

Grace Living 461: Biblical Compassion

“...He had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd.” Mark 6:34

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Biblical Compassion

An Introduction

Contrary to what we generally think, it is not sinful, in and of itself, to be a beggar. The Greek word translated “beggar” is *ptochos*, and it conveys the idea of being “destitute, helpless, and powerless.” The beggar Lazarus was all these things (cf. Luke 16:19-25). Nevertheless, when he died, he was carried by the angels to Abraham's bosom (Luke 16:22). God has always made special provision for the poor (cf. Exodus 23:11; Leviticus 19:9-10; Acts 20:35; Mark 14:7; Matthew 25:35-36; Romans 12:13). Consequently, in order to be pleasing to God, we must never lose sight of our obligation to the powerless, helpless, and destitute of this world. In fact, where we will spend an eternity depends upon a proper understanding of our obligation to these people (cf. Matthew 25:31-46).

Agape, the love the Lord requires of all His followers, is a self-sacrificing love that is not fulfilled apart from *action* (cf. 1 John 3:18). It is our contention that genuine biblical *compassion* is an integral part of this kind of love. Jesus, the sinless explicator of *agape*, demonstrated His genuine compassion on many occasions (Matthew 9:36; 14:14; 15:32; 20:34; Luke 7:12-15). Consequently, as God's love is perfected in us (1 John 4:12), we will be “moved with compassion” by the various difficulties we see our neighbors experiencing. A good example of this is recorded in the book of Hebrews, where the writer informs us that his brethren's compassionate response to his “chains” compelled them to experience the “spoiling” or “plundering” of their goods for his sake (Hebrews 10:34). What this tells us, then, is that, materialistically speaking, compassion is “quite dangerous.” Allowing one's goods to be spoiled and plundered for “pie in the sky, by and by,” as the intellectually sophisticated or “wise and prudent” (Matthew 11:25; 1 Corinthians 1:19) are fond of saying, is considered to be “utter foolishness!” Yes, to the carnally minded, the Lord's people often appear to be “fools” (1 Corinthians 4:10). Even so, it is as fools of Christ that we happily demonstrate to a lost and dying world “what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God” (Romans 12:2).

In 1 John 3:18, the apostle adds yet another factor to love. Not only must we love in *deed*, but we must also love in *truth*. Love without truth is sweet, syrupy, and weak as sugar water. But, on the other hand, truth without love can often be quite destructive (cf. Ephesians 4:15). Therefore, compassion, in order to be *authentic*, functions on a different plane than these two hurtful extremes. True compassion

exhibits the love of the truth and the truth of love that are characteristics of New Testament Christianity.

Unfortunately, too many Christians tend to either naively think that compassion is always sugary sweet and never condemnatory *or* cynically believe that no one is a worthy candidate of it. *The thesis of this discussion is that authentic biblical compassion is neither naive nor cynical. It is, instead, the glue that holds Christianity together, allowing it to be gentle and tender without deteriorating into trite sentimentality, and unpretentiously sacrificial without being melodramatic.*

Compassion is not, as some seem to think, a public relations campaign. Neither is it *simply* an emotion. It is, instead, a divinely inspired *action* compelled by 1) knowledge, 2) moral outrage, and 3) the capacity to truly identify with the object of one's compassion. We believe that if these three elements were a part of current sentiment, then the modern welfare state, as we have come to know it, would not exist.

Those who pride themselves as combatants in the so-called “war on crime” want us to believe that the difficulties people face today are somehow unique and much more complicated and perverse than at any other time in history. Although many in our society have been indoctrinated with this lie, it simply is not true! 17th-, 18th-, and 19th-century America had it all: alcoholism, drug addiction, illegitimacy, crime, unemployment, spousal and child abuse, social upheaval, and grinding poverty. What then was and is the difference? Simply this: In the past, those involved in charity were individuals who had a frank, clear-headed, compassionate, but unsentimental, view of human nature. They believed there were *some* genuinely poor who were *truly deserving* of charity (i.e., compassion/love). These were beggarly (i.e., destitute, helpless, and powerless) through no fault of their own. On the other hand, these charitable individuals and organizations knew that *much* poverty resulted when individuals, of their own free wills, chose destructive paths (alcohol and vice); that such erring individuals should and could, with God's help, change course; that all able to work *must* do so (2 Thessalonians 3:10); that those who helped should freely give of their time and love; and that money *alone*, given indiscriminately, was poisonously destructive. Today, cut off from its religious moorings, the modern state sees itself as the engine of progress and the vehicle of man's salvation. The one-by-one, individual-by-individual, person-to-person work of the past is seen as too slow of a process. Relief needs to be universal and immediate. Disagreeing with the idea that most poverty is the result of vice, freely chosen, the state believes people are basically good and that the elimination of poverty is possible through the “redistribution of wealth.”

