

*Do not deprive the alien or the fatherless of justice, or take the cloak of the widow as a pledge.*¹⁸ *Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and the LORD your God redeemed you from there. That is why I command you to do this.*¹⁹ *When you are harvesting in your field and you overlook a sheaf, do not go back to get it. Leave it for the alien, the fatherless and the widow, so that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hands.*²⁰ *When you beat the olives from your trees, do not go over the branches a second time. Leave what remains for the alien, the fatherless and the widow.*²¹ *When you harvest the grapes in your vineyard, do not go over the vines again. Leave what remains for the alien, the fatherless and the widow.*²² *Remember that you were slaves in Egypt. That is why I command you to do this. Deuteronomy 24:17-22*

God Commands Compassion

How do you react when your pastor starts talking about abstract concepts? I mean the big ideas that pastors like to talk about. Sometimes, they can sound so theoretical that members lose interest or fail to see how that matters to their lives. But one of the founding principles of the Lutheran faith is that all theology is practical. Now, when we say that, we don't mean what "practical" means when we're talking about other things. We do not mean that theology comes down to what works. When we say that all theology is practical, what we mean is that all those big ideas apply to our lives or to our hearts in some real way. Today, God's Word leads us to consider one of those abstract ideas: compassion. And I hope that when we're done, you'll see that compassion isn't just something that guys like me like to talk about. It's something that needs to be a part of our lives. **God commands compassion.**

What is compassion? Another word for it is mercy. But do we understand that word any better? I usually explain mercy or compassion like this: you're walking through Wal-Mart and you come around a corner and suddenly, there's a three or four year old child in front of you. That child is desperately crying, "Mommy!" but when you look around, there's no mommy. The child has gotten separated and is terrified. So do you just shrug your shoulders and say, "That's so sad," and go on shopping? No! You look around for mommy. If you don't find her, you take that child and ask the manager to page mommy. You summon your best parental manner and you try to comfort that child until mommy shows up. That's compassion. And notice how real and practical it is. It touches what we do. It drives us to invest our time and our effort in another person's need.

I.

God commands compassion. But why should I care? Even though you will not find either the words "mercy" or "compassion" anywhere in the text we have before us this morning, God is commanding those attitudes. Now, he doesn't talk about children lost at Wal-Mart. He talks about widows, orphans and aliens – which means foreigners, not people from outer space. And he gives some pretty specific commands about them. He says, "**Do not deprive the alien or the fatherless of justice, or take the cloak of the widow as a pledge.**" The first part is pretty clear: don't deprive foreigners or orphans of justice. In most societies, recent immigrants and orphans struggle financially. When they're wronged, they can't afford fancy lawyers and it's easy to run them down. As a society and as individuals, we should not take advantage of that fact.

The other part might be a little harder to understand. What does it mean to take a widow's cloak as a pledge? In the ancient world, widows had a very hard time. It was very difficult for them to operate a farm or a business and most of them had to depend on relatives or on charity to survive. If they had children, it was even worse. So sometimes, widows would borrow money from relatives or friends just to put food on the table. Since they had no other collateral, they would give their cloak, which was the most precious thing they did have. Understand that at that time, most people had only one or two sets of clothing. That cloak was also that poor woman's blanket. If she gave it to you as collateral on a loan, she would shiver all night long without it. Compassion called for people to loan to those in need without demanding this kind of sacrifice.

The rest of the reading deals with harvesting. It uses three examples: wheat, olives and grapes. In each case, God commands the farmers of Israel not to go back and get the fruits they missed on their first pass through. They were supposed to leave that for the poor, who had no social security or welfare payments. God expects the people whom he has blessed with physical prosperity to support those who live in need.

Compassion is always going to cost you. Stopping to help that child in the Wal-Mart might very well mess up the rest of your day. You might be late for everything else you have to do that day and you might even find yourself trying to make up the difference by speeding and then you get a ticket. God commanded those farmers in Israel to give up part of their crop – the crop they planted and tended and worked for all year long. God commanded them to loan money without any kind of collateral. You know that if you do that, some people are going to take advantage of your generosity and not pay you back. God commanded his people to stand up for people who could never pay them back. Doing that almost always puts you on a collision course with people who have money and power. They just might make you pay.

Compassion is expensive. Why would we ever do it? God told Israel, “**Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and the LORD your God redeemed you from there. That is why I command you to do this.**” The people that Moses was talking to when he said these words could remember what it felt like to be at the bottom of society. Now, this was forty years after they left Egypt, so what they remembered was what it felt like as children. For four decades, they had been free. But God had given them that freedom. God’s great act of saving them was the basis for the new attitude that God called them to have. God expects compassion to be a hallmark of his people.

That’s hard for us. If you don’t believe me, leave behind the easy example of the toddler at Wal-Mart and think about real life situations. Think about the high school student that nobody likes. How hard is it to cross the lines and sit with that kid at lunch and offer friendship to him or her? It isn’t just the grief you’ll get from your own friends, often those kids are unpopular because they’re not very pleasant to be around. So you lose either way. Think about people who stop you on the street and ask for money or who camp out by stop lights and hold up signs asking for help. Think about the appeals that you see on television. Every dollar you give to those people comes out of your pocket.

