

# THE CALL OF COMPASSION

JOSH BENTON



Send Relief



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*The Call of Compassion*

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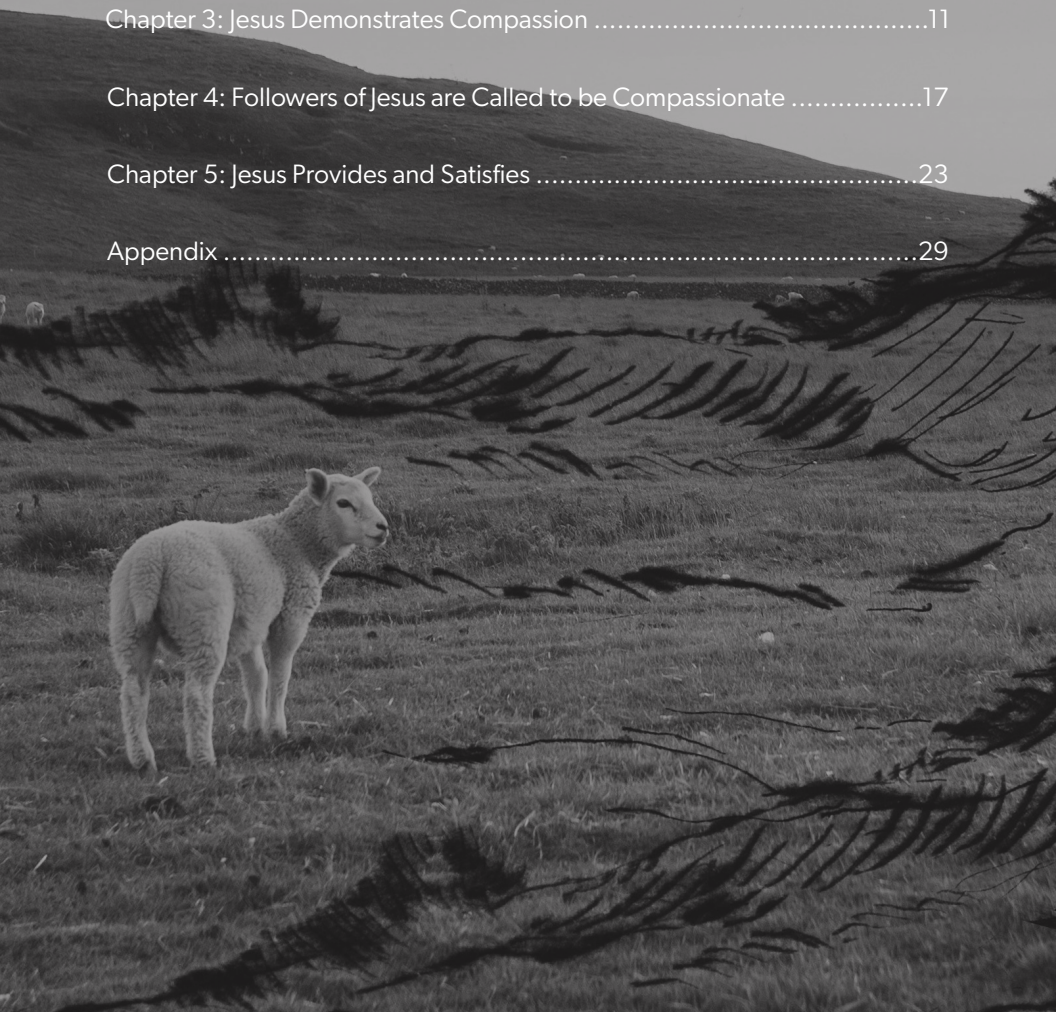
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## CHAPTER 1

# COMMUNITIES AND CONVICTION

If your church closed its doors, do you think anyone in town would care?

This question convicted me when it was asked; it still does.

For many years, I had two careers that seemed immersed in two very different worlds. On one side, I served in bivocational ministry as a student pastor. It was a typical student ministry comprised of kids whose families went to our church and who sometimes invited their friends. Students met on Wednesday nights for Bible teaching, and the expectation was to create a relevant, fun ministry that teenagers wanted to be a part of. Each summer, we went on mission trips where we served the poor and helped those in need, and we were comfortable. Generally, our ministry was made up of kids from stable, middle-class families. Alongside several volunteers, we did our best to pour into our students by teaching them about Jesus, modeling what it means to serve in the church, and emphasizing the importance of Christian missions.

My other career was in government. Among other things, my role included helping communities identify the challenges their people faced, and it ran the gamut—poverty, education, job loss, road infrastructure, and job creation. When issues were identified, my responsibility was to help community leaders cultivate solutions for these concerns. It was basic community strategic planning. In this exercise, community officials were asked to gather trusted local partners to help solve problems. After a few months on the job, I noticed a trend: Leaders from business, government, non-profits, education, and healthcare were always at the table, but rarely were church leaders present. The more I thought about it, the more concerned and frustrated I was that churches and their leaders weren't invited to help solve their community's problems. So, I did a dangerous thing. I asked why.

Common responses ranged from being outright dismissive at worst, and at best, confused as to how a church could help or contribute. The more I asked, the more I realized that churches weren't invited because they weren't viewed as partners who could help care for community needs.

Once, during a conversation with a coworker, I lamented that churches didn't have a seat at the table, though they had something to contribute. My colleague was a friend who lived in my town and knew that I was involved in ministry. He listened to my rantings. When I finished, he asked, "Do you know the neighborhood behind your church is Section 8 housing?"<sup>1</sup>

He said several other things that I don't remember because his question was piercing, and I couldn't get past it. I was frustrated because churches weren't invited to sit at these tables of influence, but I had not humbled myself to serve the people in my church's backyard ... literally. My mind raced. Our church committed itself to Biblical preaching, discipleship, and the authority of Scripture. We were generous financially and even went on occasional mission trips, yet we were ignoring the people and needs in the community where God had placed us. Like many churches, we were passionate about missions, yet our view of global missions was incomplete. Our church rightly desired to see the gospel proclaimed to all nations and took appropriate steps to do so. However, we were missing opportunities to engage locally.

