

Compassion

Introduction

How do we respond to a hurting world? What is our responsibility as Christians? Sometimes as Christians we become insular, and sidestep our responsibility to care for the world as God does. The reality is that *real responsibility* calls us to share God's burden for the poor and disenfranchised. We cannot read the Bible without seeing God's concern for the hurting. We also cannot read the Bible without seeing God's frustration toward His people, the Israelites, for neglecting the less fortunate. Let's take a look at one of the most powerful passages of Scripture, Isaiah 58, in which God challenges the attitude of His people, Israel. As we analyze their attitude toward the less fortunate and draw modern day connections in this article, we will come to understand who we need to extend compassion toward, why we should offer this compassion, and the beautiful result that occurs when our hearts reflect God's heart for this broken world.

Fatherless, Widow, and Foreigner

Throughout the Old and New Testaments we see God remind Israel to care for the fatherless, the widow, and the foreigner. The "fatherless" alone are mentioned 42 times! One example is Deuteronomy 24:17–22, which says, "When you are harvesting in your field and you overlook a sheaf, do not go back to get it. Leave it for the foreigner, the fatherless and the widow, so that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands." God is concerned for these categories of individuals specifically because they were in some way unable to care for themselves. In the Ancient Near East culture, they were at a severe disadvantage. That culture was extremely family-centric. Neither the widow nor the orphan had anyone to provide for their material needs.

Who are the less fortunate today? Orphans who do not receive the love and support they need at home, and struggle in school as a result. Widows, who live in nursing homes and live a lonely day by day existence. The homeless, and others in poverty who often do not have the basic necessities of life. The latest U.S. Census reported that 27% of Charlottesville residents live below the poverty line. There is great need where we are at U.Va.! The reality is that we live in a world full of need, and needy people can be found everywhere.

The Father's Heart

In Isaiah 58, the prophet Isaiah brings stern judgment upon Israel. The Israelites have been fasting, wearing sackcloth, and calling upon God to answer their requests. Yet, their acts of piety were empty religious gestures. God was frustrated with the Israelites for going through the motions while having a selfish heart that was cold toward injustice. God informs the Israelites of the kind of fasting He is interested in: "to loose the chains of injustice," "to set the oppressed free," "to share your food with the hungry," "to provide the poor wanderer with shelter," and "when you see the naked, to clothe them."¹ We should take up the *real responsibility* of compassion (if for no other reason, out of obedience to God). Throughout the Old Testament, the Father's heart of compassion toward the needy is clear, and as His people we must share in His compassion.

¹ Isaiah 58:6–7

Our compassion for a hurting world is a measure for our spiritual maturity. As we grow in maturity, we discover a paradox of joy and burden. Our relationship with God becomes a greater source of joy, but we also grow in the burden we carry for the lost, hurting, and needy. As we mature, our hearts will be pierced at a new level when we meet the less fortunate around us. True spiritual maturity doesn't lead to callousness or self-righteousness, but a hunger for restoration and redemption.

We should be motivated to care for the less fortunate, because the individuals we see on the Corner, or in the nursing home, or on the evening news report—the people who make up the 27% of impoverished individuals in Charlottesville—are not very different from us. A startling reality that God points out in Isaiah 58 is that these people are our “own flesh and blood.”² We must not allow our pride, our giftings, or our lifestyle, to cover up the fact that the less fortunate bear the same image of God that is stamped on us. Serving the less fortunate requires humility, and an openness to see the world as God sees it. Have you heard of the Brandon Heath song, “Give Me Your Eyes?” The chorus is as follows:

*Give me your eyes for just one second
Give me your eyes so I can see
Everything that I keep missing
Give me your love for humanity
Give me your arms for the broken hearted
Ones that are far beyond my reach
Give me your heart for the ones forgotten
Give me your eyes so I can see*

If we find it difficult to identify with the less fortunate around us, or to feel compassion toward them, we must ask God for help. Ask God to be filled in a new way with love for the less fortunate, and ask God to help you see His image reflected in every human life.

Result of Godly Compassion

When we act compassionately toward the less fortunate, what is the result? How are those around us affected? Well, God says that when we practice true fasting, “light will break forth like the dawn.”³ This verse describes more than a material need being met. Obviously, when we share our money, food, clothing with the less fortunate, we meet practical needs, even if just temporarily. But in this verse, God says something more happens. Light comes to a dark situation. Hope arises. God's character and God's presence are welcomed in as we bring Him glory. Jesus gives us a similar promise in the Sermon on the Mount: “In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.”⁴ God's ultimate goal is for the less fortunate to be rescued materially, relationally, and spiritually. As we meet needs and befriend the less fortunate, we create opportunities for the Gospel to be shared in word. This is God's—and should be our—ultimate goal.

God's promise for us is that when we sacrifice to help those around us, He will meet our needs. In verse 11, God promises to “satisfy your needs” and “strengthen your frame,” and declares that “you will be like a well-watered garden.” God wants our greatest desire to be to glorify Him. To do so means putting our own needs secondary. God's desire is that we be compassionate Christians. If you are willing to “spend yourself in behalf of the hungry,” you will be amazed by how God can meet your needs. Philippians 2:3–4 says, “Do nothing out of selfish

² Isaiah 58:7

³ Isaiah 58:8

⁴ Matthew 5:16

ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, ⁴ not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.” If we can reverse the curse of sin and place others before ourselves, we allow God’s blessings to come on the less fortunate, and to us as well.

Suggested Scriptures:

- Isaiah 58 *True Fasting*
- Deuteronomy 24:17–22 *Provision for widows, orphans, foreigners*
- Matthew 5:14–16 *Light and good deeds*
- James 1:27 *True Religion*
- Matthew 25 *Sheep and Goats*

Discussion Questions:

- What role does compassion for the poor, orphans, and widows play in your current view of Christianity?
- If you have served the poor in the past, what was your experience? How were you blessed by it?
- How do you respond when you see someone less fortunate than you? What thoughts usually run through your mind?
- When you think about the less fortunate in the Charlottesville community, who comes to mind?
- Is there any particular group of people whom you are currently serving, or could serve?
- Dream of how Christians could impact a needy community. How could we be a part of seeing that happen?