

The Compassionate Life

Rich Nathan

March 4-5, 2000

The Life of a Disciple Series

Luke 16:19-31

I want to continue in a series that I have been doing for a few weeks on “The Life of a Disciple.” As I mentioned last week, we are attempting to put together a process here at Vineyard Columbus that truly makes disciples out of people who have given their lives to Christ. It is the goal of the Christian life to become imitators of Christ. And one of the most notable things about the life of Jesus when he walked here on earth was how evident his compassion was for those who were in need. If you were to say, “Pick one characteristic of the life of Christ that most distinguished his life from other people’s lives,” you wouldn’t be far wrong to say, “Well, I guess I would point to his compassion.”

The word “compassion” is used quite a bit these days. George Bush is fond of talking about his brand of conservative politics. He calls it “compassionate conservatism.”

I recently read an article about a very well known Christian singer and performer who has sold millions of CDs and performs to packed arenas around the country. She recently went through a divorce. She was interviewed for this Christian music magazine. The reporter asked her about her divorce, which her husband, who was also a pretty well known Christian musician and performer, completely opposed. But she pressed for a divorce and apparently is now engaged to a well-known country music singer. In any case, in the course of the interview, she made this really interesting comment. She said, “My former husband has the kind of valor toward ideals that would make people overthrow governments and run armies. I think we all have different gifts. And I think that his particular gift was like that of a standard bearer. And if I have a gift, it is the gift of compassion.” She went on in the article to talk about how compassionate she was. Of course, the obvious question is “When you use the word compassion, Miss Famous Rock and Roll Star, who is the chief beneficiary of your compassion? Your husband? Your children? Or you?”

You see, in this particular person’s mind, she was compassionate. But by that she means, “I am very gentle and tender toward myself and my own failings.” For her compassion means leniency toward herself. She easily lets herself off the hook. By compassion, she certainly did not mean profound concern and care for a husband whom she calls a “standard bearer.” And here’s another thing. Not only might she be confused about whom compassion is actually to be aimed towards – oneself or toward others, but she sets compassion over against keeping standards.

There is lots of confusion today as the word “compassion” and “compassionate” is tossed about so widely regarding what exactly compassion is. What would it look like if you lived a compassionate life in imitation of Jesus Christ?

In 1990 a homeless shelter administrator in New York City was severely reprimanded and nearly lost his job when he proposed that residents of a men's homeless shelter in New York City not be allowed to wear dresses, high-heeled shoes or wigs when sleeping in the shelter. Here was a man who was proposing that because of the disruption and discomfort caused to other men, that if men wanted to use a homeless shelter, they could not come dressed in drag.

Well, this administrator was severely rebuked by his boss and also by the newspapers as being completely lacking in compassion. His boss said that, “There is a real misconception of what we are trying to do in our shelters. We are certainly not trying to curtail freedom of expression or in any way try to shape the behavior of clients. Such attempt to shape the behavior of clients is completely inappropriate and will not be tolerated.”

What does it mean to be compassionate? Dan McMurry, a Tennessee sociology professor, did some research as a participant observer in which he posed as a homeless man in cities throughout the US. McMurry wrote that in city after city all he had to do was line up and he was fed. He also received housing, towels, blankets, soap, medicine, dental care, stamps, and newspapers. He said that, “No one ever made any demand of me. In fact, I was treated as an infant in a high chair.” Now, is that compassionate? The people who gave Dan McMurry all of these things certainly did so out of good will and would likely think of themselves as compassionate people, but were they?

Let me give you one more illustration. Marvin Olasky decided to be a participant observer of American compassion. And so, in March of 1990, he decided to dress up like a typical homeless middle aged guy in urban America. He put on three used t-shirts and two dirty sweaters. He equipped himself with a stocking cap and plastic bag. He removed his wedding ring and got some dirt on his hands. He walked with a slow shuffle down the street. He said that day after day he was given lots of food, pills of various kinds, lots of offers of clothing and shelter. But he was never asked to do anything, not even to remove his tray after eating. There was one thing that he never got even though he asked for it over and over again. He said, “I never got a Bible.” At Zaccheus’ Kitchen, which offered very good, free breakfasts at a particular local church, a sweet, young volunteer kept putting food down in front of him and kept asking if he wanted more. Finally, he said, “No, I am full. But could I have a Bible?” “Puzzled, she tried to figure out what I had said. ‘Do you want a bagel, a bag?’

‘No, I want a Bible.’

She said, ‘I can get you more food.’

He said, ‘I don’t want any more food. All I want is a Bible.’

She said, 'Look, if you are going to cause trouble here, you are going to need to leave.'

He said, 'I don't want to cause trouble, all I want is a Bible.'

