



A HEART FOR THE CITY

effective

ministries

to the

urban

community

JOHN
FUDER

GENERAL EDITOR

FOREWORD BY RAY BAKKE

chapter two

CALLED TO CHRIST, CALLED TO COMPASSION

PUTTING FAITH INTO ACTION

JOSEPH STOWELL

Introduction: Between Two Worlds

John Grisham's novel *Street Lawyer* opens with a partner in a posh law firm stepping confidently into the elevator of a high-rise office building to travel up to his lavish suite of offices. As he pushes the button for his floor, a smelly, ragged street person steps onto the elevator with him. The doors close, locking the two men inside the small space. The attorney, in his pinstriped suit, exhibits all the trappings of success—in stark contrast to the disadvantaged street person, who seemingly stands dazed and disinterested. The defeated look on his face reveals his lot in life. The aroma of his streetness fills the close air of the elevator. As the elevator begins its ascent, the disparity and tension between two separate worlds grabs the reader's attention.

The same sort of tension is obvious in my world. In Chicago, where Moody Bible Institute is located, you don't have to go very far to run into the unfortunate, the down-and-out, and the defeated. Poor people, street people, and other disadvantaged folks stand on virtually every corner. Even a quick walk to the office or the train offers regular encounters with a world that is radically foreign to mine. It's easy to step around these people, ignoring their plight as we console ourselves with the thought that there is really nothing we can do to make a dif-

ference . . . or, worse yet, the thought that if they wanted to they could smarten up and make a life for themselves like everyone else.

Recently while walking to work I passed a StreetWise vendor. If you are not from Chicago, you may not know about this program designed to help some of our homeless people raise a little money by selling a small newspaper on the streets for a dollar apiece. It was a bitterly cold January morning and I had already stopped by Starbucks and paid more than a buck for a measly cup of coffee. Feeling noble, I struggled to find my wallet, reached in, and took out a dollar.

As I did, she said to me, “Do you really want the paper, or can I keep it to sell to someone else?” “Keep the paper,” I replied. “That’s fine.” Then I added, “How are you today?” She looked at me and said, “I’m cold. I’m so cold.” I turned to go, and told her matter-of-factly, “I hope the sun comes out, it warms up, and you have a good day.”

I continued on my way to Moody, with the cup of coffee warming my hand. About a half block toward the office the conversation finally registered in my mind, along with the words of James 2:15–16: “Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, ‘Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed,’ but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it?” I wrestled for a moment with what I should do, but I was late, so I kept walking.

I have regretted that decision ever since I made it. For weeks I prayed that the Lord would let me see her again. To this day I would do anything to give her a cup of hot coffee in Christ’s name.

Sadly, my actions that day were not uncommon. Each Sunday morning, many of us gather in comfortable churches, tucked safely away in middle-class neighborhoods, all dressed up and ready to worship God. We might never say the words out loud, but we act as though our God is the God of clean people, the God of the wealthy, the God of the middle and upper classes.

But one quick glance at the heart of God in the Old Testament and the actions of Christ in the New Testament and we see that God has a special interest in the disadvantaged and the oppressed. In fact, it is biblically clear that when God sees the disadvantaged that His response is one of active compassion. A lack of interest in the needs of those who are lost in the underground of our class structures only confirms that our hearts do not reside where the heart of God gets busy. This distance from God’s interests most likely is unintentional for most of us. Yet that does not qualify for a legitimate excuse. When we distance ourselves from the disadvantaged, we distance ourselves from the approval of God and the source of His blessing (notice Isaiah 58),

regardless of how good or well conformed we are to other expectations He has for us.

SEEING BEYOND THE EXTERNALS

Have you ever been around a perfectionist? Someone who not only thinks he is perfect, but wants everything else to be perfect?

