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COMPASSION

Compassion is love in action.
It comes in a variety of forms and holds
the capacity to truly change the world.

COMPASSION

In this lesson you will:

- Learn the difference between compassion and empathy
- Identify and explore the three basic components of compassion
- Learn to recognize compassion fatigue

COMPASSION

Compassion is Love in Action

You may have experienced love in action when someone showed up with a delicious meal after the death of a loved one. Or maybe it was during a time you were hospitalized and someone cleaned your house. Perhaps someone simply came and was present for you without judgment or advice when you were feeling lonely and isolated.

Reflect on a time when someone extended compassion to you.

How did that experience make you feel?

(Group work: Share experiences and the feelings evoked)

Compassion comes in a variety of forms. When we experience compassion, we may not recall the exact action of another person, but we will rarely forget how it made us feel.

Compassion Has the Capacity to Change the World

Years ago, anthropologist Margaret Mead was asked by a student what she considered to be the first sign of civilization in a culture.

Mead's answer was a femur (thigh bone) that had been broken and then healed. She went on to explain that in the animal kingdom if you break your leg, you die. You cannot run from danger, get to the river for a drink, or hunt for food. You are meat for prowling beasts. No animal survives a broken leg long enough for the bone to heal. "A broken femur that has healed is evidence that someone has taken time to stay with the one who fell, has bound up the wound, has carried the person to safety and has tended the person through recovery. "

"Helping someone else through difficulty is where civilization starts."

- Mead

Compassion vs. Empathy

The words compassion and empathy are often used interchangeably. Empathy and compassion arise from a similar desire - to understand what another person is experiencing. Both are valuable traits to possess. Yet, empathy and compassion have slightly different connotations. It is valuable to recognize the difference between the two.

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Compassion is an empathic understanding of a person's feelings, accompanied by altruism, or a desire to act on that person's behalf (Psychology Today). Dr. Jacinta Jimenez clarifies, "Compassion is when you relate to someone's situation, and you want to help them. You see someone in trouble and you feel like pitching in."

Compassion always includes an action - the attempt to alleviate one's suffering - and it requires engagement. A person choosing compassion takes thoughtful and carefully chosen actions in the situation.

"Wisdom without compassion is ruthless and compassion without wisdom is folly."

- Kofman

Empathy, in contrast, is defined as, "Our feeling of awareness toward other people's emotions and an attempt to understand how they feel."

Barbara Kingsolver defines empathy as "The capacity to understand that every war is both won and lost," and that "someone else's pain is as meaningful as your own." An empathetic person understands that it hurts to be made fun of, to be rejected, or to be ignored.

Empathy means that you are able to see what you and the other person hold in common. You are fellow companions on life's journey.

Empathy does not require that you engage with the person. You can be

physically distant from a person who is grieving and attempt to understand how he or she feels. You can sense that this is a difficult or painful experience. You can have an awareness of the situation but you don't involve yourself with the individual. You don't seek to offer anything to lessen his or her pain.

Example:

You see an individual leaving the grocery store and her bag breaks. Groceries litter the ground.

Empathetic response:

Compassionate response:

How was the person whose bag broke impacted by each response?

Both individuals acknowledge the situation, but their responses are entirely different. The compassionate person instinctively desires to make the situation better for the person.

Neither the empathetic person nor the compassionate person's day is significantly transformed by the experience, but the woman whose bag broke was positively impacted by the

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compassionate person. More than likely, she was completely unaware of the empathetic person.

Empathy has its place. It is helpful to cultivate empathy, but it is compassion that will lead you to deeper engagement with others.

Showing Compassion

Exhibiting compassion is not natural for everyone, and some individuals may find extending compassion challenging. It is a quality that can be cultivated in the same way we learn other skills.

Three basic components are critical to compassion:

1. You need to show up for those who are hurting.

To extend genuine compassion, you must be willing to engage in the messes and muck of life. Compassion shows up when the wheels of life have fallen off.