Before I could answer his first question, he asked a second one. "If your church closed its doors, do you think anyone in town would care?"

What happened next, both personally and corporately in our church, was good yet also difficult. Our congregation's desire to personally engage our community began impacting people of all ages and backgrounds in our church. Together, under the leadership of our pastor and with the assistance of our many volunteers, God led us to serve several areas of our town with a unified spirit. We didn't always get it right, but we did something. We sustained our financial support for both international and national missions, and we continued to go on mission trips to support and encourage missionaries.

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<sup>1</sup> Section 8 is a federal rental assistance program established by the Housing Act of 1937. Those who qualify are categorized as low-income households by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

Then, we took the next step to engage our community with the gospel.<sup>2</sup> We invited people whose lives had been disrupted by neglect, addiction, and poverty into our church. We stepped into neighborhoods and homes where we had never been before and extended invitations for our neighbors to come into our homes, as well. Some of these neighbors wanted our help but were not interested in church. Others came to church, and some eventually professed faith in Christ. A few church members expressed frustration about the impact that the unchurched were having on our church culture. Yet many found that serving outside their familiar context enhanced their view of missions and evangelism.

I don't share my experience to criticize churches. God created the church, loves the church, and calls His people to serve it. The church is God's plan for the advancement of His kingdom throughout the world. The church is good and was created for God's glory and purposes. However, those who lead churches have a lot on their plates. Though many churches serve their communities well, we are all capable of having blind spots to the needs around us. God used this experience in my church to reveal the blind spots in my own life and personality. He taught me that my tendencies and preferences are not excuses for neglecting His commands. This experience wasn't just about me or the church where I once served. God used this experience to teach our church more about the character of God, specifically His compassion.

God is compassionate, more so than we can imagine. God's compassion (Christlike compassion or biblical compassion) is a feeling of concern for a community's or a person's felt, emotional, mental, and physical needs that leads to action by caring for those needs with the ultimate purpose of revealing God's truth, love, and salvation.

We see God's compassion in how He draws people to salvation. This attribute of His character also brings healing to physical and felt needs. God calls His disciples—His church—to be people who reflect His compassion. This experience at our church caused us to look at God's Word to learn more about God and about our call to biblical compassion.

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<sup>2</sup> Following the instruction of the Great Commission in Matthew 28:16-20, our church purposefully established ministry partnerships and engagement locally, nationally, and globally.

Compassion is seen throughout both the Old and New Testament and can be divided into three themes:

1. Compassion is an attribute of God.
2. Jesus demonstrates compassion.
3. Followers of Jesus are called to be compassionate.

We can turn to several passages of Scripture to learn more about compassion, but Jesus feeding the five thousand gives a picture of all three themes. We will explore them in the following chapters.

## QUESTIONS

1. What is your initial response when you encounter human needs?
2. In your opinion, what role should Christians have when they encounter the needs of the vulnerable?
3. What church experiences have influenced (positive or negative) your views on serving the vulnerable?
4. Can you identify a pocket of need in your community that your church might be able to help? Explain.
5. How do you think the community at large views your church? Why?

## CHAPTER 2

# COMPASSION IS AN ATTRIBUTE OF GOD

*When he went ashore he saw a great crowd,  
and he had compassion on them ...*

Matthew 14:14a

The depiction of Jesus feeding the five thousand is a familiar narrative in Scripture. It's one of the few miracles of Jesus that is present in all four gospels.<sup>3</sup> For those who grew up attending church, it's a passage of Scripture shared with frequency. There's good reason it's told so often—it gives evidence of Jesus as Messiah, reveals His power over nature, and shows His care for human needs. All these elements make it a go-to teaching in churches. However, it can also be easy to gloss over because many of us have heard it so often. If we are dismissive, we can overlook deep truths about Jesus' humanity, His unity with the Father, and how He leads His followers to replicate His example.

Before the miracle even begins, we learn that Jesus is relatable. We see in Matthew 14:1-12 that, leading up to the feeding of the five thousand, Jesus was tired and mourning the loss of a friend. His friend and partner in ministry, John the Baptist, had just been executed. John was the person preparing people in and around Israel for Jesus' arrival, and now John was gone.<sup>4</sup> Even still, Jesus wasn't looking for a crowd to teach. He was looking for a quiet place to listen, rest, pray, and mourn, despite the crowds waiting for him. Jesus, being fully God and fully man, was unable to separate His divinity from His humanity. After surveying the situation before Him, Jesus responded in compassion.

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3 Outside of Jesus' resurrection, the feeding of the five thousand is one of the only miracles described in all four gospels. See Matthew 14:13-21; Mark 6:31-44; Luke 9:12-17; John 6:1-14.

4 John the Baptist's calling was to prepare people in Israel for God's coming Kingdom through the ministry of Jesus. See Matthew 3:1-12; Mark 1:1-8; Luke 1:5-25; 3:2-18; John 1:6-8, 32-34.

The list of God’s attributes is a long one. Scripture states that God is eternal, holy, faithful, true, just, all-powerful, all-knowing, always present, good, and righteous, just to name a few. Each of us are prone to relate to some of God’s attributes over others, but Jesus embodies them all.<sup>5</sup> Compassion is an attribute that some might not be immediately drawn to. Sometimes, we find it easier to relate to the attributes associated with strength—God’s power, holiness, righteousness, knowledge, truth, and justice. When we focus more heavily on the characteristics that humans can embody, we run the risk of deemphasizing those attributes associated with His holiness and authority.