I am amazed that God, who is perfect, could come into my world and walk alongside people like me—purveyors of imperfection—and demonstrate compassion toward us. I would expect God to be irritated with my inconsistency and frustrated by my imperfections. I would expect Him to be angry with my frequent failures. But surprisingly, Scripture teaches that God is a God of compassion. He is touched by our infirmities, and He acts on those feelings to provide grace and mercy and to help us in our times of need.

Compassion is all about connecting with the helpless condition of a hurting world. I find it interesting that as Jesus encountered the multitudes, He consistently responded with compassion. Matthew 9:36–38 captures one of these moments when Jesus expressed His compassion for the masses:

Seeing the people, He felt compassion for them, because they were distressed and dispirited like sheep without a shepherd. Then He said to His disciples, “The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Therefore beseech the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into His harvest.” (NASB)

Notice the sequencing of the text. The NIV says, “When he saw the crowds . . .” What do you see when you encounter crowds? Crowds can be rude and noisy. You can get lost in a crowd. Crowds violate your space and intrude on your solitude. Crowds make us irritable. But the text says that when Christ encountered a crowd, He was moved with compassion. How can that be?

Matthew tells us that Jesus was moved with compassion *because* He saw more deeply than we see; He saw beyond external appearances to the hearts of the people. He saw that they were distressed and dispirited. In the original language, these two words are very graphic descriptions of despondency. The word *distressed* literally means “to be flayed open, to be in hopeless despair.” *Dispirited*, or downcast, means “to be thrown down, to be at the end of yourself.”

In Greek, these words appear in a grammatical construction known as the *perfect passive participle*. The perfect tense tells us that this distress is the result of a past action that has an ongoing impact—much like throwing a rock into a pond sends waves out to the shore. It

reflects a past action with continuing results. The passive mood suggests that these people had been impacted by something outside of themselves. Combining the powerful words with the grammatical structure, we can conclude that they suffered from circumstances that they were not able to contain or conquer. When Jesus saw their plight, He was moved to compassion.

Matthew added a graphic metaphor comparing the crowds to sheep that are without a shepherd. Because we do not live in an agrarian society, we may miss the powerful significance of this comparison. If a shepherd does not lead a flock of sheep from one pasture to another, they will eat a pasture dry, then stay there until they die of starvation. If sheep ever get lost, they will never find their way home by themselves. If you have ever seen lambs, you know how vulnerable they are. Without a shepherd to protect them from predators, they do not stand a chance.

When Jesus looked at the multitudes, He saw that they were unprotected, unsustained, and unguided—like sheep without a shepherd. And, this inner view drove His heart beyond sympathy to an active compassion.

When we walk down the streets of our cities, when we drive through the neglected, despairing, destitute neighborhoods, when we see crowds of people, how do we respond? How deeply do we see? Are we moved to compassion or revulsion?

If Jesus Christ were walking with us today, He would ask, “Do you see it? Do you see the need, the depths of despair, the pain?” When you look at a crowd, do you see the bustling noisy irritation of it all, or can you see the real needs that move in the lives of those who comprise the faceless multitudes?

TRADING CONDEMNATION FOR COMPASSION

One of the reasons we have such a hard time feeling compassion, such difficulty seeing beyond the externals, is that our lives are guarded by carnal instincts. One of our instincts is our propensity to condemn people rather than feel compassion. As a rule, we are far too quick to condemn hurting people.

“Why doesn’t he get a job?”

“Doesn’t she care what she looks like?”

“How can he abuse his body that way?”

“If she had been a better wife, he wouldn’t have left her.”

In Luke chapter 15, we find Jesus at the center of a crowd filled with tax collectors and sinners. If you were a first-century Israelite,

you would speak those words with the proper measure of scorn: *tax collectors* and *sinner*s. These were the most repulsive people in the land of Israel. Tax collectors were unscrupulous men who had sold out to the occupying Roman Empire. Not only did they collect the exorbitant taxes levied by the Romans, but also they lined their pockets by assessing additional taxes on their fellow Jews. Sinners were Jews who lived their lives in open rebellion against God. These were the worst kinds of people you could imagine; yet there was Jesus at the center of the crowd.

