

# Reclaiming Compassion: A Christmas Meditation

By Marvin Olasky

*Celebrant: 'Tis the season for compassion*

*(Tra la la la la la la la la)*

*Seeker #1: But tell me – is it empty fashion?*

*(Tra la la's optional)*

*Seeker #2: Does anyone know if we're really helping?*

*(Tra...)*

*Deus ex media: JUS' SHUD'UP... WE DON'T LIKE YELPING!*

What is compassion? The word is used a lot, not only during this Christmas month, but throughout the year. This past September I made a concentrated search through five major newspapers and found the word about 300 times, in six typical usages.

First, "compassion" was used frequently as a synonym for "leniency." On September 28, when a sheriff's deputy was to be sentenced for selling cocaine, the judge was asked to be "compassionate." That same day, a jury was asked to have compassion for an accused murderer by letting him off.

Second, "compassion" was used as a synonym for warm feelings that cannot be expressed in words: A California musical group attempted to "communicate" the idea of compassion in a "non-cognitive way" by playing goopy melodies.

Third, the word was used to convey a certain attractive pose: The *Los Angeles Times* described an actor as perfect for a role because "He's got the strength, the compassion." Actresses are taught to give come-hither looks, actors looks of compassion.

Fourth, it was used as a bulwark by left-liberals who wanted us to remain "unshaken in liberalism's belief in governmental compassion for the weak and poor."

Fifth, "compassion" was used as a temporary life-preserver for drowning Republican politicians. As Jim Courter ran away from his previous pro-life positions and lost the gubernatorial race in New Jersey, he told reporters "I'd like to be considered as a person who is compassionate...."

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Sixth, and perhaps most often, it was the verbal equivalent of elevator music, a throw-in for a speech or article stuck in a shaft. A music reviewer in Chicago complained that an LP record was filled with “make-out ballads” for “the wine-and-cheese crowd,” but was saved by “the mix of spiky aggression and compassion.”

**Strong Word Turned Flabby.** Wonder Bread may still build strong bodies twelve ways, but these six types of loose usages have created a flabby word out of one which could once pump iron. Even back in 1980, the word “compassion” was still an honorable one, and Professor Clifford Orwin could write a graceful essay entitled “Compassion” in *The American Scholar*. But what *Time* magazine tried to do to God during the 1960s, liberals and pharisees did successfully to the word “compassion” during the 1980s. God was not dead, despite what *Time* put on its cover, but the word “compassion,” in any meaningful sense, is.

After all, even a strong word like compassion could not be unbent when Ted Kennedy sat on it in 1985 and said, “The work of compassion must continue.” How could the word be used honestly when the *Washington Post* in 1987 portrayed Marion Barry and Jim Wright as Washington’s two great compassionate leaders, because both favored spending more of other people’s money? But I’m not just blaming liberals here. Defense witnesses for televangelist Jim Bakker tried to help out by labeling him “a compassionate preacher.” Steve Garvey, discussing his proclivity for informal bigamy or trigamy (I lost count), asked for compassion. When we’re supposed to feel compassion for every single passion, we got trouble.

**Liberal Bludgeon.** This is not to say that the death of compassion in intelligent discourse is entirely a bad thing. We are right to be wary of the armies of compassion and the wordsmiths that accompany them. As Orwin pointed out nearly a decade ago, “Our century has hardly seen a demagogue, however bloody and monstrous his designs, who has not known how to rally compassion and mine its potential for sympathetic moral indignation.” And it’s about time for the traditional liberal bludgeon to be losing much of its effectiveness. Better for “compassion,” as currently understood, to be used in elegy — “compassionate service in the spirit of Claude Pepper” — than prophecy.

Still, for reasons both pragmatic and principled, we should not rush to declare victory over compassion, and in doing so declare that the domestic cold war, and perhaps history itself, is over. Childcare bills, marches for the homeless and the construction industry, and other attempts to build bigger bureaucracies by mandating compulsory compassion, are always with us. A few ghostly Republicans are even trying to revive the me-too, bidding tendencies of Christmases past. Even if the left wises up and avoids use of the word “compassion,” its impulse for coercion continues.

**Defining True Compassion.** Besides, beyond the pragmatics, there is principle. Compassion is like Shakespeare’s Globe Theatre, the ruins of which were recently excavated; what remained of the theater had been covered over by a parking lot. There is a wonderful idea buried beneath the ruins of “compassion.” Mother Teresa is truly compassionate. Those who, week in, week out, counsel women at crisis pregnancy centers, are truly compassionate. Those who adopt hard-to-place children are truly compassionate. We must be careful not to scorn all use of the word, lest we become part of what Nietzsche called the “hidden desire to belittle.”