Furthermore, the modern state seems convinced that the sooner charitable work is rid of the bothersome claptrap of religion, the better everyone will be. *As a result, true compassion is quite rare.*

Currently, compassion is defined by the welfare elites as how much money can be spent each year on the “war on poverty.” To categorize certain individuals as “deserving” or “not deserving” is to “wrongly blame the victims,” we are told. Now, after thirty years' experience with this *modern* system, are the poor—entitled as they are to a government welfare check, food stamps, rent subsidies, and a host of other program benefits from the state bureaucracy—better off? Has poverty been eliminated? Has it even been reduced? Isn't it time, then, to return to *genuine biblical compassion*?

As we mentioned earlier, the three elements that comprise genuine compassion are demonstrated by the life of Jesus Christ, who was the complete and final revelation of God to man. We, therefore, turn our attention to an examination of these elements as they were manifested by our Lord.

True Understanding

The first element of true compassion is an understanding of the real world that is neither naive nor cynical. According to the Bible, Jesus “knew all men, and had no need that anyone should testify of man, for he knew what was in man” (John 2:24-25). What this means is that Jesus did not deal with people from a position of ignorance. He knew that not only was man made in the image of God and, therefore, of great value, but he also knew that man was sin-sick and fallen. But, understanding the general imperfections of a real world marred by sin, and knowing mankind's basic sinfulness, he was still *open* to others, *reaching out* to the lost all around Him.

Unlike Jesus, we, unfortunately, often try to interact with others from one or the other of two different extremes. The first extreme is naiveté. The naive man is both gullible and exploitable. He attempts to bestow his compassion on all men, believing that he will, in turn, be treated well by all who are the objects of his compassion. Eventually he learns that he is often, if not always, being taken for a ride or taken for granted. With his “*self-esteem*” hurt, and thinking himself to have ample reason, he swings to the opposite extreme of cynicism, which always expects the lowest of motives in the best of actions. Now, although it is true that we do not possess perfect understanding, as Jesus did, knowing who was trustworthy and who was not, we, like Him, can learn to trust our Father, not men, and remain open to those around us without being either naive or cynical.

When Jesus saw the multitude, “He was moved with compassion for them because they were weary and scattered, like sheep having no shepherd” (Matthew 9:36). Understanding their *real* need, the Lord Himself, the Chief Shepherd, the One who had come to seek and save the lost, was “moved with compassion.” He was further moved to inform His disciples that: “The harvest truly is plentiful, but the laborers are few. Therefore, pray the Lord of the harvest to send laborers into His harvest” (Matthew 9:37-38).

Like Jesus, we, His disciples, must be compelled by compassion to seek and save the lost of a sin-sick, dying world. But this is not all! *True* compassion is born of *real* understanding. It knows the worth of men made in the image of God. It knows that man, contrary to the excellent specimen he could have been, is fallen and sin-sick. Consequently, the most excellent examples of true compassion will not always be well received. It's a fact that sinful men frequently do not *act* or *react* well. Those on whom Jesus had compassion crucified Him. Why should we expect anything less? Why should we allow the evil behavior of sin-sick men to prevent us from bestowing on them an *informed* compassion that seeks for them that which they have not yet understood they need? If God in the flesh had not so acted, *all* of us would be without *any* hope in this world. “But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8).