The religious leaders of the day could not believe it. They stood at the outskirts of the crowd, murmuring and grumbling: “Look, He claims to be God, yet He spends time with *those* people.” Rather than compassion, they were filled with condemnation. Rather than seeing the problems of the people, they saw the people as the problem. They felt revulsion at the way these people lived and behaved.

A few years ago, there was a terrible late-night accident in Kentucky involving a church bus bringing a bunch of teenagers home from an activity. All their parents were waiting in the church parking lot for the bus that was already an hour or two late. Out on the interstate, as the bus came over a hill, a pickup truck in the wrong lane hit it head-on. The collision sent the bus veering into a ditch, where it burst into flames. Nearly every child on the bus died that night.

I think of the scene in that parking lot, where those parents who would never see their children alive again waited, and my heart is filled with sorrow. When I heard about the accident, I found myself saying, “I wonder if the pickup driver was drunk.” Sure enough, a couple of days later, the newspapers reported that his blood-alcohol level was well above the legal limit. In my heart, I muttered, “I hope they’ve got one great prosecutor in that county.”

Today, I am ashamed of that response. I wonder if when that pickup driver stands before God he will say, “No one ever cared for my soul. They just wanted my hide, that’s all. No one cared for my soul.”

As tragic as that collision was for the families of the lost, there were other issues at stake that night—one of them was the pickup driver’s eternity. Did anybody care? Did anybody pray for him? Was there even a flash of compassion among Christians across the country for that man’s soul? Or did we all take great delight in condemning him?

One thing is clear about the Lord Jesus: He had compassion on sinners. Even those that seemingly deserved condemnation had His compassion. From the woman taken in adultery to the thief on the cross, the Lord emphasized compassion over condemnation.

REPLACING CURIOSITY WITH ACTION

Another carnal instinct, seemingly much more innocent but equally lethal, is curiosity. In John chapter 9, when Jesus and His disciples walked past a beggar born blind, the text says the disciples stopped Jesus and asked, “Lord, tell us who sinned that this man would be born blind? Was it his parents, or did he sin in his mother’s womb?” Rather than eliciting compassion, the man’s affliction became the object of the disciples’ theological curiosity.

When someone you know has walked into a tragic, despairing moment, have you ever caught yourself saying to your friends, “Maybe God is chastening him,” “Maybe he is a horrible father; maybe that’s why this is happening,” or “I do not think she would be suffering like this if she were a better person”?

Instead of coming alongside the suffering to offer our support, we get caught up in the desire to know the details of the sin. Have you ever heard anyone open a prayer meeting by saying, “I wouldn’t share this normally, but just so you can all pray more intelligently, let me fill you in on all the details”?

In response to the question about the blind beggar, Jesus refused to indulge the disciples’ curiosity. He said, “This happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life” (v. 3). In a moment of compassionate power, Jesus touched the man’s eyes, and he could see! And God was glorified.

Before my wife and I moved downtown to be closer to Moody, I used to commute to work from the suburbs. Every once in awhile, on a traffic report, they would tell me that the Eisenhower Expressway was like a parking lot. To avoid delays, I had several alternate routes worked out, most of which took me through some of the seedier neighborhoods in Chicago. As I drove those streets to avoid the gridlock on the expressway, I would see prostitutes standing on corners, boarded-up buildings, windows with iron bars, and scores of people standing on street corners with seemingly no purpose. Every once in a while, I witnessed a drug exchange. Since that was not my usual world, I was curious. How much better it would have been to have moved beyond my curiosity to compassion.

Thank God, many students who have come to Moody Bible Institute have seen the underside of the city and refused to be merely curious. They’ve moved beyond condemnation and curiosity and instead have become instruments of God’s compassion among the disadvantaged. Arloa Sutter came to Moody from a farm in Iowa. She never went back. Seeing the need, she was driven by a kind of divine compassion

to reach the disadvantaged in the neighborhood. This Mother Teresa of Chicago has spawned effective ministries in gay bars, among gang members, and a particularly noteworthy work among the homeless that has been recognized by the mayor of Chicago as a model work. Compassion drove her to leave the tending of her father's lambs to the tending of lambs dramatically separated from her heavenly Father.

