

VALUES FOR OUR
LIFE TOGETHER

G.R.A.C.E.



Part Four: Compassion

*A Chat for Faith Teams
Accompanying the Devotional Series
“G.R.A.C.E. Values for our life together”*

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NOTE to Faith Team Leaders: This Faith Chat is the fourth in a series of five that feature Christ-centered values for living with others in community. It contains a variety of options allowing its use either at a monthly or even weekly gathering of a Faith Team. Faith Team leaders are encouraged to use bits and pieces as they see fit. The goal is to have a meaningful conversation that is supportive and allows participants to explore and deepen their faith. By design, there is more material than could possibly be used in a single session.

Gathering (15 minutes: 0:00-0:15)

Coming Together - (12 minutes: 0:00- 0:12)

Introduce yourself around the table. Share your name and something about yourself that others may not know.

Light a candle and invite God's Spirit to be present.

Opening Prayer: *Ask for a volunteer to pray the following...*

Gracious God, help us in our learning to be kind, inquisitive, and responsive to your grace. Make us aware in our listening and speaking that you have gifted each of us with wisdom and experiences to share. Give us the courage that we need to welcome change and transformation. Through Jesus Christ, amen.

Introduction: (3 minutes: 0:12- 0:15)

Throughout Jesus's ministry, as recorded in the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke,) reference is made to the fact that he "had compassion" (Cf. Mt 9:36; 14:14; 15:32; 20:34; Lk 7:13; Mk 6:34; 8:3.) Crowds of broken, vulnerable, and directionless people followed Jesus throughout the Galilee region. When he looked at them, compassion stirred his heart to action.

With love (passion) in his heart, Jesus did extraordinary things. He fed the hungry masses, healed debilitating illnesses, and even raised the dead. Christ's love in action forever changed

multiple lives in those Galilean villages. Each life transformed pointed to the restorative purpose of God.

Here is where those ancient stories still hold importance for us. As we read of mouths fed, illness cured, and resurrection, we gain a glimpse of God's loving nature. The stories spark our imaginations inviting us to picture God as a lover of every broken, hurting, and dead being. God seeks communion with those who struggle and suffer.

The Christians in Rome were no strangers to hardship and persecutions. The Roman Emperor Claudius expelled the Jewish Christians and the rest of the Jewish population from the city. It seems like they were fighting among themselves over the messiahship of Jesus and caused enough of a stir to give Claudius a headache.

When Claudius's edict waned, the Jewish Christians returned to Rome only to find their churches filled with Gentiles who didn't follow Judaism's traditions, customs, and the Law. It was this divided climate that Paul addresses in his letter.

He appeals to the love of God as enduring common ground. Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ - not even the biggest argument or most painful hardship. The compassion of Christ, which he so freely shared with the hurting masses, doesn't leave at the first or last sign of trouble. God's love remains, and we can trust in it no matter what we face.

This Faith Chat will hold up the value of compassion. Like the other values, it emerges from the life of Jesus. When Jesus reaches out to feed, heal, and raise the dead, he defines compassion. Jesus followers allow compassion to fill their hearts and make their hands busy in similar work. God invites us to imitate Jesus's life work, embracing it as our own. In so doing, we participate in God's ongoing restoration of all creation even as we remain broken, hurting, imperfect, and vulnerable.

Engaging God's Word: (10 minutes: 0:15- 0:25)

Reading God's Word: (5 minutes: 0:15-0:20)

Romans 8: 37 (NRSV)

“Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.”

For those who are using this Faith Chat for more than one session, you may choose either to repeat the verse above or choose one of the alternate options. Use the same questions below to guide your reflection upon each of these sayings of Jesus.

- “Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.” Romans 12:9-18 (NRSV)
- “Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, “You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet”; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law. Romans 13:8-10 (NRSV)
- “We who are strong ought to put up with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Each of us must please our neighbor for the good purpose of building up the neighbor. For Christ did not

please himself; but, as it is written, “The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me.” For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope. May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Romans 15:1-6 (NRSV)

Responding to God’s Word: (5 minutes: 0:20- 0:25)

What stands out for you in these words from Paul to the Christians in Rome?