Moral Outrage

A second element of true compassion is genuine moral outrage. In fact, *spagkhnozomai*, the Greek word translated “compassion” in Matthew 9:36, conveys the idea of “a yearning in the gut or bowels.” In other words, what the Lord was *feeling* for the multitude involved a visceral reaction (i.e., He was “moved with compassion”). Actually, this word has been translated too weakly in our modern Bibles. *Spagkhnozomai* is a very strong word conveying a powerful emotional feeling. It does more than describe plain pity or common compassion; it describes an emotion that moves one to the very depth of his being. This word describes the compassion the forgiving King had on the servant who was unable to pay his debt (Matthew 18:27), of the compassion that compelled the father to run to his prodigal son to welcome him home (Luke 15:20), and of the compassion of the Samaritan who rescued the wounded traveler on the Jericho road (Luke 10:33). As we have already mentioned, it is the same word used to describe the Lord's reaction upon seeing the multitude in the wilderness as being sheep without a shepherd (Matthew 9:36). It is the same word used to describe His reaction to the leper who came to Him for healing (Mark 1:41), the two blind men who cried out for mercy (Matthew 20:34), and the bereaved widow of Nain whose son had died

(Luke 7:13). In each case we are confronted with the deep visceral reaction that is always characteristic of authentic compassion.

This word, compassion, also hints of a controlled, mature anger at the forces at work in a fallen world that seem to entrap men and women in the most unfortunate of circumstances. We must remember that Jesus, who was Himself the Creator (Colossians 1:16), originally created this world to be a paradise; but man, by sinning, messed everything up. Consequently, this world is definitely not what the Lord created it to be, and when the One who knew what it *ought to be* experienced in the flesh how things *really are*, He was naturally and honestly moved with deep moral outrage at the devastating effect man's sinfulness was having on the nature of things. This is all made even clearer when one considers another word used to describe Jesus. This word is *embrimaomai*, and is used twice by John to describe Jesus' reaction to the death of His friend Lazarus (John 11:33, 38). The NKJV says, "He groaned in the spirit" (verse 33) and "groaning in Himself" (verse 38). Normally, these verses are interpreted in view of verse 35, which says, "Jesus wept." Of course, in lieu of what was happening, tears were certainly appropriate. Jesus was touched emotionally by the real sorrow of Martha and Mary, but there is much more here than mere sympathy. *Embrimaomai*, according to *Vine*, means "to have indignation: to snort with anger." Standing at the tomb of Lazarus, a friend He knows He will soon raise from the dead, Jesus is seized with deep moral outrage and indignation. Why? Because all the order, beauty, harmony, and fulfillment the Lord had created into His creation was now nothing but fractured disorder, raw ugliness, and complete disarray. At this tomb of His friend, God in the flesh came face to face with a death that symbolized the evil, pain, sorrow, suffering, injustice, cruelty, and despair of a world lost in sin. Yes, there can be no doubt that He was moved to tears for His friends, but surely He was also moved by the outrageous abnormality of death. Man was not created to die. He was created, instead, to live. But sin had changed all that. Things are no longer like they ought to be, and Jesus is outraged by it all.

While in the flesh, God's Son experienced genuine moral outrage. It is informative to examine this same characteristic as it was exhibited in the lives of other individuals who are recorded in the Bible. For example, the newly appointed King Saul, before becoming corrupted by his position of power, was a man of principled character. When he heard about the outrageous thing that Nahash, the Ammonite king, had dictated to the inhabitants of Jabesh-gilead (viz., he would permit them to surrender only if they permitted him to put out their right eyes), Saul became outraged with anger (1 Samuel 11:6). In examining this episode, there can be no mistaking the relationship between the inspiration of God's Spirit and Saul's anger

or moral outrage—it was not just God approved, it was God-inspired as well. Later, as Israel's national decadence produced social injustice and inhumanity, the moral outrage of Amos is absolutely searing: “Hear this word, you cows of Bashan, who are on the mountain of Samaria, Who oppress the poor, Who crush the needy, Who say to your husbands, ‘Bring wine, let us drink!’” (Amos 4:1). These ignoble recipients of the prophet's moral outrage were the people who sold the righteous for silver and the poor for a pair of shoes (Amos 2:6). They were the ones who turned justice into gall and righteousness into wormwood (Amos 6:12). They rightly deserved his righteous indignation. For Amos to have reacted any other way, would surely have been sinful!

