

Heartfelt Compassion for People without Christ
Romans 9:1-5

Most Christians I know really want to share their faith with other people. In theory we want to tell others about Jesus. But when we think about talking to specific people, the dominant emotion we experience is anxiety. “What if we mention the name of Jesus and people get mad at me? Maybe it would be better if I keep my mouth shut. . .” Have you ever thought that?

There are all sorts of things that can help us share our faith; periodically we teach classes on how to tell our personal faith stories and how to explain the gospel. But today I want us to think about ***the non-negotiable*** when it comes to sharing our faith: heartfelt compassion. I’ve noticed that people with compassion take risks and find a way to share the love of Christ in word and deed. Compassion is the place to begin.

Today as we return to our study in the book of Romans the Apostle Paul will be our example. This fall we are going to study chapters 9 through 11. In these chapters Paul wrestles with the fact that relatively few of his fellow Jews believed in Jesus. Even though Jesus was Jewish and the original disciples were Jewish, the church across the Roman Empire was predominantly Gentile (non-Jewish). We can imagine people saying, “Paul, you claim that Jesus is the fulfillment of the Old Testament and everything that is written in the Hebrew Scriptures, but the fact of the matter is that the Jewish people aren’t buying it. Christianity is largely a Gentile religion.” This observation was troubling - both historically and theologically.

Beginning next week we’ll see how Paul begins to address this issue of whether or not God has somehow failed because so few Jews believed in Jesus. But before he makes that argument, Paul is compelled to declare how passionate he was about seeing his Jewish brothers and sisters come to Christ. Paul had been accused of being anti-Jewish. And so in the strongest of terms Paul expresses his heartfelt longing for their salvation.

Paul’s Example of Compassion for People without Christ (Romans 9:1-5) It’s hard to imagine how Paul could have expressed his passion for seeing fellow Jews come to Christ any more fervently than in these verses.

1 I am telling the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience testifies with me in the Holy Spirit, 2 that I have great sorrow and unceasing grief in my heart.

In verse 1 Paul expresses his sincerity with both a positive and a negative statement. Positively Paul says, “I am telling the truth in Christ.” As someone who is united with Christ in His death and resurrection (see 6:3-11), Paul is telling the truth.

Negatively Paul says, “I am not lying,” adding “my conscience testifies with me in the Holy Spirit.” For Paul the conscience is your “inborn faculty” (Moo’s term, p. 556) that lets you know whether or not you’ve violated your morality. Your conscience is only as good as your morality. If you don’t think there’s anything wrong with theft, for example,

your conscience won't bother you when you steal something. When Paul says, "my conscience testifies with me in the Holy Spirit" he is saying that the Holy Spirit is speaking through His conscience.

Paul is saying that both Christ and the Holy Spirit bear witness with him that "I have great sorrow and unceasing grief in my heart." Just as the OT prophets lamented that the Jewish nation had turned away from God, Paul was brokenhearted over the Jews' unbelief in his day. Paul was not someone who thought that "as long as you believe something you'll be fine." He believed that there is salvation in Jesus alone. He taught that Jesus' sacrifice on the cross was God's provision - God's only provision - for our sinfulness. That fact that so few of his fellow Jews believed brought him "great sorrow" and "ceaseless grief."

Verse 3 is one of the most intense, anguished statements in the entire Bible.

3 For I could wish that I myself were accursed, separated from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh,

The Greek term translated "accursed" is *anathema* (the same term used in Galatians 1:8-9). Whereas in the previous chapter Paul had written that nothing can separate us from the love of Christ (8:35-39), here he speaks of being "separated from Christ." Why? ". . . for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh." In the next paragraph it becomes apparent that Paul's anguish was because so few of his fellow Jews had trusted in Christ.

It's shocking that someone whose entire identity was wrapped up "in Christ" and who wrote, "For me, to live is Christ" would even conceive of the possibility of being *anathema* and "separated from Christ" for the sake of others.

Paul didn't actually pray that he might be accursed. Paul didn't believe that his separation from Christ would actually bring about the salvation of his Jewish kinsmen. I think Paul is speaking hypothetically here and is basically saying, "There is no price I wouldn't pay to see my fellow Jews come to Christ and avoid an eternity separated from God."

Paul's words here are all the more striking when we remember that his fellow Jews largely hated him and his message. Some of them tried to kill him (stoning, beating, legal processes). But since Paul was apprenticed to Jesus, he didn't return evil for evil or insult for insult; Paul loved his enemies.

His anguish is further explained in verses 4 and 5 where he lists some of the privileges that his fellow Jews enjoyed. They had so many advantages and yet so few believed.

4 who are Israelites, to whom belongs the adoption as sons, and the glory and the covenants and the giving of the Law and the temple service and the promises, 5 whose are the fathers, and from whom is the Christ according to the flesh, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen.

