

Developing Sensitivity and Compassion in the Christian Life.

The word developing suggests growth and progress; it suggests adding piece by piece to a project until the project is complete. In many ways the Christian's life is a life of development, it is of growth. So it is with these virtues of sensitivity and compassion we are talking about, developing sensitivity and compassion. We are not thinking of maintaining something that is right there just like it ought to be or maintaining a completed well rounded out expression of these virtues, but rather that we should seek to understand the virtues of sensitivity and compassion and cultivate them and grow in them for the benefit and the blessing of our Christian life and the brotherhood (church fellowship) in which we may find ourselves.

Well we may raise the question what is sensitivity? Well first of all I want to say that when I use the word sensitivity I am not thinking about that thing that makes people more and more touchy. Sometimes we talk about individuals who are very sensitive, you must be very careful or handle them with kid gloves. That is not the sense in which I am using the word sensitivity. The dictionary definition says: It is the awareness of the needs and emotions of others. That is the way I'm thinking about it this morning, the awareness of the needs and emotions of others.

What is compassion? Well compassion includes sensitivity but it goes further. Again the dictionary defines compassion as: Sympathetic consciousness of others' distresses, together with the desire to alleviate them. That makes it go further, what I see here that it is possible to be aware of others needs but not be all that interested in helping that need to be alleviated. It is possible to be aware of needs but not be compassionate, that is you do not have the desire to see the need alleviated. There may be sensitivity to a degree that we could have one with another, but not compassion. On the other hand compassion will always include sensitivity, it will include that. Sensitivity is an ingredient of compassion but compassion is not necessarily an ingredient of sensitivity.

The word sensitivity is not a Bible word but the concept of the word is biblical. The word compassion is a New Testament word and is used 20 times in the New Testament and most of those times when the word compassion is used it refers

to Christ's attitude and His response toward others, and that is revealing, that is quite interesting. [See Footnote #1 for a list of New Testament references.]

Probably, more often when we think of compassion as a Christian grace, we think of it as an attitude toward the lost, such as when Jesus looked on the multitudes and had compassion on them, as it says, because they were like sheep without a Shepherd. Doesn't that bring up to our feelings and our heart a sense also of compassion, to see sheep without a Shepherd? It says that on the prodigal's returning home, that the father had compassion on him and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him. Or in Jude, speaking of the same attitude toward apostates, he says; On some have compassion, making a difference and others save with fear, pulling them out of the fire, hating the garments that are spotted by the flesh. Again the idea there is compassion with regard to those who have lost the way, those who are lost and who need to be redeemed. We see it as a grace that we ought to demonstrate towards those that are outside of our Fellowship and rightly so, but we also need to exercise compassion within the brotherhood.

How are sensitivity and compassion developed? Well, they are developed in a number of ways but let me suggest what I believe are the basic ways.

1] *The first way in which to develop compassion and sensitivity is to acquaint ourselves with the compassionate Christ.*

As I said, more than 20 times that word is used and as far as the Epistles are concerned the only time the word compassion shows up in its actual form is in 1 Peter 3:8 "*Finally, be ye all of one mind, having compassion one of another, love as brethren, be pitiful, be courteous:*"

Elsewhere in the New Testament the word compassion mostly is referred to and used about Christ. We have to acquaint ourselves with the compassionate Christ. Over and over again the gospels record that phrase about Jesus, that He had compassion, He was moved with compassion, He had compassion toward the multitude that followed Him, He had compassion towards the diseased and afflicted individuals crying out for help. He had compassion towards some of such that did not cry out for help, He asked them what they may wish or what they wanted and He healed them.

And Jesus had compassion even toward those that disliked Him, which were quite a group of people also. Those who despised Him, those who sought to destroy Him, He even had compassion on those, He rebuked them severely sometimes, but overall the tenor of His voice and of His life and of His ministry was one of compassion toward those who were opposing themselves we could say. And you know what He said as He came to the conclusion of His ministry toward those people, what He said about those people and to those people who disliked and despised Him? He said; *“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, which killest the prophets, and stonest them that are sent unto thee; how often would I have gathered thy children together, as a hen doth gather her brood under her wings, and ye would not!”* [Luke 13:34]

It doesn't tell us that He said; You have despised Me so long and now you're about ready to take My life and I am done with you. It does not tell us that. It tells us that He had compassion on them and pled that yet now they would come to repentance so that they could be gathered as chickens under His wing.

