

Compassionate Hearts

by Walton Weaver

Everett M. Dirksen once said, “The mind is no match with the heart in persuasion; constitutionality is no match with compassion.” But what is it to be compassionate? In the Old Testament the primary term used for compassion derives from a word for womb (*rhm*). The children coming from the same womb, or having the same mother, are the most closely bonded and ought to be the most considerate of one another. Note how in the following instance the first reference gives special emphasis to the closeness of siblings by making reference to the fact that they have come from the same womb: “If your brother, the son of your mother . . .” (Deut. 13:6). But of Sarah, Abraham says, “She is my sister, the daughter of my father but not the daughter of my mother; and she became my wife” (Gen. 20:12).

A Close Look At The Words

In view of this use of the word *rhm*, John Pilch concludes that “compassion is a peripheral value, that is, it is specific to given interactions, namely those guided and governed by kinship considerations.” From this conclusion he goes on to say that compassion is to be defined as “the caring concern that ought to be felt and acted upon between real or fictive kin, specifically between brothers since the basic connotation of *rhm* was brotherhood or brotherly feeling” (*Handbook of Biblical Social Values*, p. 30). The prophets occasionally call for these kinds of brotherly feelings, as in Zechariah 7:9-10: “Thus says the Lord of hosts, Render true judgments, show kindness and mercy each to his brother [one another], do not oppress the widow, the fatherless, the sojourner, or the poor; and let none of you devise evil against his brother [one another] in your heart [RSV].” Sometimes they condemn for failure to have such feelings, as in Amos 1:11 where we read a pronouncement of judgment from the Lord against Edom “because he did pursue his brother [Judah] with the sword and did cast off all pity [“compassion,” RSV], and his anger did tear perpetually, and he kept his wrath for ever [KJV].”

Other words for compassion are also used in Scripture. In the Old Testament *nihumim* is found in Hosea 11:8, and though rendered “repentings” in the KJV, it is translated “compassions” in NASB. In the same way the word *noham* in Hosea 13:14 is also rendered “repentance” in the KJV but “compassion” in the NASB. *Hen*, another word for compassion, is rendered “grace” in Zechariah 12:10 by both the KJV and the NASB.

In the New Testament the gospels often use the Greek word *splanchnizomai* which is the closest to the Hebrew *raham*. W. E. Vine says the former word means “to be moved as to one’s inwards” (*Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* I: 218). W. L. Walker points out that these two words “are examples of the physical origin of spiritual terms, the bowels being regarded as the seat of the warm, tender emotions or feelings.

But, while *raham* applied to the lower viscera as well as the higher, *splanchnon* denoted chiefly the higher viscera, the heart, lungs, liver” (*International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* [Fully Revised] I: 755). Paul uses *splanchna* with *oiktirmou* in Colossians 3:12. The two terms are rendered “bowels of mercies” in the KJV, but “a heart of compassion” in both the ASV and NASB. This latter rendering is also better than that of the RSV and the NIV. They both render the two Greek words with the one English word “compassion.”

Two other words found in the New Testament should be mentioned. Paul uses *oikteiro* in Romans 9:15. Vine says this word means “to have pity, a feeling of distress through the ills of others” (I: 218). Second, we find the word *sumpatheo* in Hebrews 10:34, “for ye had compassion of me in my bonds,” and, as one can tell by looking at the word, it is the term from which we get our word sympathy. Again, Vine says it means “to suffer with another (*sun*, with, *pascho*, to suffer), to have compassion upon . . .” (I: 218). This term is used of Jesus in Hebrews 4:15, and is rendered with the English word “touched”: “For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities: but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin.”

From the words we have looked at in the preceding paragraphs, it is clear that compassion is *a feeling with and for others*, and, as we will note briefly below, it is one that is attributed to God and to Jesus Christ, and it is also a quality that must characterize Christians in their relations to others.

The Father Who Is “Full Of Compassion”

In the Old Testament God is the one most often described as the subject of the verb “to show compassion.” Sometimes the word for “compassion” (*raham*) is linked with the word for “mercy” (*hen*), and frequently the covenant theme is also present. Note for example 2 Kings 13:23: “But the Lord was gracious unto them, and had compassion on them, and had respect unto them because of his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and would not destroy them from his presence as yet.” Similarly, in Isaiah 54:8-10 God promises that “with everlasting kindness will I have mercy on thee . . . For the mountains shall depart, and the hills be removed; but my kindness shall not depart from thee, neither shall the covenant of my peace be removed, saith the Lord that hath mercy on thee.” Behind all of God’s kind acts toward Israel, his people, was the one fundamental truth about God, a truth affirmed by God himself to Moses: “The Lord, The Lord God, merciful [compassionate, NASB] and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth” (Exod. 34:6). It is only because God is “full of compassion” that he forgives sins and does not destroy (Ps. 78:38).

