



COMPASSION

God's Heart, Our Mission

by Johan Mostert

[Dr. Mostert (far right) prays for a young man dying of AIDS in South Africa, 2006.]



Throughout the Bible, God reveals himself as compassionate. Part of his nature is to show kindness and mercy to those who are in trouble and in need. Paul said that God is “rich in mercy” (Ephesians 2:4). In the gospels, we see that Jesus had compassion on people who were in distress and depressed, sick, suffering from oppression, alone or hungry or who had experienced great loss. Jesus was a person of compassion.

When God chose a group of people to be his representatives on earth, he expected them to show compassion. He made it clear that because they had received his compassion when they were being oppressed and enslaved by their enemies (Exodus 22:21), they needed to show compassion to others.

In the early church, the apostles found it incomprehensible that a believer who had been blessed with resources would refuse to help a person in need. Showing compassion was integral to their mission. “Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress” (James 1:27).

This compassion needs to be focused first on those who are part of the family of God. Scripture teaches us that we are to help those who are our brothers and sisters in Christ. In fact, to ignore the pain or distress or needs of a fellow believer is interpreted by Jesus as ignoring his pain or his distress or his needs (Matthew 25:31–46). To Jesus, denying compassion to spiritual

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brothers and sisters meant denying compassion to *him*!

But our compassion should not be limited to those who call themselves Christians. Even when our paths cross those of strangers who have been injured, abused or exploited, we are expected to interrupt our normal course of life and extend compassion to them in any way practical (Luke 10:25–37).

When we have done what we can do personally, we must connect such people with resources, even provide finances, to ensure that they receive the care they need after we’re gone.

James wrote about loving our neighbors as ourselves. He gave a wonderful description of it, calling it the “royal law” (James 2:8). James stated that hurting people do not need someone to stand in judgment over them, watching them suffer without doing anything. “Because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment!” (James 2:13).

Paul understood that showing mercy is something that tends to emotionally drain us. Social scientists have developed a special term for this: they call it compassion fatigue. In Galatians 6:9–10, Paul warned the church not to get tired of showing compassion: “Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of



believers.” Every opportunity we have should be devoted to works of compassion, because the time may come when we no longer are able to do that. It’s almost as if Paul were saying, “Wouldn’t it be a shame if we couldn’t help people any longer? So while you can still pour out compassion on people in need, do it!”

Our theology of compassion needs to develop to the point where we actually are in danger of compassion fatigue. Clearly, we have a long way to go before we get there.

Guidelines for Compassion Ministry

1. Make compassion part of discipleship

Too often, in our zeal to win the world for Christ, we treat compassion ministries as simply another way to win souls for the Kingdom. It is true that many millions of people have come to the Lord through compassion ministries. Jesus’ words to his disciples certainly support this interpretation: “Let your light shine before men,

that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:16). But in a hostile environment, if our compassion toward the lost is motivated only by evangelistic fervor, the world may perceive our compassion as having ulterior motives.

Compassion should be developed as part of our discipleship ministry, not just as part of our evangelistic efforts. Our compassion should flow out of us because we are the children of a compassionate God. We seek the power of the Holy Spirit to enable us to be more like him. Loving God and loving our neighbors should be part of our spiritual DNA.

2. Beware of the edifice complex

When planning compassion ministries, don’t limit your thinking to buildings and facilities. Too often the vision of what can be done to serve those less fortunate is driven by thoughts of bricks and mortar. When people hear about the AIDS orphans in my beloved

Africa, the first thing they might think is, *Let’s build an orphanage!* This is referred to as an edifice complex. AIDS orphans, like people who are in life crises in your community, don’t just need a building; they also need relationships.

3. Let local need lead

Another common mistake people make when planning compassion programs is to start by establishing a budget and raising money to develop a program. As stated previously, people are in need not only of financial resources but also of relationships with people who really care about them, who are committed to them and who undertake to share their burdens.

I’m not convinced that the excitement about faith-based money being available to churches to serve their communities is altogether a good thing. I have managed many government-supported programs to address poverty and AIDS in Africa. I’m not principally against them, but I am concerned when money

love your neighbor as poor yourself

drives vision. The compassion of people whose hearts have been stirred by a need in their neighborhood should drive the vision.

4. Start with one wheelbarrow at a time

When the late David du Plessis visited Cape Town, South Africa, he spoke on the power of faith to move mountains. Table Mountain is a majestic backdrop to that port city. David admonished us by saying that faith is not to stand in front of Table Mountain and yell at it to move. Faith is picking up your shovel and pushing your wheelbarrow to the foot of the mountain. After loading one pile into the wheelbarrow and taking it to another place, the power of supernatural faith enables us to return to the mountain to move it, one wheelbarrow at a time.

Too often, we can be seduced by the “quick fix” and “instant solution.” Urban violence, racial intolerance, poverty, marital disharmony, binge drinking and sexual experimentation by students are all social crises that are not amenable to a superficial, instant solution. Our desperately broken world requires supernatu-

ral faith to attack the problem, one wheelbarrow at a time.

5. Don't do it alone

Once you begin working with the poor, the broken and those who have lost hope in the future, you begin to realize that no single church or organization will ever be able to make a significant difference by itself. It is wise to find out who else is working in the community and to complement the services that already exist.

6. Recognize the vision in your midst

When people are challenged by the call to discipleship and service to others, expect God to inspire ministries and visions of service. One middle-aged woman in Pretoria cared for an AIDS orphan in her home until the baby died; then she requested another AIDS orphan from our social workers. A father whose son was autistic saw the high divorce rate among parents of special-needs kids and started a support ministry to those families. A retired businessman who saw the low math and science scores of kids in a local school volun-

teered to tutor those children. A stay-at-home mom started an after-school play group for mothers who had to work but were concerned about their children being at home alone.

The answer to people's needs is not some specially funded compassion “program”—the answer is an army of compassionate people!

Dr. Johan Mostert, a native of South Africa, has 20 years of experience in compassion ministries. He is widely recognized as a leading authority on local-church response to the global AIDS pandemic. He travels frequently as a speaker and project consultant for faith-based development agencies. He is associate professor of community psychology at AGTS.