Furthermore, the Bible teaches us that moral outrage is not something reserved for those in the flesh, but God, who is a Spirit, experiences outrage at man's injustices to his fellow man and that there was no one who felt compelled to set these injustices right. In Isaiah 59:15b-16a, the prophet says: “The Lord saw it, and it displeased Him that there was no justice. He saw that there was no man, and wondered that there was no intercessor.” The Hebrew word translated “wondered” in this passage conveys the idea of being *stupefied* and *outraged*. Therefore, genuine outrage is not just the reaction of one who is hard-pressed by the difficulties of living in a fallen world; but God Himself experiences it. And so should the Christian. In the midst of the pain, cruelty, violence, and injustice of this world, we ought to be *moved* with moral outrage and *compelled*, with God's help, to do something!

God, by virtue of the immutability of His moral character, is eternally opposed to evil and is, in turn, outraged by its dreadful effect. Consequently, the Christian, who is called upon to be like God (1 Peter 1:15-16), can *never* be neutral toward morality without betraying his faith. Once again, we see this truth demonstrated in the earthly life of the Son of God. Jesus, who came to do His Father's will, and, in doing so, is our perfect example, was so outraged by the effect of sin in regard to His Father's house, that He, on two different occasions, drove the money changers from the Temple (John 2:14-17; Luke 19:45-46). On seeing Jesus in action, His disciples, who were not as critical as some of His disciples might be today, remembered that it had been written, “Zeal for Your house has eaten Me up” (John 2:17; Psalm 69:9). Without this same moral indignation, the outrage that wells up in the gut as a result of morally outrageous acts, the Christian remains a non-combatant in the moral battles currently raging on this planet between what is right and what is wrong. It is, indeed, unfortunate that many who call themselves Christians today no longer know how to be morally outraged. What spiritual life remains in them is being strangled by a society that has cut itself off from God.

Ignorant of God's word and lacking discernment, these have not realized they are actually choking on the truths that they, themselves, have betrayed. They have seen the moral issues of our day reduced to political platforms and have ignorantly thought themselves free to choose one over another. What this generation desperately needs is the authentic compassion that is exhibited by knowledgeable Christians who are genuinely outraged at the horrendous injustices taking place all around them. Even so, in order for it to be authentic biblical compassion, there is yet another element that must be added.

Bonding

The final element necessary for authentic compassion is the capacity to truly identify with the object of one's compassion. This is sometimes called *bonding*. In this connection, it is interesting to note that the Latin root of “compassion” and the Greek root of “sympathy” are parallel in that they both refer to deep feelings “with” or “alongside” another. Genuine compassion, then, is able to identify, empathize, or bond with the object of its compassion. This is exactly what God did in Jesus of Nazareth. As God became man and dwelt among us, He so identified with us that He actually bore our grief and carried upon Himself our sorrows (Isaiah 53:4a). In fact, in Jesus, God so clearly bonded with those He came to save that some who saw Him hanging on the cross mistakenly thought he was just a man who was being “smitten by God, and afflicted” (Isaiah 53:4b). Nevertheless, Jesus was never just a man. In the person of Jesus, He was both *fully* man and *fully* God. When he suffered “with,” “alongside,” and “for” man, He did so not just as a man, but as God. When He experienced death, He did so not just as a man, but as God (Acts 20:28). Even so, Jesus was *fully* man and, as such, was in all points “tempted as we are, yet without sin” (Hebrews 4:15). This means that He was no Pentagon chief far removed from the battlefield. Instead, He experienced the warfare firsthand. He shared the foxholes, He knew the risks, and He even bore the scars of the battle in His body. Therefore, the Captain of our salvation (Hebrews 2:10) and great High Priest (Hebrews 4:14) is totally able to “sympathize with our weaknesses” (Hebrews 4:15) and aid those of us who are tempted (Hebrews 2:18).

The God With Wounds

No other God has wounds. It was the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53, *et al.*, God in the flesh, who laid down His life for us so that we, through obedience to Him, might have eternal life. The cry that pierced the darkness of history's blackest day, “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?,” was the voice not *just* of a man, but of Immanuel, or “God with us.” We do not fully understand it, but, by faith, we know it's true. In fact, we are emboldened to trust Jesus like we do because of His

willingness to come into this world and so fully identify with us. In the life of our magnificent Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, we see all the warm compassion of a God who has so unashamedly proved His love for us.