Behind His coming to earth to be despised and put to death was compassion. In Luke 1:78 Zachariah refers to the coming of Christ before He was here as; *“Through the tender mercy of our God; whereby the dayspring from on high hath visited us.”* Jesus is the ultimate expression of God's tender mercies to man. And I like so much how he puts that, he says it is God's tender mercies, the suggestion being that you might be merciful but when it is the tender mercies of God you have a dimension even beyond just being merciful. His compassion was not merely so that we might standby and admire Him. We need to acquaint ourselves with and learn compassion by acquainting ourselves with the compassion of Christ, and that's what He wants us to do. We are not just supposed to praise and revel in His compassion for us, we ought to do that, and it seems as though part of what it is going to take for us to learn compassion is to sense our indebtedness to His compassion. I think that it is necessary that over and over again we are reminded and remind ourselves of His mercy. We are to do more than merely talk about how compassionate Christ was. We are to see His life as an example for us to pattern ourselves after in this regard. As he says in 1 Peter 2:21; *“Even here unto were ye called: because Christ suffered for us,”* *Doing what? “Leaving for us an example that we should follow*

His steps.” And then he goes on to say what His steps were Verses 23 -24; *“Who, when he was reviled, he reviled not again, that when he suffered, he threatened not but committed himself to him who judges righteously. Who his own self bore our sins in his own body on the tree, that we being dead to sin should live unto righteousness, by whose stripes ye are healed.”*

Learn the compassion of Christ, see that when He was reviled He did not revile again, and He showed compassion though they despised Him, and when we see that when they despised Him we must remember this; that we were part and parcel to those that crucified Him, we also. He was despised and rejected of men and we were into that rejection ourselves.

2] *Secondly take developing compassion as a personal responsibility. How might we develop compassion?*

We'll take it as a personal responsibility. It is not hard to observe within the brotherhood that there ought to be more love, it is not hard to observe that, whether in general life or a brotherhood setting. You do not have to listen long to hear someone resound that and say that there ought to be more love within relationships. We say that especially when we feel that another should have handled us more kindly, that is when we think there ought to be more love. And indeed there is much room in this area, there ought to be more care and consideration for one another, but these things are not corrected as a group effort. Yes, everyone can determine how they are going to do better in this area, and they will be more or less successful depending on their determination, however Christian graces and virtues are personal responsibilities, that is what they are. When they are developed and when they are exercised by individuals within a group then the group is blessed by their example and by their influence. So do not wait around until others show more love that is the burden of this point, that we must take developing compassion as a personal responsibility. These Bible commands are not just commands to the church in general, as we use the expression, but to people in particular, individuals in particular, seeking to express compassion.

So the question we need to ask our self is: Was my action or reaction in this particular incident was that compassionate? Was it sensitive and compassionate or was it insensitive, was it in-

different, was it maybe even cruel or rude? Ask those questions.

3] *Third, identify and deal with selfishness.*

Selfishness hinders a lot of Christian graces and it will hinder compassion. Within the brotherhood, other relationships, and within the human heart, we can notice this very readily, it is easy to become ingrown and preoccupied with ourselves and with our own family's needs and interests. And certainly it is both normal and right that we pay attention to the needs closest to ourselves and then as it were, move out from there. But notice that I used the word preoccupied, preoccupied with ourselves, which means that we are so taken up with ourselves, or with our own family, that we fail to even notice the needs that exist, that we fail to even notice what others are facing at the moment and are not aware of it, that is what I'm talking about, that's how we can start identifying selfishness. I said identify selfishness, you can't really deal with selfishness in yourself until you have noticed that that is what it is, and that is a very hard thing to do, to identify it in ourselves. We don't have a real hard time seeing where it shows up in others but we often need another person to help us see it in ourselves.

