

I. Intro:

A. When I was just starting out in ministry, I was told that most pastors only have two or three messages, and they just keep repeating them.

1. I am not talking about the exact same messages – I think most of you would eventually realize that. (Haven't I heard this story?) But the same themes. The suggestion is that pastors tend to steer their sermons in the same direction.

2. I did not think that true of me at the time. I do now. Some of you realize I fall off of the horse in the same direction over the over. I argue that Jesus is the most important person in history and you really need to look at him again; I remind you that eternity changes everything, call on you to serve – because everyone wins when you do, starting with you. I advocate for resilience – “press on.”

B. Well, I have recently felt better about that after noticing that Jesus kept repeating themes as well.

1. He taught many things – indeed, the gospel writers state that he taught many things not recorded in their books. But there are ideas that come up over and over, such as compassion.

C. Of course, Jesus is not alone in this. We see compassion on display in other places in the Bible.

1. In Exodus 34, where Moses is getting the 10 commandments for the second time – and Moses wants to see God but can't, the Lord comes down in a cloud and proclaimed his name – YHWHY. And we read, that God “passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, “The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God.

2. Or in Nehemiah, where an appeal to God's compassion keeps showing up throughout the book, especially in his prayers.

3. Or the whole book of Jonah, where God shows mercy to the Assyrians much to the consternation of Jonah, who wants them wiped out.

4. And compassion is a big theme in the parables.

a) In Matthew 18, Jesus compares the kingdom of heaven to a king who has compassion for his servant and forgives his debts.

b) In Luke 10 - compassion is at the heart of the Parable of the Good Samaritan. The hero isn't the priest or the Levite but the Samaritan who “had compassion” on the man lying on the side of the road.

c) In Luke 15 –compassion is on display in the parable of the Prodigal Son – where the father (God), who is wronged by his younger son keeps watching for him. And while he was still a long way off, he sees him and is full of compassion for him, and runs to embrace him.

5. Of course, the term comes up over and over in the Psalms.

D. This is the fourth sermon in this six-week series:

1. All of which have been grounded in the Psalms. We have been turning to the Psalms, noticing qualities of God that we are to champion here on earth.

2. We stepped our way into this series noting:

a) That because we matter – because we were made by God in his image, because we have value, because God loves us - everything about us matters to God. Including our day job. Our work matters to God.

b) And that work is good. It's a get to not a have to. We are given the opportunity to create and build and serve.

c) But, three – although work is good - it is hard because everything (including work) is broken. It is cursed.

d) And then four: part of God's plan is that we use the things he has given us – including the way he has wired and gifted up - to spread his kingdom now. To bring aspects of His goodness here.

3. We then set out five things to look at:

a) Ben took us to Psalm 65, and we looked at goodness, highlighting the business community, those working with their hands – those who created value.

b) I then led us to Psalm 89 to look at justice, highlighting attorneys and judges, legislators and police officers, social workers and journalists and the military.

c) Last week Brad led us to Psalm 27 reflect on beauty – which included: artists and landscapers, designers and architects, musicians and singers and actors.

d) Next week we will look at Wisdom---and our focus will be educators, engineers, scientists, consultants..

4. Today we look at compassion and we are thinking about:

a) People who work up and down the medical field – doctors and nurses and medical technicians of all types, social workers and day care workers and hospice workers, veterinarians, counselors, therapists, dentists, healthcare administrators. People who take care of young children or aging parents.

II. I want to focus on a few verses from Psalm 51

A. There are many Psalms to choose from:

1. In Psalm 86 David appeals to the Lord who is, “compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness.”

2. In Psalm 103:13 – There is a reference to God who, “like a father has compassion on his children.

B. We are turning to Psalm 51 – David's famous prayer of repentance after he commits adultery with Bathsheba and then has Uriah put to death – because:

1. I know it fairly well.

2. I looked at it this week just because of the contrast with this moment.

3. It does a good job of noting how central compassion is to God's heart.

III. I suspect most of you know the basics:

A. David – who in many ways is the rock star of Israel. He is military hero, a great strategist, a diplomat, a musician and a poet. He has unified the country and expanded its borders and defeated her enemies and written most of the prayer book.

B. A prayer book that includes this prayer of repentance. He owns his sin. There is no spin. No blaming the other side. No hiding behind a press secretary. He doesn't just only admit that "mistakes were made." He owns his sin and his confession becomes part of their national prayer book.