Conclusion

Touched by our Lord's compassion and moved by His love, we “come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (Hebrews 4:16). Touched by His compassion and moved by His love, we are determined to “let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind [we are ready to] esteem others better than [ourselves]” (Philippians 2:3). Touched by His compassion and moved by His love, we are willing to “look out not only for our own interests, but also for the interests of others” (Philippians 2:4). Finally, touched by His compassion and moved by His love, we reach out to the weak, the hurting, and the down trodden with compassion and love.

How God Defines Compassion

Colossians 3:12-15

What is thought of as compassion is often just a concern to ease a troubled conscience. It can show itself as mere superficial gestures that appear to show concern but do little to really help, or may actually hurt the person more. The other extreme is to condemn superficial gestures and do nothing to help those in need. We need to learn how to follow God's mandate. There is a false compassion that doesn't do what's really good for people at all. It may look good, and feel good. But in reality it may cause more harm and hurt to those we say we are helping.

True compassion is not ...

- to tell someone the story that makes them happier even though its a lie.
- to give a person everything he thinks he ought to have.
- to give children all the sweets they crave.
- to help someone ignore their conscience when they've done wrong.
- to pay others to do good in our place, and then think we've done our part.
- to leave our neighbors to the care of government agencies or charities.
- to keep spending money on solutions that really only prolong the problem.
- to pay able people to stay unemployed when they could be helped to work.
- to allow babies to be aborted, when we should be helping the child's parents. They need to be encouraged to love their babies, and avoid unwanted pregnancies.

Its harder ...

- to tell the truth in tough situations.
- to help a person understand that what he craves may be harmful to him.
- to help a person face his faults when he would rather find excuses or blame others.
- to befriend our disabled neighbors and help them with housework, yardwork, or get to the store.

Its not surprising that a society made up of unsanctified souls tends toward false compassion. Fallen people define compassion by what they believe it ought to be. God's word shows us what true compassion is, and how we can put it on.

God's word defines true compassion and is filled with help about how we can show true care for others. When we know the truth about God and about others as his creatures, and when we remember that all the redeemed are our brothers and sisters by grace, then we will have a foundation for learning to appreciate what is really best for others.

Our text, Colossians 3:12-15 describes the elements of that compassion. It must include kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. It must bear with one another, and be forgiving to each other with love, peace and thankfulness.

2 Corinthians 1:4 explains how God's mercies enable us. It is Him who comforts us in all our affliction so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.

1 Peter 3:8-9 puts it this way ... "To sum up, let all be harmonious, sympathetic, brotherly, kindhearted, and humble in spirit; not returning evil for evil, or insult for insult, but giving a blessing instead; for you were called for the very purpose that you might inherit a blessing."

The love chapter, 1 Corinthians 13, shows how this kind of compassion is part of love ... "love is kind ... Then in the next verses of 1 Corinthians 13 Paul continues {love} ... does not act unbecomingly; it does not seek its own ... When self is our center, our compassion is just a means to making us, not others, to feel good.

Paul, in Philippians 2:3 writes, "do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind let each of you regard one another as more important than himself." These verses show us that true compassion not only puts up with the rudeness of others, it responds with kindness! Instead of treating them the way they deserve, it treats them as God commands.

This means that the best thing we can do for others, is to help them to live by the principles God gives us in his word and by helping them with their needs inwardly and outwardly as they struggle along.

Learn what biblical compassion looks like

Examples from Scripture

Its good to know how the Bible describes compassion. But, as humans, it also helps us to have examples to follow. The Bible is filled with examples of compassion and godly models for us to see.

Daniel didn't refrain from forbidden prayer to avoid getting people upset with him. Compassion in his understanding was not to hide his prayers to make the pagans feel good about him. It was to show devotion to God's word above comfort to himself.

Paul didn't tell the Thessalonians to keep giving food to those who were out of work. In sincere and godly compassion he told them in 2 Thessalonians 3:10 "... if anyone will not work, neither let him eat." It was best for them was to help the habitually dependent learn the importance of work.