Compassion, along with others like mercy, love, patience, and peace, represents the wholeness and complexity of God’s character. It is critically important that Jesus is not one-dimensional. He is strong and merciful at the same time, and His power and humility coexist. When Jesus feeds the five thousand, He demonstrates God’s strength and power through the miracle, all the while demonstrating God’s compassion in His response to the crowds. Throughout Scripture, God demonstrates compassion in three distinct ways:

### **1. Compassion toward His people**

God has a special relationship with those who know Him and are known by Him. One benefit of that relationship is that God provides compassionate favor to those who belong to Him. Our church experienced this relational reality through serving our community. Our church was a small-to-mid-sized, working-class congregation, and generationally, it was comprised of young families, as well as middle-aged and older adults. We were made up of people from all backgrounds and histories, but we had one thing in common: We now were a part of God’s kingdom and were actively being restored for His purposes. Because we belonged to God’s family, He strengthened our faith and showed us grace amid our struggles. Even in times of correction and discipline, God demonstrates His compassion through opportunities for the restoration of His people.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Matthew 28:18; John 1:1-14; 8:58; 10:29-33; 14:7-11; Romans 1:25; 9:5; Colossians 2:9; Philippians 2:6-11; Hebrews 1:1-3; 1:6; 13:8.

<sup>6</sup> 2 Chronicles 30:9; Psalm 103:13

## **2. Compassion toward sinners**

God demonstrates His compassion most fervently through the handling of sin. Because of His holiness, God cannot be in union with anything sinful. Yet in His compassion, God has made a way for sinful people to repent, be forgiven of sin, and know Him through a relationship with His Son. My journey to faith in Christ is a familiar one to many who grew up in the church. At an early age, I sat in a church service and listened to a guest speaker share stories from the mission field. I heard about how God was the God of the nations and that all were sinful, separated from God, and in need of the salvation that could only be found through faith in Christ. Through Scripture, those stories, and the foundation I had already received in church, God revealed to me that I was sinful and in need of salvation. I asked Jesus into my heart and soon walked down the aisle to profess my faith publicly and was later baptized. This was not the end but the beginning of my story.

After that experience, my adolescence was filled with several mistakes, doubts about my faith, and even outright rebellion. My late teens and early adulthood could be viewed as a season of deconstructing my faith. Then in my early twenties, through the influence of several godly people and the conviction of the Holy Spirit, I began to understand that Jesus was not only my Savior, but the King of God's kingdom and, therefore, the King of my life. From childhood on into adulthood, God in His kindness forgave my sins and provided clarity that changed the trajectory of my life. As I matured in my faith, I understood that being a Christian was not about rule following and displays of veiled morality, but about worshiping Jesus, serving Him with gratitude, and being transformed into His image. All Scripture points to this same reality. God does not just provide for physical or emotional needs, but He leads people to repentance and a restored relationship with Him so that we can serve Him now and into eternity.<sup>7</sup>

## **3. Compassion toward the vulnerable**

Because He is just, God cares for the difficulties of the sojourner, fatherless, oppressed, and poor. God shows compassion to the vulnerable because all humanity is His creation and was made in His image. God calls His people, the caretakers of His creation, to care and

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<sup>7</sup> Exodus 34:6-9; Romans 2:4

work for the good of those in need. God desires for broken people to be cared for and, through that care, be pointed to the One who can restore their souls.

A middle-schooler named Ava was one of the first people our church formed a relationship with. Her upbringing was difficult. Her parents were no longer married, and she had several siblings. She did not have an active relationship with her mother. Her father was a hard worker and held a job to support his family but had significant health problems. The combination of the two prevented him from being consistently present with his family. Life in Ava's neighborhood was difficult. Violence and drug activity were not unusual on her street. If there were ever a family on the brink, it was hers.

A retired couple in our church, Dennis and Rose, poured into the lives of Ava and her family. They became a part of each other's family through rides to school, trips to the doctor, groceries, holidays, everything. Over the course of several months and years, Ava, along with some other members of her family, professed faith in Christ. Ava is now married with a growing family and remains a faithful part of the church. Her relationship with Dennis and Rose still exists today because they didn't just care for the vulnerable, but they made them family. As Christians, our faith calls us to serve others with compassionate good works. We point others to faith in Christ, and we ultimately serve Jesus by serving those who are in need among us.<sup>8</sup>

Acknowledging God's compassion is a reminder that He desires an eternal relationship with those He created. He cares about our eternal souls, but He also cares about our lives here on earth. God wants people from all places and backgrounds to know Him and have a full, meaningful life on earth.<sup>9</sup> When we know God through Jesus, we enter that relationship because of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection by His grace through faith, trusting in Him for the forgiveness of our sins. We do not earn salvation by our own merit. However, once we experience His life-changing gift of salvation, we are called to serve Jesus and others through doing good.

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8 Deuteronomy 10:18; 15:7-8; Isaiah 3:14-15; Exodus 22:22; Matthew 25:45; 1 John 3:17-18  
9 John 10:1-10

Through the power of the Holy Spirit, Christians are transformed into the likeness of Jesus so that we reflect His holiness and grace to others.<sup>10</sup> This reflection of God includes compassion toward His people, sinners, and the vulnerable. God's call to salvation is an invitation to an eternal relationship with God and a call to join His mission to see souls and lives restored. Jesus is our example and the epitome of obedience to this calling.

The narrative of Jesus feeding the five thousand puts God's compassion on full display. When Jesus encountered the crowds, He had compassion on them because that is a part of His nature. Even amid busyness, grief, and the desire for solitude, Jesus showed compassion for the spiritual and physical needs of people He encountered.

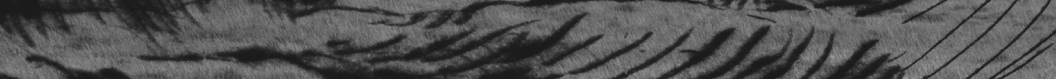
## QUESTIONS

1. Do you most often relate to God's compassion or his power? Why?
2. How does God demonstrate compassion to others? How have you encountered God's compassion?
3. Why do Christians often view compassion as an optional type of ministry within churches?
4. What is the over-riding goal when showing Christ-like compassion?

