



# Chapter 1

## Compassionate

### **The Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37 CEB)**

*A legal expert stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to gain eternal life?"*

*Jesus replied, "What is written in the Law? How do you interpret it?"*

*He responded, "You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your being, with all your strength, and with all your mind, and love your neighbor as yourself."*

*Jesus said to him, "You have answered correctly. Do this and you will live."*

*But the legal expert wanted to prove that he was right, so he said to Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"*

*Jesus replied, "A man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho. He encountered thieves, who stripped him naked, beat him up, and left him near death. Now it just so happened that a priest was also going down the same road. When he saw the injured man, he crossed over to the other side of the road and went on his way. Likewise, a Levite came by that spot, saw the injured man, and crossed over to the other side of the road and went on his way. A Samaritan, who was on a journey, came to where the man was. But when he saw him, he was moved with compassion. The Samaritan went to him and bandaged his wounds, tending them with oil and wine. Then he placed the wounded man on his own donkey, took him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day, he took two full days' worth of wages and gave them to the innkeeper. He said, 'Take care of him, and when I return, I will pay you back for any*

additional costs.' What do you think? Which one of these three was a neighbor to the man who encountered thieves?"

Then the legal expert said, "The one who demonstrated mercy toward him."

Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise."<sup>1</sup>

## What does *compassionate* mean?

**Compassionate:** thoughtful and sympathetic regard; affectionate, loving, respectful

When I was a freshman in college, I started a small group with my roommate. We were both religion majors with the goal of spreading God's love, so we invited classmates to join us one evening for some singing and some preaching. I was the preacher that night, though I would never have used that label, and I preached on the good Samaritan text.

I love this parable. The original audience would have expected the priest and the Levite to help the injured person, but they walk right on by. (Or just walked right over his injured body. I have hiked the road to Jericho, and the path is about twelve inches wide in most places and winds along a cliffside.) Instead, the Samaritan is the hero. The Samaritan bandages the injured person, takes him to a local inn, and pays for his stay. These two people are ethnic enemies. But the Samaritan is moved by compassion.

The Greek word *ἑσπλαγγνίσθη*<sup>2</sup> means compassion and literally means to feel one's guts move. The Hebrew word for compassion is *רַחֲמִים*<sup>3</sup>. This is also the same word used for womb. I think it's important for us to understand that the feeling of having compassion for another is rooted in the womb and causes deep movement and stirring within. Having just been pregnant and recently experiencing movement within my womb—and the compassion I felt for the vulnerable life moving inside—I can understand the etymology in a way I never could have before.

<sup>1</sup> From the Common English Bible, copyright 2011. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

<sup>2</sup> <https://biblehub.com/lexicon/luke/10-33.htm>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/4576-compassion>

I don't remember what I said in that little baby sermon my freshman year (probably something along the lines of the importance of loving everyone no matter what). But after I rambled on for ten or fifteen minutes, everyone was invited to process what they heard and what came up for them. One of the guys in the group said something that I have never been able to get out of my head: "This is the first time I have really heard the instruction to love your neighbor as yourself. It reminds me that I can't love my neighbor unless I love myself first."

As a codependent Enneagram 2, this shocked me. I never even heard that part of the story, not truly. I thought I was a good person because I focused on everyone but myself. I thought I was loving because I wasn't "selfish." This guy's comment felt like a slap in the face about not only my homily but my own personhood. I believed the lie that in order to bring others to Christ, I needed to look out for everyone else's needs and forget my own. It's a common thing for many people who end up in helping professions. I also believed that no one would want me around unless I made myself small and useful. But at eighteen, I hadn't had the life experiences necessary to learn these things. I just thought I was doing what God wanted me to do.

I have spent the last fifteen years learning that I must put my own mask on first. I want to start this chapter on compassion with the importance of this lesson. In order to raise our children to be compassionate people, we need self-compassion and we need to help them learn it too.

## Self-Compassion

I gave birth to my first child, Rowan, by emergency C-section in the middle of a global pandemic. Without going into the extremely long saga that was his birth, I will just say this: It was not easy, and the surgery and the pandemic added extra complications for all of us. I fell into the perfection trap. I compared my reality with all the things I imagined for his birth and his infancy, and found no crossover. I compared myself to what I thought every other mother experienced and did, and found myself lacking. I heaped on the shame, making a tough situation tougher. I told myself I was failing at motherhood.

It took hitting a wall and having a meltdown to tell my husband the dark and twisty thoughts I was having. He met me with the compassion I needed and asked me what we could do to make it better. His compassion and listening ear reminded me I could be more attuned to my own needs and give myself the love I needed. So, I did.

Previous experience told me that isolation allows shame to thrive, so I joined a free online new moms group. When I participated, I talked about how things were really going even if I was worried everyone else would think I was a failure. I said nice things to myself. I took stock of the radical context we were all living in and reminded myself that it was hard for everyone. Add in the hard transition of motherhood and then add in the hard stuff my body went through, anyone else would look at me and see a faithful warrior.