It is helpful for us to look at it this way, that we are all selfish by nature, children are born into the world selfish and we remain that way through our childhood basically, only as we learn from teaching that is given to us that we learn to share and we are helped to deal with selfishness. If individuals are left to themselves they are selfish and will be that way. So if we have never put forth effort then, to be unselfish then we can safely conclude that we are still quite selfish. But you say: I am a Christian, I am born again, and to that I say the New Testament would not need to tell us to be compassionate and forbearing and forgiving and all these other things that we read about. It would not need to tell us to do those things if those were things what automatically occurred when we became Christians, but they do not. It does not mean that being a Christian does not put us in a frame of mind and attitude of heart in which know the ground is fertile to develop these things. But over and over again we see this command to add to our faith, we learn how we are to grow and be different than what we were, even though we are Christians. So again I say if you have never put any conscious effort forward to be unselfish and reach out to touch the lives of others

then no doubt there is still a good deal of selfishness within you. Even if you have worked at that it is one thing that you have to keep on working at if you want to be compassionate with others.

What scripture is there that we have a word on selfishness? There are a number, but this one might be about the best of any, it is Philippians 2:4, where he says; Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others. Now he doesn't mean here to nose into other people's business, if you look at the context of what he says in Philippians 2:1-4): *"If there be therefore any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any bowels and mercies, ²Fulfil ye my joy, that ye be likeminded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind. Let nothing be done through strive for fame glory but in loneliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves. Look not every man on his own things but every man also on the things of others, let this mind to be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus."*

That is the context, and so what you are seeing there is, don't just look after your own things, look after the things of others, tend to, look after and address other people's needs and enter into their needs, it is this word empathising, it is that we enter into the difficulties that another has. Though we cannot perfectly identify with them many times yet we can show our interest. It is an admonition to teach us to learn unselfishness.

4] *Fourthly: Be alert for opportunities to express compassion.*

How do we learn to be compassionate? Be alert for opportunities to express it. This is an extension of number three. The truth here is though that you won't be alert for opportunities unless you develop the habit of a genuine interest in others, unless you somehow cultivate that you don't just look after your own things only but also the things of others. And as I say we develop, we don't get this all at once and that this comes naturally for us, this is something we need to develop; we develop the habit of genuine interest in others. A genuine interest in others is what Jesus was talking about when He talked of the greatest commandment of all; To love thy neighbour as thyself. And you say was that the greatest commandment? Yes it is. [Matthew 22:37-40] He said the greatest is this: "Love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and the second is like unto it, and thou shalt love thine neighbour as thyself." He

says on these two hang all the law of the prophets. It means that they were the ultimate expression of relationship of God to man. There in a nutshell is what we are to do. So you see when we learn how to love others with the same measure and expression and intensity that we love ourselves, then we will have learned compassion. And by this interest I don't mean or include, that we must be the first to know new things that are happening and new things about people that may be hurting etc.

We don't have to be among the first to know everything about everyone. Sometimes people are insulted that they didn't find something out or that they were not among the first to find out. Nor does it mean that others are obligated to inform you always about what is going because you want to know. No, though you do need to know it before you can express compassion. What it means is alertness to others needs. Alertness to the opportunity to express compassion means that when you know that here is somebody hurting, that you seek to respond to that hurt. That you seek to respond with a word, a visit, with a card, whatever it may mean, something like that, that shows you care. So many times we excuse ourselves on this or that saying: "Yes, we do know we ought to, we should have visited and so on, we should get there, we know we should." But you know, good intentions are fine but they just do not minister compassion, they don't get that done, and I think that many people will miss heaven, and I don't just mean because they didn't show compassion. But there are many people who have the intentions for instance, that some day they will make their peace with God, they have the good intention to do right sometime, but they still think there is plenty of time. And it is true that if you miss one opportunity to be compassionate that doesn't mean you won't have another opportunity. But again, these opportunities do come and go and if you have delayed and delayed and passed it off on grounds that you were too busy here or there, we know we can't all get everything done that we would like to get done this we understand fully, but if you habitually procrastinate in reaching out to others then you can not be thought to be compassionate. I say these things on the grounds that I know there is much room for myself to grow in compassion and yet we need to take a look and be challenged.

