

# Compassion

by the Rev. Frederick M. Chapin

“So which of these three do you think was neighbor to him who fell among thieves?’ And he said, ‘He who showed mercy on him.’ Then Jesus said to him, ‘Go and do likewise” (Luke 10:36-37).

The Lord demonstrated great love and compassion while He was ministering upon the earth. He showed that He was dedicated to helping those who were in need. He especially displayed compassion toward people who were disadvantaged. He helped the poor, widows, and those who were sick. Even when He was weary or discouraged, the Lord assisted those who came to Him for help. The Lord even showed compassion upon His enemies. Perhaps the most dramatic incident of this was when He prayed that the Father would forgive those who were nailing Him to the cross (see Luke 23:34). And the Heavenly Doctrines point out that when the Lord rebuked His antagonists, it was not done with revenge or anger, but for their eternal benefit and welfare (see *Arcana Coelestia* 904:2). The Lord showed compassion upon everyone, friend or foe. He was a great example of full devotion to the benefits of others.

We are meant to strive to emulate the dedication that the Lord showed while He was upon the earth. We are to have compassion upon everyone we have contact with. The Heavenly Doctrines for the New Church describe the quality of compassion as having mercy springing from love (see *Arcana Coelestia* 5690). Indeed, the Hebrew word for compassion has the idea of the most tender love (see *Arcana Coelestia* 5691). Compassion is having a sense of mission from the Lord about how we should regard another and how we should act accordingly (see *Arcana Coelestia* 6737). Certainly, the Word is abundantly clear that we should be willing to help anyone we can, without conditions. Whenever we can be of help, we should do so without question.

However, the Heavenly Doctrines do describe different types of compassion. Some of these types are not genuine. Some people are said to have a natural disposition to be compassionate toward others (see *True Christian Religion* 428). Whenever they see someone in pain, they take action to try to alleviate the pain. However, this is called a natural compassion, which means that often it enables or allows disorderly or evil practices to continue. It is a type of compassion that tolerates and excuses things that are against the Lord’s teachings. Even the evil can show compassion when it is to their advantage (see *Doctrine of Charity* 40). However, their compassion is really hypocritical; they respond to a need only because they recognize some advantage for their selfish interests. If they saw no benefit toward themselves, they would not be involved to help the person in need. Therefore, the Heavenly Doctrines teach that a person can have a compassion that is not directly inspired by the Lord.

This can seem rather frightening to us. How can we tell if our states of sympathy and compassion toward others are genuine or not? How can we be sure that the compassion we feel toward others truly leads to a good end?

Thankfully, the Lord has given us abundant teachings on how we can be motivated by a genuine compassion, one that can stimulate us to perform services that accomplish the Lord’s will. This

is a type of compassion that holds another person's welfare above our own. Yet this type of attitude is foreign to our natural inclinations. We are prone to want others to serve *our* needs and pleasures, not the other way around. This is why the Lord not only *demonstrated* a devotion to be of service toward others, but He also *taught* about it. One place we can learn about how we are supposed to regard others is in the parable of the Good Samaritan. Even a small child can recognize that we should help others without any thought of reward when they are suffering and in a desperate situation. Externally, the Samaritan received nothing for the services he performed for the man in need. In fact, this cost him both time and money! When we examine this parable more closely, the Lord can use it to instruct us about how we can prepare ourselves for a life that is sincerely useful to others.

In this familiar story, a man was robbed and beaten on his way from Jerusalem to Jericho. A priest and then a Levite saw the man along the road half-dead, but they did not want to offer him aid. Instead, they walked by him. A Samaritan, however, saw the man and immediately went to help him. He bandaged his wounds, poured oil and wine upon him, set the man upon his own animal, and took care of him in a nearby inn. The following day, the Samaritan left money for the man and promised to repay the innkeeper if more was required. Everyone who heard this story recognized that its message was that we should show mercy upon anyone who has a need.