It requires being observant and recognizing when a person needs help. Do you know someone who is in a challenging situation that he or she is unable to change by him or herself? Compassion says, "I care enough about you to be present in this situation." All too often when someone is suffering, people stay away. It is easy to say, "I didn't know what to do," or "I didn't want to say the wrong thing." And so we do absolutely nothing. Compassion says, "I'm willing to get in there."

Who do you know that is hurting? Who do you know that may need some encouragement? Who do you know that could use a helping hand? In other words, go where the hurt is.

A word of caution:



"Today was a Difficult Day," said Pooh. There was a pause.

"Do you want to talk about it?" asked Piglet.

"No," said Pooh after a bit. "No, I don't think I do."

"That's okay," said Piglet, and he came and sat beside his friend.

"What are you doing?" asked Pooh.

"Nothing, really," said Piglet. "Only, I know what Difficult Days are like. I quite often don't feel like talking about it on my Difficult Days either. But goodness," continued Piglet, "Difficult Days are so much easier when you know you've got someone there for you. And I'll always be here for you, Pooh."

And as Pooh sat there, working through in his head his Difficult Day, while the solid, reliable Piglet sat next to him quietly, swinging his little legs... he thought that his best friend had never been more right.

2. The second key ingredient of compassion is listening.

Let your motto be, “To love is to listen.” To listen means you don’t simply hear the words another person speaks; you genuinely listen to his or her heart. You read their body language and pay attention to their tone of voice. You squelch your desire to speak and instead honor what is being shared with you. You must be willing to be fully present for others. Compassion requires allowing silence and space so that the other person’s heart might be fully expressed and they feel heard and validated. You may want to alleviate their pain so much that you immediately go into advice mode in order to “fix it” and make things better. You are not honoring the other person when you do so. Instead be willing to validate a person’s pain and help them to strategize what can be done. Many times, the most helpful thing to do is to ask what the other person needs or wants.



3. The third element of compassion is investment.

Compassion requires engagement rather than simple observation. To extend compassion is costly, especially emotionally. If you want to genuinely help another human being, you must be willing to be all in. You must be willing to go a mile even if you only wanted to go a block. You must do some heavy lifting.

Compassion takes a lot of energy. When extending compassion seems like too high of an investment, you may have mixed feelings about the situation. Don’t dismiss your feelings. Explore the root of those feelings.

Do you consider yourself a good listener?

Give a personal example of good listening or describe what keeps you from listening well.

Ask yourself:

What is making me reluctant to show compassion? Why am I hesitant to extend love to this person?

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Maintain a spirit of curiosity and freedom from judgment but be open and honest about your feelings in a particular situation. It is okay to have mixed feelings and recognize why you are reluctant to move forward. You can display compassion without having warm feelings. Being compassionate doesn't mean you aren't disappointed, discouraged, or distraught at times.

Compassion Fatigue

If you are on your own supporting others in need and do not have individuals with whom you can appropriately share your joys and frustrations, you may experience compassion fatigue.

