

Identity Crisis: Compassion

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Introduction

Until we recognize that we were created in the image of God, we will suffer from an identity crisis. As we learn about the characteristics of God, we can begin to understand who we were created to be.

Made in His image

“Then God said, ‘Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground. So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them’ (Genesis 1:26-27).

Whenever something is repeated in the Hebrew scriptures, it is meant to emphasize the message. It is a literary technique that is found all throughout the Old Testament. But when something is repeated 3 times, it implies completion and absolute affirmation. The idea that humans were created by God in His image cannot be ignored. It lays the foundation of what humanity is supposed to be.

But, as we all know, humanity didn’t make it too long before failing. And that started a pattern of humanity forgetting who and what they were created for. But, somehow nothing caused God to completely give up on people. Time after time, He provided opportunities for them to find their way back to their original identity, purpose, and to Him.

The Children of Israel

In Exodus 32, we find the nation of Israel in the desert after having been freed by God from slavery in Egypt. They had seen the 10 plagues, had walked through the Red Sea on dry land, had been led by the presence of God with a pillar of smoke by day and a pillar of fire by night, and had been eating mana and quail sent by God. So now they are at the base of Mount Sinai. Moses had gone up to meet with God and had been gone a little over a month. What they didn't know was that God was giving Moses the 10 Commandments and clear instructions on how they should live so that they would reflect His image. But, they were getting restless... (Exodus 32:1-8)

It didn't take very long for the Israelites to forget about God and all that He had brought them through. They literally were creating their own image of a god to worship while the true God was giving Moses the commandment that there should be no other god to be worshiped by His people other than Him. Ironical huh... When they forgot about God they forgot who they were created to be.

The Law

The Israelites needed to be reminded who they came from too. So God gave them the Law to live by so they could learn what it looked like to be His image. But the Law could never be enough. It could only regulate behavior, not transform the hearts and minds of the people. Only a relationship with God could do that.

The Law could make the Israelites look like God to a degree, but unless they yielded their inward identity to Him, it was only an outward makeover. Their motivations, desires, and character would only reflect God if they would allow Him to transform their hearts and mind

through a personal relationship with Him which would be made possible through the life of Jesus. But, Jesus would not come for nearly 2,000 more years. So God told Moses who He was so they would know His character. “And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, ‘The Lord, the Lord, the **compassionate** and **gracious** God, **slow to anger**, **abounding in love** and **faithfulness**,’” (Exodus 34:6).

The Compassion of a Parent

Compassion comes from the Hebrew adjective *Rakhum* which is related to the noun *rekhem* which means ‘womb.’ The relation to the word ‘womb’ evokes an image of the tender care of an infant when it is most vulnerable. It implies a mother-like love. It is often translated into English with the phrase ‘deeply stirred’ which shows a deep emotional connection.

For example, in 1 Kings the wisdom of Solomon is shown in his ruling in a dispute between two women. They both had sons around the same time but one had not lived and they were both claiming to be the living baby's mother. Solomon made an extreme ruling on the issue in order to know which woman was the real mother. “Then the woman whose child was the living one spoke to the king, for she was **deeply stirred** over her son and said, ‘Oh, my lord, give her the living child and by no means kill him.’ But the other said, ‘He shall be neither mine nor yours; divide him!’” (1 Kings 3:26). Solomon knew that the compassion of the true mother would selflessly give up the child if that’s what it took to preserve his life. That’s a mother’s love.

Throughout the Bible, God is compared to a parent because of his compassion. The parent/child relationship is unique from any other kind of relationship. If you are a parent, you understand that even though you may pour yourself out for your children and sacrifice more than

they will ever know, they don't always seem to notice or appreciate it. You care for them and have compassion for them because they are part of who you are. They are connected to you. They didn't have to do anything to earn your love and somehow there is nothing that they could ever do that could cause you to stop loving them.

This kind of compassion is only able to be experienced by humans because it is a reflection of God's love for us. We are connected to Him. He is more than just the creator, He is our Father. There is nothing we could ever do that would cause Him to stop loving us. All we have to do is look at the way he responded to the rebellion and disobedience of the Israelites to see that His compassion for His children is consistent (Isaiah 54:10).

Jesus' Compassion

The idea of God's compassionate care, forgiveness, and rescue from suffering is seen repeatedly in the person of Jesus. He embraces the sick, cares for the outcast, and is deeply moved by human suffering. "Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had **compassion** on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd" (Matthew 9:35-36).

Compassion goes beyond feeling sorry for someone in a bad situation. It compels us to step into their mess to try to help or rescue them. The ultimate expression of God's compassion is Jesus's self-sacrifice, where he enters into our suffering and takes on death, and offers us forgiveness and rescue. He became the shepherd to all the lost sheep. Through His sacrifice, we were given the opportunity to be adopted into the family of God and experience His parent-like compassion.

Reflecting God's Compassion

God's compassion is a heartfelt response to the pain of His people. Our compassion is a heartfelt response to having experienced the compassion of God through the self-giving sacrifice of Jesus. We are not meant to just receive God's compassion... we are supposed to offer it to others. Reflecting God's image means reflecting His character in this world.

We are not responsible *for* other people or their choices but we are responsible *to* them. It is our responsibility to reflect God's image of compassion to them in a way that they can feel His love through us. We reflect God's image of compassion by showing His love to the world in tangible ways. In James, we are reminded that "Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world" (James 1:27). We reflect God's image when we see the 'least of these' as members of our family and treat them like our Father would.

Further Study:

- Bible Project Video: Character of God
 - https://bibleproject.com/explore/video/character-of-god-exodus/?utm_source=web_social_share&medium=shared_video
- Bible Project Video: Compassion
 - https://bibleproject.com/explore/video/character-of-god-compassion/?utm_source=web_social_share&medium=shared_video

Discussion Questions:

- What comes to mind when you consider God's compassion for his people being related to a mother's care for her infant?
- What are some of the ways Jesus embodies the compassion of God?
- Describe the ways followers of Jesus are called to live out the same self-giving compassion of God. What is one specific example of how this could be practiced in the life of the Church today?