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<sup>10</sup> Our own good works cannot save us, but after coming to saving faith through Jesus, we begin to be transformed into the image of God and are called to live a life filled with good works that glorify God. Ephesians 2:8-10; Titus 3:1-8; James 2:14-26; 2 Corinthians 5:17; Galatians 5:13-26; 6:15; Ephesians 4:23-24; Colossians 3:10; 2 Peter 1:3-11





CHAPTER 3

# JESUS DEMONSTRATES COMPASSION

*When he went ashore he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd.*

*And he began to teach them many things.*

Mark 6:34

“Seeing people like Jesus does” is a common phrase in Christian culture. It’s meant to encourage Christ followers to see people beyond the surface and to understand their deeper needs, along with who they really are. Even more, 2 Corinthians 5:16-17 compels us to “regard no one according to the flesh” because all people are valuable to Jesus and are capable of being saved by God’s grace. He created all people and can make anyone a “new creation” spiritually, physically, mentally, and emotionally through faith in Christ. Seeing others through the eyes of Jesus is a challenge—it’s uncomfortable. It causes us to break down our presuppositions, prejudices, and preferences to realize that all people have worth and dignity and can be restored to their Creator. As followers of Jesus, we are responsible for demonstrating Christlike compassion to those in need. Through our compassion, we hope to gain the relational trust to point those in difficult circumstances to our Savior and His kingdom.

When our church began engaging with the communities in our city, we were all challenged. We came face-to-face with circumstances involving dysfunctional families, abuse, neglect, and poverty. We entered the homes of children living with extended families because their parents were incarcerated. We saw the impacts of drug abuse and violence. It wasn’t easy for me to see others like Jesus sees them .

I remember the first time my family was invited into Mary's home. Mary was a single mother with two children and had allowed her kids to come to our church. Mary had difficulty holding a job. She couldn't afford a vehicle and fed her family with food stamps. She and her kids lived in a low-income housing complex. After a short time of knowing them, Mary invited us to one of her children's birthday parties. At the time, I did not know what an honor this really was. At first, I was hesitant. We had young children. The apartment complex had a reputation of being unsafe, but we went anyway.

Thinking back on that first visit, I'm embarrassed of the things I remember feeling. The apartment was small, and it smelled like dirt and grease. Several kids were there. They weren't well-behaved, according to my standards. I remember thinking that I was above being in this place with these people. Thankfully, my wife saw people the way Jesus does. She jumped right in. She started talking to the others who were there, helped serve cake, and played games with the children. My tendency was to cast judgment on the circumstances and behaviors of those around me. But in those moments, the Holy Spirit convicted me—and He still does—that people in hard places need to see and know Jesus.

Thankfully, that was not our last visit with Mary and her family. We went back several times, and they came to our house as well. We took them grocery shopping and to work. We even developed a relationship with their landlord who allowed us to host holiday parties and Bible studies. What I saw as obstacles to the gospel, God saw as an opportunity to display His grace, especially to me. Perceived circumstances or behavior, good or bad, do not increase a person's appeal to God. Without Christ, all people, circumstances, and behaviors fall short of meriting God's favor. However, a person's circumstances and behavior can influence our perception of who we think deserves God's love and forgiveness. Because of my own sin, my perceptions were blinded by arrogance and self-righteousness. In those moments, I chose who deserved to see God's love. At times, we are prone to view bad circumstances as obstacles that God cannot overcome. At our worst, we see the vulnerable as beyond Christ's power to save, and we often neglect the opportunity to care for their practical needs.

Instead of embracing opportunities to serve the vulnerable in our communities, we as Christians have too often delegated their care to

governments, schools, and secular non-profits. While these organizations may address a physical need, they are not designed to point to eternal change, and their goals do not align with the priorities of God's kingdom. Churches are designed to do both. With the gospel, we have the answer to broken lives, systems, and communities. If we choose not to engage brokenness, we lose credibility in the communities where God has placed us, and many will miss the opportunity to hear the hope Christ offers. Retreat and delegation are not the answer. Compassionate gospel engagement is.

When Jesus fed the five thousand, He demonstrated how to see others and respond to their practical needs. As Jesus saw the crowds, He had compassion because that is part of His very nature as God. Looking further, we learn that what He observed caused Him to feel compassion. We also see what compassion requires. As He looked upon the crowds, Christ in His compassion recognized two needs: They were in need of physical healing, and they were spiritually lost. Upon seeing these needs, Jesus responded in very specific ways. First, He met their physical needs. Second, He met their spiritual needs by teaching about the kingdom of God.

Christlike compassion requires action; otherwise, those sympathetic emotions are nothing more than feeling sorry for people or their circumstances. Godly compassion requires recognizing a need and acting to meet it. When Jesus saw the crowds, He did not merely feel bad for their circumstances and move on. His feelings of compassion led to acts of mercy. Jesus acted to provide relief and help to those experiencing physical, emotional, and spiritual distress. He healed their infirmities and taught them about the kingdom of God. It's important to recognize that acts of mercy can be done without Christlike compassion. Mercy can be void of godly motivation and thus fail to direct those who are being served toward Christ.

Jesus points to this concept in Luke 10:25-37, when He teaches the parable of the Good Samaritan. In this parable, those who identified themselves as people of God neglected a man who had been robbed, brutally beaten, and abandoned, whereas someone who was not a follower of God, a Samaritan, showed mercy. Jesus uses this teaching to demonstrate important truths. First, God's people are expected to be motivated by His love and to extend mercy to those in need. Second, those who claim to know God are still capable of neglecting compassion by focusing on following religious rules

while ignoring the human needs around them. Third, the parable reveals that not all acts of mercy point to God's redemptive work since acts of mercy can be completed without Christian conviction.

Though both of these examples give insight into the roles of compassion and mercy in God's kingdom, Jesus' actions when feeding the five thousand contrast those of the religious leaders and the Samaritan in the parable. The Samaritan shows that throughout creation, God has ingrained all people with the desire to help others. In other words, the attributes of God's kingdom impact believers and nonbelievers alike. Through the Samaritan, Jesus confronts those who thought they had mastered religion by pointing out their neglect of the common grace given to all people, the basic instinct to help others. However, without Christ, compassionate acts of mercy can fall short. Temporary help can be provided, but without Christ, the relief and healing are just that: temporary.