Significantly, Paul begins referring to his fellow Jews as “Israelites,” a term which emphasized the Jews’ unique place in the history of salvation. Israel had a unique place in God’s dealings with all humanity. Paul lists eight privileges that Israel enjoyed among all the peoples of the earth.

Paul writes in verse 5 that to the Israelites belong six things:

1. “the adoption as sons” - Out of all the nations on earth, God adopted Israel as His “son.” God cared for the nation as a good father cares for a son.
2. “the glory” - God blessed Israel with His glorious presence in many different ways.
3. “the covenants” - God entered into a unique relationship with Israel through the covenant He made with Abraham and renewed with Isaac and Jacob.
4. “the giving of the Law” - The Law (i.e. the old covenant) was one of Israel’s greatest treasure; it defined what a walk with God looked like.
5. “the temple service/worship” - The temple’s sacrificial system provided a way for the people to atone for their sins and maintain their relationship with God
6. “the promises” - This is probably a reference to all the promises that flowed from the great promise God made to Abraham - the promise of descendants through whom all the families of the earth would be blessed.

In verse 5 Paul writes that to the Israelites belong “the fathers” (or “patriarchs”) - a reference to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. These are the ones who received God’s great promises that extended to their descendants. The final privilege of being Israelites is: “from whom is the Christ according to the flesh.” Jesus doesn’t belong to Israel the way the patriarchs did, but it was still a great privilege that He is “from” them.

That last couple of clauses in verse 5 are very significant theologically: “who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen.” Some think Paul is praising God the Father as the One is “over all” and “blessed forever.” The arguments are rather complicated because Greek manuscripts had very little punctuation. But I think Paul is saying here that the Christ (the Messiah) is exalted above everyone and everything and that He is God, sharing deity with the Father and the Spirit. Given this identity, He is “blessed forever.”

That fact that this exalted Messiah had come from Israel and had been rejected by the vast majority of His people weighed heavy on Paul. He so longed for his own people to experience Jesus as he had. For that reason there was nothing Paul wouldn’t do to lead his people to faith in Christ.

I think we’d agree that Paul’s compassion for his fellow Jews reflects the heart of God. In our time remaining I want us to think about how we might follow Paul’s example in Romans 9:1-5. There are at least two implications for us. The first involves . . .

. . . Cultivating our compassion for people without Christ (esp. those closest to us). I am challenged by these first five verses in Romans 9. I find myself wondering, “Do I have ‘great sorrow and unceasing grief’ over **anybody** in my life?” There are some people I’d love to see come to Christ - friends and acquaintances and family members. But I don’t really lose sleep over the fact that many people I “love” aren’t in relationship

with God. Before studying this passage I never contemplated being *anathema* and “cut off from Christ” for the sake of someone I’d love to see come to Christ. That thought never crossed my mind. But God has me asking the question, “What am I willing to suffer. . . to sacrifice. . . to endure. . . to see specific people and specific groups of people come to Christ?”

Every few years I make a lame attempt to read *The Brothers Karamazov*; for some reason I think I should read a Russian novel before I die. With all the unfamiliar names and complicated dialogue I keep running out of steam about sixty pages in. Having said all of that, there’s a paragraph on page 57 of my copy of *Brothers* that makes it worth the trouble of reading. The “elder” is describing a conversation he had with an “old man” some time ago; he says that the old man spoke “with sorrowful humor” when he said:

“I love mankind, but I am amazed at myself; the more I love mankind in general, the less I love people in particular, that is individually, as separate persons. In my dreams,” he said, “I often went so far as to think passionately of serving mankind, and, it may be, would really have gone to the cross for people if it were somehow suddenly necessary, and yet I am incapable of living in the same room with anyone even for two days . . . [he describes the annoying little habits that make him hate others] . . . It has always happened that the more I hate people individually, the more ardent becomes my love for humanity as a whole.”

How many of us would say that we love humanity or even that we “Love Manhattan,” but don’t love specific people? We need to be brutally honest with ourselves when it comes to our compassion - not so that we can heap condemnation on ourselves, but so that we can humble ourselves before God and ask Him to change our hearts.

What if we would make it our ambition to cultivate a heartfelt compassion for those who are closest to us who don’t yet know Christ? I’m thinking about our families, our roommates, our neighbors, and our coworkers. These are the people we know the best and who know us the best. We can’t fake it with these people. The problem is that the people you know the best are sometimes the hardest people to love. It’s much easier to love people at a distance that you barely know.

So how do we cultivate this compassion for specific people without Christ? I hope you weren’t expecting some new, amazing, never-before-taught truth about cultivating compassion. The reality is that compassion is a natural byproduct of walking with Christ. When we walk **with** Christ we become **like** Christ. We begin thinking like Him and treating others like Him. If somebody says, I’ve been walking with Christ for 20 years and I could care less whether or not my family and friends know Christ. . . we’d have to wonder if they’re really walking with Christ. In 1 John 4:8 John wrote that “the one who does not love does not know God, for God is love.” In 4:20 he wrote that “If someone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen.”

