

Love in Action

Compassion, the Seventh Pillar of Joy

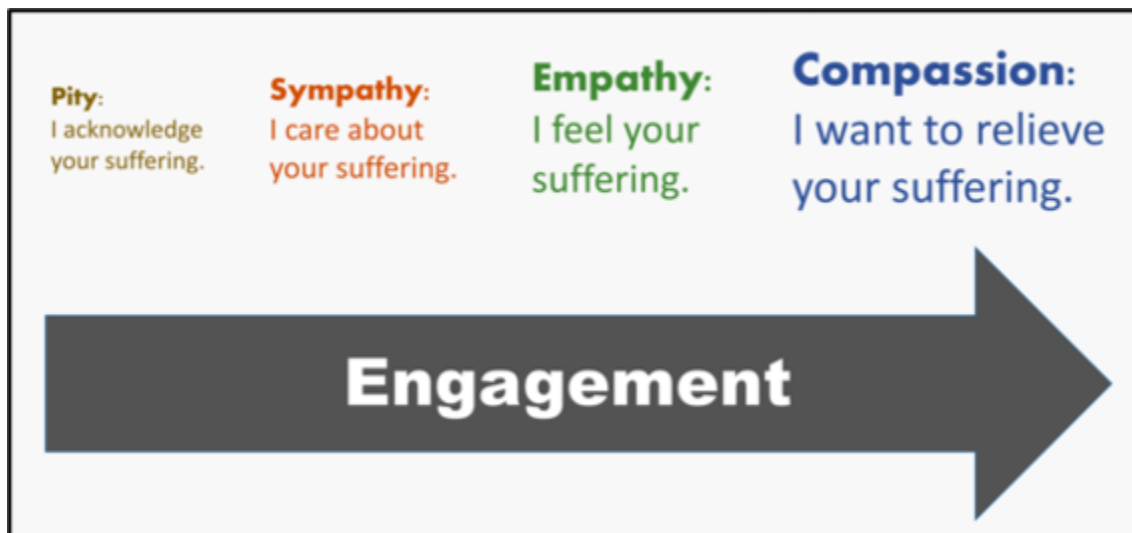
"A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

– John 13:34-35



What is Compassion?

Of the eight Pillars of Joy identified by the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Tutu both agree that the last two, Compassion and Generosity, are perhaps the two most central. The Latin etymology of *compassion* means co-suffering, that is, "suffering with." For the Dalai Lama it means the desire to not just feel for the suffering of others, but to seek to end the suffering of others.



As we have been reminding ourselves throughout this series, joy is a byproduct of the well-lived life. It is not the thing to go looking for, because if you pursue it out there in the world somewhere, you risk missing out because it's within us already. The Dalai Lama and Jesus make the same point two different ways: According to the Dalai Lama, "The ultimate source of happiness is within us." In the *Gospel of Luke*, Jesus says that we ought not go looking for the Kingdom of God, "For indeed, The Kingdom of God is within you." Because we are made in the image of God, we have within us all that we need to experience joy. As Archbishop Tutu says, because we are made in God's image, "we are God carriers." We carry the image of God within us. Indeed, we might even think of joy not even as a byproduct so much as something that is *drawn out* of us. And what draws this wellspring out into the open where we can experience and feel its affects? When does the "Kingdom of God" begin to break in? Whenever we bring joy to others. The bigger and warmer our heart, the stronger our sense of aliveness and resilience. The abundant life that is within us, is drawn out when we practice compassion. Want to feel love in your life? Love your neighbor. Do you feel distant from God? Spend more time loving others. It is the great paradox of the faithful life, that our joy is increased by giving it away. "If you want others to be happy, practice compassion. If you want to be happy, practice compassion," says The Dalai Lama.

Additional points about Compassion:

1. We are Biologically Wired for Compassion. Research shows that we are even biologically wired to be caring of the other. Neuroscience show that the reward center of our brain lights up. Oxytocin is released — the same hormone that is released by lactating mothers. Indeed, compassion is the expansion of the maternal instinct; our own nurturing teaches us to nurture others.

2. Compassion is contagious. We are social animals and we dependent on each other. Even kings, queens and presidents are dependent on their public. Compassion is often repaid and offers a kind of security that way. We shrivel if there is no other.

3. Compassion is the root of all religion. Most all religions teach it as it is the ethical root of religion. For Christians, of course, it is The Greatest Commandment. The Buddha said: "What is that one thing, which when you possess, you have all other virtues? It is compassion."

4. Lessens our own suffering. The Dalai Lama makes the point that even when we are in the midst of our own suffering, if we can practice compassion toward others, it shifts our focus from ourselves to someone else, which lessens our pain. Saying “How can I help?” even in the midst of your deep anguish, has an alchemy that transforms your pain, making it more bearable.

5. You can start small. Both the Dalai Lama and the Archbishop make it clear that practicing compassion doesn’t always need to be a big, heroic act. The Dalai Lama says, “Acts of kindness, even in the simplest ways, are what make our lives meaningful, bringing happiness to ourselves and others.” Not only does it need to be a big, grandiose gestures, but it’s not something we need go on a ‘mission trip’ or to travel to far off lands to practice. Indeed, as the Archbishop points out, never discount the little, local acts of kindness, “Do a little bit of good where you are’ it’s those little bits put together that overwhelm the world.”