Glen Kehrein came to Moody as a country boy from the north woods of Wisconsin. While he was here, he became so gripped by the needs of the city that he began Circle Urban Ministries, which has made its mark on the West Side of Chicago. Among the many great accomplishments under his leadership at CUM are medical relief, redevelopment, and many who have come to Christ. A school is perhaps Glen's most significant ministry. Seeing that one of the great needs in the city is for education, Glen started a Christian school where parents can send their young children for a quality education. As the children have blossomed and come to know Christ, their parents have begun to ask questions. "What are you doing with my kids? I can't believe the improvement I'm seeing!" Glen responds by saying, "Well, let me tell you about Jesus Christ, and how He can change a life, a home, a street, and a neighborhood."

Several months ago, Glen took me on a tour of the new school his group has recently founded. He told me that if these children were not coming to his school, Circle Urban Ministries would probably never reach them. The parents can't afford to send their kids to private school, most of the kids don't have fathers living at home, and the families are beyond the reach of most ministries. These are the truly needy families in our neighborhoods. Looking in the children's faces and hearing them recite Scripture, I could not help but think that this is what Christ meant when He said "even to the least of these."

BRIDGING THE CULTURAL CHASM

Another carnal instinct that stands between other people and us is the cultural chasm. In John chapter 4, Jesus and His disciples were traveling from Judea to Galilee, which took them through the region of Samaria. I think Jesus arranged this journey through Samaria for the disciples' sake, because if you know anything about Jewish history, you know that a Jew would never travel through Samaria if it could be avoided. Despite the deep ethnic, religious, and political chasm between the Jews and the Samaritans, Jesus went there because an immoral woman needed to have her hurting, empty heart filled with the living water of the Messiah. He bridged the cultural chasm and set an example for us all.

Each of us must ask ourselves, “Am I able to set aside my prejudices and offer living water to a hurting soul from another ethnic, religious, or political culture?” Think about it for a minute, because even in our churches there are prejudices and criticisms. So what’s your view of people from a different race or a different culture? Do your carnal instincts clog your compassion and render you unfit for the Master’s use? Are you prone to condemn like the Pharisees? Do you tend to be curious like the disciples? Are you perfectly satisfied to live in your own little cultural box and never see the worth and dignity of others who are outside of your circle? Until we repent of these carnal instincts, the compassion of God cannot flow through us to touch a hurting world.

CULTIVATING COMPASSION

If we are going to move beyond condemnation, a critical curiosity, and our prejudice, we must let the mind and heart of Jesus touch us. The church has largely ignored the inner city, moving out to the more comfortable suburbs. But in doing so it has left an entire group of people without the gospel, yet God has never been satisfied with a gospel that reaches only the safe, the clean, and the whole. He wants us to cultivate compassion and reverse the flight of churches out of the inner cities.

Four principles drawn from the ninth and tenth chapters of Matthew’s gospel will lead us from appropriate repentance to a godly response. The first principle is to *go where the need is*. In Matthew 9:35, we are told that Jesus “went through all the towns and villages,” teaching and healing. Not only was He encountering the multitudes, He was coming into close contact with them. Perhaps our compassion has been short-circuited because we have not been willing to connect with the real needs of people. The word translated “compassion” in this text (v. 36) comes from the Greek word *splagchnizomai*, which is the deepest word for compassion in New Testament Greek.

Jesus walked the streets and rubbed elbows with real people. He was not afraid to get close enough to see the need. We can follow Christ’s example by finding ourselves where the needy are. When we get outside of our safe little worlds, down to where real needs are, we will find that compassion is a normal heartfelt response to pain and despair. Compassion is about connecting with real needs.

