

Text: [Galatians 6:2-5](#)

Date: October 18, 2020

Title: "On Compassion"

Theme: We need to have compassion for ourselves and others, as Christ has had compassion for us.

1

Have you ever walked with someone through something so difficult that when you stepped back and looked at the situation you thought: I'm not even sure how this person is standing up right now? How are they functioning at all? Have you ever walked with someone through something like that?

There are things in life people face where we can't even imagine how they feel

Sudden, tragic losses of people we love

Completely unexpected diagnoses

Radical reversals in financial situations

Family and relationship struggles that just spiral out of control

Addictions that drive people to act in ways that are just not who they are at their core

There are moments where the best thing we can do for our family or friends is to sit with them, listen to them and cry with them

To be fully present, to be fully engaged, to shed tears with them

To let them know that they are heard and seen

That someone understands their pain

When we can do that well, it literally brings the presence of Christ into their lives – today's scripture talks about that

There's a hard thing that happens, though

Ultimately, at some point you have to take your leave of them

God doesn't, but you do

So they are left with their problems, whatever they are

And you go back to your life, your own problems

Maybe not without being changed by what we've heard and felt

But if we're really honest, we are often just as likely to be relieved that we have our own problems instead

2

Here's one thing I've experienced over my years as a pastor
Compassion is a somewhat limited and limiting resource
Don't get me wrong, we can be very understanding, empathetic and kind
We can love people in their pain and it's good
It changes us. It's healing for them.

Within the word compassion is this idea of "suffering with" someone – that's
actually its origin, to "suffer with"
"Suffering with" is powerful.
It's exactly what God does for us in stepping into this world as Jesus Christ.
Compassion puts me in a place where we embrace this notion of suffering
together, where we are just human together, sharing a common
human experience of pain

That's why God's decision to become human is so astounding
Because in that moment, God is on the same plane of existence as we are
Just like when I sit with you in your pain – what it shows is that I am neither
better than you or worse than you
Which is an incredibly powerful thing to imagine God doing for us

3

Whenever I read this scripture – and I love the book of Galatians - I am
constantly wrestling with the two ideas expressed here
"Bear one another's burdens" in verse 2
And "All must carry their own loads" in verse 5
I preached a sermon on this text back in 2016
And I keep coming back to it, because it's so strange to find these ideas so
close to each other without a hint of irony
So strange, in fact, that many scholars look at this chapter as a kind of
appendix of loosely connected sayings of encouragement rather than
an integral part of Paul's argument

I'm not sure about that, but I know this time, I didn't just notice those two
verses

This time, I also noticed this: "each person should test their own work, be
happy with doing a good job and not compare themselves with
others"

4

“Not compare themselves with others”

I think this is exactly where this scripture begins to touch down during the days of COVID in ways it maybe didn't when I preached it in 2016

I didn't even mention that verse then

Even though we constantly compare ourselves with others

That's not new. It was true then as well. Always is.

However, here's the thing about COVID and how we're coping versus how others are coping.

Every comparison we make during this time is probably false.

Completely inaccurate. Why?

Because we're operating in a vacuum

What do I mean?

Most of the time, when we're interacting with each other, we can't read facial expressions – the mask hides a lot of things

That's for starters

Stay six feet apart, with no touching – and you're even more removed

I notice we don't have as many casual encounters anymore like we used to, where someone stops us on the street

I ran into a friend, a guy I really like a couple weeks ago

He wanted to stop and talk, pulled over actually to say hello

And I felt terrible because all I wanted to do was keep it moving

Have you experienced that too?

There's not a lot of chit-chat – which may seem unimportant – I used to think it was

But chit-chat is really the stuff of relationships

My daughters tell me that there's a lot of silence in places where there didn't used to be silence

And that's weird, because these are kids we are talking about – not anti-social adults

You get on a Zoom call for work

And unless that group is pretty tight, is there much time spent on connection?

My guess is probably not

Why? Because we don't feel as close to EVERYONE on that call as we do to a few
And so what used to happen in a side conversation while you get coffee now doesn't happen at all. It can't.

What's the result of all this?
We don't really know how ANYONE is doing
Not unless we feel close enough to call them up directly
And honestly get down to the real deal

So what's our assumption when we don't have any information?
We may have an intuitive sense that people are hurting and struggling
But it's never revealed to us in a full way
We very seldom – between the masks, the distance, and the Zoom – very seldom do we have the inclination to practice that compassion that at other times comes so naturally to us
There are barriers to helping share another's burden, EVEN IF we know doing it helps us to fulfill the law of Christ, as Paul puts it
So we NEVER see how other people are doing, really

And that's not even accounting for a key point
Even if we do get that insight that someone's not doing great, we may not be able to feel with them – at least not in the way we normally would
Because many of us don't feel great ourselves and right now we literally don't have the capacity to hold someone else's pain in addition to our own

What's the end result?
We fall into the trap of assuming everyone's doing fine, or at least doing better than us
We don't tend to receive the compassion we need
And we don't give the compassion we otherwise might

5

So what are we going to do about it?

Well, if you're struggling yourself, I don't want you to hear this sermon as: I need to do more to care for others
I think it's actually the opposite

I think my charge to you is to extend compassion to yourself
To recognize that your experience is unique but not unusual
That there's nothing wrong with you if you feel like you have very little
margin for compassion right now
I'm seeing it a lot in people I talk to
If that's where you are, remember those times you've walked with people in
difficult circumstances and give yourself credit for even standing up at
all!

Because there's a formula – all you need is:
a pandemic + one little thing
to make life pretty hard right now
So show compassion to yourself – especially if your little thing is a big thing
Because if you can do that for now, eventually things will shift back to a
place where you can show compassion for others
Everyone is entitled to take a breather from time to time
Trust God to care for others like God cares for you

But some of you listening today might say, I DO have some margin – at
least a little
And I really miss opportunities to give and receive compassion and care
Maybe you've just not been as intentional as you want to be
So today, I'm giving you this charge: reach out and talk to ONE person you
care about this week
It could be a family member on the other side of the country, an old friend
who moved away
It might even be someone who lives with you in the same house
But I want you to choose someone whom you believe is likely to both talk
and listen freely
Take the time to sit with them and really hear their answer to the question:
“How are things going?”
And then I really want you to do the same – to honestly share your own
answer to that question

Paul says this kind of listening, this kind of sharing and bearing one
another's burdens, fulfills the Law of Christ
And we can't know 100% what he meant by that
Paul actually makes very few direct references to any of Jesus' teachings
But I'd like to think that the Law of Christ means this: loving others as he
has loved us
The way Christ has loved us is by pouring out compassion on us
By suffering with us – because that's what God has done in him

During this pandemic, it's my prayer that we might not just withdraw into
our shells – into that place where we just assume we're the only ones
struggling because we just don't know
My prayer instead is that we'd find compassion
For ourselves
And in the faces of others
Just as we see it in the face of Christ

Amen.

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