I could go on and on, but the point is clear. It’s hard for us to give up our time, our popularity, our money to help other people. We fear that there will be no end to it. The more we offer, the more people will take advantage of us. And we don’t really want to give up too much of our time, our money, our effort. The real problem is selfishness. God actually says that if we’re generous, he will bless us. He’ll make sure we’re alright. But we don’t easily believe that. The real problem is that each and every one of us was born a sinner. That means we were born looking out for number one. We are convinced that we have to take care of ourselves first. That attitude is the exact opposite of what God commands here. Compassion demands that I sacrifice for someone else. And that goes against all that we are by nature.

So why would we ever do it? Because Israel isn’t the only people that God saved from slavery. Every one of us was born a slave to sin. We were born slaves to our own ego and our own desires. Left to ourselves, we would never show real compassion to anyone. If we ever seemed to, we’d break our arms patting ourselves on the back and telling ourselves how great we are. Either way, we’d be condemning ourselves to an eternity in hell because hell is God’s just punishment for selfishness and lack of compassion. But God had compassion on us poor, miserable sinners. God looked down from heaven and saw that we were born slaves and we could never escape. So he sent his Son to free us. He sent Jesus to live as he calls us to live, in perfect compassion. He sent Jesus to die in our place, to suffer our hell. When he was finished, he rose and told us that we are free. Our sin and our selfishness are paid for. It was God’s mercy that drove him to sacrifice his Son. And it was the Son’s mercy that drove him to lay down his life to set us free.

When God announced that to us, he changed us. He gave us faith and made us new creatures. Every time God announces that gospel message he reaches into our hearts and renews the work that he’s been doing in us since we first heard his message. That change makes us want to show compassion. It makes us seek his will, not for a reward, because we already know how much our God loves us. Now, because we’re still sinners, we still need to hear sermons like this and study passages like this. We still have to fight against the sin that wants to live totally and completely for me. But God has made us new. He has redeemed us from slavery to sin. And he calls us to make compassion a hallmark of our lives.

II.

God commands compassion. What should I do? Is God only concerned about cloaks and olives and grapes? Or is there a deeper meaning in all this? Of course, there is. You have to understand that in the Old Testament there are different kinds of laws. There are laws that governed how the Old Testament people were to worship. There are laws that governed Israelite society. And then there are laws that told what is right and

what is wrong. Which kind of laws do we have before us today? We have laws that told how to take care of the poor in Israel, so they are really civil laws, laws about running their country.

The worship laws and the civil laws were temporary. They only applied to Israel and only until Jesus came. God says we are free from these laws. So you don't have to worry about whether you're sinning if you go back and pick the tomatoes you missed on your first pass through your garden. But behind every civil law, there was a truth that God holds all people to. What is the universal truth, the big idea, behind these laws? It's what we've been talking about: compassion. Mercy. Love that is moved to help people in distress.

That is what God commands us today. It doesn't matter how you do it. You don't have to follow the things commanded in these verses, because they don't really apply to our society. You are free to choose how you will show compassion. You can decide to send a fixed amount of money to charity every year or to volunteer at a local nursing home. You can decide that you're going to mow the lawn and shovel the sidewalk of the elderly lady who lives next door. You can decide that you're going to be a friend to that person in your school or your office who needs one. And there are hundreds of thousands of other things you can decide to do. None is better or worse than another. It would be wrong for me to tell you you're sinning if you go over your garden a second time. It would be wrong for me to tell you you're sinning if you don't contribute money to the neighbor kid who's walking for cancer. It would be wrong for me to tell you're sinning if you don't throw a couple of bucks to the guy holding up the sign by the stop light. You are free to choose.

But it would also be wrong and sin if you used that freedom to ignore this command of God. Compassion is not optional. It's not something that you check off your list – "I did that. I'm good." Compassion is a way of life. It's constantly being moved to help those who are in need. God expects you to live it, day in and day out. Freedom doesn't make this easy. It increases our responsibility and our struggle to live as God calls us to.

Do we take this command seriously? Or do we have to admit that it's easy for us to retreat into selfishness? It's so easy for us to make excuses to silence our consciences. It's so easy for us put ourselves first. That's not what God did for us. He sacrificed his Son for us. It's sin for us to refuse to sacrifice for others. But that sin is also forgiven. Jesus died and paid even for our selfishness. God has wiped that sin away for ever. As his servant, I forgive you now for all the sin you're guilty of and all the guilt you feel.

I call you to go out joyfully as a child of God and live a life of compassion. It will be work. You will wrestle with it. But rejoice to be a child of God. Rejoice even in the struggle, because you are fighting against the sin that you were born with. The only reason you are willing to engage that sin is because the Holy Spirit has called you by the gospel and made you new. Rejoice and show compassion because God has loved you and he promises that he will bless you, even in this difficult work. Trust him and his work for you and in you. Amen.