What initial questions emerge? What is confusing or hard to grasp?

How does it make you feel?

What does it teach us about our relationship with God? With others?

How does it challenge you?

What do these words teach you about compassion?

Exploring Connection (45 minutes: 0:25- 1:10)

Choose one or more of the following options to generate group discussion. For those who are using this Faith Chat over multiple sessions, you might want to do one of the supporting Bible stories in Option A for each session.

Option A: Compassion Abounds in Jesus-Stories

Choose one of the following stories from the gospels in which Jesus exhibits the value of compassion. If you are using this Faith Chat for more than one week, you might want to select a different story for each session.

I. A Leper Jesus Chooses.

At the time of Jesus, leprosy was more than just a skin condition, which depending on the severity could be extremely painful. When you had leprosy, you suffered twice. Not only did the puss-filled sores cause constant discomfort but the social isolation was brutal.

Communities and families disowned lepers forcing them to live on the physical margins. Touching lepers was taboo, and potentially dangerous as it risked contagion.

A compassionate feature of Jesus's ministry involved interaction (including touch) with lepers. Courageously, Jesus crossed boundaries of ritual purity for the sake of those who were isolated on the other side. When he healed them, as a sign of God's inclusive and expansive realm, he often instructed them to go to the priests who would verify that they were cleansed of leprosy. This allowed for them to return to full participation in the life of the community, their family, and synagogue. .

Read the story and use the questions below to discuss.

"A leper came to him begging him, and kneeling he said to him, "If you choose, you can make me clean." Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, "I do choose. Be made clean!" Immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean. After sternly warning him he sent him away at once, saying to him, "See that you say nothing to anyone; but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, as a testimony to them." But he went out and began to proclaim it freely, and to spread the word, so that Jesus could no longer go into a town openly, but stayed out in the country; and people came to him from every quarter.."

-Mark 1:40-45 (NRSV)

Questions for discussion:

Where do you see the value of compassion displayed in this Jesus-story? Where do you see a lack of compassion?

What is the role of compassion in this story? What actions does compassion motivate? What lessons does compassion teach? Why is it important for the followers of Jesus to be compassionate?

What is the interaction between God's grace and compassion?

How does this story relate to **Romans 8: 37** (or the guiding verse chosen for this session)?

II. Jesus Feeds A Crowd

The story of the feeding of the 5000 operates on multiple levels. At the simplest, a group of people are hungry and God feeds them. Miraculously, the limited resources of the disciples are blessed and become bountiful, providing more than enough to satisfy the crowds hunger. The setting, however, invites our scriptural imagination to remember. They were in a deserted, wilderness-type, place reminiscent of the wilderness of Sinai where their ancestors wandered for forty years. There God provided manna, daily bread from heaven. God's legacy is one of compassion, care, and provision. Those who follow Jesus are invited to orient their lives in that same direction.

Read the story and use the questions below to discuss.

“As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things. When it grew late, his disciples came to him and said, “This is a deserted place, and the hour is now very late; send them away so that they may go into the surrounding country and villages and buy something for themselves to eat.” But he answered them, “You give them something to eat.” They said to him, “Are we to go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread, and give it to them to eat?” And he said to them, “How many loaves have you? Go and see.” When they had found out, they said, “Five, and two fish.” Then he ordered them to get all the people to sit down in groups on the green grass. So they sat down in groups of hundreds and of fifties. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to his disciples to set before the people; and he divided the two fish among them all. And all ate and were filled; and they took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces and of the fish. Those who had eaten the loaves numbered five thousand men.”

Mark 6:34-44 (NRSV)

Questions for discussion:

Where do you see the value of compassion displayed in this Jesus-story? Where do you see a lack of compassion?