Aquilla and Priscilla were thanked in Romans 16:4 because they risked their lives for Paul. They could have just prayed and minded their own business. They could have just repaired tents and lived quiet lives. But that would not have been the compassionate thing to do.

Jesus is of course our greatest example. His whole life is an example of compassion. But he didn't hide the truth to draw more followers. John 6:65-66 Jesus said ... "For this reason I have said to you, that no one can come to Me, unless it has been granted him from the Father." As a result of this many of His disciples withdrew, and were not walking with Him anymore.

He knew that what was best for these people were to hear the truth. There are many other examples that could be drawn from Christian history and from the Christian community.

One Christian writer tells of the time when he was riding a subway on a cold Chicago day. An elderly woman shuffled into the subway and took a seat. Her clothes were ragged, barely able to protect her from the bitter Chicago winds. She hunched herself against the cold gripping a worn shawl around her. He said her hands appeared to be white, cracked and bony.

In contrast a healthy looking young man energetically got on the train. He noticed the pain of the old woman sitting in quiet misery. Three stops later the man left the train leaving his pair of brown leather gloves in her lap.

The writer then says, "He saw her need and responded with compassion while I just sat there. It never occurred to me to give her my gloves. That young man showed compassion in a way I'll never forget."

Some Scripture

I John 2:10-11

I John 3:10-11

I John 3:14-17

I John 4:7-13

I John 4:16-21

The Compassion and Sympathy of Christ

Selected Scriptures

1. Necessary to his priestly office (Hebrews 5:2,7.)

2. Manifested for the
 - a. Weary and heavy-laden (Matthew 11:28-30)

 - b. Weak in faith (Isaiah 40:11; 42:3; Matthew 12:20)

 - c. Tempted (Hebrews 2:18)

 - d. Afflicted (Luke 7:13; John 11:33,35)

 - e. Diseased (Matthew 14:14; Mark 1:41)

 - f. Poor (Mark 8:2)

 - g. Perishing sinners (Matthew 9:36; Luke 19:41; John 3:16)

3. An encouragement to prayer (Hebrews 4:15)

Restoring Biblical Compassion

I Timothy 5:3-16

Don't assume people know why you're doing what you are doing. Jesus said Matthew 5:16 "Let your light shine before men, in such a way, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven." Over the past almost 80 years the prevailing thinking in our land when it comes to helping the needy is that government can do it better. In the early 1920's the social thinkers of the day lobbied to get charity, and philanthropy out of the hands of churches and community organizations by promoting the notion that local groups can only help individuals but central government could help the masses.

Someone has said; "No person who is interested in social progress can long be content to raise here and there an individual." This sociologist went on to say that only when private groups went on strike would "public funds ever be wholly adequate for the legitimate demands made upon them." Well after 70 plus years of government bureaucracy and billions of dollars given away- what's the state of the poor in our society?

Some Facts

1 out of 6 American families with children live on an annual income of 17,000 or less. More than 1 million babies are born each year to unwed mothers. An estimated 15 million young people are considered "at risk" of ever becoming productive members of society. And millions of Americans are enslaved to drugs and alcohol, hundreds of thousands live on the streets and many have become overly dependent on a system that robs them of their dignity. People are often viewed like animals that need to be fed, problems that need to be subsidized rather than human beings that need to be liberated.

In a world guided more by impressions than by God's word, ideas like *compassion* are hard to define and even harder to sort out from the self-serving motives that often lie behind people's words and actions. Though its often confused by our fallen hearts, its the common testimony of all sorts of people that compassion is to be a goal of humanity.

I think it would be fair to say that a new kind of poverty has resulted. No longer are people just lacking in financial means, now they have lost their self respect, their personal pride and for many any sense that life could be or should be any different. As for the rest of us, we who are funding this Great Society, well for the most part we've become cynical and indifferent because we see the ineffectiveness

of this system and the propensity toward indolence it produces.

The Welfare State has become the ultimate in bureaucracy. You have anonymous public support (taxes) feeding an anonymous system which then in turn funds an anonymous client. Nobody knows anybody, there's no communal connection, no relationships and no responsibility required. When accountability is removed from assistance what results is abuse. And that's exactly what we have seen. It is time to get us back into the game, to see where we have gone wrong and begin to correct it, by restoring true compassion!