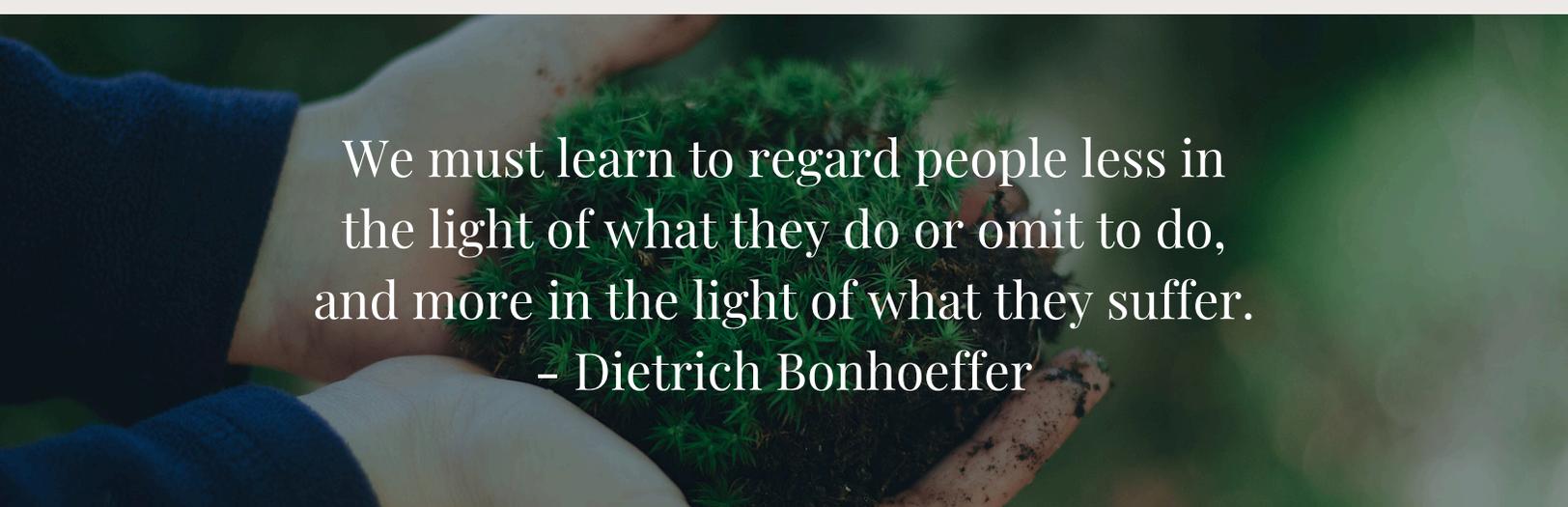
Find others who are also committed to being compassionate and supportive friends and speak honestly about your feelings to them. Remember the importance of maintaining confidentiality about those you are supporting and do not share specific details about them.

Compassion fatigue is a serious condition.

It is possible to become so overly empathic that you find yourself growing numb to others' suffering. One of the best ways to avoid compassion fatigue is to practice self-compassion. Self-compassion simply means extending compassion to yourself as you would to a friend. If a friend came to you feeling exhausted, what advice would you offer him or her? How would you want your friend to care for him or herself?

If you are feeling burnt out, please seek support. Compassionate individuals tend to think they shouldn't need assistance. You may be the giver, but you too need to take time to attend to your emotional, physical, social, and spiritual needs. If your well runs dry, you will have nothing to offer to others.

Compassion is a wonderful gift we can extend to others. John Connolly says, "The nature of humanity, its essence, is to feel another's pain as one's own, and to act to take that pain away. There is nobility in compassion, a beauty in empathy, a grace in forgiveness."

A pair of hands, one in a blue sleeve and one in a white sleeve, are gently holding a small, green, mossy plant in a dark pot. The background is a soft, out-of-focus green.

We must learn to regard people less in the light of what they do or omit to do, and more in the light of what they suffer.
- Dietrich Bonhoeffer

REACH OUT AND TOUCH



Reach Out and Touch Song by the Imperials

Reach out and touch a soul that is hungry;
Reach out and touch a spirit in despair;
Reach out and touch a life torn and dirty,
A man who is lonely, if you care!

Reach out and touch that neighbor
who hates you;
Reach out and touch a stranger
who meets you;
Reach out and touch the brother/sister
who needs you.
Reach out and let the smile of God touch
through you.

Reach out and touch a friend who is weary;
Reach out and touch a seeker unaware;
Reach out and touch though touching
means losing
A part of your own self, if you dare!

Reach out and give your love to the
loveless;
Reach out and make a home for the
homeless;
Reach out and shed God's light in the
darkness;
Reach out and let the smile of God touch
through you.

DISCUSSION OR REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Who is one of the most compassionate people you know and why do you think so?
2. When you have been suffering, what compassionate act was helpful to you?
3. Have you ever done something compassionate for another person and been misunderstood or judged for your actions?
4. Which of the three components of compassion is the most challenging for you?
5. What typically gets in your way of taking compassionate action, and what can you do to minimize those barriers?

PRACTICE, ROLE PLAY, OR MORE TO CONSIDER

Scenario One:

As you approach the entrance to your local supermarket, you notice a single parent struggling to open the door with a baby in their arms and an uncooperative toddler in hand. You are surprised by how many people have entered the store without seeming to notice.

What would you think/feel in that situation? What would be the best action in that situation?

