

Cultivating Christ-like compassion

We may feel compassion in our guts, but we learn it by practicing empathic solidarity.

by [Peter W. Marty](#) in the [February 9, 2022](#) issue



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I've thumbed through various leadership books for most of my adult life. Much of the literature strikes me as excessively jargony and less helpful than more practical methods for learning effective leadership. Nevertheless, certain leadership characteristics surface repeatedly—traits that capture the attention of followers.

What attracted people to Jesus, interestingly enough, were not traits that we customarily associate with effective leadership in our day, traits like self-awareness, innovation, emotional maturity, self-confidence, creativity, strategic thinking, and more. His personality may well have encompassed any of these. But when people followed Jesus, they were drawn by his compassion as much as anything else. He possessed what Frederick Buechner describes as the “fatal capacity for feeling what it’s like to live inside someone else’s skin.”

At the very outset of his ministry, Jesus touched and cleansed a leper, moved as he was then (and at many other times) “with compassion.” He cared for crowds from the deepest parts of his being—*splagchnizomai* in Greek, the bowels or entrails, or what we might speak of as “from his gut.” His was a deep feeling for what others were experiencing, which he then acted upon kindly.

Because compassion was central to Jesus’ self-understanding, we may speak of it as the primary ethical virtue of the Christian life. “If we want to be Christian,” wrote Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “we must share in Christ’s large-heartedness . . . his liberating love for all who suffer.” Developing this compassion takes practice and intentionality, so that our hearts actually open up and behave benevolently.

One way to nurture compassion is to be honest about the adversity in our own lives. Reckoning with our own hardship and suffering better prepares us to express empathy for others who know adversity. Empathic solidarity with others having a hard time in life can lead us to be more generous, kind, and supportive toward them.

David DeSteno, professor of psychology at Northeastern University, has studied this effect of personal adversity on compassion. Much of his recent research focuses on how we empathize with others in their distress, responding warmly with compassion because of our own experience with suffering. His thesis is compelling, to my mind at least, with one caveat. DeSteno is quick to suggest that we often use compassion for our own psychological well-being. It’s a strategy, he argues, “for regaining [our] own footing . . . and making [us] more resilient.”

I don’t want to suggest that every motive for compassion is selfless and pure, or that DeSteno’s data needs to be disproven. I simply want to make a case for a distinctively Christian understanding of compassion that DeSteno’s work isn’t intended to include.

Christians aren’t the only people who cultivate compassion, but we do so for a distinctive reason: the imitation of Jesus Christ. When we come close to someone else’s suffering, become unafraid of their pain, and connect their fragility and mortality with our own, a deep feeling in the gut inevitably results. Our vulnerability intensifies. We become a conduit for God’s love to flow through us to the afflicted. This has little to do with selfish purpose contributing to resilience in our lives. It has everything to do with entering deeply into the world of someone who’s hurting.

Compassion is hardly an automatic reflex, even for the most faithful. It's more like a disposition we have to keep fitting ourselves for. This may be why one New Testament writer directs us to dress in the clothing of compassion every day.

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