I Timothy 5:3-16 deals with one type of needy – widows. However the principles that are promoted here work with any group that's in need; whether teenager or older person, the disabled or dysfunctional, those out of work or just out of gas, these truths are true.

Principle #1 **IDENTIFY THE "WORTHY" POOR**

1 Timothy 5:3 Give proper recognition to those widows who are really in need. For years in this country we used to identify or categorize those seeking assistance as able and unable poor. Worthy poor are those who through no fault of their own are unable to work or fully carry the burden they are faced with.

They're "worthy" of assistance! Today we don't feel it's appropriate, let alone our responsibility, to ask why some one is in the condition they are. If someone is in need we deem him or her as "worthy".

The Bible's admonition is to distinguish between those who are and those who are not in "real" need. That takes discernment. The Scriptures understand our sinful nature and how many would be quite happy to have someone else take care of them. It also knows that treating the capable as incapable robs them of their God-given capacities.

Helping those who should be helping themselves ultimately hurts them. Every parent knows that, if they're trying to raise adults.

Principle #2 **INVOLVE THE FAMILY**

I Timothy 5:4 But if a widow has children or grandchildren, these should learn first of all to put their religion into practice by caring for their own family and so repaying their parents and grandparents, for this is pleasing to God.

The Apostle's point is simply that the family is the first line of defense when hardships hit. If you remove that, you undermine the very fabric of society. We

could demonstrate how the present system has contributed to the break down of the family and the deterioration of any real sense of community. The government as well as the church is not here to supersede what God has called the family to do but rather to support and strengthen it.

Any assistance that's provided must be done in partnership with the family, otherwise no relationship is fostered and that's what ultimately develops responsibility, on both sides- those in need and those able to meet that need.

Even in the church, those who are connected to a Grace Group, receive a much higher level of support and encouragement than some one who just attends on Sundays. When you're apart of everyone sometimes you're apart of no one. The family must be involved.

Principle #3 **CAPITALIZE ON THE CROSSROADS**

I Timothy 5:5-6 The widow who is really in need and left all alone puts her hope in God and continues night and day to pray and to ask God for help. But the widow who lives for pleasure is dead even while she lives.

Did you notice the contrast that Paul makes? One widow is broken by her circumstances and turns to God and the other seems to use her plight as sort of a justification for pleasure. When someone struggles or experiences hard times they can have a tendency to medicate their pain with some kind of self indulgence.

Sin is always right around the corner promising us comfort and contentment in our time of grief. But oh the pain that comes in the morning. Pain can either push us away from God or it can push us to God. Whenever someone experiences any kind of loss, heartache or hardship they are faced with a decision, they are at a crossroad. That's why this is such a significant moment for ministry in someone's life.

That's what I mean by capitalizing on the crossroad. Many of us came to Christ while were going through a crisis. We're not really helping people if we're not helping them turn to Jesus.

If you're hurting right now because of loneliness or loss, feeling hurt or helpless, please hear God's call to put your trust in Him and then come to Him and keep coming to Him in prayer.

I understand that your grief and frustration are hard to handle, I know that sin offers immediate relief, but what it never tells you or allows you to forget, is the

long term troubles that come and stay after the momentary relief has passed.

Don't let your pain push you away from God, you need Him more now than ever. When we minister to those in pain we need to point them to the only one who will not just numb their hurts but heal them.

Principle #4 **EXTEND A CHRISTIAN WITNESS**

I Timothy 5:7-8 Give the people these instructions, too, so that no one may be open to blame. If anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his immediate family, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.

Paul says that if we are not caring for those in need we are denying the faith. Not caring for those who are hurting is not Christian. Charity and Christianity are almost synonymous in the minds of many.

That's Paul's point. Christians should stand head and shoulders above the crowd when it comes to this area. And they have.

We have 2000 years of history of Christians starting hospitals, orphanages, nursing homes, homes for the homeless, help for unwed mothers, help for those dealing with alcohol and drug abuse, help for any one that's hurting.