What is the role of compassion in this story? What actions does compassion motivate? What lessons does compassion teach? Why is it important for the followers of Jesus to be compassionate?

What is the interaction between God's grace and compassion?

How does this story relate to **Romans 8: 37** (or the guiding verse chosen for this session)?

III. Curing on the Sabbath, Tsk, Tsk.

The Sabbath is a sacred time for worship and rest. It comes as a gift in a 24/7 world where production and being busy never stops. In the Bible, Sabbath is God's gift from the beginning of creation. On the seventh day, God rested from the work of creation, establishing a pattern for human life to follow.

By the time of Jesus, Sabbath regulations were well-formed. The human tendency to head in directions opposite God's intentions had caused a variety of Sabbath violations. Resultant rules sought to reclaim God's intention to set aside the day as holy.

When Jesus heals on a Sabbath, those tasked with maintaining ritual purity for the community are offended. Such "work" is taboo and violates the tradition of setting aside Sabbath. Ironically, they miss the forest for the trees. Although healing might be construed as unsanctioned work, the greater purpose of Sabbath is missed. Sabbath comes as a liberating gift from a compassionate God.

Read the story and use the questions below to discuss.

"Again he entered the synagogue, and a man was there who had a withered hand. They watched him to see whether he would cure him on the sabbath, so that they might accuse him. And he said to the man who had the withered hand, "Come forward." Then he said to them, "Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?" But they were silent. He looked around at them with anger; he was grieved at their hardness of heart and said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and his hand was restored. The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him."

Mark 3: 1-6 (NRSV)

Questions for discussion:

Where do you see the value of compassion displayed in this Jesus-story? Where do you see a lack of compassion?

What is the role of compassion in this story? What actions does compassion motivate? What lessons does compassion teach? Why is it important for the followers of Jesus to be compassionate?

What is the interaction between God's grace and compassion?

How does this story relate to **Romans 8: 37** (or the guiding verse chosen for this session)?

IV. Jesus' Burial

The following story from Jesus's life and ministry is unique in that Jesus plays a passive role. After Jesus died on a cross, friends take it upon themselves to perform the gruesome task of burial. Joseph of Arimathea, at great personal risk, asks Pilate for the lifeless body. He takes it down from the cross and wraps it in linen cloth and lays Jesus in Joseph's own tomb. Such compassion and care are remarkable and a tangible expression of Joseph's waiting expectantly for the kingdom (realm) of God.

Read the story and use the questions below to discuss..

“When evening had come, and since it was the day of Preparation, that is, the day before the sabbath, Joseph of Arimathea, a respected member of the council, who was also himself waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God, went boldly to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then Pilate wondered if he were already dead; and summoning the centurion, he asked him whether he had been dead for some time. When he learned from the centurion that he was dead, he granted the body to Joseph. Then Joseph bought a linen cloth, and taking down the body, wrapped it in the linen cloth, and laid it in a tomb that had been hewn out of the rock. He then rolled a stone against the door of the tomb. Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Jesus saw where the body was laid.”

Mark 15:42-47 (NRSV)

Questions for discussion:

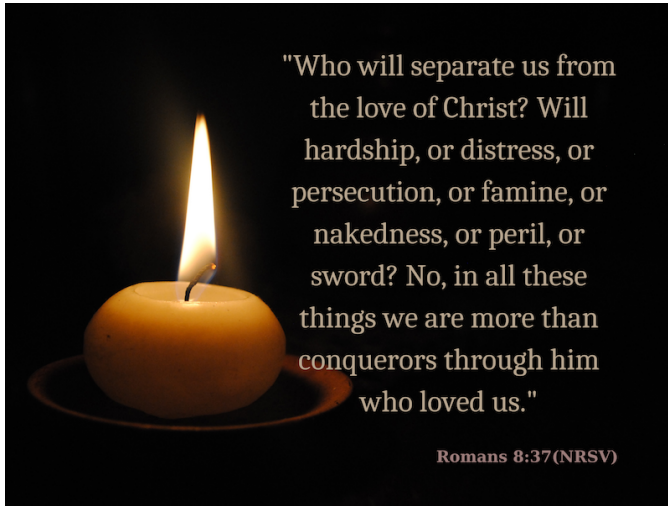
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How does this story relate to **Romans 8: 37** (or the guiding verse chosen for this session)?

