

Building More Compassionate Hearts

Dublin Baptist Church

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Introduction: There are certain regrets in life that fall under the category of what might be called, "If only I'd known it was you..." "I would have behaved differently if only I'd known it was you."

An author wrote of the time that Mark Twain was returning from a very successful three weeks of fishing in Maine. Although the fishing season in Maine was closed, Twain fished anyway. On his train ride home, he started bragging about his very large catch to the only other person in the club car who was not too enthusiastic.

Finally, Twain asked him, "By the way, who are you?" "I'm the game warden of the state of Maine," the man said. "Who are you?" Twain nearly swallowed his cigar. "To be perfectly truthful, Warden, I'm the biggest liar in the whole United States." "I would have never done what I did; I would have never said what I said if I'd only known it was you."

But I think that the ultimate regret story along these lines is one that Jesus told 2,000 years ago. It might be the

single most sobering story he ever told. It is found in the gospel of Matthew, chapter 25.

Matthew 25:31–45 (NKJV)

³¹ “When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory. ³² All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats. ³³ And He will set the sheep on His right hand, but the goats on the left. ³⁴ Then the King will say to those on His right hand, ‘Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: ³⁵ for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; ³⁶ I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me.’ ³⁷ “Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You drink? ³⁸ When did we see You a stranger and take You in, or naked and clothe You? ³⁹ Or when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?’ ⁴⁰ And the King will answer and say to them, ‘Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me.’ ⁴¹ “Then He will also say to those on the left hand, ‘Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared

for the devil and his angels: ⁴² for I was hungry and you gave Me no food; I was thirsty and you gave Me no drink; ⁴³ I was a stranger and you did not take Me in, naked and you did not clothe Me, sick and in prison and you did not visit Me.’ ⁴⁴ “Then they also will answer Him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see You hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to You?’ ⁴⁵ Then He will answer them, saying, ‘Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me.’

Can you imagine carrying that regret into eternity?

1. Now Jesus is not saying in this story that you earn your way into heaven by doing good deeds.
2. ***He is saying that the ultimate test of a transformed life is a compassionate heart.***

The Apostle John put it like this: "If anyone does not love their brother or sister whom they have seen, they cannot love God whom they have not seen. If anyone says that they love God, but they do not love their brother or sister, they are a liar."

3. And I'll tell you one of the most sobering parts of this story to me. Jesus doesn't say to the goats, "You oppressed the least of these." He doesn't say, "You went around burning crosses in yards. You robbed them and engaged in acts of violence against them." He doesn't say, "You did bad things," at all. He just says, "You did nothing. You looked away. You decided that having a bigger house maybe or a nicer car was worth working pretty hard. But helping other people was not worth working very hard.

4. "You decided that you had more important things to do, but you were wrong." The day is coming when you will regret that more than you can imagine. Now I think every one in this room wants to build a heart of compassion. Otherwise, you wouldn't be here.

So what do you do? I'm going to get very concrete now because I know almost everybody in this room has a quite busy life, commitments that you cannot walk away from.

How do you build a more compassionate heart? I want to give you one thought. This comes from a man named **Jim Wallace** who has written a book called "**Faith Works.**" And he gives a kind of starting point for people

who want to build compassionate hearts. So I want to tell you the phrase that he offers and then kind of unpack it.

"The place to start is here: You've got to get out of the house." Here's the idea: We all tend to live in a little slice of the world where we feel comfortable. Here are some things that really do happen when we get out of the house:

1. WE SEE THE WORLD LIKE JESUS SEES THE WORLD.

So I spend my life. I go to school. I shop. I work. I go to church. I play with people who are like me. Our society just divides folks up that way. It puts all kinds of real subtle barriers in between different kinds of people. And as long as I don't get out of the house, people who live in other conditions, people who are different from me—different language, different accent, different skin color, and different economic conditions—they're just not on the radar screen. They're just not in my mind and heart.

Usually what transforms people when it comes to this business of extension, of building more compassionate hearts, is not a great talk, not a good book, not a powerful documentary or a real moving film. **It's a real life experience that;**

- **grips your heart**

- **and seizes your vision**
- **and immerses you into the life of a real person.**

When you get out of the house you begin to really see the world the way Jesus sees the world. Not through the lens of our differences but through the lens of common needs.

I have a very deep conviction that if you will do that, if you'll get outside your normal world, **if you know to serve and pray for a real person your heart will be touched**. God will just work in you in that way, and you will want to extend your hand. You will begin to think about how you might do that, not because somebody is trying to make you or because you feel like you ought to. **It will come from inside you.**

On the other hand, I'm here to tell you that if you don't take that step, if you don't get out of the house, your attention will simply be devoted to other things. It just will. And over time, your heart will get smaller and colder. ***And the day is coming when you will face a mountain of regret, not so much for the wrong things you did but for the wonderful things you did not do.***

2. YOU SEE PEOPLE THAT GOD LOVES & JESUS DIED FOR.

I want to tell you friends, something happens when you get out of the house. ***Something happens in the world and something happens in you. You touch the world but the world also touches you.***

In the book by Jim Wallace that I mentioned, he tells about a lawyer named Dale who was into big deals. He had an income in the high six-figures. He helped negotiate the contract for Dolphin Stadium in Miami. But he began to get out of the house one day, and it changed his life. He started working at the Good News Soup Kitchen in Tallahassee, and this is what he writes.

