

The Graces of Compassion and Kindness

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Introduction

Among the many attractive and ennobling traits of character urged upon servants of God and followers of Christ are the twin virtues of compassion and kindness. These sweet attributes are appreciated and admired even by the uncompassionate and unkind.

Definitions

There are two principal words translated “compassion” in the Old Testament. *Racham*, according to the *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, is the type of feeling or conduct the superior would have for the inferior, such as an adult would normally have for a helpless infant. The other word often rendered “compassion” in the Old Testament is *chamal*, meaning to pity or to show pity. There is one word used far more than any other in the Old Testament for “kindness.” It is *chesed*, referring to a kindly disposition.

A greater variety of words for these two traits is found in the New Testament. The most frequently used term is *splanchnizomai*, literally meaning, “to be moved as to one's inward parts,” according to W.E. Vine. It has to do with the pity toward or sparing of another out of a deep love. The next most-used word for compassion (often “mercy” in ASV) is *eleeo* and the kindred adjective, *eleemon*. These words have to do with feeling for the misery or misfortune of another. Our English word, *eleemosynary*, is derived from these Greek words. The one other word used with any frequency for “compassion” is *sumpatheo* and the kindred adjective, *sumpathes*. This is a compound word composed of *pascho* (to suffer) and the preposition, *sun* (with), thus, “to suffer with.” Obviously, our English word, *sympathy*, derives directly from these Greek terms.

The consistent Greek word for “kindness” in the New Testament is *chrestotes*, meaning usefulness or beneficence, thus one who is kind as a helper or benefactor. The other words for kindness are all compounds based on *philos*, connoting affection. It is worth noticing that the LXX translators most frequently used *eleeos* to translate both *racham* (compassion) and *chesed* (kindness).

The Compassion and Kindness of Deity

The compassion of God is extolled in Psa. 86:15: “But thou, O Lord, art a God full of compassion, and gracious, longsuffering, and plenteous in mercy and truth.” Notice the

companion virtues to compassion in God's nature: graciousness, longsuffering, mercy, and truthfulness. God's compassion is linked not only with mercy and graciousness in Psa. 145:8, but with his being slow to anger. God's sending of the prophets to warn his people of doom if they failed to repent is credited to God's compassion (2 Chr. 36:15). Nehemiah says that it was because of "great kindness" that God did not destroy Israel completely because of her rebellion in the wilderness (Neh. 9:17). The willingness of God to forgive those who genuinely repent is due in part to the fact that he is "of great kindness" (Joel 2:13). God's ultimate expression of kindness is seen in the sending of the Christ (Eph. 2:7).

These traits also graced the earthly life of our Lord. Upon seeing the multitudes who were like sheep without a shepherd, Jesus "was moved with compassion for them" (Mat. 9:36). When he saw the needs of the vast multitude from the cities that followed him into the country, "he had compassion on them" (Mat. 14:14). Time after time we read the same expression concerning Christ. In every case he did something to help the objects of his compassion. The term *kindness* is used to describe the entire earthly life and sacrificial death of Christ in Titus 3:4, since these were of the fullest benefit for us.

Compassion and Kindness in God's People

Since these are the traits of Deity and we are to be holy even as God is holy (1 Pet. 1:16) and since Christ is to be "formed" in us (Gal. 4:19), it follows that these will be found in God's faithful servants. The upright man is "gracious, and full of compassion and righteousness" (Psa. 112:4). The Hebrew Christians were commended for exercising compassion on them that were in bonds (Heb. 10:34). Paul exemplified kindness, along with other laudable traits, lest he cause some to stumble and so that he might commend himself to the Corinthians as a servant of God (2 Cor. 6:3-6).

Exhortations to be Kind and Compassionate

Those who would be servants of God are exhorted to exercise these beautiful traits. The prophet Zechariah commanded Israel, "Execute true judgment, and shew mercy and compassions every man to his brother" (Zec. 7:9). Jesus identified the trait of mercy as a "weightier matter of the law" in his last public discourse (Mat. 23:23). (*Mercy* is here translated from *eleos*, sometimes rendered "kindness.") Paul often urges this commendable trait upon us: "And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving each other, even as God also in Christ

forgave you” (Eph. 4:32). He further tells us the source of true kindness when he writes, “love is kind” (1 Cor. 13:4).

The practice of kindness and compassion is urged (although the words themselves are not used) in Ephesians 4:28: “Let him that stole steal no more: but rather let him labor, working with his hands the thing that is good, that he may have whereof to give to him that hath need.”

Galatians 6 contains several charges that can flow only from a heart of kindness and compassion: The erring brother is to be restored “in a spirit of gentleness” (v. 1). We are to “bear one another’s burdens” (v. 2). We are to supply the “good things” our teachers and preachers deserve (v. 6). We are to “do good unto all men” especially to our brethren (v. 10). These beautiful traits are an inherent part of the practice of pure religion that will cause one to supply the needs of the orphan and widow (Jam. 1:27).

Limitations of Kindness and Compassion

While lauding these all too-uncommon virtues, perhaps a word of warning needs to be spoken to keep them in balance. They must never be used to excuse a compromising attitude toward the Truth of God’s Word. In the name of “kindness” some would even withhold the Truth from their neighbor lest he be offended. It is no mark of compassion to neglect to speak the whole counsel of God whereby one might be saved, whether it be to a brother or an enemy. Nor does a kind disposition contradict the capacity to raise one’s voice in bold protest against sin and error, as our Lord often did. Paul was compassionate, but he still called Elymas the sorcerer “thou son of the devil” to his face (Acts 13:10). As with the admirable trait of sincerity, so with kindness and compassion – they are not the totality of Truth and righteousness. While they are required in men to please God, they are not the only things that are required.

Conclusion

Let us cultivate the sweet disposition that can be born only of kindness and compassion, all the while determined to stand firm in all of the Truth of the Gospel.

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