When He fed the five thousand, Jesus' actions teach us that His compassion compels a response and points to truth. He expects His people to be merciful in order to reflect and point others to His kingdom. When introduced to God's kingdom, we learn that Jesus is the King and entrance requires repentance and a restored relationship with God through faith in His Son. Citizens of God's kingdom are then expected to reflect the attributes of Christ by being moved with compassion, acting mercifully toward those in need, and inviting them to join His kingdom. Christian compassion ministries cannot neglect the responsibility to both care for the needs of others and point them to the truth and hope found in God's kingdom.

Acting mercifully on feelings of compassion shows concern for physical and felt needs, as well as spiritual needs. Jesus saw that the people were like sheep without a shepherd. There was no one to care for the people's needs, no one to lead them in the right direction. Seeing others through the eyes of Jesus causes Christians to see physical needs without neglecting the spiritual, and vice versa. Christians should see and genuinely care about both. We cannot hide our faith when serving, but at the same time, meeting physical needs cannot be a smokescreen for evangelism. When we genuinely care, we cultivate relationships and win the right to share what we believe. Genuine—not transactional—service to others builds trust. Even more, this kind of service allows the greatest problem in a person's life, separation from God, to be resolved through faith in Christ.

Jesus saw the needs of the people around Him and acted. In our humanity, it's easy to see needs and pretend they don't exist or to merely feel emotionally sorry for someone. Both responses lead to inaction and are not the example Jesus provides. Whether it be giving financially, cooking a meal, providing a child with a home, teaching a skill, or simply listening to someone share his or her story, Christlike compassion requires action.

## QUESTIONS

1. As a Christian, why is action necessary when we "feel" sympathy toward those in need?
2. What are some examples in Scripture where Jesus models compassion?
3. As Christians, should we separate compassion ministry with verbally sharing the gospel? Why or why not?
4. Why does compassion require humility?
5. In your words, what is the difference between compassion and mercy?



## CHAPTER 4

# FOLLOWERS OF JESUS ARE CALLED TO BE COMPASSIONATE

*And when it grew late, his disciples came to him and said, "This is a desolate place, and the hour is now late. Send them away to go into the surrounding countryside and villages and buy themselves something to eat." But he answered them, "You give them something to eat." And they said to him, "Shall we go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread and give it to them to eat?" And he said to them, "How many loaves do you have? Go and see." And when they had found out, they said, "Five, and two fish." Then he commanded them all to sit down in groups on the green grass. So they sat down in groups, by hundreds and by fifties. And taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven and said a blessing and broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples to set before the people.*

*And he divided the two fish among them all.*

Mark 6:35-41

The final act of this miracle is the most memorable. After Jesus healed the multitudes in the crowd and taught about the kingdom, He proceeded to feed those who had stayed all day to be in His presence. It is undoubtedly miraculous that Jesus took five loaves and two fish and fed over five thousand people. But it is important to not overlook that Jesus used this miracle to teach His disciples about how to serve others through faith in Him and obedience to Him.

Mark's account of the narrative finds the disciples ready to wind down after a very long day. They were tired, and sensing the crowd was growing

restless, the disciples encouraged Jesus to send the people away. The needs of the people, mixed with the time of day, were becoming an inconvenience. The disciples surveyed the situation and realized their ability to respond appropriately was limited. Jesus, however, saw the situation as an opportunity to remind the disciples of who He was and who they were following. His response to the disciples' encouragement was, "You give them something to eat," indicating that Jesus was not ready to send the people home. The disciples responded to Jesus with an excuse, a valid one, yet still an excuse. The disciples understood they did not have the resources in money, food, or time to meet the need. They believed the need could not be met. Even though they had seen Jesus perform many miracles, the disciples' first thought was in their own abilities and limitations, failing to trust in Jesus to provide.

In our weakness, we act similarly to the disciples. It is our natural tendency to view situations such as poverty, injustice, natural disasters, human trafficking, hunger, abuse, or orphaned children and look to our own resources and abilities to measure how we can respond. We typically lean one of two ways. First, we may say, "The need is too big; there is nothing I can do to help." On the other hand, we may try to do too much, thinking that we can solve these problems with our own abilities and resources. The first response leads to inaction, while the other leads to burnout. So, what is the correct response? When confronted with human needs, Scripture provides the best example of how to respond. In Mark's account, specifically in Mark 6:41, Jesus prayed with a right perspective, and the disciples obeyed His instruction.

## **1. Prayer**

After Jesus gathered the loaves and fish, He looked to heaven and prayed. The text indicates that during this time, He prayed a blessing over the food. It was also Jesus' habit to pray for God's will and glory to be revealed through His actions.<sup>11</sup> Before attempting to meet the needs of the vulnerable, Christians should individually and collectively pray for guidance on how to respond as a church. Gospel narratives indicate that Jesus did not alleviate every need He encountered. For those needs He did alleviate, He often used a variety of methods.<sup>12</sup> Through His perfect

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<sup>11</sup> Matthew 6:9-13; Luke 11:2-4; 22:42; John 17:1-26

discernment, Jesus responded in ways that glorified God the Father and were good for the person experiencing the need. Additionally, though we are called to care for the vulnerable, Scripture tells us that poverty and human suffering will not be fully alleviated until Christ returns.<sup>13</sup> This truth does not excuse us from caring for the vulnerable. Christian compassion is an expected attribute and action of those who claim Christ as Lord.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, praying for the Holy Spirit's guidance is essential to understanding what our roles can be when caring for the practical needs around us.

After praying for God's guidance, praying for discernment and provision reminds us that no one person or church can sustain the work on their own. God may lead a church to start a ministry or lock arms with other churches and serve through an association of churches or with a like-minded, Christian non-profit. Whatever the arrangement, we should be willing to do our part while understanding our need for God's help.