The second principle is that *compassion is a response rather than a reaction*. The biblical concept of compassion is not to be confused with our modern-day notion of sympathy. *Splagchnizomai* is a compassion that is moved to action. Sympathy merely *feels* sorry. Biblical compassion always *acts* on that sorrow. It is not a reaction; it is a response.

In Matthew 9:38, Jesus told His disciples to pray that the Lord of the harvest would send workers into the field. Then, in chapter 10, He split the disciples into teams of two and sent them out into the surrounding villages, telling them to preach the kingdom, preach the gospel, and heal the sick. He promised to supply them with power and authority over evil spirits. Christ commissioned His followers to personally engage needs. They went to teach, heal, and, when necessary, do battle with demons. As we get close enough to see the real needs of people, Christ will commission our hearts to respond by *doing* something to meet those needs. Biblical compassion is an active response to real needs.

The third principle for cultivating compassion is to recognize that *biblical compassion is a commitment, not a convenience*. As you read through Matthew chapter 10, you'll see that Jesus warned the disciples that some people would ignore them, and others would work against them. As we seek to express the compassion of our hearts to hurting people, we will often be faced with circumstances that are bewildering, dangerous, and challenging beyond our ability to cope. We will need to pray and perhaps fast in order to get the work done. Compassion is a tough, risky business. It requires commitment.

If you choose to minister to people dying of AIDS, some people will say you are soft on sin. If you choose to minister to drunks and drug addicts, some will criticize you for hanging out with sinners. You'll run the risk of self-pity when you see others who prosper in soft and affluent settings. Active compassion is costly. It takes a special kind of commitment to hit the streets, to go to a mission, or to join an inner city ministry. Yet Jesus modeled such commitment. He invested three years in a ministry that was driven and defined by compassion, then He sent His disciples out to carry on His heart's passion. And just as He commissioned the disciples to minister in ancient Palestine, He commissions us to reach the hurting people of our generation.

The fourth principle is that *compassion takes people all the way to Christ*. In Matthew 9:35, we see that Jesus not only felt compassion for the people and healed them, He also preached the gospel of the kingdom. The most compassionate thing we can do is to reconnect a lost soul to the eternal God. We can fill a person's stomach and meet their other physical and emotional needs, but only Jesus Christ can take a hurting life and make it whole.

THE MARK OF FAITH

Scripture clearly teaches that if we truly desire to express genuine love for Christ, we will express authentic love to the poor, the disad-

vantaged, and the oppressed. In Matthew 25:34–40, Jesus laid out this principle in bold relief:

Then the King will say to those on His right, “Come, you who are blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry, and you gave Me something to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me something to drink; I was a stranger, and you invited Me in; naked, and you clothed Me; I was sick, and you visited Me; I was in prison, and you came to Me.” Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, “Lord, when did we see You hungry, and feed You, or thirsty, and give You something to drink? And when did we see You a stranger, and invite You in, or naked, and clothe You? And when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?” The King will answer and say to them, “Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me.” (NASB)

While Ephesians 2:8–9 clarifies that we are not saved by our works but by the grace of God exercised through the gift of faith, verse 10 adds that we have been redeemed and created in God’s image *for the purpose of glorifying Him through the good works of our lives*. James also teaches us that authentic faith produces good works.

What Christ is saying in the text from Matthew is that one of the leading evidences of a truly righteous life is service to the disadvantaged. In fact He makes it clear that when we touch the oppressed with our love, we have touched Christ with our love.

Leo Tolstoy, the brilliant nineteenth-century novelist who penned the classic *War and Peace*, also wrote volumes of short stories. One of his lesser-known works, titled “Where Love Is, God Is,”¹ tells the story of a Russian shoemaker who lived a very difficult and disappointing life. His wife died early, and his children forsook him. In the depths of his bitterness, a visitor to his home showed him the forgiveness of God. As a result, his life was radically transformed.