Scenario Two:

A newcomer has joined the community organization in which you've been involved for the last few years. You don't see yourself as having much in common with this newbie, but you notice they are standing by themselves during the social time before the business meeting while you're having fun and laughing with your friends.

What would you think/feel in that situation? Describe compassion in action for those circumstances.

Scenario Three:

John was someone whom others could always count on to extend compassion. He was generous with his time and resources. Recently, he assisted Martha with securing housing. Martha was thrilled with her new place. She was delighted to finally have a place to call home. She was excited to share her new home with others. This resulted in her having numerous overnight guests, which was a violation of her lease agreement. After several warnings from her landlord, Martha received an eviction notice. Martha called John and told him the news. John was quiet as he listened to Martha. He was flooded with a host of emotions. He couldn't believe that after all he had done to help Martha find a place to live, she was being evicted.

How might John respond? What would compassion look like in that situation?

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Christ-Centered Corner

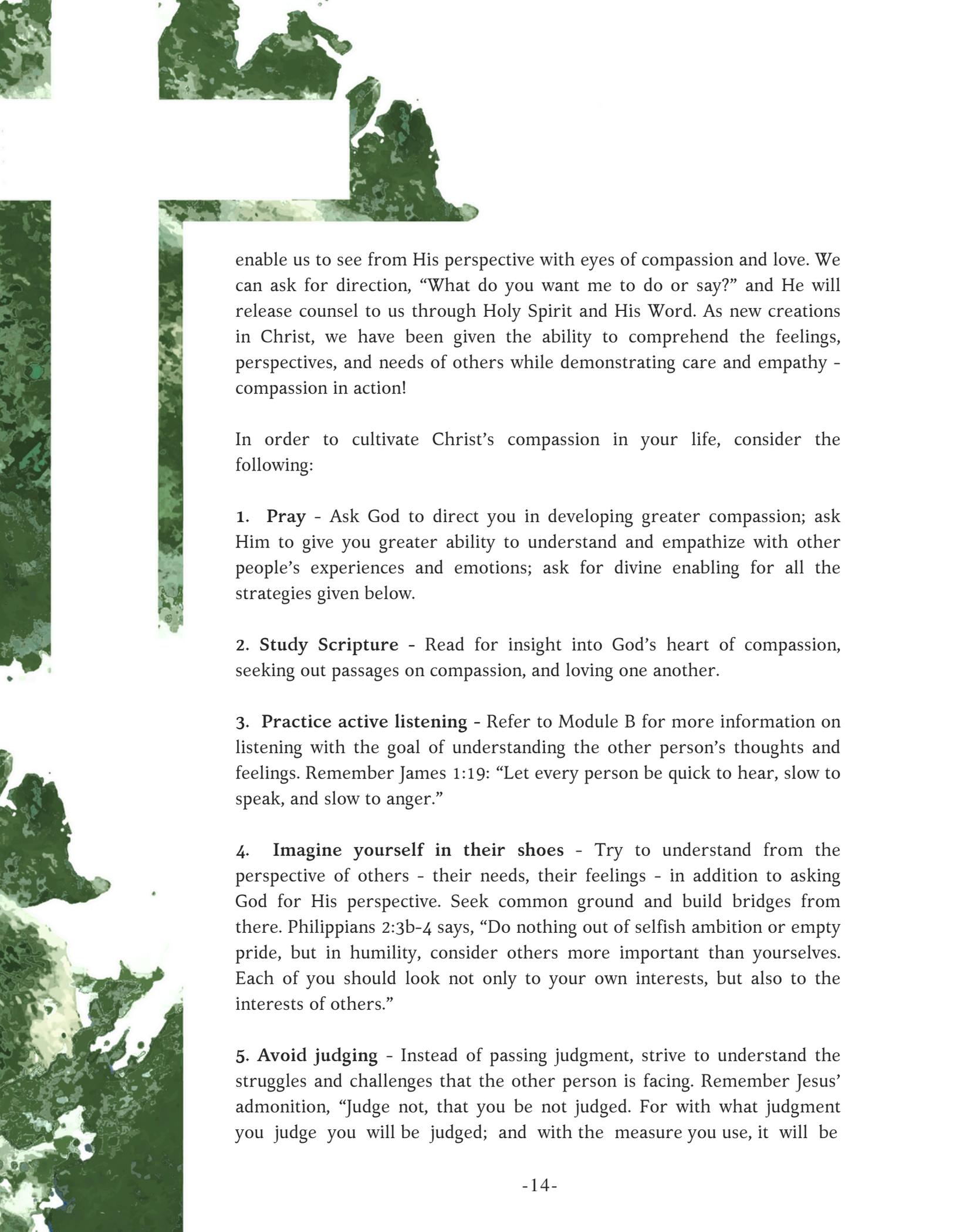
Encouragement From a Christian Perspective

