Believe: What About the Poor and Injustice?
Psalm 82:3-4

As we return to our series called, Believe, we are asking this very important question: “What about the poor and injustice?” In other words, what do we as Christians believe to be true when it comes to our attitude and behavior towards those people in our world who suffer under the weight of poverty and oppression?

Our scripture memory verse speaks directly to this question, and it comes from Psalm 82:3-4, “Defend the weak and the fatherless; uphold the cause of the poor and the oppressed. Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked.”

Our belief statement is once again quite simple and clear, “I believe God calls all Christians to show compassion to all people in need.”

I will unpack the Christian’s call to compassion under three subheadings this morning: 1) a biblical understanding of compassion; 2) why we often fail in showing compassion; and 3) why compassion is the necessary and inevitable response of those who belong to Jesus.

I. First, what does the word compassion mean, and how are we to understand compassion within the biblical narrative?

Our English word, “compassion” comes from the Latin, *compati* which means “suffer with.” Compassion means someone else’s heartbreak becomes your heartbreak. Another’s suffering becomes your suffering. When we look to the Bible, we observe the following:

1) Compassion is a unique attribute of God’s character as revealed in the scriptures. Time and again throughout the Bible, God defines Himself and is described by others as compassionate.

The Lord is gracious and righteous; our God is full of compassion. Psalm 116:5

The Lord is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love. The Lord is good to all; he has compassion on all he has made.— Psalm 145:8-9

Shout for joy, you heavens; rejoice, you earth; burst into song, you mountains! For the Lord comforts his people and will have compassion on his afflicted ones.— Isaiah 49:13

“Though the mountains be shaken and the hills be removed, yet my unfailing love for you will not be shaken nor my covenant of peace be removed,” says the Lord, who has compassion on you.— Isaiah 54:10

Whenever the Bible refers to God as compassionate, it is always within the context of His justice, and it is always a source of amazement for the biblical writers. Here’s why: God’s people understood that God chose to show compassion as an expression of His mercy; but God could have remained just and never once shown mercy or compassion. We must remember that
in the ancient world, the “gods” were never thought to be merciful or compassionate! The “gods” were thought to be ruthless and uncaring about the plight of human beings. Stories like the world-wide flood and the total destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah were more along the lines of what people would have thought to be “normal” behavior for the “gods.” The ancients understood that a just God would rightly destroy sinful human beings due to their evil attitudes and behavior. So, when God revealed Himself as a God who was both perfectly just and at the same time a God who was perfectly merciful and compassionate, that was NEW and unprecedented in the ancient world. Such is why the Psalmists so often marvel at God’s nature and His compassion for corrupt, stiff-necked human beings.

2) God never grows weary of being compassionate. If you study the history of Israel from the time of their enslavement in Egypt until the time of Christ, you will see a pattern emerge. The Israelites get themselves into trouble and they are suffering. Their suffering usually comes about because they ignored God’s instruction. When things get really bad, they cry out to God. God has compassion on them and sends them a “deliverer”…like Moses, or a prophet, or a judge…who serves as God’s agent to deliver the people from their place of bondage. Then, once delivered, the people forget God’s goodness and mercy. They turn away from God and disobey His instruction. Which leads to their enslavement. Which leads them to suffer, so they cry out to God, and He has compassion on them and sends them a deliverer, and the cycle repeats itself over and over again. But notice: God does not weary of showing compassion to sinful people who will humble themselves and cry out for help. It doesn’t matter how many times the people fail to express gratitude, it doesn’t matter how many times they have turned away: when God hears the cries of his people who are willing to repent and call upon His name, He is merciful and compassionate to them. As we find in Nehemiah 9: “And when they cried out to you again, you heard from heaven, and in your compassion, you delivered them time after time.” Which leads us to my third observation…

3) God demands His people to be compassionate to the undeserving because He showed compassion to them when they were undeserving. There are a myriad of examples I could choose from, but here a just a few:

Deut. 24: “Do not deprive the foreigner or the fatherless of justice, or take the cloak of the widow as a pledge. Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and the Lord your God redeemed you from there. That is why I command you to do this.”