I listened as other new moms experienced similar stuff. I had compassion in my guts, like the Samaritan had for the man on the side of the road. As I heard my story showing up in all of these other stories, and as I was moved to show others compassion, I found self-compassion.

Jesus says we have to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. We have to start by loving ourselves. Then and only then can we show up in healthy ways to care for the children in our lives. Sometimes this looks like a five-minute walk around the block while we take in the majesty of God's creation. Sometimes this looks like an afternoon of introvert time while you write a chapter of your book. ;)

When things are hard—and they seem to always be hard—you must find some time to love yourself so you can show up for others. We can't do the work of embodying Christ without self-care. Jesus himself took time for self-care. (There are several examples of this, but I love the many times he goes up into the mountains alone [John 6:15].) And if we are to follow his example, self-compassion and self-care must be a part of our ministry.

When we take the time to show compassion to ourselves, it also gives the people around us permission to do the same.

When I married Michael and joined his family, I remember feeling some discomfort about the culture I had created for myself and the culture of Michael's family. I am an introvert and had gotten really used to spending time alone to recharge. Michael's family gathers a lot more than I was used to, and I opted out of some of the gatherings. It was uncomfortable in the beginning for us as we navigated these different needs, but it meant I was more engaged when I was with my new family. Over time, I also noticed other introverts taking the time they needed for self-care and recharging. This means that all of us are now more engaged and able to show compassion to each other in better ways. We're showing compassion out of desire instead of obligation. And if we're showing up for each other out of obligation, it isn't really compassion.

## Here are some things you can do to show yourself compassion:

- Do a sixty-second prayer meditation. There are many of these guided prayers online now. I find these minutes remind me of God's presence, and help me feel grounded in God's love and present in the moment at hand.
- Take a bubble bath.
- Place one hand on your heart and one hand on your belly. Take a deep breath in and feel the air filling your body. Let it go.
- Go for a walk.
- Choose a recipe that sounds delicious to you. Set some time aside to make what you have chosen, and then eat it with full awareness of each bite.
- Turn off the TV, the notifications on your phone, and any other noise that's clouding your space. Sit in the silence.
- Do something creative! Pinterest is full of amazing ideas.
- Reach out when things are hard. It's usually "easier" to isolate when things are hard, but that actually perpetuates the hardness. One of the most compassionate things any of us can do when we are hurting is to reach out to someone we trust and to say the hard thing out loud. It's amazing how quickly the weight of it all lessens. That's the beauty of community and why I think Jesus set the disciples up as a group. We need each other.
- Eat a snack.

Here are some things you can encourage the parents in your churches and communities to do to show themselves compassion:

- Try box breathing: Inhale for four seconds. Hold the inhale for four seconds. Exhale for four seconds. Hold the exhale for four seconds. Follow these steps four times. It resets the parasympathetic nervous system (this controls our breathing and heartrate) and has been proven to relax bodies and minds.<sup>4</sup>
- Listen to a podcast about a topic you love.
- Take a MasterClass on a topic that intrigues you.
- Make a cup of tea and enjoy it inside of a closet all alone. (This is something I have done, and I never regret it.)
- Take a yoga class on YouTube.
- Scream into a pillow, then take a bubble bath.
- Let yourself cry. Tell yourself while you cry that you are loved, safe, and okay, just as you are.
- Find a place to sit outdoors. Breathe in the fresh air. Notice the sounds around you.
- Tape some affirmations and some encouraging Bible verses on your mirror. Read them to yourself each morning.
- Eat a snack.
- Call a friend.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.verywellmind.com/the-benefits-and-steps-of-box-breathing-4159900>

Here are some things you can encourage the kids in your churches and communities to do to show themselves compassion:

- Bubble prayers: Invite the children to blow their prayers (and their worries) into the bubbles and then let them go.
- Read a favorite book or watch a video of someone reading your favorite book on YouTube.
- Tell a trusted adult about how you are feeling.
- Place your hand on your heart. Say, "God loves me and is always with me."
- Play outside and explore God's creation.
- Make a list (or draw a picture) of all the things you are thankful for.
- Take a nap. (I know naps aren't super fun, but everything is always better after a nap. I promise.)
- Eat a snack.

## Compassion for Others

Now that we have put on our own oxygen masks, we can begin assisting others.

When Cokesbury Kids began asking parents what they wanted their children's spiritual formation to be like, many people said they wanted their children to be kind. Kindness comes from one's ability to be compassionate. Parents, all of us, are watching our world become more divisive and uglier. Many of us thought the world was getting better. We saw the first Black President of the United States get voted into office, marriage equality pass the Supreme Court, healthcare for all being discussed in the public square, and so many other things that would indicate our society was becoming more accepting of all.

And then 2016 happened, and many of us felt the stupidity of our "better world" fantasy. Then 2020 happened, and things felt worse and even more heated. Where were our faith communities? What was the point of teaching us about the example of Jesus if we had no intention of following him to the margins? Why did showing up at



church count more than showing up for neighbors? Why did fifteen minutes of prayer mean more than standing up against bigotry?