C. And he can do that in part because of God's compassion, which David declares right away. Psalm 51:1:

1. **Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin.**

2. **³For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight; so you are right in your verdict and justified when you judge.**

3. **⁵Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me. Yet you desired faithfulness even in the womb; you taught me wisdom in that secret place.**

D. David has no right to hope for leniency. There is a sense in which all sin is the same. It takes only one sin to separate us from God, because He is perfectly holy. But there is another sense in which sins have gradations. The devastation of some sins are worse than others. David has broken trust, violated his marriage, lied and then committed murder. He has massively abused his position. He has no right to hope for leniency. But he knows that God is a God of compassion.

IV. When we think of compassion we think of someone who's heart is soft – who is emotionally moved by someone's pain or trouble.

A. Both the Hebrew and Greek terms pick up on that.

B. *Rakem* is related to the word for womb. It picks up on a mother's love for a child. It is used in that classic passage in Isaiah 49, "Can a mother forget her nursing child?" No. Of course not. Well, even if she did, God says, I will not forget you. (He is talking to Israel). I will compassion for you.

1. Jesus will pick up on that and compare himself to a mother hen – who protects her chicks.

C. The Greek term is the rather inelegant word, *splanchnizomai*, which seems to be a stronger, more forceful term that refers to the way our insides are moved. The root here likely leads to our term spleen. But the force is, compassion is not just a powerful idea, they unsettle us. They make us weak kneed. They cause us to suffer.

D. And we see this with Jesus over the over – especially when Jesus heals someone

1. There are not that many miracles in the Bible. For the most part, God accomplishes what needs to be done through people doing normal things, which is part of this series.

a) The miracles we find tend to be grouped in the early chapters of Genesis, we get them a bit in Exodus and then here and there with the prophets.

b) And of course, a bunch around Jesus.

2. And when you study them you realize that they are often there less to get something done than to help us understand God. The key reason for the miracle is for those around to see God's power or goodness.

3. That is true with Jesus. When you work your way through that middle section of Luke's Gospel, you hit these chapters where it seems pretty clear that the point is to say – Jesus has power.
 - a) He has power over sin, over sickness, over evil, over nature and over death.
 - b) The goal is to make it clear that Jesus is more than just a teacher.
4. However, one of the other take-aways is that Jesus heals people because He can't help himself. He has compassion on the people.
 - a) In Matthew 9:36 we read: "When Jesus saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd."
 - b) Jesus has compassion on those who are suffering – one of the reasons we are told to be alert to the needs of the widow and orphan, the poor and the outsider – is because God's heart goes especially to them.

E. Men and women, we are to be the hands and feet of God extending compassion.

1. The purpose of this series is to help you see how important your work is. Many of you have moved into jobs that are significantly shaped by compassion. Thank you.
2. Many of you run to the pain – and you may not have ever realized that is what you do.
 - a) After 9/11 there was this celebration of those who run into burning buildings, who run towards gun-fire, who run towards the blood. Who run towards people in pain. We celebrated all the first responders. As we should.
 - b) Many of you have a related instinct. You see hurting people and you move in to help. To you it is only natural. It is not natural to everyone.
3. I want to be sure you hear: thank you.

V. But I don't want to stop there. There are three things I want to note about compassion before we pray for those of you who

A. One: The world needs compassion. It's rough out there.

1. This is a point I do not need to develop.
 - a) In the Friday Update I keep trying to make the point that a lot of things are going well, but also to note that the ambient anger index is climbing. I think you get that.
 - b) There is a lot of distress out there. A lot of tension. A lot of conflict and miscommunication - way too much greed, pettiness and sin.
2. Compassion is to society what oil is to an engine.
3. We need people who see those who are hurting and being overlooked.
4. There are lots of people who feel very little compassion for others.
 - a) Some people are wired for justice – they want to reform the world to better reflect the values of his kingdom. We need that, but justice without compassion can be cruel.
 - b) Other people are very alert to issues of truth. They want to champion right doctrine and theological purity. We need this. But truth without compassion creates another set of problems.