The Bible describes God as “a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness” (Psalm 86:15). The writer of Lamentations tells us that God’s compassions never fail, they are new every morning.

Jesus, as the exact representation of God’s nature and radiating God’s glory, perfectly demonstrated this compassion in action. He was moved by compassion when He reached out and touched the leprous man and healed him. He was moved by compassion when He heard the two blind men sitting by the road crying out, “Have mercy on us, O Lord, Son of David!” He asked them, “What do you want me to do for you?” and they asked for their sight. In response, he touched their eyes, and immediately they were able to see. He was moved with compassion when he saw the crowds of people coming to hear him teach, and noticing their distress and helplessness, he instructed His disciples to pray for the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest.

As followers of Christ, the love of God has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, and we now have access to His compassion in action. Our loving devotion to God will naturally result in loving our neighbor as ourselves. The way we experience God responding to our struggles will empower us to come alongside our “neighbor” - that person in need - and support them in the same manner. Have you experienced God being patient with you as you seek to make changes? Have you felt the comfort of His love and affection? Have you experienced Him walking alongside you through a difficult season? Then, the apostle Paul says to follow that example and do the same. Jesus described this process when He said, “The Son can do nothing of Himself, but what He sees the Father do; for whatever He does, the Son also does in like manner.” As sons and daughters of the Most High God with the Spirit of God dwelling in us, we have been given eyes to see what God is doing, and ears to hear His voice.

We can ask Him, “What are you doing in these circumstances?” or “What do you think of this person?” and He will highlight what we need to notice and



enable us to see from His perspective with eyes of compassion and love. We can ask for direction, “What do you want me to do or say?” and He will release counsel to us through Holy Spirit and His Word. As new creations in Christ, we have been given the ability to comprehend the feelings, perspectives, and needs of others while demonstrating care and empathy - compassion in action!

In order to cultivate Christ’s compassion in your life, consider the following:

1. **Pray** - Ask God to direct you in developing greater compassion; ask Him to give you greater ability to understand and empathize with other people’s experiences and emotions; ask for divine enabling for all the strategies given below.
2. **Study Scripture** - Read for insight into God’s heart of compassion, seeking out passages on compassion, and loving one another.
3. **Practice active listening** - Refer to Module B for more information on listening with the goal of understanding the other person’s thoughts and feelings. Remember James 1:19: “Let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger.”
4. **Imagine yourself in their shoes** - Try to understand from the perspective of others - their needs, their feelings - in addition to asking God for His perspective. Seek common ground and build bridges from there. Philippians 2:3b-4 says, “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or empty pride, but in humility, consider others more important than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.”
5. **Avoid judging** - Instead of passing judgment, strive to understand the struggles and challenges that the other person is facing. Remember Jesus’ admonition, “Judge not, that you be not judged. For with what judgment you judge you will be judged; and with the measure you use, it will be

measured back to you. And why do you look at the speck in your brother's eye, but do not consider the plank in your own eye?" (Matt 7: 1-3)

6. Practice forgiveness - Unforgiveness is a sin and creates a dividing wall in our relationships. "Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another as God in Christ forgave you." (Eph 4:32)

7. Choose patience - To gain understanding of another person often requires patience.

Colossians 3:12-14 - Therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with hearts of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Bear with one another and forgive any complaint you may have against someone else. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. Above all these things put on love which is the bond of perfection.