## **2. Perspective**

Next, Jesus had perspective of the context and situation. By providing food for a meal, Jesus supplied what was appropriate for the context. In some cases, Jesus provided a permanent solution to someone's physical need such as blindness, sickness, or disease.<sup>15</sup> When feeding the five thousand, Jesus provided a solution to the circumstantial need for food. To best serve the vulnerable around us, understanding the needs of our communities is essential to responding appropriately. After identifying a way to serve, meeting immediate needs is important; however, we must also be willing to learn about the root causes and solutions that will help move people toward a fulfilled, healthy, and transformed life.

## **3. Obedience**

After praying and understanding the context, Jesus provided instruction that the disciples obeyed. Instead of offering excuses, the disciples

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12 Jesus' methods of healing were diverse and not formulaic. He understood each circumstance and healed others in ways that He saw fit. Jesus was also able to discern the motives of those requesting miracles and alleviation of need. If those motives did match Jesus' purposes, Jesus refused the opportunity to perform the miracle. Matthew 8:5-13, 23-26; 9:1-8, 18-33; 12:10-13; 15:22-28; 16:1-4; 20:30-34; Mark 1:23-45; 6:1-6; 26:53; 7:31-37; Luke 7:11-18; 8:43-48; 11:16-31; 13:1-17; 14:1-4; 17:11-19; 22:50-51; John 4:46-54; 5:1-9; 9:1:38; 11:1-46

13 Matthew 26:11; Mark 14:7; John 12:8; Romans 8:19-23; Revelation 21:4

14 Colossians 3:12

15 See footnote 9

recognized that Jesus was at work and inviting them to join Him. Jesus provided the plan and resources; the disciples followed His lead. As redeemed followers of Jesus, Christians and churches are called to be Christ's ambassadors in the world.<sup>16</sup> The call on our lives is to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, as well as to love our neighbors as ourselves.<sup>17</sup> Through this call, we share the gospel message with others in hopes that they will trust in Jesus as Savior and Lord. We are also called to extend Christlike compassion through actions of truth, justice, and mercy.<sup>18</sup> These actions are not to gain favor with God or others, but to give God glory. Serving others is a part of our spiritual DNA as believers.<sup>19</sup> When the Spirit of God dwells in a believer and is active within a church, we are transformed into His image and become motivated to live lives that imitate Jesus'.

By obediently serving others with Christlike compassion, Christians, like the disciples, grow in their faith. When Jesus fed the five thousand, He met the crowd's temporary need for food, but He was also teaching His disciples to trust in Him. When Jesus gave the instruction, "You feed them," the disciples were thinking only of earthly methods and solutions. In His response, Jesus makes it clear that He wanted His disciples to depend on Him to complete the task He called them to. As immediately as the disciples began doubting that the task could be completed, Jesus invited them into His plan by giving instructions on what to do next.

In Mark 6:38-41, Jesus instructed the disciples to serve in three specific ways. First, He asked them to determine how much food was available. Second, He instructed them to organize the people into groups. Third, He told the disciples to serve the people what He provided. While feeding a multitude of people with little to no food was a miraculous, supernatural event, Jesus was doing something far greater in the lives of His disciples. Jesus showed the disciples who He was so that their faith in Him would increase. He had begun preparing them to have the faith to obey the commission He would soon impart. Jesus was discipling them.

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16 Luke 6:36; 2 Corinthians 5:11-20; 1 Thessalonians 1:6; Ephesians 5:1-2; 1 Peter 2:21; 1 John 2:6

17 Matthew 22:37-39

18 Micah 6:8; Matthew 5:7; Luke 6:36

19 Matthew 25:31-46

While Christians and churches serve others with Christlike compassion, Jesus disciples His people. Our faith in Christ grows as we serve the vulnerable. When faced with circumstances that are uncomfortable and seemingly insurmountable, we must depend on Jesus to love like He loves, to empathize with needs we can't relate to, and to share the gospel with those who may seem undeserving. Serving others with compassion makes Christians more like Jesus. It reminds us that Jesus, "though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross."<sup>20</sup>

Serving others with compassion is a part of our sanctification as Christians. It is a way the Holy Spirit conforms us more into the image of Christ so that we can view God's people, sinners, and the vulnerable through the holy and compassionate lens of Jesus. Jesus came to serve the vulnerable; so should His followers and His church.

## QUESTIONS

1. In what ways does our compassion to the vulnerable reflect Christ's compassion?
2. Before you can show compassion to the vulnerable, what needs to happen in your own life? Where is change needed?
3. What are some dangers a church can encounter by being comfortable in their own context?
4. What are the implications if a church preaches the gospel but doesn't demonstrate Christ-like compassion?

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<sup>20</sup> Philippians 2:6-8



## CHAPTER 5

# JESUS PROVIDES AND SATISFIES

*And they all ate and were satisfied.*

*And they took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces and of the fish.*

*And those who ate the loaves were five thousand men.*

Mark 6:42-44

Leading up to the feeding, it is easy to imagine the scene. As the day grew long, the crowd became hungry. The disciples noticed a restlessness among the crowd because when people get hungry, they can likewise become edgy. After the disciples went to Jesus and were provided instructions, they prepared the crowd to receive the meal. Soon after, the baskets were filled, and the crowd was fed. Whatever tension was in the air dissipated and was soon replaced with the ambiance that accompanies a meal: the scents of the food, the sound of quiet eating, and maybe even the radiant joy of a conversation shared during a meal. Jesus transformed tension into contentment.

For the disciples specifically, this moment must have been surreal. They knew they had only five loaves and two fish. Scripture tells us that five thousand men ate, not counting the women or children.<sup>21</sup> The moment must have been mixed with awe as their anxiety turned to excitement, relief, and joy. Mark 6:42 says that when the food was distributed, “all ate and were satisfied.” *Satisfaction*. When we serve Jesus, He provides and satisfies. It is out of the overflow of His provision to us and the satisfaction we find in Him that we are able to act compassionately toward others.