“When you beat the olives from your trees, do not go over the branches a second time. Leave what remains for the foreigner, the fatherless and the widow. When you harvest grapes in your vineyard, do not go over the vines again. Leave what remains for the foreigner, the fatherless and the widow. Remember that you were slaves in Egypt. That is why I command you to do this.”

The same argument is made in the New Testament. Consider Romans 5:

“For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die—but God shows His love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”
Mercy begets mercy. Compassion begets compassion. Generosity begets generosity. In every instance, that which God demands of us is that which He did first. Which is why we must remember that compassion is never a means to an end. In other words, we don’t show compassion to others in order to get a richer reward in heaven. We don’t show compassion and mercy to people because we want people to admire us. We don’t show compassion and mercy to others because we expect them to pay us back some day. Compassion is first and foremost a response to the compassion we first enjoyed when God was merciful to us.

4) God’s ultimate expression of compassion came in Jesus of Nazareth. God’s nature has always been compassionate, but then comes Christmas. A king is born to a peasant woman. God becomes flesh and dwells among us. God enters into our condition and takes on the human experience. For the first time, our suffering is literally His suffering. As we find in Hebrews 4: For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are.

Jesus showed us that compassion is incarnational. Compassion means entering into the mess of those people who are in need and learning what that feels like. Jesus showed us that compassion requires “walking with” people and not just transactional handouts.

From His first breath to His last, Jesus modeled what compassion looks like. Consider the following stories about Jesus:

Two blind men were sitting by the roadside, and when they heard that Jesus was going by, they shouted, “Lord, Son of David, have mercy on us!” The crowd rebuked them and told them to be quiet, but they shouted all the louder, “Lord, Son of David, have mercy on us!” Jesus stopped and called them. “What do you want me to do for you?” he asked. “Lord,” they answered, “we want our sight.” Jesus had compassion on them and touched their eyes. Immediately they received their sight and followed him.— Matthew 20:30-34

As he approached the town gate, a dead person was being carried out—the only son of his mother, and she was a widow. And a large crowd from the town was with her. When the Lord saw her, his heart went out to her and he said, “Don’t cry.” Then he went up and touched the bier they were carrying him on, and the bearers stood still. He said, “Young man, I say to you, get up!” The dead man sat up and began to talk, and Jesus gave him back to his mother.— Luke 7:12-15

When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So he began teaching them many things.— Mark 6:34

When Jesus came down from the mountainside, large crowds followed him. A man with leprosy came and knelt before him and said, “Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean.” Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. “I am willing,” he said. “Be clean!” Immediately he was cleansed of his leprosy.—Matthew 8

In story after story Jesus models compassion in the way that he responds to people in need. We never find a story where Jesus weighs the “worthiness” of a person before he responds to their
need. We never find Jesus placing conditions or restrictions on his compassion. Instead, we find Jesus acting with compassion in a way that challenged all the social norms of his day. Jesus touches the lepers and the dead; Jesus speaks to a Samaritan woman of questionable character in the middle of the day; Jesus welcomes the street urchins to sit on his lap; Jesus extends His already long day to address the crowds who lack sensitivity to his need for rest and appropriate boundaries. When invited to a dinner with wealthy, important people, Jesus chooses to heal a sick man who stumbles in...a man who clearly was of less value than a sheep or an ox to those seated at the table.

Jesus took compassion to a whole new level. Not only were the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lepers ministered to, but Jesus also showed compassion to those that everyone loved to hate. Jesus showed compassion to a Roman centurion who asked for his servant to be healed. Jesus showed compassion to several women who were thought to be unclean. Jesus showed compassion and inclusion to a vertically-challenged tax collector...one who was considered to be the scum of the earth in his community. In a story that Jesus told about compassion, Jesus highlighted a merciful Samaritan over the unmerciful Temple leaders...an absolute scandal to the pious Jews he was talking to.