Option B: Inspirational Images



Discuss the Inspirational Images above.

How do you connect or disconnect with them?

In what ways do the images convey compassion? How might the value of compassion be either supported or not supported by what is contained in the image?

What other images would you choose to go with these scripture texts?

Option C: Gleaning Wisdom from Experience:

Look at the following questions through the lens of your Faith Team. Allow for recurring foci and conversations of the group to guide your conversation.

Where do you find yourself when it comes to compassion? Do you apply this value easily? What situations or persons make being compassionate easier or more difficult? How do you show compassion?

How do you feel when others show compassion to you? Describe a situation when compassion came as an unexpected gift?

Where might God's presence be found in the sharing of compassion? What good can God create in a compassionate environment? How might God help transform uncompassionate situations?

What does being a disciple of Jesus mean for you? How does this identity shape and influence the ways you relate to others as you show compassion?

Option D: “Romans and countrymen, thanks”

Throughout this Faith Chat series on Christian values, Paul's letter to the Romans will be used as our biblical foundation. This epistle, which is the longest of all the correspondence attributed to Paul, has long been read as a theological treatise on matters of faith that were of critical importance to the reformers (including Luther) of the sixteenth century. Recently, scholars such as Douglas Moo, have suggested other lenses through which we might access the wisdom and import of this letter.

Recall from previous Faith Chats that Paul writes the Book of Romans as a letter to a group of Christians who were divided into Jewish and Gentile factions. Both groups sought to follow the teaching of Jesus but did it in very different ways. The Jewish Christians used ancient traditions and practices to shape their Christianity as an extension (fulfillment) of Judaism. The Gentile Christians took their cues from the cultural norms of the wider Graeco-Roman culture.

These approaches clashed. Issues related to circumcision and diet were particularly problematic. Convinced of the “righteousness” of their own positions, divisions occurred which prevented the overall community from following the compassionate lead of Christ.

Paul invites both sides to get back to the heart of the gospel, the unconditional love of Christ given freely for a world that is broken by sin. Righteousness - defined as being in a “right relationship” with God and others - comes as a gift from God. Christians (both Jews and Greeks) are called to respond to the gift (and model) of Christ’s righteousness by extending mutual love to one another, living peaceably with all.

Questions for discussion:

What do you think of Paul’s compassionate call to live “peaceably with all” and extend the love of Christ to others? What benefit might such teaching have for a community torn by conflicts and divisions?

What parallels might we make between the divisions among the Roman Christians and Christians in America today? Where do Christians find themselves divided? How might Paul’s counsel (particularly in Romans 12:9-18) provide a roadmap towards reconciliation?

How might Paul’s teaching on compassion be a resource for us during a time of great national division and turmoil? What behaviors might we need to change or adopt to become more compassionate?

How might compassion foster hope?

Sending (15 minutes: 1:10- 1:25)

Sharing of Appreciation for Learning (5 minutes: 1:10-1:15)

Ask each person to name a single insight or learning that they will take home with them.

What can you do differently going forward based on these insights/learning from this Faith Chat?

Bringing Our Time to a Close (10 minutes: 1:15-1:25)

Salt, Light, and Prayer: Go around the table a second time. Ask folks to share three things: 1) something positive from their week; 2) something with which they are struggling; 3) someone who is in their prayers.

The Lord's Prayer: Close with saying Jesus' prayer together (choose a version as a group)

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours, now and forever. Amen.

-or-

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever and ever. Amen.