

Theme: Who's ALMIGHTY?

Topic: God's Compassion

Date:

Opening: Start with a video clip from *Les Miserables*. Jean Valjean is a convict on parole from prison. He has a mark on his passport which identifies him as a convict, and he is required by law to show it to anyone he meets. He can find nobody who will take him in for the night, and is asleep on the wall in a town. A woman comes up to Valjean while sleeping and tells him he can't sleep there.

After asking him if he has asked around for a place to stay, the woman points Valjean to the house of the local priest. The priest invites him in, even as Valjean continues to remind him that he is a convict. Shocked by the priest's compassion, Valjean asks yet once more, "You're gonna let me inside your house?" (chapter 2, 0:2:56 to 0:4:12).

As this movie clip introduces, today our look is at the compassion of God.

Small Groups: Split up into small groups and answer these questions:

1. Share your name and answer this question: When you think of "compassion", who comes to your mind? Why?
2. For you personally, is it easier for you to picture God as a forgiving God or as a God of punishment? Any idea why that's so?
3. Knowing that God is compassionate, we also know He gets offended by sin. What sin(s) do you think most offend Him?

Get some feedback on these questions.

Our focus will be on Psalm 103:8-14:

⁸ *The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love.*
⁹ *He will not always accuse, nor will He harbor his anger forever;*
¹⁰ *He does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities.*
¹¹ *For as high as the heavens are above the earth,*
so great is His love for those who fear Him;
¹² *as far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from*
us.
¹³ *As a father has compassion on his children,*
so the LORD has compassion on those who fear Him;
¹⁴ *for He knows how we are formed, He remembers that we are dust.*
Psalm 103:8-14

Just as Jean Valjean was shocked by the compassion of the priest, we should be blown away by the compassion God has for us. Yet we see it so strong in this passage. There are 4 traits in God's character that jump out at us throughout this passage:

1. **“COMPASSION”** means God “feels along with us”

We see this very clearly in v. 8 and 13. What an amazing trait that God Almighty would choose to FEEL what we feel. It’s a similar word as “sympathy” or “empathy”. He feels the things we do - joy AND hurt, laughter AND pain, rejoicing AND sorrow.

What is also amazing is the DEGREE He feels it. We see that in v. 13 - “As a father has compassion on his children...” Not until we are parents can we really feel what this means. Every parent knows the truth that often the pain our children feel is magnified when we feel it. In some ways it’s easier for children to get over their pains than for their parents who watch them.

2. **“GRACIOUS”** means God “gives what we don’t deserve”

It’s one thing for God to FEEL what we feel, it’s quite another for Him to offer GRACE. This is God yielding up what He rightfully deserves (for us to pay a punishment if we disobey or disappoint Him). Instead, He gives us what we don’t deserve (restoration to Him and the peace that comes with knowing we stand right in His eyes).

There is a legend that nearing the end of the construction of the light bulb, Thomas Edison had a team of workers work over 24 hours to make that first bulb. He gave it to a young lab helper and told him to be extremely careful taking it to the spot to be tested. Sure enough, as he approached, he tripped and dropped the bulb, breaking it. The workers put in another 24 hours to create a second bulb. As Edison needed it carried to the test spot, he chose, once again, that young man to carry the light bulb. This is being gracious, giving what he didn’t deserve - another chance.

Here is another illustration about being gracious. The boss has told all the employees that because workers had made it a habit of coming in late to work, no more off-days would be granted. They had lost the privilege. One of the workers wanted to come in late one morning so he could attend his son’s presentation at school. He was almost embarrassed even to ask. But the boss granted him not only the morning off, but told him to stay and eat lunch with his son at school. This is being gracious, giving what was not deserved - another chance.

Being gracious partly means giving that second chance which is clearly undeserved. And God is gracious!! Verses 8,10, and 12b reveal that a huge part of God’s graciousness has to do with wiping away, or forgetting, our sin against Him.

3. **“SLOW TO ANGER”** means God does not respond to our sins thoughtlessly

Check it out in v. 8 and 14. God does not REACT to our sin; He is not impulsive; He does not erupt or retaliate quickly.

One of the most Christ-like traits in a person is this - being slow to anger. Ask the students what they think it says about a person if they are slow to anger. You’re likely to get answers like this:

- “They don’t have to have their own way.”
- “They’re patient.”