Obstacles to Compassion

Compassion – turning our sympathy and empathy into action — is the most courageous and difficult of all motivations, but it is also the most healing and most elevating. We have many obstacles to practicing compassion that we struggle with every day. Here are some of the most common ways we can talk ourselves out of practicing compassion. As you read these, see if you can remember at time when you felt this way or said these things to yourself. How can you overcome them when they rise up again?

1. *I have enough problems of my own.*
2. *I don’t have enough...money, skills, expertise, experience, etc.*
3. *Others will take advantage of me if I am compassionate.*
4. *Those I help will become dependent upon me.*
5. *I’m too busy with... job, children, church, activities, etc.*
6. *Belief that compassion is a self-defeating folly of the weak*
7. *We are “afraid of experiencing the suffering, the vulnerability, and the helplessness that can come with having an open heart.*
8. *Afraid of being overwhelmed by their sadness, grief, etc.*
9. *Don’t want to feel indebted if I receive compassion from others.*

Behind many of these fears and obstacles is a desire to maintain our autonomy and keep our status quo. We seem to know deep down that practicing compassion will lead to 'getting involved' and getting involved is messy, unpredictable and disruptive to our plans for our life. In other words, our fears about 'getting involved' is a near-perfect description for the Holy Spirit! In short, rather than be afraid, be heartened. Following the Jesus is supposed to be disruptive to our status quo. Try to see the list of obstacles to compassion not as problems to avoid, but as signals from the Holy Spirit that you are on the right track!

Practicing Compassion

1. Make the decision to be compassionate. Compassion is a choice. Our default mode will be to look out for ourselves and to seek joy through achievements and the admiration of others. Being compassionate with others is a muscle that must be exercised to build it and exercise requires commitment. "Most people are as happy as they make their minds up to be." Abraham Lincoln

2. Start somewhere. Make point to do small acts of kindness every day. Keep a journal of your acts. Review what you did at the end of the day and give thanks to God for the mindfulness and the courage to be compassionate. Do not judge yourself about their size or worth or the effort they took. Don't grade them or discount them. Give yourself grace and remember that it's not all on you — compassion is contagious.

3. Practice Self-Compassion. Self-compassion is having compassion for our own human frailties and recognizing that we are limited and vulnerable like all people. Many people will try to practice compassion for others but are very hard on themselves. Research shows the people who are more self-compassionate are happier, more resilient and less stressed. Moreover, both the Archbishop and the Dalai Lama point out that it is very hard to give compassion away when we don't have any to give. Indeed the Great Commandment begins with self-love as a kind of assumption – 'love others *as you love yourself.*' If you have no love for yourself, how can you love others? What do you have to share?

Self-compassion should not be overlooked. It's actually much more difficult that we think as we live in a culture that places self-worth on top of a pyramid of achievement that never seems to have an end as you can always climb higher, while at the same time, bombarding us with constant messages that we are not good enough and that we are somehow not making the grade. Practicing self-compassion is to reject these messages, whether they are from within or without, and remind ourselves at every turn, that we are all frail and imperfect human beings, yet first and foremost, we are a beloved child of God. We all long for connection and belonging and suffer when we are disconnected from our true nature, which is made in the image of God, which is negated when we harden our hearts or minds to goodness. We all face these challenges and we all come us short. Rather than judge ourselves when we do, try to approach these moments with curiosity and acceptance rather than self-judgment.

Additional thoughts on self-compassion:

- Have a genuine curiosity in knowing the details of your life, your beliefs, your habits, your suffering.
- Start where you are stuck, look with courage and kindness, okay with not knowing what will happen.
- "Lean into the sharp points and experience them". (Pema Chodron). Breathe. Be truthful and gentle.
- Realize that we are all human, we all make mistakes, we are loved anyway. (Desmond Tutu)
- Rest, sleep, food, exercise. Very important. Nurture yourself.
- Make up your mind not to have an adversarial relationship with yourself. (Nathaniel Brandon).
- Treat yourself as you would treat your best friend. (Kristin Neff)

Practice self-compassion: Dr, Kristin Neff offers this meditation for developing your self-compassion. This and others can be found here. <https://self-compassion.org/category/exercises/#exercises>

1) Think of a situation in your life that is difficult, that is causing you stress. Call the situation to mind, and see if you can actually feel the stress and emotional discomfort in your body.

Now, say to yourself: "This is a moment of suffering."

That's mindfulness. Other options include:

- *This hurts.*
- *This is stress.*

2) Say to yourself, "Suffering is a part of life." That's our common humanity. Other options include:

- *Other people feel this way.*
- *I'm not alone.*
- *We all struggle in our lives.*

3) Now, put your hands over your heart, feel the warmth of your hands and the gentle touch of your hands on your chest. Or adopt the soothing touch you discovered felt right for you.

Say to yourself: "May I be kind to myself."

You can also ask yourself, "What do I need to hear right now to express kindness to myself?"

Is there a phrase that speaks to you in your particular situation, such as:

- *May I give myself the compassion that I need*
- *May I learn to accept myself as I am*
- *May I forgive myself*
- *May I be strong.*
- *May I be patient*

This practice can be used any time of day or night, and will help you remember to evoke the three aspects of self-compassion when you need it most.

Questions for Further Discussion:

1. *What/who inspires you to be more compassionate? Art? Music? Holy Communion? Service?*
2. *How does compassionate action show in the choices you make?*
3. *How do you feel when you are asked, in some way, to show compassion?*
4. *Do you feel worthy of self-compassion? How much?*