

Compassion (For Such A Time as This)

Sermon Summary

This sermon provides a detailed theological exploration of compassion. The central explanation defines compassion not as a passive feeling but as an urgent, visceral, and action-oriented response to suffering, rooted in the very nature of God. An analysis of Luke 1:57-80 reveals that God's salvation is an act of "tender mercy," founded upon a covenant of divine, not human, performance. Jesus is presented as the ultimate embodiment: the "matterization" of God's compassion, making an abstract concept tangible and believable for humanity. The analysis also addresses the modern cultural fear of receiving compassion, which is often perceived as a sign of weakness. The sermon concludes with a call for individuals and the church to both actively receive God's compassion and to become its physical representatives in the world.

I. Foundational Concepts: Biblical and Experiential Context

The sermon frames the concept of compassion through both personal experience and a detailed analysis of Scripture, establishing it as a core principle of faith that demands action.

A. Initial Impetus: Personal Encounters with Need

The exploration is motivated by questions arising from direct service and observation:

- **Honduras:** While visiting Leadership Mission International's The Leadership Center, Daniel contemplated the profound impact of being a church that could "literally change the lives of sixty women every year."
- **Local Community:** While volunteering at the South Lakes Food Pantry, a similar question arose regarding the potential of a movement to address food insecurity, providing not just necessities but dignity (e.g., flowers, laundry detergent).

These experiences prompted an internal reflection: "What is this I'm feeling in my heart?" This is identified as an example of how compassion moved Daniel to "plan, prepare, and preach, and practice serving others."

B. Scriptural Foundation: Luke 1:57-80

The primary text for the sermon is the narrative of John the Baptist's birth and the subsequent prophecy of his father, Zechariah.

- **Narrative Summary (Luke 1:57-66):** Elizabeth gives birth to a son. Defying custom, she and Zechariah insist his name is John. Zechariah's ability to speak is immediately restored, and he praises God. This event fills the community with awe and wonder about the child's future, recognizing that "the Lord's hand was with him."
- **Zechariah's Prophecy (Luke 1:67-79):** Filled with the Holy Spirit, Zechariah declares that God has initiated a plan of salvation. This prophetic text forms the basis for the sermon's key theological arguments.

II. Core Theological Arguments from Zechariah's Prophecy

Zechariah's words are deconstructed to reveal foundational truths about God's salvation, mercy, and covenant-keeping nature.

A. Salvation as Merciful Rescue

Zechariah's prophecy declares that God has "come to his people and redeemed them."

- **Redemption:** Defined as being "freed at heavy cost."
- **Salvation:** The word used can mean healing, restoration, or rescue. In this context, it specifically refers to a **rescue** from a "dire predicament" that the people of Israel had fallen into through generations of unfaithfulness and disobedience.
- **Mercy:** Zechariah proclaims that despite these failings, God's action is rooted in **mercy**.

B. The Abrahamic Covenant: A Model of Divine Performance

The prophecy states that God is acting to "remember his holy covenant, the oath he swore to our father Abraham."

- **Ancient Covenants:** Explained as binding contracts. The ceremony often involved cutting animals in half and having the parties walk between the pieces, signifying that a similar fate should befall anyone who breaks the agreement.
- **God's Unique Covenant:** The Abrahamic Covenant is unique because God makes it with God's self. God puts Abraham to sleep and passes through the animal pieces alone (in the form of a "smoking firepot and a blazing torch").
- **Central Insight:** This demonstrates the covenant is based on **divine performance**, not human performance. God knows humans will "inevitably fail," so God guarantees the covenant through God's own faithfulness. Salvation is therefore an act of grace.

- **The Meaning of "Remember":** In this context, "remember" is not about recalling something forgotten. It is an "active bringing forth," an "activation," and a "re-membering" or reconnecting of God's promise into present reality.

C. God's Mercy ("Eleos") vs. Pity

The sermon emphasizes that God's salvation is an expression of deep compassion, not distant pity.

- **Mercy (Greek: *eleos*):** Defined as "a form of empathy for those who are suffering that causes action to take place to relieve people of suffering."
- **Distinction from Pity:** God does not act out of detached pity (as in Mr. T's phrase, "I pity the fool") or grudging obligation (as in Thanos's line, "Fine, I'll do it myself."). God looks upon humanity with active, engaging compassion.