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<sup>21</sup> Matthew 14:21; Mark 6:44

Done well, demonstrating respect and empathy for a person's humanity builds connection and trust. Relational trust is a key component to caring for the vulnerable. When Jesus saw the crowds, they chased Him. They trusted Jesus and wanted to hear what He had to say. Without relational trust, those we serve can feel like projects rather than like people created in God's image. Discernment and authenticity are key. Once a church understands the biblical call to serve others with compassion, they often struggle to determine where to start. In the appendix of this book, you'll find helpful principles that our team at Send Relief uses to help discern and cultivate impactful, God-honoring ministry.

As Christians and churches, God places us where we are for a reason. The location of our church, the makeup of our families, the schools our kids attend, and the people we work with are not accidental. Scripture provides a narrative of God's people as exiles: people belonging to one place but forcibly moved and residing in another. In the Old Testament, God's people were literal exiles, as slaves in Egypt or captives in Babylon. In the New Testament, specifically in 1 Peter 1, the Apostle Peter compared Christians to exiles while on earth. Our citizenship is eternally in God's kingdom, even while we temporarily dwell on earth. While exiles, God's people live in ungodly cultures but are expected to reflect God's kingdom through holiness, godly living, and care for others. Furthermore, in Jeremiah 29, when writing to God's people who were physically exiled in Babylon, Jeremiah provided instructions for them—and principles for us—on how to engage in these places of exile. Jeremiah instructed God's people to *"seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you to exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare."*<sup>22</sup>

While in exile, Scripture reminds us that God has designed for Christians to be in exile, that we belong to a greater kingdom. Yet while in exile, we should live as citizens of God's kingdom who care for the well-being of the people and context He has placed us in and around, all the while maintaining allegiance to our King and his kingdom. When Christians and churches choose to engage the needs of their community, it isn't easy, but it is our calling to care for those needs. It will require sacrifice and is often disruptive. We will experience stress, anxiety, doubt, tension, and second-guessing, but our constraints do not excuse inaction.

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<sup>22</sup> Jeremiah 29:7

We should not grow weary in doing good. When we least expect it, we start to see change. In the midst of serving, a child who has never set foot in church memorizes a Bible verse. A single mom finds a job and keeps her children in their home. Someone struggling with addiction enters rehab. Church members begin fostering and adopting children in crisis. A senior adult couple begins mentoring a teenage girl in need of guidance and support. A new generation of believers, and even some of their parents, come to faith in Christ.

One of the most impactful examples of serving in difficult times was a seventy-five-year-old widower named Tom. He was a Korean War veteran who became a successful businessman in our town. After his wife passed, he enjoyed gardening, playing golf, and spending time with his children and grandchildren. He had lived a life of serving, and no one would have blamed him for enjoying a leisurely retirement. When we started building relationships in the neighborhood near our church, Tom was first in line to go door-to-door to meet people and invite them to church. When we needed monitors to engage with kids on the way to church (and to make sure they behaved on the vans), Tom volunteered. As part of our children's ministry, he helped kids from broken homes memorize Scripture. If a family needed food, Tom delivered it. While we had detractors object to our church's involvement with hard neighborhoods, with bringing the poor and marginalized into our church, we saw God's compassion through Tom and many others like him. Through their compassionate service, we saw transformation in ourselves and in those we served. We felt satisfaction in serving our Savior and knowing that God is faithful to provide for what He calls us to do. We experienced satisfaction in knowing that Jesus saves and changes lives, satisfaction in knowing that we serve a compassionate God who calls us to compassionately serve those who can easily be ignored.

When we serve with Christlike compassion, we reflect the attributes of God. Our view of God's people becomes one of a family. We are united in our pursuit of making disciples among the nations, worshiping God in spirit and in truth, encouraging each other in Christian living, and serving the vulnerable for the glory of God. Our approach to sin in the lives of those who do not know Christ changes from a need for behavior modification to a need for forgiveness of sin through faith in Christ, for transformation of the whole person. Christlike compassion also changes our view of the

vulnerable. As people of God, we are compelled by His compassion to serve the vulnerable, the poor, the fatherless, the abused, the sojourner, and those who have experienced injustice. We are compelled to respond with the empathy, action, and grace that points others to a relationship with their Creator. We do these things because God is compassionate and calls us to be like Him.

Christlike compassion opens the door to the gospel. When we show genuine care for someone experiencing significant hardship, God softens hearts and breaks down emotional walls. When we show the love of Christ, we find opportunities to share the hope of Christ, as well. There may be times when, like the disciples, we doubt or question if we have the time, ability, or resources to serve well. However, we can rest assured that on our own, these doubts are fair. We do well to remember Jesus is the One who gives more than is needed. After Jesus finished feeding the five thousand, twelve baskets of food were left over. Trusting Jesus to serve with compassion requires faith that He will see His plan to completion. When Jesus calls us to serve the vulnerable, He may not give us the full plan, but He is faithful to give us what is needed, as it is needed. Often, we will find that Jesus gives more than we could have ever expected.

## QUESTIONS

1. Describe a time that God provided in ways you didn't expect when you served the vulnerable?
2. Why is it important to see the humanity of those you are serving?
3. List some of the societal and cultural challenges in your community. How can you/your church seek the welfare of those experiencing those challenges?
4. What things prevent you from demonstrating Christ-like compassion?
5. As a Christian, why is it important to view ourselves as exiles in the world? How does this perspective reshape our goals when we serve the vulnerable?
6. What are some ways that you have felt satisfied in Christ when serving others?

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# APPENDIX

## SEND RELIEF COMPASSION MINISTRY PRINCIPLES

### **1. Compassion Ministry is Gospel-Centered:**

The gospel should always be our motivation and focus when serving others. We serve because of the gospel, so that others can hear the gospel. When a church serves compassionately with a gospel focus, its congregation will:

- Reflect Christ

"A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

— John 13:34-35

- Point to Christ

"In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven."

— Matthew 5:16

- Serve Christ

"And the King will answer them, 'Truly I say to you, as you did it to the least of my brothers, you did it to me.'"

— Matthew 25:40

- Grow in Christ

"A disciple is not above his teacher, but everyone when he is fully trained will be like his teacher."