Sometimes the compassionate God is pictured as a father or a mother in relation to their children. The Psalmist presents God in this way when he says, “Like as a father pitieth [has compassion on, NASB] his children, so the Lord pitieth [has compassion on, NASB] them that fear him” (Ps. 103:13). Isaiah pictures God in the same loving way when he asks, “Can a woman forget her sucking child, that she should not have

compassion on the son of her womb? yea, they may forget, yet will I not forget thee” (Isa. 49:15). David clearly understood God’s ability and willingness to show mercy and compassion. He knew as did Isaiah that many human beings fail to show compassion, but God is likely to be more considerate. When he wrongly took the census he preferred that God deal with him directly rather than indirectly through his enemies. He said, “I am in a great strait [in great distress, NASB]: let us fall now into the hand of the Lord; for his mercies are great; and let me not fall into the hand of man” (2 Sam. 24:14).

In the New Testament God is shown to be a God who is “full of compassion” when Jesus says to his disciples, “Be ye therefore merciful, as your Father also is merciful” (Lk. 6:36). The word for “merciful” (*oiktirmon*) corresponds to the Hebrew word *raham* and is translated “compassionate” in Marshall’s *NIV Interlinear Greek-English New Testament*. This is the only time this word appears in the gospels. Paul uses the noun form of this word when he speaks of the “mercies of God” in Romans 12:1 and “the Father of mercies” in 2 Cor. 1:3.

The Son Who Is “Moved With Compassion”

Jesus, who was “God manifest in the flesh” (1 Tim. 3:16), and was announced by God himself to be his own “beloved Son” (Matt. 3:17), is often described as one who had compassion toward various people. As he went through various cities and villages and taught in the synagogues, we are told that when he saw a multitude of people who appeared to be distressed and dispirited like sheep without a shepherd, “he was moved with compassion [*essplagchnisthe*] on them” (Matt. 9:35-36). In a similar way, like parents who hurt when their children hurt, Jesus responded to a father’s cry for “pity” (*splagchnistheis*) to do something for his son who was “possessed with a spirit” and as a result was dumb and frequently had convulsions (Mark 9:17, 22ff.). Earlier in his book Mark had reported a case where Jesus had showed compassion on one who was mentally ill and disoriented (Mark 5:1ff., esp v. 19, “had compassion on [*eleesen*, “pitied,” Marshall] thee”).

This same term (*eleesen*) is rendered “had compassion” (KJV) in Matthew 18:33, whereas in v. 27 of the same story the word *splanchnizomai* is used and is also rendered “compassion” in the KJV. This story illustrates how Jesus taught that one who has been forgiven a great debt ought himself to be merciful toward others who are indebted to him. Jesus also had compassion on the bereaved (Luke 7:11-17 [see esp. v. 13]; John 11:31ff.). From such examples we see how Jesus had a genuine feeling of compassion for those with mental and emotional burdens.

Another group in society for whom Jesus felt “pity” and showed compassion were those who carried physical burdens. We see his compassion for those who were sick (Matt. 4:24; 8:14-16), the diseased (Mk. 1:34, 40-41), the blind (Matt. 9:27; Mk. 8:23), and the hungry (Matt. 12:1ff.; see especially v. 7, “I will have mercy”).

Christians Who Must Put On “Bowels of Mercies”

It was pointed out earlier that the expression “bowels of mercies” in Colossians 3:12 means “heart of compassion.” Having a “heart of compassion” is part of what it means to “put on the new man” (v. 10). For the Christian to put on compassion, kindness, humbleness of mind, etc. is for him to be “renewed in knowledge after the image of him that created him.” The compassion Christians are to have for one another is described in the following way in Ephesians 4:32: “And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ’s sake hath forgiven you.” From such statements it follows that the Christian’s compassion is rooted in love and modeled in Christ. Jesus led the way by showing compassion on others, and then he taught his disciples that such compassion was to be extended not to friends only, but to all without exception, even to enemies (Matt. 5:43-48; Lk. 10:30-37). Paul shows that such feelings of pity are first to be shown toward our own brethren in Christ, but that they are not to be limited to them, i. e. we must be willing to help any who are in need (Gal. 6:10).

In the Old Testament God’s people were to have compassionate hearts because their God was a God of compassion. God’s own character became the standard for them. The prophets showed that because this was God’s character, such compassion or kindness was an essential requirement of members of the community. Micah 6:8 probably states it better than anywhere else, when it says, “He has told you, O man, what is good; And what does the Lord require of you But to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God” (NASB). Proverbs 19:17 says that “he that hath pity upon the poor lendeth unto the Lord: and that which he hath given will he pay him again” James says that “pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world” (1:27).

May God help us develop compassionate hearts.