We need to explore the distinctions between true compassion and its current epigones — distinctions theological, historical, and political. Rather than scorning compassion, conservatives must see how a misunderstanding of the concept is at the root of the ABC bill, the XYZ appeal, and many other current political and social panaceas. And we must learn how to make conservative compassion (which I will presently define) a real alternative to the devalued liberal variety.

To put it perhaps more vividly, I see conservative policy analysts as successors of Hercules, who hacked off one Hydra head after another only to find two growing in its place. Not until Hercules and his servant Iolaus burned off eight of the nine heads, and then cut off the immortal head, and then buried that head under a rock, was the monster finally slain. Our monster is government social spending, and its central head is the false understanding of compassion. We need to burn, baby, burn the eight heads, but our effort is in vain unless that last head ends up under a rock.

“Suffering With.” How do we begin? How can we use the word “compassion” correctly? What is the distinguishing mark of conservative compassion? When I am faced with puzzling questions like these, I tend to turn to the two books on my desk at home: the Bible and the Oxford English Dictionary, God’s Word and man’s words.

Turning initially to the babble, I was struck by the first definition of compassion offered by the Oxford English Dictionary (OED): “Compassion: Suffering together with another, participation in suffering.” The emphasis, as you can see from just looking at the word — “com,” with, and “passion,” from the Latin *pati*, to suffer — is on personal involvement with the needy, suffering with them, not just giving to them.

The OED, however, also includes a second definition of “compassion”: “The feeling, or emotion, when a person is moved by the suffering or distress of another, and by the desire to relieve it....” There is a world of policy differences between those two definitions: One works, the other feels. But let’s be more precise: One is action, the other is “feeling” that does not require personal involvement except perhaps a willingness to send a check — yours or someone else’s.

**Political Charge.** Historical lexicography is a very interesting subject; we tend to think of dictionaries as objective repositories of bare fact, but words carry a political charge, as Orwell pointed out so well in his essay on “Politics and the English Language.” The history of the two definitions of compassion is revealed in some of those old dictionaries you can dig up at the Library of Congress. Noah Webster, in the 1834 edition of his *American Dictionary of the English Language*, defined compassion as “A suffering with another; painful sympathy....” A century later, however, lots of folks were using *Webster’s New Twentieth Century Dictionary of the English Language*, which had been “Newly revised” by “a staff of eminent scholars, educators, and office editors.” All of those eminent scholars, educators, and office editors defined compassion as “A suffering with another: hence sympathy.” Interesting: Once the sympathy had to be “painful”; later, the “pain” was gone, and living was easier. And currently, in *Webster’s Third International Dictionary*, compassion is defined as a “deep feeling for and understanding of misery or suffering and the concomitant desire to promote its alleviation.”

These American definitions clarify those handed down in the august OED. I hope you’ve noticed how over the course of 150 years we have gone from painful sympathy to sympathy

to deep feeling; from “suffering with” to a vague desire to promote the alleviation of misery.

Now, we are not here today for a lexicography lesson, but if the older definition, “suffering with,” came to mind whenever we thought of compassion, we would laugh at contemporary uses such as the *New York Times*’ “compassionate observer” – compassion classically means participation, not observation. Nor would copy editors leave in redundancies such as the *Washington Post*’s “personal compassion,” used in the way a Hill staffer might say, “I personally spoke with the Senator.” After all, in the past compassion had to be personal.

**Central to Christianity.** Enough about man’s words for now. Keeping in mind the distinction between suffering with and feeling sad, let’s turn to the Bible. During this Christmas season, when we are surrounded by visions of ourselves as wise men and God coming to us bearing gifts, we Christians may need to be reminded that Christ’s coming was not a party, but an earthquake. We need to remember that God’s compassion is serious indeed. The idea of “suffering with” is central in Christianity because it was central in the life of Christ. Given the season, I hope even Ayn Randians will grant me the theological license to read from what my children memorize and I try to, the Westminster Shorter Catechism, which dates from the mid-17th century and is one of the central Reformed documents (I’ll read a modern English version). The question, no. 27, is “How was Christ humiliated?”, and the answer is “Christ was humiliated: by being born as a man and born into a poor family; by being made subject to the law and suffering the miseries of this life, the anger of God, and the curse of death on the cross; and by being buried and remaining under the power of death for a time.”