- “Even if they’re in control of the situation, they don’t have to force others to do what they want.”
- “They trust that whoever wronged them might get it right eventually.”

One reason God reacts like this is in vs. 14 - He knows exactly what we are made of, that we are formed from the dust. He does not expect too much, yet He also refuses to accept too little. I cannot do it on my own, but with Jesus in me, I can live at a whole new level of obedience and approval to God.

This raises questions about those passages or events in Scripture where God does NOT seem slow to anger, but instead is very wrathful. Where is His patience then? And how can I know if, when I sin, God is burning with anger or not? If you look at those instances where God pours out wrath, He has already demonstrated patience and has warned the people over and over. They have simply grown hardened and uncaring of His response. The book of Revelation demonstrates God’s wrath, but only after He has warned and warned and warned the people. They have ceased caring. The point is this: God’s anger comes AFTER our hardness. If I am concerned about Him being angry, chances are good that He is still demonstrating patience toward me.

4. “ABOUNDING IN LOVE” means God is saturated with His desire for what is best for us

Check it out in v. 8 and 12a. "Abounding" means overflowing, an abundance, so much that He has plenty to spare.

Think of a time when you had an abundance of something, so much that you were looking for places to put it (ie, turkey at Thanksgiving). For example, we recently spread pine chips around our landscape. We ordered a bunch to be delivered. When we started spreading it, we wanted to make sure we had enough, so we were careful not to put too much in any area. Cover everything, but not very deep. When we had covered everything, we had a whole lot left over, so now we went back over and put another layer on everything...still having leftover. At this point, we just began tossing it wherever it would go around the landscaping. THAT IS "ABOUNDING"! God's love is like that. He doesn't spread it sparingly, hoping He doesn't run out. It's abundant, so much that He's basically looking for places to pour it out.

These four traits form a grid which can be laid over many passages of Scripture where we see God's compassion, grace, slow anger, and abounding love. Pick any of the following, or look quickly at several of them, so see how each of these operate:

- David's Treatment of Mephibosheth - 2 Sam. 4:4; 2 Sam. 9:1-13
- Prodigal Son - Luke 15:11-32
- Woman Caught in Adultery Brought to Jesus - John 8:1-11
- Jesus' Treatment of Peter and Other Disciples After the Betrayal - John 21:1-17

IMPLICATIONS FOR GOD’S COMPASSION:

You can sum all of this up with this simple thought: GOD IS GOOD.

This "grid" of 4 traits can be placed over passages all throughout the Bible. AND it can also be placed over our lives as well. We would do well to look at each event we walk through and remember God feels this way about us as well:

1. COMPASSION

- What have I gone through in the past week in which I thought I was alone?
- Do I trust that God hurts with me, and goes through all my pain alongside me?
- Would I be daring enough to believe that God's compassion is like a father's, that He actually hurts in ways deeper than I do?

2. GRACIOUS

- How has God already given me grace and second chances?
- In what areas do I feel a need for another chance?

3. SLOW TO ANGER

- Are there areas I know I'm disappointing God? How do I feel knowing that it disappoints Him?
- Am I hardened?
- How does it make me feel that God knows exactly what I am made of, guilty habits and desires and all?

4. ABOUNDING IN LOVINGKINDNESS

- Have I felt that I have exhausted God's forgiveness to me?
- Do I hesitate to go back to Him one more time?
- Can I really trust that the pile of His love will more than cover my sin?

Close by showing the scene from the next morning in *Les Miserables*. Even though he has been shown compassion by the priest, Jean Valjean steals expensive silver from him. Valjean gets caught by the priest at night, but he knocks the priest to the ground and escapes. Captured the next day, Valjean is brought back to the priest by the police captain. The priest overs for Valjean, who is shocked by such mercy. Valjean asks the priest why he did that, to which he says, "With this silver I've bought your soul. I've ransomed you from fear and hatred. And now I give you back to God." (chapter 4, 0:06:28 to 0:09:53)

God shows incredible compassion and love to us. Discuss some of these questions as you close:

- Why can it be very dangerous to teach about God's compassion?
- How can we prevent ourselves from taking this compassion for granted?
- How do you deal with the "wrath of God" portions of the Bible in light of His compassion?