Why is compassion needed within the Christian brotherhood, why is it needed?

Well it is needed because sickness, distresses and afflictions and death come to God's people as they do to all others in the same way, with the same intensity, with the same pain and agony that they come to all others. In fact it seems that sometimes that those who are children of God experience even more pain than those who do not serve the Lord. That is what the psalmist struggled with when he said: When I see how good it goes with the wicked my feet almost slip. So that is one of the reasons why compassion is needed, because we are prone to experience all the same things that those who are not Christians experience. God does not keep us from those things just because we are Christians, just because we are dedicated to Him, they are the natural course of life and of man. This gives us the opportunity that the Bible talks about when he says: Weep with those that weep, it gives us that opportunity to weep with those that weep. We weep with those that weep who are experiencing physical illness and aid also by cards or visits of encouragement. These things provide opportunities to weep with those that weep.

We need to compassion within the Christian brotherhood because of spiritual faults and failures. Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, and this happens then; Ye which are spiritual restore such in the spirit of meekness. So we need compassion in order to restore those who are falling. And that is where Jesus demonstrates such a beautiful example as we see that towards the elders of Jerusalem, as we see His attitude both towards Judas and towards Peter. It is restoration that He had in mind and compassion in His heart, He was wanting to do that, to restore and encourage those who are in one way or another hurting. It is what Ephesians 4:32 is all about when he says be kind one to another, tender hearted, forgiving one another, he is talking about actual offences committed, and we are called to forgive. Colossians 3 he says that we are to forbear one another and to forgive one another. It is because of spiritual failure that we need compassion within the Christian brotherhood. Spiritual failure does not mean that that person has lost the way permanently. They may not come to repentance but the effort of the brotherhood is to restore, that is the whole idea behind the Matthew 18 scripture when he calls us that if someone has trespassed, go to tell him his fault, the fault was an actual fault and

the trespass is the real, but he is not saying go and tell him so that he understands how badly he has hurt you, but he says if you talk to him about it and he hear you, you have gained him. The whole idea of compassion within the brotherhood is that we would gain one another, in helping each other along life's pathway to heaven.

Why is compassion needed in the Christian brotherhood? It is needed because of differences in spiritual growth and convictions. We that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak and not to please ourselves, this clearly indicates that in the Christian brotherhood at any given time there are people on various places in the scale of strengths and weaknesses. The idea is that we learn to demonstrate compassion as we see what we call in others lack of conviction or we see that they have not grown as far as they should. One of the things that impresses me about the New Testament scriptures is that over and over again in the same breath that he calls for like-mindedness, he also calls for the demonstration of forbearance and Christian love. Now if like-mindedness meant we were all thinking exactly the same about our Lord and our redemption, about church life and about all the other major issues, if we were all thinking exactly the same way then we don't need compassion. You do not have to be compassionate towards someone that is not a whit behind you in anything, but are in the same place that you are in spiritual development. But compassion and forbearance are needed within the brotherhood, when we understand and realise that some of us still need to be instructed in the way of God more perfectly. Some need help to come to repentance in certain areas of their life, as we have already talked about. There are different levels of spiritual growth and development and it will always be that way.

How is compassion demonstrated? First of all it is demonstrated by communication that seeks to minister to another's need. Communication includes both talking and listening. Communication that seeks to minister to another's needs means that we don't always get it done, but that is our goal to administer to another's needs. I base this on Ephesians 4 where he says that we should: *"Let no corrupt communication proceed of our mouth but that which is pure, for the use of edifying, that it may minister grace to the hearers"*. Do you get that? Corrupt communication there is put as the negative to communication or conversa-

tion that edifies and administers grace to the hearer. Our first impression on corrupt communication is that there shall be no foul language, no dirty stories, no cursing and swearing, and surely that is included there. But notice that he doesn't say let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth but that which is pure and holy but goes a step further and says for it to be useful; **But that which is good for the use of building others up and ministering grace to the hearer.** Communication that seeks to minister to another's need.