As Tolstoy unfolds the story, the shoemaker is reading Luke 7, where the immoral woman came to see Jesus at Simon the Pharisee’s house. Simon has been rude to Jesus and has held Him at arm’s length. Martin the shoemaker sees the connection:

“That Pharisee must have been like me. I’ve only ever worried about myself, thinking of the next cup of tea, keeping warm and cozy. I’ve never shown anyone hospitality. Simon only worried about himself and couldn’t have cared less about his guest. And who was his guest? Why, it was Christ Himself. Now would I have behaved like that if Christ had come here?”

Martin laid his head in both arms and dozed off almost before he knew it. “Martin!” He suddenly heard as though someone were whispering in his ear. Martin started and sleepily asked, “Who’s there?” turned around and

glanced at the door and no one was there. He laid his head down again to sleep and heard quite distinctly, "Martin, Martin, look out into the street tomorrow for I will come."

The next morning, Martin got up before dawn, said his prayers then lit the stove, warmed up some cabbage soup and porridge, lit the samovar, put his apron on and sat down to work by the window. As he sat there, he could not forget what had happened the night before. He was in two minds about it, thinking first that he had imagined everything and then persuading himself that he had heard a voice. "Well," he decided, "I think I really did hear one."

Martin went and sat at his window, but he concentrated more on what was happening outside than on his work. Whenever anyone would come past in unfamiliar boots, he would crouch in such a way that he could clearly see the person's face as well as his feet. A house porter went by with a brand new left boot only. Then a water carrier. Then an old soldier from Nicholas I's time, wearing old, patched felt boots, with a shovel in his hand, appeared outside the window. Martin recognized him from the boots: the man's name was Stepanych and a neighboring tradesman gave him food and lodging out of charity. His job was to help the house porter, and he began clearing the snow outside of Martin's window. Martin looked at him and resumed work. "I must be going soft in the head!" Martin exclaimed, laughing at himself. "It's only old Stepanych clearing away the snow, and I immediately conclude that it's Christ who's come to visit me. Silly old fogy!"

However, after about a dozen more stitches, Martin again felt the urge to look out the window. This time he saw that Stepanych had propped the shovel against the wall and he could not quite see whether he was warming himself or simply resting. He was obviously a poor, broken-down man, who just did not have the strength to clear the snow away. Martin thought he might offer him a cup of tea, especially as the samovar happened to be on the boil. Martin stuck his awl in the piece of leather, put the samovar on the table, made the tea and tapped on the window. Stepanych turned round and came over. Martin beckoned him to come inside and went to open the door. "Come in and warm yourself," he said. "You must be frozen stiff."

"God bless you! My bones are aching," Stepanych replied. Then he came in, shook off the snow and started tottering as he wiped his feet so as not to dirty the floor. "Don't bother about that," Martin said. "I'll clean up afterwards. It's all in a day's work! Come through and sit down. Now, have some tea." Martin filled two glasses, offering one to his guest and emptying his own saucer and blowing into it. When Stepanych had emptied his glass, he turned it upside down, put the remains of his sugar on it and thanked his host. But he obviously wanted some more. "Drink up," Martin said, refilling his guest's glass and his own. As he drank the tea, Martin kept looking out into the street.

"Are you expecting someone?" his guest asked. "Am I expecting someone? Well, I feel too ashamed to tell you. As it happens I'm both expecting and not expecting. The fact is, there are some words I cannot get out of my

head. Whether I imagined I heard them, I can't really say. You see, my friend, last night I was reading the Gospels, about our dear Lord Christ and how He suffered and walked this earth. I'm sure you must have heard all about it."

"Yes, I've heard about it," Stepanych replied, "but I'm an ignorant man, can't read or write."