III. A Deep Dive into the Nature of Compassion

The sermon provides a detailed etymological and practical definition of compassion, distinguishing it from related concepts like empathy.

A. Etymological Roots: Suffering and Action

The meaning of compassion is explored through its Latin and Greek origins.

- **Latin (*Compassio*):** Means "to suffer with." The root word *passio* (passion) is linked to profound commitment and a willingness to suffer for a cause, as exemplified by the "passion of the Christ."
- **Greek (*Splanchnizomai*):** The biblical word for compassion, meaning "moved to the bowels" or "to have the bowels yearn." In ancient thought, the bowels were considered the **seat of the emotions**.
- **Key Implication:** The imagery of a visceral, digestive reaction highlights the immediacy and urgency of true compassion. "Compassion *always* deals with a physical response. It engages you into action to go *do* something about it."

B. A Framework for Empathy

While related, empathy and compassion are not identical. The sermon outlines three distinct types of empathy, suggesting a potential progression toward compassionate action.

Type of Empathy	Description
Cognitive Empathy	The ability to observe the emotions of others and identify their distress.
Emotional Empathy	The ability to feel the emotional experience of another person's distress.
Compassionate Empathy	The drive to take action to alleviate the distress observed and felt.

The sermon notes that individuals are not limited to one type and can grow in all three.

C. Jesus as the Epitome of Compassion

Jesus is presented as the ultimate model of compassionate empathy.

- **Incarnation as Action:** Jesus did not just observe humanity's suffering from afar. He "came to physically be with us in our suffering as one of us."
- **Biblical Example (Matthew 9:36-38):** When Jesus saw the crowds were "harassed and helpless," he was "*moved* with compassion." His immediate response was to command action: he instructed his disciples to pray for workers.
- **Commissioning as Action (Matthew 10):** In the very next passage, Jesus sends out the Twelve disciples to heal, cast out demons, cleanse lepers, and proclaim the good news, telling them, "Freely you have received, freely give."
- **Core Principle:** "Compassion doesn't sit and count the cost. Compassion takes action and says, 'I will go. I will do.'"

IV. Contemporary Relevance and Challenges

The sermon addresses the difficulty of receiving compassion in modern culture and presents Jesus as the definitive answer to this challenge.

A. The Fear of Receiving Compassion

A significant barrier to experiencing compassion is the fear of receiving it.

- **Cultural Idolatry:** In a culture that "idolizes strength, victory, success, and power over," receiving compassion can be perceived as an admission of weakness.
- **Vulnerability:** It "makes us vulnerable," which is difficult for those who carry trauma from past betrayals, "false help," or "empty promises."
- **Scientific Reference:** A study referenced in *Psychology Today* (2021) noted a post-COVID-19 pandemic "fear of compassion" linked to this perception of weakness.

B. "God's Compassion Matterized"

Jesus's incarnation is presented as God's solution to humanity's inability to trust or understand compassion.

- **Making Compassion Tangible:** The quote from Michael Adam Beck, "**Jesus is God's compassion matterized,**" encapsulates this idea. Because people couldn't believe in or understand compassion, God made it tangible in the person of Jesus.
- **The Cross as Ultimate Compassion:** Jesus's crucifixion is framed as the ultimate act of compassionate empathy, "the greatest vulnerability of taking the cross for our shame and our pain."
- **Unconditional Acceptance:** Through Jesus, acceptance and love are not earned through performance. God's compassion is always available, as "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever."

V. Conclusion and Call to Action

The sermon concludes by challenging the audience to **internalize** and **externalize** the compassion they have received from God.

A. Pondering Questions for Application

Two questions are posed to encourage personal reflection and action during the Advent/Christmas season:

1. In what ways do you need God's compassion today?
2. What act of compassion can you do this Advent/Christmas season?

B. The Role of the Church

The final charge extends the concept of "matterized compassion" to the church itself.

- **The Body of Christ:** The quote from Isaiah Park, "**We are Christ's compassion matterized,**" asserts that believers are now the physical representations of Christ's compassion in the world.
- **A Visible Jesus:** "When the world sees the church acting with compassion, that's when the world sees Jesus." The ultimate goal for Restoration Church is to be a community where people can tangibly observe the presence of Jesus through its compassionate actions.