Sometimes we may say something that we hoped would be helpful to another, only to learn that the other person took it differently then we wished they would have or how we meant them to take it. Should we conclude then; Well from now on I will keep quiet. No, we should not conclude that. If Christ would have clammed up and pulled Himself into a shell as soon as He found out that there were some people misconstruing His words there would be a lot that we wouldn't have from Him. But He didn't do that, He never behaved in negative ways. No, we don't want to say, "Well I'll keep quiet from now on." It could be that we may need to be more cautious before we talk and think through what we are going to say before we say it, but don't refuse just because at one time or another you were misunderstood. Remember that to the hearer there is often as much weight in the tone of voice in which something is said as in the actual words themselves. Remember that.

Compassion comes so that not only that the right words are chosen, but that the tone, the attitude and expression of the heart is also clearly understood. Minister grace. He says that the conversation that we put forth should minister grace to the hearers. So ultimately the hearer becomes the final judge as to whether we have ministered to them. Perhaps sometimes hearers may think that they weren't administered to but later on as they think about it they may realise that it is one of the best things that they could have heard and it was very helpful to them in the matter of redeeming and restoring or helping them find their way in a particular issue.

Some things to recognise. How is compassion demonstrated? It is demonstrated by forbearance. Forbearance simply means that we are putting up with something in someone else that we ourselves would not want to do, that we ourselves could not really condone in our own lives. That is what for-

bearance is. Well you say how long does that have to be done? The Bible doesn't really tell us how long it has to be done, but if purity is to be maintained within the church, or our lives, sin must be dealt with, people must be helped along the way to see their error and certainly that is another subject. Right now we are thinking about the need to be gracious to others who differ from us and that is what 1 Peter 3:9 points out when he says; *"Finally be all of one mind having compassion one of another, love as brethren, be pitiful."* Again when everyone agrees hundred percent the pity thing isn't needed. Again be careful how you take this, you could misinterpret my words, even though I am trying to be clear, I do not mean that it is pity that overlooks the wrong. The very heart of God is that He is always gentle with the sinner but hard on the sin, that is the heart of God, and we should keep that in mind. Of course the sinner that does not come to repentance will ultimately be banished from His presence and that will be very hard. The ultimate for a sinner that does not repent is the wrath of God. That is a law that is put in place. And by forgiveness, it simply means that we cancel another's debts or wrongs as we have already talked about.

Then also we demonstrate compassion by resisting the temptation to level with others. One of the causes of much difficulties in brotherhood and other relationships is this, that some think that if this person spoke to me this way, I will watch for my opportunity to get back to him in a similar way, that is the only message he will hear. This is wrong, that is a wrong conclusion, 1 Peter 3 again says this; *"That we are to be pitiful and to be courteous, not rendering evil for evil, nor railing for railing"* It may mean that we will sometimes be defrauded by another person, sometimes we will have received evil and it is for us to resort to this - that we are not to render evil for evil unto any man, but ever follow that which is good. So resist the temptation to level with others even though you felt like they gave you what you might call a hard time, do not resort to the temptation. Do not give in to the temptation to say: Here is my opportunity to give him his own medicine. No, no, that is not in the Christian context as I would understand the Bible. So may God help us, I'm not saying that it is not present amongst Christians, it is not what God wants it to be, it is the way it is sometimes and that is what we have to understand.

Compassion comes back to this;

That there is much yet to learn about your compassionate Lord.

Therefore go and do thou likewise.

Footnote #1.

The word compassion is found in these KJV New Testament References:

[Matthew 9:36](#); [Matthew 14:14](#);
[Matthew 15:32](#); [Matthew 18:27](#);
[Matthew 18:33](#); [Matthew 20:34](#);

[Mark 1:41](#); [Mark 5:19](#);
[Mark 6:34](#); [Mark 8:2](#);
[Mark 9:22](#);

[Luke 7:13](#); [Luke 10:33](#); [Luke 15:20](#);

[Romans 9:15](#);

[Hebrews 5:2](#); [Hebrews 10:34](#);

[1Peter 3:8](#);

[1John 3:17](#);

[Jude 1:22](#).