For Jesus, compassion was that which transcended party lines, gender, race, socio-economic status, and even religious affiliation. Time and again, when Jesus perceived those in need, He showed compassion without prejudice. And rest assured, Jesus expected that His followers would do the same.

II. Now...let’s stop there for a minute. The Bible says a lot about compassion, and most people think they are compassionate. But the reality is that most people actually do very little in the way of showing compassion to people in need. We think about doing something compassionate; we have good intentions; but then we actually do very little. So...why is it that we often fail in our efforts to show compassion.

1) We often fail to be compassionate because we don’t see people the way that God sees people. We covered this ground last week but remember that God sees all people as those worth dying for. God sees all people as those who have intrinsic, infinite value. God sees all people as sheep who have gone astray, as those who are vulnerable and in danger, as those in need of a Savior. God sees all people as those He was willing to purchase in exchange for the life of His one and only Son. The number one reason we fail in compassion is that we don’t see people like God sees people.

2) The second reason we fail in our efforts to show compassion is that we simply don’t see people at all! Many of us have put on blinders and we simply don’t see people. We turn away from people in need; we remain intentionally superficial so that we don’t get entangled in the lives of people who might have needs; or we intentionally insulate our lives such that we are not forced to look upon human need. I know that hurts, but let’s face it: the beautiful suburbs of Prairie Village or southern Johnson County with ginormously priced homes ensures a community where you will not have to see the needs of the poor on a daily basis. That is on purpose, by the way. Let me ask you a question: have you ever found yourself getting irritated or angry when you have to “see” a homeless person standing on the street corner? Somehow we
have come to believe that we should not have to “look at” human need…it offends us…but where does that come from? It seems to me the Bible says exactly the opposite. Jesus said, “When you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind and you will be blessed because they cannot repay you!” Can we be followers of Jesus and avoid people who have great needs? Is that even a thing?

3) I know I often fail to be compassionate because of the paralysis of analysis. Our western culture has trained us to be efficient and strategic. If we are going to invest in “compassion,” we want to feel very confident that our investment is going to produce long lasting change. But that is rarely possible when compassion is called for. When we encounter human need, we rarely have sufficient information or sufficient resources or efficient systems. Let’s face it: there is a reason that people have needs, and those reasons are typically more complex than we care to know. However, because we don’t have enough information; because we fear we might be “taken advantage of;” because we fear that some needy person might wear us out; because we fear we might “enable” somebody by our act of compassion…and for a thousand other reasons, we (I) often choose to do nothing. Somehow we convince ourselves that NOTHING is better than an uncertain SOMETHING. And somewhere, in the back of our minds, we actually feel justified in doing Nothing because…“after all…there must be somebody out there who knows all the right answers and will help this person in the right way.” But friends…let me gently remind you: nothing is nothing. Doing nothing is accomplishing NOTHING.

4) Another reason that we fail to be compassionate is that we forget. We forget what God did for us in sending Jesus to the cross on our behalf. We forget all those occasions in our past when God graciously provided for us through the generous compassion of other people. We forget what it feels like to be in great need, to have such little hope that help will come…to be in a situation that is so overwhelming and crushing that we wonder if we will survive. One of the most repeated mandates throughout the entire Bible is this: remember, and be grateful. Jesus told us to remember and give thanks every time we share a meal! When we remember…when we practice gratitude, showing compassion to others comes naturally. When we forget…when we fail to thank God for His compassion…our compassion for others dries up. We MUST remember, and we MUST practice gratitude if we are to be people of compassion.