What Christians celebrate at Christmas, in short, is humiliation: God coming to earth to suffer with. This, to my mind, is terrific stuff, and it led me to become a Christian some thirteen years ago: earlier, my chief political goal in life was to make the other side suffer. Other religions, including Judaism certainly, and Islam, and the eastern religions, have strong elements of compassion in them, but only Christianity, to my knowledge, has a God who comes to earth to suffer with. Jesus suffered with, and throughout his life on earth He told parables about the suffering with of Good Samaritans and others. (Note that the Samaritan in Christ’s story bandages the victim’s wounds, puts him on a donkey and takes him to an inn – the Samaritan walks alongside – nurses him there, pays incurred and future costs, and only then goes on his way, with a promise to stop back.)

**Theology of Early America.** What does it mean to live in a society in which people worship a God who suffers with, and believe that they – creatures made after God’s image – are called to suffer with? Some children today are taught to contribute money or cans of food to help the needy, and that may be a good thing, but what does it mean when the central religious theme is not just the transfer of material, but suffering with?

That was the theology of early America. People throughout the colonies could hear sermons such as this one preached by Benjamin Colman in 1725:

Compassion and Mercy to the poor is Conformity to God.... There is much of the Spirit of God in Bowels of Pity to one another....Acts of Compassion and Mercy to our poor and needy *Brethren*, and to the

necessitous Members of Jesus Christ, [are] esteemed by the *Lord of the Sabbath* to be *Holiness* to himself.

Colman emphasized that he was talking about personal involvement, and not mere monetary transfer:

How should an *unholy Person* offer to God in a holy manner? The Person is more than his Estate. Christ *seeks not yours but you*. God values our *Hearts and Spirits* above all our Silver or Gold, our Herds and Flocks. *If a Man would give all the Substance of his House instead of Love, the Loves of his Soul and the Souls of his House, it would be contemned.*

The historical record is clear: Individual action and public policy was based on the idea of suffering with. In 17th century New England, for example, it was common for families to share the care of the destitute: Some would share their homes for parts of the year, and others would pitch in for food costs, and supply clothing and medical care as well. At that time options other than suffering with, including governmental income transfers, were not unknown, but those who followed biblical precepts concluded that placement in poorhouses or distribution of alms without personal involvement was not suffering with. As one critic of the income transfer idea pointed out, state involvement was “a mighty solvent to sunder the ties of kinship, to quench the affections of the family, to suppress in the poor themselves the instinct of self-reliance and self-respect – to convert them into paupers.”

**Stressing Personal Involvement.** I do not have time today to plow through the historical record – I will be discussing that in future lectures and articles – but I want to note how thoroughly American society was impregnated with the idea of personal involvement. Alexis de Tocqueville wrote about this, of course, but I’m as tired of Tocqueville quotations as many of you are, and there are numerous other sources. For example, in 1844 William H. McGuffey placed in one of his *McGuffey’s Readers* a wonderful little dialogue between a “Mr. Fantom” and a “Mr. Goodman.” Parts of it went like this:

Mr. Fantom: I despise a narrow field. O for the reign of universal benevolence! I want to make all mankind good and happy.

Mr. Goodman: Dear me! Sure that must be a wholesale sort of a job: had you not better try your hand at a *town or neighborhood* first?

Mr. Fantom: Sir, I have a plan in my head for relieving the miseries of the *whole world*....

Mr. Goodman: The utmost extent of my ambition at present is, to redress the wrongs of a poor apprentice, who has been cruelly used by his master....

Mr. Fantom: You must not apply to me for the redress of such petty grievances. I own that the wrongs of the Poles and South Americans so fill my mind, as to leave me no time to attend to the petty sorrows of poorhouses and apprentices. It is provinces, empires, continents, that the benevolence of the philosopher embraces; every one can do a little paltry good to his next neighbor.

Mr. Goodman: Every one *can*, but I do not see that every one *does*.... [you] have such a noble zeal for the *millions*, [yet] feel so little compassion for the units...come, do assist me in a partition I am making in our poorhouse...

Mr. Fantom: Sir, my mind is so engrossed with the partition of Poland, that I cannot bring it down to an object of such insignificance.

Minds were engrossed with Poland back then also, you see – but local problems demanded not just attention but action.