"Well, I was reading about how He walked this earth and how He went to the house of a Pharisee who did not make Him welcome. Well, as I read further, I thought to myself how badly Christ the Father was treated. Supposing Christ had come to my house—or to someone like me—what wouldn't I have done to give Him a proper welcome! But that Simon would not receive Him into his house. That's what I was thinking when I fell asleep. And in my sleep I heard someone calling my name. Then I lifted my head and thought I could hear someone whispering, 'Expect me, for I shall come and see thee tomorrow.' Twice I heard that voice whisper. Well, as you can imagine, those words have affected me deeply. I know I'm being silly, but I'm really expecting our heavenly Father!"

Stepanych silently shook his head, emptied his glass and laid it on its side. But Martin stood it up and refilled it. "Here, drink some more. And I was thinking about the time when our Lord was upon the earth, despising no one and mixing mostly with ordinary folk. Yes, He always went with the humble and chose His disciples mainly from folks like us, from ordinary sinners and working people."

Stepanych left and Martin went back to sewing, making shoes and keeping watching out the window. Soon a woman in a springtime dress, with tattered boots, freezing in the cold, clutching a baby to her bosom, stood outside. He invited her in. Later, an old woman came by with a little boy who only had an apple. Seeing this poor, disadvantaged woman trying to rear her boy with nothing at all, Martin invited her in. After they left, Martin went back to his work, and Tolstoy concludes the story:

Martin turned around and saw what appeared to be people in the dark corner, but he could not make out who they were. A voice whispered in his ear, "Martin, Martin! Don't you know me?" "Who is it?" Martin asked. "It is I," the voice said. "Behold it is I!" And out of the dark corner stepped Stepanych. He smiled and then he was gone, melting away like a small cloud. "It is I," repeated the voice. And out of the dark corner stepped the woman with the baby. She smiled, and so did the child, and they too vanished. "It is I!" said the voice. And out stepped the old woman and the boy with the apple. Both smiled, and then they too disappeared. And Martin's heart was filled with joy. He . . . looked at the page where the Bible had fallen open. At the top he read, "For I was hungered, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in. . . ." And lower down, "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye

have done it unto me” (Matthew 25). And Martin understood that his dream had come true, that his Savior had visited him that day, and that he had welcomed Him into his house.

Tolstoy understood that when you touch the disadvantaged with your love, you touch Christ with your love.

Conclusion:

Touching Others with the Love of Christ

When I was a boy, I remember watching my dad sign the bottom of letters he had written. Over in the corner of the page, he always wrote the reference for Isaiah 58:10–11. These verses contain a powerful statement detailing what God thinks about the oppressed and the disadvantaged.

In this text, Israel was complaining about doing everything right but still not feeling close to God. They didn’t sense His presence. They went through a whole list of things they had done for Him, including their daily devotionals, and God responded by saying that if they really wanted to know why they never felt close to Him, it was because they were missing something:

Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood? Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard. . . . If you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday. The Lord will guide you always; he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land and will strengthen your frame. You will be like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail. (Isa. 58:6–11)

The Lord told Israel that they were missing the point of what touches Him. For all their devotion and fasting, they had failed to minister God’s love to the disadvantaged in their midst. I am reminded of Jesus’ response when John the Baptist sent a group of His disciples to check out Christ’s credentials. It is fascinating that rather than dazzling John’s men with a spectacular review of His finest qualities, Jesus of-

ferred a simple response: “Go back and report to John what you hear and see. The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor. Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me” (Matt. 11:4–6).

Then, in Luke 4:18–19, when Christ taught in the synagogue, He read from the prophet Isaiah to proclaim His own identity as the Messiah: “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

Our acts of love for the disadvantaged authenticate the genuineness of our faith. When we touch the disadvantaged with our love, we touch Jesus Christ.

Reflection Questions

1. What is the “spiritual temperature” of your heart toward “the least of these”? Are there calluses keeping you from reaching out to them?
2. What steps can you personally take to “trade condemnation for compassion”? Can you identify some tangible ways in your own life to replace curiosity with action toward the poor?
3. Are there “cultural chasms” keeping you from loving the unlovely? If so, are you willing to bridge those gaps by “cultivating compassion” within your sphere of influence? How will you do so?

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