We all hope for a better future where our children lead the way through compassion and respect, not the world of hypocrisy we see. We want our kids to do better—to be better—than we are.

But how do we raise our children to show compassion like the Samaritan? The Samaritan went above and beyond for an enemy. I know I have a hard time showing kindness to someone who falls on the other end of the political spectrum, let alone going above and beyond to show compassion! But I think our children already have the gifts that lead to compassion. I've seen it in them over and over, and I am watching them grow in my baby.

In order to dismantle an enemy, Michael T. McRay (my husband) in his book *I Am Not Your Enemy: Stories to Transform a Divided World*<sup>5</sup> says you have to:

1. Get proximate.
2. Be curious.
3. Be humble.

We see this in the Samaritan and in the injured person. They were in the same place (proximate), the Samaritan was curious about the injured person, and the injured person was humble enough to be wrong about any judgments he had about the Samaritan's motives.

Children lead with curiosity. That curiosity drives them to explore things and beings up close. And their openness to learning (and their comfort with not knowing) grounds them in humility. Our work as the caregivers in their lives is to get out of the way of our children. Our work as caregivers is to encourage their intuitive compassion.

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<sup>5</sup> McRay 2020, 126.

The opening of *Raising White Kids* is a personal story by the author, Jennifer Harvey. She tells of a time when she was in the first grade standing outside of the bathroom. They are both white, and Jennifer's friend suggested that they start a club for white girls. Their teacher snapped and shushed them and told them she never wanted to hear them say things like that ever again. Jennifer didn't know what they had done wrong, but she felt ashamed and "was determined to never go near that something again."<sup>6</sup>

This adult missed an opportunity to engage Jennifer and her friend in a conversation that invited their curiosity and compassion. She turned away instead of leaning in. She shut down and closed any hope for an open dialog about difference and why it was inappropriate to start a whites-only club because her own discomfort got in the way.

While this would cause me discomfort, a conversation like this isn't about me. This is about our children learning how to navigate our world and our differences with compassion. The teacher could have said, "Girls, while starting a club with just you two might be fun, it's not kind to exclude the other girls in our class. I am proud of you for noticing that you don't look just like your friends! All of you are different colors, and every shade is beautiful." If the teacher had let compassion steer the conversation instead of fear, the girls would have been given an opportunity to learn compassion for people who look different. Instead, they were given a heaping helping of fear and shame. Shame is never compassionate.

Going back to the story of the good Samaritan, we see two people who walk past the injured person. In her book *Short Stories by Jesus*, Amy-Jill Levine tells her readers that the priest and the Levite walk past the injured person because they are only thinking of themselves. There isn't a relevant excuse (some scholars think it had to do with purity laws, but Levine debunks this idea) for them to pass him by. Jewish law instructs Jews to save all life and to bury the dead with the utmost respect. They failed at following their faith's rules.

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<sup>6</sup> Abingdon Press 2019, x.

If I practice some compassion for the priest and the Levite, I could make an argument that they were acting out of fear. Maybe they go out of their way to avoid the injured person because they were scared of getting robbed themselves. Maybe they were running late. Maybe there was some shame reinforcing their lack of action. Maybe, when they were children, they heard their parents talking about a person who should have pulled themselves up by their own bootstraps instead of depending on someone else.

I would say most of us are like the priest and the Levite. And our kids are watching us as we hurry along avoiding others, living in our fear and shame. But Jesus calls us to love our neighbors as ourselves. Jesus calls us to see our enemies as humans in need of compassion. Spending time with the story of the good Samaritan, we are reminded that all people are worthy of respect, care, and compassion. We see the action of love from the Samaritan to the injured person, a person in need. We all have times of need, and we all have times when we are invited to give. We must create space for our children to feel comfortable with their humanity. Plus, when we do mess up—and we most certainly will—we have an opportunity to show our children how to apologize and try again. This is humility and compassion in action.

## Cultivating Compassion for Others

- Invite families to participate in a service project. This could be cooking and dropping off a meal to another family, organizing the children's ministry closet, or a churchwide mission.
- Encourage parents to keep protein bars and water in their cars to give to people on the streets. When children see their parents extending compassion to others, they follow that example.
- Invite families to learn about different people and cultures around the world. Heifer International and ZOE Empowers have some great resources to do this.
- Invite kids to make get-well cards for the people on your prayer lists.

- Give kids opportunities to lead missions with the support of you and other adults in your church. They see a lot that we don't recognize. How can we help them with a project that is close to their hearts?
- Hold an interfaith gathering. Invite groups to make some of their favorite foods to share.
- Invite kids to pray for the needs in your community. Tools like Flipgrid allow for kids to send in short videos safely.
- Collaborate with local nonprofits on a project for families to do together.
- Siblings can be a great source for learning compassion! Help parents learn conflict management skills. A great book for this is *Raising Mediators: How Smart Parents Use Mediation to Transform Sibling Conflict and Empower Their Children* by Emily de Schweinitz Taylor.

Remember, our kids are already equipped with the skills necessary for compassion. When we do our own self-care and work through our own biases, we support them in their growth to become good, compassionate people.