- c) Some people are gifted around evangelism and mission. We need this, but even here, mission without compassion can end up misguided.
5. The world needs compassion.
- B. Two: Compassion is not the normal response in this sinful world.
 1. In her book *Pilgrims at Tinker Creek*, Annie Dillard writes about how cruel nature is. She has escaped to nature to be free of the corrupting influences of society, only to watch a water bug devour its prey. And she is scandalized and repulsed.
 2. Nietzsche famously notes that lots of people want to get rid of God and hold onto compassion, but it doesn't work that way. If you get rid of God you get Hitler and the Holocaust, not charity and compassion.
 3. A few years ago, Tom Holland – a non-Christian Oxford historian and best selling author – released *Dominion*, in which he comes to this conclusion that most of the things he likes (such as compassion) are only in place because of Jesus.
 4. In this broken world, we are naturally selfish. Compassion is there. It is part of our nature, and it does show up in many settings, but it is not always our default response. And not to the level it should be.
- C. Point number three: 1) The world needs compassion; 2) it is not our default response; 3) Jesus calls us to compassion.
 1. Jesus calls on us to love and serve and care for others. He calls on us to go to the end of the line. He calls on us to take care of the poor. He calls on us to love our enemies and extend forgiveness over and over again. Jesus celebrates sacrificial actions.
 2. Jesus calls on us to be particularly alert to the needs of the quartet of the vulnerable: the widow, orphan, poor and foreigner.
 3. This is shocking, radical, you-can't-be-serious stuff. The truth is, there are all kinds of people to whom we do not want to extend compassion.
 4. Whether consciously or not, we sort people into two categories—those who should receive God's compassion and those who should not. And then we set up ways we determine who belongs in which camp.
 - a) We might make this determination by ranking offenses. We develop a hierarchy of sins.
 - b) Others adopt a tribal approach, where the magnitude of the sin counts less than the sinner's identity. The corrupt political leader in the other party deserves prison, but the corrupt politician in my party deserves a Mulligan.
 - c) The Lord is quite clear that He does not embrace our views or endorse our prejudices.
 5. In his remarkable book, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, Henri Nouwen reflects on this parable that I mentioned earlier in the sermon.
 - a) A young son – who is an utterly foolish and unsympathetic character – basically tells his Dad to die, takes his share of the money and loses it all. He causes great loss and embarrassment to his family. He eventually limps home hoping to get a job as a servant. The father has compassion on him.

b) This makes the self-righteous older brother – who is a placeholder for the Pharisees – furious. He ends up acting worse than the younger brother (the prodigal).

6. The truth is, they both desperately need the compassion of the Father.

7. After identifying first with the younger son, and then the older son, Nouwen concludes his book by recognizing our call to imitate the love of the father.

a) “Perhaps the most radical statement Jesus ever made is: “Be compassionate as your Father is compassionate” [Lk 6:36]. God’s compassion is described by Jesus not simply to show me how willing God is to feel for me, or to forgive my sins and offer me new life and happiness, but to invite me to become like God and to show the same compassion to others as he is showing to me. If the only meaning of the story were that people sin but God forgives, I could easily begin to think of my sins as a fine occasion for God to show me his forgiveness. There would be no real challenge in such an interpretation. I would resign myself to my weakness and keep hoping that eventually God would close his eyes to them and let me come home, whatever I did. Such sentimental romanticism is not the message of the Gospels.

b) What I am called to make true is that whether I am the younger or the elder son, I am the son of my compassionate Father. I am an heir.... Indeed, as son and heir I am to become successor. I am destined to step into my Father’s place and offer to others the same compassion that he has offered me.... Being in the Father’s house requires that I make the Father’s life my own and become transformed into his image.”

VI. We are all called to compassion – for some of you it also profoundly shapes your day job. Thank you.

VII. We are going to pray for you now – for health care workers.

A. Father God, we pray for seek to share with others the compassion you extend to us. We think of doctors and nurses, medical technicians and administrators. We pray for EMS workers, pharmacists, doctors, nurses, mental health workers, social workers and those who work with the very young and with the elderly.

B. We ask you, God, to provide them with wisdom and patience and love for those they serve – we ask that they have the stamina to always treat those under their care with respect and dignity. May the love that you have for them be reflected in them to their patients.

C. We pray, God, that you would sustain them through the secondary trauma that can come with seeing others suffer and carrying those burdens. We pray that they would feel supported and cared for as they process this grief. Provide them with peace and space to care for themselves in order to maintain a healthy frame of mind to care for others. Uphold and sustain them we pray.

D. In Jesus’ name, Amen.