for your own private gain, or any other motive than their good, it is much to be feared that the love of God and the influence of the Holy Spirit is not the prevailing principle in you, and that your hearts are not sufficiently redeemed from the world.”²

The result of John Woolman’s efforts was that Quakers, with rare exceptions, ended the practice of slavery among themselves over a hundred years before the Civil War.

John Woolman gave himself to a cause of social justice that had captured his heart, and the impact of his labor was far-reaching, indeed. Woolman had discovered what Richard Foster calls “the compassionate life.”

What do you associate with the word, “compassion”? On Mother’s Day, we celebrate the compassionate, self-giving, always-believing-in-us love of our mothers, as well we should. At the same time, we may sometimes think of “compassion” as rather a “soft” attitude, a weak position “for women only,” but such an idea badly misses the mark. “Compassion” is actually **Christlike care** for persons who are experiencing misfortune, coupled with the **courageous commitment** to do all in one’s power to make things better for them.

Lyndon Johnson was an unlikely civil rights advocate. Throughout his long career in Congress, the Texas Democrat showed no inclination to support civil rights. But once he became President, Johnson became a powerful advocate for African American rights. Where John Kennedy struggled to pass a civil rights bill, Johnson succeeded. During his administration, President Johnson passed the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, Maryland on May 6, 2012.

² Richard Foster, *Streams of Living Water: Celebrating the Great Traditions of Christian Faith* (HarperOne, 2001), p. 141.

of 1965, and the Fair Housing Act of 1968. These efforts freed African Americans to vote and to serve in government, and they paved the way for Barack Obama to later become President.³

Lyndon Johnson voted against civil rights legislation many times while representing Texas in Congress; but after he became President, he told an aide, "I'll tell you a secret. I swore to myself that if I ever had the power to help these kids, I would do it. Now I have the power, and I intend to use it."⁴ That's what compassion looks like.

In recent weeks we've looked at prayer, Scripture, and virtue as components of Great Commission living, and it sometimes happens that Christians pursue these qualities in ways that make us "so heavenly minded that we're no earthly good." But such an outcome is not the way of Jesus.

William Penn, another Quaker, and the founder of Pennsylvania, wrote, "True godliness does not turn men out of the world, but enables them to live better *in* it and excites their endeavors to *mend* it."⁵ Dag Hammarskjöld, a former Secretary-General of the United Nations, wrote that "The road to holiness necessarily passes through the world of action";⁶ and Jesus' own brother, James, reminded us that "*faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead*" (James 2:17).

Compassion is "care that makes a difference," and it's rooted in the very character of God. Jesus often experienced and expressed compassion. When He saw the crowds following Him, "*he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd*" (Matthew 9:36). When Jesus fed the hungry and healed the sick, it was because He felt compassion for them (Matthew 14:14, 15:32, 20:34, Mark 1:41).

In the Parable of the Prodigal Son, which He told to show us God's heart, Jesus said that when the father saw his lost son coming home while he was still a great distance away, he ran to his son, "*filled with compassion*" (Luke 15:20).

God is holy, yes. But God is also compassionate (Psalm 103:13, 2 Corinthians 1:3), and God's compassion is care that makes a difference both in time and in eternity.

Living a compassionate life helps to make our faith not merely theoretical, but practical, as well. Living a compassionate life gives traction to our frequently rather soft and sentimental talk about "love." While we do well to yearn for world peace in these troubled times, the bumper sticker speaks the truth when it says, "If you want peace, work for justice." Living a compassionate life puts names and faces on the work of justice.

As Julius Nyerere, the long-time President of Tanzania, put it, "the world is not one. Its peoples are more divided now, and also more conscious of their divisions, than they have ever been. They are divided between those who are satiated and those who are hungry. They are divided between those with power and those without power. They are divided between those who dominate and those who are dominated, between those who exploit and those who are exploited." He continued, "If God were to ask the wretched of the earth who are their

³ Don Keko, "Lyndon Johnson and Civil Rights," www.examiner.com/article/lyndon-johnson-and-civil-rights, January 4, 2011.

⁴ Robert Caro, in an interview with Belinda Luscombe, "10 Questions," *TIME*, May 2, 2012, 64.

⁵ Foster, p. 135.

⁶ Foster, p. 166.

friends, are we so sure that we know their answer? And is that answer irrelevant to those who seek to serve God?”⁷

According to www.snopes.com,⁸ if we could shrink the 6.7 billion people who lived on Planet Earth in the year 2000 to a village of 100 people, here are a few numbers that I call “Earthstistics” that would pertain to the village:

- 60 people would be Asians, 12 would be Europeans, 15 would live in the Western Hemisphere, and 13 would be Africans.
- 73 would be “persons of color.”
- 67 would be of some faith other than Christian.
- 33 would suffer from malnutrition.
- 33 would live in substandard housing.
- 16 would be unable to read; and
- 27% of the entire wealth of the world would be held by the 5 North Americans.

Do you realize that if your household income is just \$25,000, that puts you in the top ten percent of wealthy people in the world? At just \$50,000, we enter the top one percent. If you want to know precisely where you are, just go to www.globalrichlist.com.