Love/compassion is the natural byproduct of walking with Christ. Without compassion (i.e. heartfelt love), our words will be hollow and even detrimental. We'll be "those Christians" that give Christianity a bad name. We'll come across as know-it-alls or worse. We all know people who are "always so right" that nobody can stand to be around them. But if we have genuine, heartfelt compassion for people without Christ, we can simply "be ourselves" when we're with people without Christ. We can simply be ourselves because we're like Christ.

Of course we're not completely like Christ. And when we're not, we can admit it. We don't need to model perfection; we need to model redemption. We can be honest and transparent about our sins, giving people an idea of how real Christians live their lives. We don't have to be "worldlier than thou," but we do need to be transparent (as opposed to giving off the vibe that we have everything figured out and that we have everything together).

Allowing our compassion fuel our actions. Today's passage doesn't spell out how Paul took action on his compassion for his fellow Jews without Christ. But other Scriptures confirm that Paul's compassion led to some very specific actions.

Prayer. In Romans 10:1 we read about one thing Paul did; he prayed to God about their salvation.

1 Brethren, my heart's desire and my prayer to God for them is for their salvation.

Paul asked God to bring them to the place of faith in Jesus and therefore to salvation. We aren't told exactly how prayer works. But we are told over and over that God loves when we ask Him for things that He already wants. The salvation of family and friends surely falls into that category. Because He sent His one and only Son to die for us, we can rest assured that He is much more compassionate than we are. And so we can pray for the salvation of the people we love.

I'd encourage you to always have at least a few people whose salvation you're praying about. I'm praying for a couple of family members and a couple of friends

Labor. Of course Paul did more than pray. He also ***labored*** (worked hard) at love people in word and deed. This is how he summarized his efforts in 1 Corinthians 15:10.

10 But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me did not prove vain; but I labored even more than all of them, yet not I, but the grace of God with me.

Paul didn't see anything incompatible between his hard work and God's grace. He actually understood that the grace of God is what allowed him to work so hard sharing Christ.

As an apostle, Paul traveled around Asia Minor telling people the message about Christ. When he entered a new town, he would typically go to the synagogue (to the Jews first -

Romans 1:16) and talk about Christ. When/if they rejected the message he then found some Gentiles who were interested. In some places he earned money making tents and lived among the people; his life and his message worked together to give a full-orbed picture of the life Jesus offers. In 1 Thessalonians 2:8 Paul wrote that they imparted “not only the gospel of God but also our own lives, because you had become very dear to us.”

Paul, of course, was an apostle/missionary; his “work” will look different than ours, but we’re kidding ourselves if we think we can have an impact in the lives of others without an effort, without any intentionality, and without any sacrifice. I can’t predict what that will mean in the lives of the specific people you care deeply about. My encouragement is to ask the question, “How can I be the best possible friend to the people I care about who need Christ?” If you have the mindset of a friend, you will look for ways to show compassion in word and deed. You will allow people to see your life and hear your words.

Your friend might need someone to listen and empathize. Many times friends don’t really want or need us to solve their problems. They mainly need someone to walk with them through tough times. Sometimes a friend needs help materially or financially; the Scriptures tell us to “be generous and ready to share.” Sometimes you might give a gift with no strings attached. Sometimes you can pray for your friend. It’s very rare when somebody says, “No, whatever you do, don’t pray for me.” Even people who don’t believe in God often appreciate being prayed for. Of course you can share your story and how you’ve found life through Jesus. And you can invite your friend to enter into a relationship with God through faith in Jesus.

Here at Faith, we consider sharing Christ to be a “team sport”: together (as an expression of the body of Christ) we represent Christ and show people what a relationship with him looks like. This is why we offer a life group called Alpha. We describe Alpha as Christianity 101. It is an 8-week course about the Christian faith. We run the Alpha course 3x a year so that we can invite our friends to come have a conversation about Jesus. We begin with a meal, then we watch a teaching video on topics like Who is Jesus? How can I have faith? Why pray? Who is Holy Spirit? Why is there so much suffering in the world? Why read the Bible? After the teaching video we break into discussion groups. People can ask questions and express their opinions, or they can sit back and listen. It is a safe place to learn about Jesus.

If you’re already a follower of Christ and want a Bible study, we have many other life groups; we’d encourage you to sign up for one. But if you have friends who would be interested in learning about the Christian faith, Alpha would be a great option for you. We have invitation cards in the seats in front of you. There’s a table in the foyer with more information.

Life is too short not to take risks and reach out with heartfelt compassion.