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Lou Priolo, series editor

Compassion

Seeing with Jesus' Eyes

JOSHUA MACK



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IT IS NICE to be right.

Who doesn't like winning Trivial Pursuit or knowing the answer to a question that many others do not?

There are times when being right is not only nice, but important. You can't afford to be wrong about God, about salvation, about Jesus Christ, about the Scriptures, about the Christian life. When being wrong has consequences like possibly going to hell, you know that being right matters.

Some people become so focused on the importance of being right, however, they begin to act as if being right is *all* that matters. It is as if they think that as long as they are right in what they are saying, then they are right altogether.

But they are wrong.

There's More to Being Right Than Being Right

Not only is it important to be right about truth, it's also important to feel right toward people.

Underline the word *feel*.

How you feel about other people is absolutely, vitally important. God wants you to be emotionally invested in people to the point where you sincerely rejoice when they rejoice and weep when they weep (see Rom. 12:15), where their interests become yours (see Phil. 2:1-4), where your heart is soft toward them and they know it (see Matt. 18:27). The Bible calls this deep concern for people *compassion*. Without compassion, no matter how right you are in what you are saying, you are wrong in how you are acting.

One proof that this is true is the fact that God commands us to be compassionate.

In Colossians 3, Paul explains the difference the gospel should make in the way we, as believers, treat people. After telling us to put away things like anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk, he goes on to tell us as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, to put on compassionate hearts. The word Paul uses for *compassion* has to do with feelings of sympathy, and he says we are to have these feelings of sympathy for other people deep down in the innermost parts of our hearts. As people who have been shown such compassion—to be chosen! to be set apart! to be loved by God!—we should be clothed in compassion ourselves, as one of the distinguishing characteristics of our new lives as followers of Christ.

It is not only the direct commands to be compassionate that highlight the importance of compassion, however. It is also all the commands Scripture gives us to love others. Whenever you read a call to love in the Bible, you are reading a command that in one way or another requires you to be compassionate. Loving people is more than being interested in their good and having certain feelings toward them, but it is certainly not less. How can anyone think he loves someone else if he merely says the right things to her and does the right things for her, without actually caring for her? That's not called love; that's called pretending.

And biblical love is much bigger and better than that.

Here is how Peter puts it. "Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart" (1 Peter 1:22). One of the reasons God saved you was to enable you to love other people in a way that is real.

There are lots of important terms in this particular passage that describe the kind of love you are to have for others. And each of them calls for something to be going on in your heart.

Take for example the word *brotherly*. Peter is talking to you as a believer, and he is saying you are to love others *like family*.

This means that the relationships you have with others are to be way beyond merely casual ones. Imagine saying that you love someone like a brother but then not hurting when he hurts. Brotherly love requires compassion.

Another term Peter uses in verse 22 to describe the way you ought to love others is found in the command itself: “Love one another.” The term that is translated *love* comes from the familiar Greek word *agape*. The greatest example of *agape* is the sacrificial example of Jesus Christ. He loved you by going to the cross in your place. Is it possible to love people like that without intensely wanting their best? Of course not! Loving others like Jesus loved you is going to require more sacrifice than simply being interested in their good, but still, it is going to require at least that. *Agape* love assumes compassion.

Learning to love others better is something you need to take seriously. I think that’s what Peter is getting at when he uses the term *earnestly*. *Earnestly* is a word that indicates commitment and zeal. This verse could even be translated, “Love one another strainingly.” Peter wants believers to flat-out *work* at loving others. You are to make a priority of pursuing something far beyond casual relationships with others, of working hard at developing family-like relationships, of making a habit of sacrificing for other people’s good, of thinking about ways in which you can express Christlike love to others, and of being bothered and concerned when you don’t.

And, most importantly, you are to do all this from the heart.

This heartfelt love may be where Peter actually places his greatest emphasis. Notice how he repeats himself. “Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a *sincere* brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a *pure* heart.” This means it is not enough to say the right thing or even do the right thing; you need to work at feeling the right thing. Sincere love requires compassion. If you are going to be the kind of person God wants you to be, who He saved you to be, you need to do more than just look like you care for the

people you are speaking to; you need to actually care—and if you don't, you need to make a priority out of becoming a person who does.¹

The kind of love the Bible demands, demands that. And the fact is, it demands it a lot.

God puts all kinds of different exclamation points throughout Scripture to highlight the importance of love. It is how the world will know that you are one of Jesus' disciples (see John 13:33–35). It is described as the greatest commandment in the law of God (Matt. 22:37–40). We are told that great spiritual gifts plus great faith plus great sacrifice minus love equals nothing (1 Cor. 13:1–3). Can you think of any other command in Scripture that is emphasized more? Perhaps it might help if God prefaced one of the commands to love with a phrase like *above all*. Oh, wait. He did. Twice. “And *above all these* put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony” (Col. 3:14). “*Above all*, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins” (1 Peter 4:8).

It is strange for someone to claim to love the Bible without taking seriously what the Bible says about love. But it happens all too often. Certainly, there are people who minimize the importance of truth. But there are also many who minimize the importance of caring about people. And sometimes the very people who say they are most serious about truth seem to be the least serious about the truths that the Bible teaches about showing compassion to others.

This doesn't make sense.

It is impossible to love people without loving truth. Love without truth is no love at all. But it is equally impossible to disconnect a sincere love for truth from a deep love for people. We should not try to serve people without a love for God. We must not try to serve God without a love for people.

1. The command to be compassionate and the commands to love are, in part, commands to feel. They, like all scriptural commands, are something that true believers can learn to do by God's enabling power.