5) Finally, we often fail in showing compassion because we settle for transaction over relationship. When we look at Jesus, we see that compassion is ultimately about leading people into a reconciled relationship with God. Granted, compassion may require us to provide food, shelter, clothing, medicine or counsel at the outset…but in the end, if all that we are doing is providing material goods for material needs, our compassion will be reduced to a transaction with no lasting value. True compassion looks beyond the immediate needs in a person to the deeper need for a reconciled relationship with God. Such is why we MUST believe…not just in our heads…but also deep within our hearts…that all people need Jesus. Yes, they need food, clothes, affordable health care, justice, friends, and so many other things. But the deepest, often unmet need in the human heart is a relationship with Jesus. Such is why our compassion should not be limited to those who have obvious physical needs…compassion demands that we serve all people in a way that leads them to the feet of Jesus.
III. Now, we have only a few minutes for my last subheading, which is this: why compassion is the necessary and inevitable response of those who belong to Jesus. When Jesus talks about the end of the age in Matthew 25, he describes the scene this way.

31 "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne.
32 Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.
33 And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left.
34 Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.
35 For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me,
36 I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.'
37 Then the righteous will answer him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink?
38 And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you?
39 And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?'
40 And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.'
41 "Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.
42 For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink,
43 I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.'
44 Then they also will answer, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to you?'
45 Then he will answer them, saying, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.'
46 And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.'

I suspect that if any of us were to paint a scene of the last judgment, we would paint a different picture than the one we just envisioned here in Matthew 25. I think we would prefer the version where we are separated based upon our theological convictions regarding the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Or the version that separated the sheep who repented of their sins from the goats who refused to repent of their sins. Or possibly the version where those who did more good than bad are the sheep but those who did more bad than good are the goats.

However, it goes without saying that our version of the judgment means nothing; and what Jesus has to say about the final judgment is authoritative and extremely important. Right?

So what did Jesus just say would happen at the end of the age? Here’s what He said.
1) All human beings, of all nations, will be held accountable...we will all be judged. Not all will be saved. Some will be welcomed into God’s Kingdom, others will be banished to a place where there is eternal punishment.

2) The “stink test” of who we actually are...as those forgiven by the blood of Jesus as opposed to those who remain unforgiven...is this: did you show compassion, or not? Now...there may be more to this scene than what Jesus told us in Matthew 25, but we should assume it will not be anything less than what He described. Clearly, according to Jesus, our response to human need will be a primary indicator of our salvation.

3) When we show compassion to people in need, Jesus receives that compassion as though it was directed towards Him: “For as you did unto one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.”

4) When we disregard people in need, we have disregarded Jesus: “As you did not do it unto one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.”

5) Which means: compassion is the necessary and inevitable response of those who have been saved by Jesus. According to Jesus, if there is no evidence of compassion, you cannot possibly be saved...it’s that clear. However, if there is evidence of compassion, it serves as a primary indicator that you are filled with the Holy Spirit, and thus a person who has been forgiven in Christ.

In light of all that Christ said, and in light of the whole biblical witness, I do not see how we can understand this picture of the judgment in any other way.

Now, I’m not trying to shame you or scare you or pick a theological argument about salvation. I am stating that which seems to be incredibly obvious from the biblical text: Compassion is not a suggestion. Compassion is not optional for the Christian...compassion is inevitable for the Christian.

So take inventory of your life and make an honest assessment: if you have no compassion for people who are in need, you likely do NOT believe the Gospel is true; and, consequently, you remain unforgiven. If you don’t believe the gospel, it’s totally natural to lack compassion and just be self-absorbed...but now you know what Jesus thinks about that.

On the other hand, if your heart breaks for the poor and the oppressed, the fatherless and the marginalized...if you are moved to take action in Jesus’ name even at great personal expense and inconvenience...(and I know that is true of many people in our congregation) I think it’s safe to say that Jesus has gotten a hold of you and transformed you into a new creature...one that is looking more and more like Jesus with each passing day. Your compassion for people is an indicator of what you believe, and WHO you believe. Christians believe Jesus, and consequently, Christians are people of compassion. Colonial...may we be known as a community of great compassion. Now let us gather around the table. Let us remember and be grateful.
Let’s pray.