Some years ago it fell to me to call one of our church members, a visiting professor from the Philippines, to encourage him to support our new church budget. He was rather intense when he responded, “*Why should I give my tithes and offerings to help you pay for your huge, beautiful building when I can send the same money to the Philippines and help fifteen churches who are actually reaching people for Jesus?*” Such ideas are troubling, and they are troubling because they are uncomfortably true.

The man we know as “the rich young ruler” had the same problem that you and I very often have. His various properties and his financial resources had so possessed his heart and mind that compassion had been very nearly squeezed out.

The rich young ruler was not an evil person; but he was imprisoned by those very things he trusted to make him free. God doesn’t ask many of us to give everything we have to help the poor, but God’s command to tithe our “increase” is designed as much to protect us from idolatry as it is anything else (Deuteronomy 14:22, 26:12).

Many of us find that our past financial choices make tithing rather a challenge in the present. But even so, if John Woolman were to speak to us this morning, I suspect he might say something like this: “My friends, if you say you are followers of Jesus, and if at the same time you are not giving rather extravagantly to further the work of God’s Kingdom as it meets the needs of the poor and the hurting around our world, then it is much to be feared that the love of God and the influence of the Holy Spirit is not the prevailing principle in you, and that your hearts are not sufficiently redeemed from the world.” Yes, those are hard words; and they are hard because they’re uncomfortably true.

Sisters and brothers, God does not give us the ability to generate wealth just so that we can be wealthy and pass that wealth on to our descendants. To do some of that is

⁷ Julius Nyrere, “On the Division between Rich and Poor,” in *Moral Issues & Christian Response*, second edition, ed. Paul Jersild and Dale Johnson (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1971), pp. 240, 242.

⁸ www.snopes.com/science/stats/populate.asp

prudent; but God gives us the ability to generate wealth primarily so that we can experience the joy and the exuberance of giving it away.

Listen to Paul's familiar words once again: "*Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness. **You will be enriched in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God.***" (2 Corinthians 9:10-11).

So how do we discover compassionate living? There are no easy answers, and I struggle with these questions just as you do, but some things do seem clear. God told us through the prophet Isaiah, "*Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—when you see the naked, to clothe them, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood? Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the LORD will be your rear guard. Then you will call, and the LORD will answer; you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I*" (Isaiah 58:6-9a).

Jesus echoed these words of Isaiah when He told us that we'll be judged, at least in part, on the basis of whether we have fed the hungry, given drinks to the thirsty, invited strangers into our homes, clothed the naked, and visited the sick and the imprisoned (Matthew 25:31-46). These instructions are not ambiguous, though we might like it better if they were.

My friends, as followers of Jesus, you and I offer *compassion*—care that makes a difference—to those experiencing misfortune, not IF they meet certain criteria, not BECAUSE they've done something to deserve it, but IN SPITE OF what they may currently seem to be. Why do we do this? Because this is precisely what God offers to us. Again, and again, and again, God meets you and me where we are, mired in the muck of our own futile attempts to build castles of protection for ourselves, and gives us the opportunity to begin again . . . by trusting Him.

I think President Bush had the right idea when he once challenged every American to do at least 4,000 hours of volunteer work over the remainder of our lives. Spread over twenty years, that would be four hours a week. If we thought in terms of tithing our waking hours, that would be more than ten hours a week.

Some of this work could be done through the church, in all the ways that we use our gifts and abilities to build up the Body of Christ, but we miss a significant component of God's plan for world transformation if we volunteer only in "safe and clean" ways, substantially removed from the painful realities of the poor. I'm very grateful for the great strength and the apparent health of the social fabric of our community in Columbia and in Howard County; but greater things can happen if you and I engage our lives, our influence, and our resources more fully with the poor.

What does it really mean to us that probably nearly every person in this room is among the top ten percent of wealthy persons on this planet? What does it mean that many of us are in the top one percent? What *should* it mean?

How do the Earthstistics we considered earlier affect and define our mission as a congregation? How might the ministries and emphases of our congregation have to change if we were to take these matters more seriously? And where is the call of God in these numbers for you?

It's easy to become overwhelmed by all this, and it's crucial for us to remember that the most important step on the path toward a compassionate life is always the first one.

Choose something, no matter how small, and **get started**.

- With \$8 you could buy a bag of organic apples . . . or you could buy 25 fruit trees that farmers in Honduras could use to grow fruit to sell at their local market.
- With \$30 you could buy two DVDs . . . or you could send a First Aid kit to a village in Haiti.
- With \$75 you could buy a mobile phone . . . or you could send a mobile health clinic to care for AIDS orphans in Uganda.
- With \$2,400 you could buy a huge high definition television . . . or you could provide education for a whole generation of children in an Angolan village.⁹

You probably know the story about the young boy on vacation at the beach. He awoke one morning after a storm to discover that tens of thousands of starfish had been washed up on the beach in the night, and he began throwing them back in the water before they died. An obviously well-to-do man came by on his morning jog and said to the boy, "Son, there are ten miles of starfish on this beach. What you're doing is not going to make any difference." The boy looked for a moment at the starfish in his hand, and, as he threw it back into the sea, he said, "Well, it will make a difference to that one."

John Woolman was just one man, but he helped to light a fire that changed America forever. My friends, God still intends to change the world, and in this generation God intends to do it through you and through me. Let's move forward together in bold compassion that makes a difference both in time and in eternity!

⁹ www.globalrichlist.com