"I showed up every day in my three-piece suit to help from 11:00 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. They assigned me door duty. My job was to make sure street people lining up to eat waited in an orderly fashion. Every day I stood at the door for an hour chatting with the street people waiting to eat.

"Before I came to Good News, a street person was a meaningless term. It defined a **group** without defining anybody in **particular** from the comfort of my car, my suburban home, my downtown law office. Street people were just **those** people out there somewhere. Then one day an elderly woman named Helen came running to the

Good News door. A man was chasing her and threatening to kill her if she didn't give him back his dollar.

"Tell him he can't hit me because it's church property,' she pleaded. In true lawyerly fashion, I explained that Good News is not actually a church, but he still couldn't hit her. After 20 minutes of failed mediation, I bought peace by giving them each a dollar. That evening I happened to be standing on the corner of Park and Monroe, and in the red twilight I spied a lonely silhouette struggling in my direction from Tennessee Street.

"A poor street person,' I thought, as the figure inched closer. I was about to turn back to my own concerns when I detected something familiar in that shadowy figure—the red scarf, the clear plastic bag with white border, the mismatched shoes. 'My God,' I said in my thoughts, 'that's Helen.' My eyes froze on her as she limped by and turned up Park. No doubt she'd crawl under a bush to spend the night.

My mind had always dismissed the sight of a street person in seconds. I could not expel the picture of Helen. That night as I lay in my \$1,500 deluxe temperature controlled waterbed, I couldn't sleep. A voice kept asking, 'Where is Helen sleeping tonight?' No street person had ever interfered with my sleep. But the

shadowy figure with the red scarf and the plastic bag and the mismatched shoes had followed me home. I made a fatal mistake. **I learned her name.**"

That's what happens when you get involved. You learn somebody's name. **And when you learn somebody's name, you're never quite the same.** Why is it that one name, one face can be so powerful? I'll tell you why.

Because that's the face of somebody made in the image of God. Because that name is the name of somebody that Jesus died for.

Jesus said in some way we don't fully understand that when you extend a hand to someone, no matter how ragged they may look to you, "whatever you do for the least of these, you do for Me."

Mother Teresa used to send members of her community to a home for the dying. She wrote of a young woman from a well-to-do family who spent three hours caring for a dying man brought in from the streets who was covered with maggots. And Mother Teresa said to this young woman, "You be very careful. You be very loving as you touch him for there is Jesus in the distressing disguise."

That's why when you get out of the house and learn a name and see a face something changes in you—for there is Jesus in the distressing disguise. Now that's why every church needs to be absolutely committed to building a community of women and men who extend themselves. This is just core to the message of Jesus.

3. YOU SEE JUST HOW STRONG THE TUG OF THE WORLD IS IN YOUR LIFE.

Now for everybody here that is a parent, I want to make a very strong plea. Get your kids involved. They need it. How many of you have or have had teenagers around your house? Raise your hands, would you? How many of them have ever been to the Galleria Mall? Now I'll tell you something. This is not a bad thing to go to the Galleria Mall.

But the more time you spend in a mall, the more your heart will say, "I need, I want, I've got to have." It's just that way for me and for all of us.

So we need to take our little hearts to some places that will cause them to say other things. We need to take our hearts, and we need to form our kid's hearts by taking them to places where hearts will say things like, "I care. I weep. I've got to give. I've got to serve. I've got to make

my life about something bigger than just my own comfort and success."

I promise you at the end of your life, you will not regret one act of compassion. You will not regret one moment that you spent, one dollar that you gave, one tear that you shed. You won't regret any of it because extension is Jesus' way of life. And every one of us who knows and follows him has been on the receiving end of his compassion.

4. YOU GET A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF WHAT GOD HAS DONE FOR YOU.

You see, we don't fully understand the story that Jesus told until you understand this: **that we too are one of the least of these—me too.**

This is not a story about big, strong, clever, adequate, bright people helping little, weak, helpless, grateful, dependant people. And folks who enter compassion ministries with the romanticized picture about how my strength and my adequacy will bring magic, easy solutions to people that I classify as needy will not last very long.

I believe that the greatest poverty of all is the poverty of spirit, the poverty of compassion. And that can co-

exist with a real big bank account and a very high functioning title.

One day Jesus looked around at this world and saw all the needs and the hunger and the aloneness and the sin and the guilt and the poverty. And Jesus lived—think about this—at the right hand of God in unspeakable glory and splendor. But Jesus said to himself, "**I've got to get out of the house.**" And he crossed every barrier and boundary to extend himself in love to every human being who would receive him.

CONCLUSION: On August 7, 2000 we stood before a judge in a Ukrainian courtroom and answered questions before his court about why we wanted to adopt Alona. After a while the judge excused himself, went to his chambers and wrote in long hand his decision. The forty to forty-five minutes that he was gone were emotionally intense as we waited.

When he finally reentered the courtroom he very stoically read his decision; Whereas Olena Murgan is an orphan, and whose parents are dead, and whereas she is unwanted by any citizen of the Ukraine and whereas... and I don't think I heard anything beyond that. I knew she had understood in her language what he had said, and I just prayed, please Lord, don't let him say those

words again. But despite that prayer, he repeated those same words two additional times in reading his decree. I wanted to cry out at the top of my voice, we want you, we love you.

Later that evening the real truth that God intended for me really hit me. That's exactly what God has said and done for each of us. I want you, I love you, I sent my son to die for you. Please accept my love.