— Luke 6:40

### **2. Compassion Ministry is Practical:**

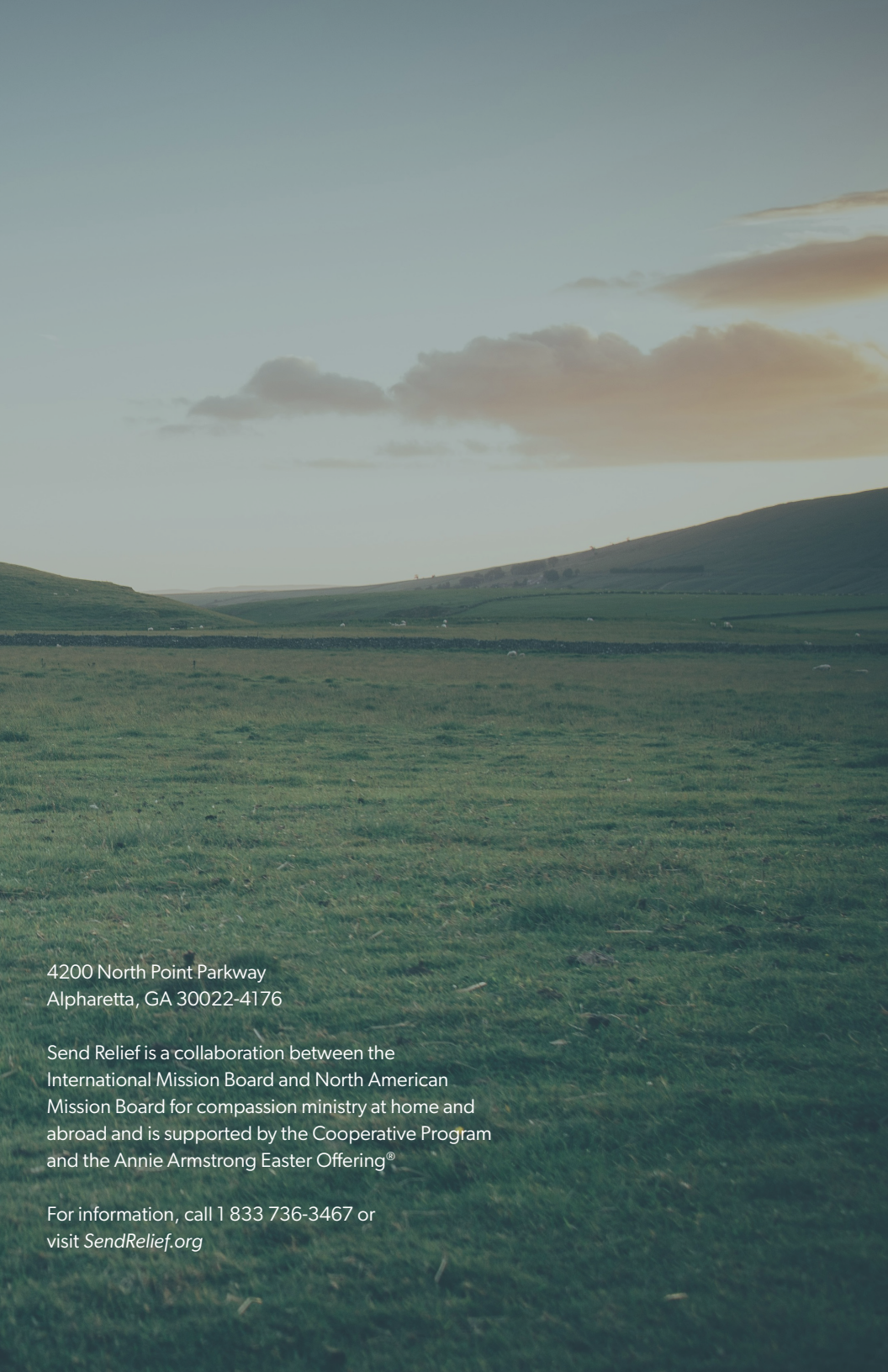
When Jesus fed the five thousand, He served people in real and tangible ways. By performing miracles, Jesus showed that He cared for people's physical needs. While meeting needs, He taught about the kingdom of God with intentionality. Jesus did not view caring for physical and spiritual needs as a separate ministry strategy. Understanding the people's holistic

needs and seeing them through the eyes of Jesus, He instinctually knew when meeting a physical need would open a heart to His salvation. He also knew when it would not.<sup>23</sup> The following principles can serve as a guide for responding to needs in practical and respectful ways.

- Meet the need first (Matthew 8:14-16; Matthew 9:35; Mark 2:9-12; John 9:6-7)
  - Start small. A grand plan isn't necessary to get started meeting immediate needs.
  - Be willing to learn, observe, and listen. Then, begin to work toward long-term solutions that can lead to a fulfilled, healthy, and transformed life.
  - Be personable. Meeting needs and building relationships open the door to sharing the gospel.
  
- Respect the context (Luke 10:25-37)
  - Respect differences; don't require change before you serve.
  - Understand the needs of those you are serving.
  - Through prayer, determine if you should start a ministry or partner with one that already exists.
  - Respond to the real needs of others, not what you think they need.
  
- Empower those you serve (2 Corinthians 9:10; 1 Thessalonians 2:8)
  - Removing barriers produces creativity. Those you serve know the problems best and have ideas about how to solve them.
  - The community and people you serve are not projects; they are partners.
  
- Count the cost (Luke 14:25-33)
  - Compassion ministry is challenging, requiring commitment to the person and community.
  - Understand what it takes to serve, prayerfully considering your commitment before you start.

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<sup>23</sup> Matthew 12:38-42; 13:53-58; 16:1-4; Mark 8:11-13; Mark 15:29-32; Luke 11:16-31



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Send Relief is a collaboration between the International Mission Board and North American Mission Board for compassion ministry at home and abroad and is supported by the Cooperative Program and the Annie Armstrong Easter Offering®

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