

# Where is the Love? - A Plea for Compassion

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Last month's massacre of European tourists on a Tunisian beach raised the question in my mind of how an individual who purportedly believed in a benevolent Creator could apparently dispassionately discharge the contents of a Kalashnikov assault rifle and explode grenades slaughtering 38 innocent victims. A similar question occupied my thinking as I recently watched a Panorama documentary, which sought to trace the whereabouts of the '300' schoolgirls kidnapped by the 'Islamic' militant group Boko Haram.

Reports indicate that while some may have escaped, the vast majority remain in captivity, compelled to convert to 'Islam', forced to marry, perpetrate acts of violence, and be subjected to the most dehumanising abuses. Video footage of the militant group's leader Abubaker Shekau's grinning taunting of the West, displayed a personification of evil that was chilling in its malevolence. What is it that happens in a person's mind that can so completely negate the ability to feel compassion toward fellow human beings?

We are created for loving relationships with God and with one another. Especially because of our fallen nature, we are admonished, "clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive one another" (Colossians 3:12-13). Even in our fallen condition, modern studies in social neuroscience indicate that our brains are wired naturally to reach out to those who are suffering. Areas of our brains are populated by "mirror neurons" that allow us to "feel with" those who are experiencing pain or distress and prompt us to bring relief. However, the same body of research points to self-absorption as a primary hindrance to the practice of compassion. Preoccupation with self, intentionally or unintentionally, closes our hearts to the needs of others (1 John 3:17).

The priest and the Levite in the story of the Good Samaritan were not evil as we might define the term, but they were overly concerned with their busyness, the need for self-preservation and religious correctness, preventing them from meeting an immediate human need (see Luke 10:25-37). We lose the capacity for compassion when being 'right' becomes more important than loving right. One of the reasons that Jesus fought so relentlessly against right-wing fundamentalism was its tendency to elevate the preservation of doctrinal 'truth' above the very relationships those truths were designed to promote and protect. Truth without love sacrifices compassion on the altar of religious propriety and behavioural conformity.

The reality is that those who operate in a religious context and yet balk at the experience and demonstration of agape love, will ultimately take refuge in biblical knowledge as opposed to biblical experience. Ellen White stated that, "a religion of externals is attractive to the unrenewed heart" (The Great Controversy, 88). As precious as our distinctive truths are, they are simply the context in which we are to reveal the love of God. Truths designed to bring sanctifying grace may become weapons that wound when wielded by a cold heart. We are told that, "The last

rays of merciful light, the last message of mercy to be given to the world, is a revelation of His character of love” (Christ’s Object Lessons, 415). We often resist compassion because it comes with a price.

Compassion does not exist in a vacuum. It calls for a response. The “Good Samaritan” not only cared for the one who fell among thieves; he bore the emotional cost of getting involved; the physical cost of getting the wounded to a place of safety; the financial cost of providing for his upkeep and the cost of continued commitment. The question we need to address is, “Am I willing to pay the price to live compassionately?”

While we may easily distance our own personal experience from that of sociopaths and religious fanatics, the Bible clearly warns us that as we approach the close of earth’s history, “the love of many will wax cold” (Matthew 24:12). What makes this warning all the more disturbing is that it indicates that significant numbers who have experienced the love of God will lose the capacity to exhibit His love to others.

The Apostle warns that the very facility that God has instilled within us to sensitize us to doing the right thing can be nullified. Paul states that our conscience can become, “seared as with a hot iron” (1 Timothy 4:2). Repeated violations of our consciences will ultimately compromise our ability to experience truth. Continual resistance of the natural urge to alleviate suffering will stifle the promptings to do so.

Compassion dies when we practice to keep people at an emotional and psychological distance. We diminish people when we lose sight of the value that Jesus invested in them - when we fail to see them as God’s property, purchased by the ultimate price. It is when this occurs that a mother can forget her nursing child (Isaiah 45:9), spouses can divorce without cause (Matthew 5:31), and brothers and sisters can “bite and devour one another” (Galatians 5:15). Cruelty and neglect necessitate us psychologically and emotionally distancing ourselves from the pain we cause. We have to silence our own conscience.

Just as many flip their TV channels when emotional appeals are made for charitable giving, we can flip our minds when confronted with legitimate needs in our daily experience. Our expression of compassion requires our choice to remain engaged with those who require our help in spite of our discomfort. The reality is that we cannot love from a distance. Love requires us to be up close and personal - to be spiritually, emotionally, socially connected with the recipients of our love. This begins in our homes and works outwards. Our ability to experience compassion for others is in direct proportion to how much our hearts are softened by the compassion God has for us.

The “Unjust Steward” was asked, “Should you not also have had compassion on your fellow servant, just as I had pity on you” (Matthew 18:33). Compassion rises in our hearts when we sincerely pray the sentiment articulated by Bob Pierce, the founder of World Vision, “Let my heart break for the things that break the heart of God.” Jesus said that the greatest evidence that we are His disciples is the love we have for each other (John 13:35). Compassion grows when we choose to shift our

focus away from self and onto others. Martin Luther King declared that, “A man has not begun to live until he can rise above the narrow confines of his individualistic concerns, to the broader concerns of all humanity.”

Our concern for others and our personal transformation are intimately connected. The Dalai Lama said, “If you want others to be happy, practice compassion. If you want to be happy, practice compassion.” God’s plea for compassion is ultimately for our eternal benefit. He inspired Paul to exhort, “Finally, all of you be of one mind, having compassion for one another; love as brothers, be tender-hearted, be courteous; not returning evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary blessing, knowing that you were called to this, that you may inherit a blessing” (1 Peter 3:8).