This parable teaches us how we should love our neighbor. We must first have a desire or commitment, before we take action, that we will help whenever and wherever we are needed. Compassion is not manufactured when a need arises (see *True Christian Religion* 642). It must already be present so that we can perform acts of charity when the opportunity presents itself. And we must be prepared by knowing what action we should take, what we need to do when called upon to offer assistance. The Good Samaritan showed both of these qualities when he provided aid to the helpless man. He was able to respond in the way he did because he was already a caring person who desired to help wherever he could be useful.

The priest and the Levite did not help the man in the story because they did not have the spirit of looking out for the welfare of others, but only for maintaining their selfish interests and biases. They did not respond with help because they saw no advantage for themselves. All they saw was a task that required a personal sacrifice they were not willing to make. However, the Samaritan was able to respond, regardless of the cost and lack of external rewards, because compassion was already present in his heart, and this stimulated him to helpful action.

And the Samaritan not only had the desire to serve; he knew how to use the tools that he had. He knew how to bandage the man and how to use the oil and the wine. He knew how to administer aid that would benefit the victim. Likewise, we must have both the *desire* to help those in need and the *wisdom* to effectively use the tools we have. If the Samaritan had not known how to use the bandages and oil, he would have had the desire to help but would not have known how to help.

The Heavenly Doctrines of the New Church give us numerous teachings about how we can be of use to others. These truths provide that can help people who are suffering forms of sickness and despair, bringing them comfort and hope. Such people may be attacked by evil spirits who rob them of a sense of purpose in their lives. They are left half-dead, believing that there is no hope

of emerging from the difficulties and despair dominating their lives. And it is so easy to pretend that there is no pain or need. We can intentionally make ourselves blind to the anguish and deprivation of others. It is easy to look the other way, just like the priest and the Levite.

However, we are meant to stand ready to take advantage of any opportunity that may come our way to help someone who is in need of our help. As noted above, there are two things we must do in order to have a genuine compassion that can provide true service for others. First, we must have the desire to show mercy and forgiveness, a desire from within ourselves that truly wishes well to others. With this, we will be in a spirit that continually excuses and forgives (see *Arcana Coelestia* 8573:2). However, this does not mean that we enable or intentionally overlook the wrongs of others. We should strive to see how we can help the person get back on the right track, no matter what he may have done. This is the “excusing” that we should apply in our relationship with others.

Secondly, we must use prudence in our help of others. We must examine and judge the quality and form of good that we are providing for the other person. Zeal and compassion go hand in hand (see *Arcana Coelestia* 8875). Sometimes we can even be of help when we punish another, not out of revenge but so that the person may be brought back into order. An example the Heavenly Doctrines use quite often is of a judge who punishes a criminal, not out of anger, but so that the criminal can be encouraged to return his life to order. Even though the external form may seem harsh, the judge is really showing genuine compassion.

As we gain new insights into the truths that the Lord has revealed to us, we may discover that our type of compassion needs to be examined and perhaps adjusted. We may discover that we are not as open toward helping others as we had thought. Or we may find that our compassion at times does more harm than good. These thoughts can be disconcerting and humbling. It can be upsetting to see ourselves like the priest and the Levite, walking by on the other side, ignoring those who need our help. However, the Lord does not allow these states in order to degrade us, but so that our desire to serve our neighbor can be strengthened and purified. Our compassion toward others can always be perfected.

The more our compassion is directed *from the Lord*, the more we can have the wisdom to recognize the wounds of others. And the more we will be able to use the truths that we know in a way that can bring comfort and relief to those in pain. Only from the Lord can we have a true compassion, dedicated to serve the needs of others. Let these words from the *Arcana Coelestia* be our guide in our relationship with others: “Charity means love toward the neighbor and compassion, for anyone who loves his neighbor as himself also has as much compassion for him in his suffering as he does for himself in his own” (351).

*Amen.*

Lessons: Luke 10:25-37; Mark 6:30-34; *Arcana Coelestia* 8573:2