But don't assume people know why you're doing what you are doing. Jesus said Matthew 5:16 Let your light shine before men, in such a way, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.

The reason we care is because He cared first. That's a message that needs to get out. And it happens as we get out and visibly demonstrate our concern.

Principle #5 **REWARD RESPONSIBILITY**

I Timothy 5:9-10 No widow may be put on the list of widows unless she is over sixty, has been faithful to her husband, and is well known for her good deeds, such as bringing up children, showing hospitality, washing the feet of the saints, helping those in trouble and devoting herself to all kinds of good deeds.

This list that Paul is talking about is like a support list, having your name as someone who was receiving financial assistance. Someone isn't automatically deserving of support just because they are needy. Now I think he's talking about long term support not just emergency relief.

But notice the kind of things he mentions here: fidelity in marriage, how many times have we already seen this as a qualifier? Raising children, boy there's a real sign of the kind of person you are, it shows us more about ourselves than we care to see, certainly more than we care others to see.

Showing hospitality- that doesn't mean just entertaining, or having people over, the word means "lover of strangers" hospitality is opening yourself and your home to those who are feeling like they're on the outside looking in.

Washing the saints feet, thankfully most of us have running water and can do our washing at home but the idea is valid. Washing feet was a menial task that nobody wanted to do but everyone was grateful it got done. There are all kinds of menial tasks that are meaningful when someone does them.

Nothing is more discouraging then giving support to people who squander it. Taking food to families that have amenities and gadgets that you can't even afford seems sometimes like a slap in the face.

When someone has demonstrated that they are not only in real need but also that they will be good stewards of the support given to them, then it should be given.

How do you think this entitlement mentality ever came about? What happened to gratitude for the "gifts", that's what they are, that are given.

Remember, irresponsible giving contributes to irresponsible living!

Principle #6 **PROMOTE PRODUCTIVITY**

I Timothy 11-15 As for younger widows, do not put them on such a list. For when their sensual desires overcome their dedication to Christ, they want to marry. Thus they bring judgment on themselves, because they have broken their first pledge. 13 Besides, they get into the habit of being idle and going about from house to house. And not only do they become idlers, but also gossips and busybodies, saying things they ought not to. So I counsel younger widows to marry, to have children, to manage their homes and to give the enemy no opportunity for slander. Some have in fact already turned away to follow Satan.

Idle hands are the devil's workshop! Have you heard that one before? That's still pretty sound advice. It seems that some women had become widows at a fairly young age and because of that "freedom" they, like the older widows were wanting be on the list, they wanted to be financially supported so that they could "dedicate the rest of time in ministry, to serving the Lord and the church.

Sounds commendable, doesn't it? How does Paul respond? It's sounds so practical that it doesn't appear all that spiritual. He simply says Timothy I wouldn't do it! I wouldn't expect these young women to keep some pledge that they will never have another man in life and that they will somehow use all their time for others. It's just not realistic.

Paul knows, and so do we, that over time desires kick in, and when that happens earlier commitments can go by the wayside. Besides too much time on most peoples' hands isn't good. It's just too easy to get into all kinds of things that frankly if we were busy we just won't have time or the energy for.

Paul's promoting productivity, he's encouraging them to become contributors not just consumers. Getting married again and having a couple of children certainly should help in dealing with sensual desires and idle talk.

This isn't just limited to young widows or single mothers, this is sound advice for any one who finds themselves with too much time on their hands. Just watch what happens during the summer months when your student has too much time on their hands. Work is not a curse, it's a blessing. Some need to hear again the value and admonition to be productive.

Principle #7 **DO MORE FOR LESS**

I Timothy 5:16 If any woman who is a believer has widows in her family, she should help them and not let the church be burdened with them, so that the church can help those widows who are really in need.

If I read this last verse right, the whole point seems to be that God wants to help those who are helpless, those who have no one else to help them. Our emphasis shouldn't be on how many we are helping, that's how the government has historically justified their programs. Ours emphasis should be on who we are helping.

As we identify the "worthy" poor and follow these principles most likely we'll end up doing more for less. We won't help as many, but in the end we will help more, help them to get to a place of self-reliance and God dependent.

That's the goal of Biblical Compassion!

Final Thoughts