Again, I'll be writing more about the types of action many compassionate individuals took – the idea that people were cold and heartless during the pre-welfare era is progressive agitprop. There was, however, consistent opposition to any kind of bureaucratic approach. As minister William Ruffner noted in 1853, charity

is a work requiring great tenderness and sympathy, and agents, who do their work for a price rather than for love, should not be trusted to execute the wishes of donors. The keepers of poor-houses (like undertakers) fall into a business, unfeeling way of doing their duties; which is wounding and often partial and cruel to the objects of their attention.

Ruffner fought against the tendencies to think of compassion in terms of money rather than time:

To cast a contribution into the box brought to the hand, or to attend committees and anniversaries, are very trifling exercises of Christian self-denial and devotion, compared with what is demanded in the weary perambulations through the street, the contact with filth, and often with rude and repulsive people, the facing of disease, and distress, and all manner of heart-rending and heart-frightening scenes, and all the trials of faith, patience, and hope, which are incident to the duty we urge.

And he argued that professionals should be involved as facilitators, not major or sole suppliers:

There must, of course, be officers, teachers, missionaries employed to live in the very midst of the wretchedness, and to supervise and direct all the efforts of the people. And it is just here that the Church ought to connect herself directly to the enterprise. The leading officers should be appointed by the Church...but mark you! these officers are not to stand between the giver and receiver, but to bring *giver and receiver together*.

The system worked very well through most of the 19th century, regardless of what today's historical myth-makers say. Late 19th century charity networks were pushed hard by population increase and urbanization – a system that is time-intensive can be overwhelmed in times of rapid migration. Nevertheless, my preliminary research indicates that the community and church-related charitable organizations actually did quite well, as long as

their morale was high. My suspicion is that a change in theology among many Christians contributed as much to the change from personal to bureaucratic, as did the material needs of the wretched and the poor. And to explain that change, we need to look once more, briefly, at the Biblical meaning of compassion.

**Culmination of a Process.** Hebrew and Greek words that are commonly translated as “compassion” – typically *rachum* and variations in the Old Testament, *splanchnon* and others in the New – are used over 80 times in the Bible. Their most frequent use is not as an isolated noun, but as the culmination of a process. Repeatedly, in Judges and other books, the Bible shows that when the Israelites had sinned they were to repent and turn away from their sin – only then, as a rule, would God show compassion. Second Chronicles 30:9 states the process precisely: “the Lord your God is gracious and compassionate. He will not turn his face from you if you return to him.” Nehemiah 9:27 notes that “when they were oppressed they cried out to you. From heaven you heard them, and in your great compassion you gave them deliverers....” God’s refusal to be compassionate at certain times makes the pattern even more evident. Isaiah 27:11 describes Israel as “a people without understanding; so their Maker has no compassion on them....” In Jeremiah 15:6, God tells Israel, “You have rejected me...I can no longer show compassion.”

The Christmas story and its aftermath, of course, show how God once again had mercy: “While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.” And yet, it’s important to note that Jesus’ miracles, like those of His Father, were never at random or universal. For example, Jesus certainly had the power to feed everyone...but he did not. Only after people had studied with him for three days and had nothing to eat did He say – in Matthew 15:31-32 – “I have compassion for these people.” (Then, from seven loaves and a few small fishes, He created enough to feed 4,000 men, and their women and children.) Jesus could have healed everyone...but he did not. Matthew 20:30-34 tells us that Jesus had compassion on two blind men who kept following him and shouting, “Lord, Son of David, have mercy on us.” Those circumstances are crucial: it was after the blind men recognized Christ’s Lordship and descent, that Jesus “touched their eyes, and gave them sight.”

**Discriminate Compassion.** God, in short, is not tame, and the idea of a God who merely feels sorry for people in distress is not a biblical idea. In past centuries, folks who daily studied the Bible understood that they were not to be indiscriminate in their compassion. For example, when Charles Chauncey preached a sermon in 1752 before the Society for Encouraging Industry and Employing the Poor, he told his compassionate listeners that they were

restrained as to the Distribution of [their] Charity; not being allowed to dispense it promiscuously, but obliged to take due Care to find out suitable Objects; distinguishing properly between those needy People who are *able*, and those who are *unable*, to employ themselves in Labour....

Referring to the apostle Paul’s famous maxim of 2 Thessalonians 3:10, “If a man will not work, he shall not eat,” Chauncey said:

The Command in my Text is plainly a *Statute of Heaven*, tying up your Hands from Charitable Distributions to the slothful poor. And, so far as appears to me, it would be an evident Breach of the Law of the