Finally, she said, 'Look, we don't give out Bibles here.'"

Compassion. What does it mean to be a truly compassionate person? Do you know the Bible uses some of the most graphic words in communicating to us the fact that God is compassionate and that Jesus, God Incarnate, God come in the flesh, lived a life of compassion among us? The word compassion is used about eight dozen times of God, if you are looking at an English Bible and hundreds of times, if you simply translate some of the other words like loving kindness, and merciful, and pity. But both in the Hebrew Old Testament and the Greek New Testament there are some wonderfully rich evocative words to describe the compassion of God and the compassion of the Lord Jesus Christ.

In speaking of God in the Old Testament, we read the word "racham" which means to have mercy upon; to be compassionate towards. This racham that is imputed to God is closely related to another Hebrew word "rechem" which means womb.

Here's the idea. God has a feeling of pity or compassion toward an individual in need similar to the kind of connection that a mother has toward the child of her womb. It is the kind of feeling that is evoked by a small helpless baby. God's tie to those in need is like a mother's tie to a baby in her womb.

In the New Testament there are a number of words that are translated in our English Bible compassion. But probably the most colorful is the Greek word "splachna," which literally means your innards – your spleen and liver and kidneys, your guts. And so when it says that Jesus felt compassion toward the leper or Jesus had pity on the blind man who was calling out for mercy, or when Jesus saw the widow who was weeping over the death of her only son, Jesus felt "splachna". Literally the Greek word is splachnizomia. He felt something from the depth of his innards.

Here is the idea. Whenever we talk about compassion, one thing that we have to keep straight is that it is a deep personal connection like the mother for the child of her womb. And it has to do something with the depth of our beings. It is no light or superficial thing. It involves your innards, something that just wells up in you.

The English word compassion also gives us a little bit of a nuance. Because the word compassion is actually a compound word – *com*, means with; and *passion*, which comes from the Latin "pati" which means to suffer. So compassion also communicates not only deep personal connection, deep personal feeling, but also suffering with someone. Real sympathy for a person and a desire to relieve

their misery. Compassion, in other words, doesn't permit any distance between you and another.

Here is what I would like to do today. Because of all the confusion surrounding the word compassion and all the ways that it is used and misused, particularly in American political life, and by media stars, such as that rock and roller that I talked of earlier, I want to, as I continue in this series on the Life of a Disciple, talk about The Compassionate Life. Let's ask God's presence.

Luke 16:19-31

"There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores and longing to eat what fell from the rich man's table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores. The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried. In hell, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. So he called to him, 'Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.' But Abraham replied, 'Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony. And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.' He answered, 'Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my father's house, for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.' Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.' 'No, father Abraham,' he said, 'but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.' He said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.'"

So we read in Luke 16: "There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus." It is interesting that this rich man in Jesus' story – and by the way there is significant debate about whether this is a parable or not; Jesus doesn't introduce it by saying that it is a parable; some people are concerned about calling it a parable because they are concerned about eliminating the literalness of hell that is spoken about – but I do think it is interesting that the rich man in this story is un-named while the poor man is not just any poor man, he has a name. He is a person and his name is Lazarus. This communicates to me what an amazing difference of perspective that God has compared to the perspective of the world toward people. To polite society, to all of the MBAs and all the Drs. and all the those in upper management and to the movers and shakers of society driving by in their BMWs, Volvos, and Mercedes, Lazarus would have amounted to a big zero. He is less than nothing. Lazarus was an eye sore, someone you had to walk around or step over on your way to your dinner reservation or to the theater or to a party.

The person in their minds who would have really made his mark and counted was the rich man. Oh, he was an important person. He is one of our friends. He is funny. He has a great sense of humor. The rich man knows how to dress, he knows how to choose a great bottle of wine. He knows how to eat a lobster. He knows all the maitre'ds in all the best restaurants and all of them know him. And they know where he wants to sit. He and his wife belong to a great country club and he is a scratch golfer. He has a boat, which he takes out in the summer. He always spends a week in Vail in the winter skiing. At work he is a finder, great at developing new business accounts. He is the ultimate sales person.

And then we read this. If you go up a few verses to Luke 16:15, "What is highly valued among men is detestable in God's sight." How different the standard of evaluation is between God and us. What is highly esteemed, knowing all the right people and all the right places, and having all the right contacts – in God's book this rich, popular, loved, urbane man doesn't even rank a name. He is nothing. He thinks he is something, but before God he is nothing.

But, oh, he is wealthy. It says he dressed in purple. In Jesus' day clothes made with purple dye were very expensive. The dye came from a shellfish and had to be manufactured through a very expensive process. That is why purple became associated with royalty and kings' robes historically were purple robes, since only a king or someone who was fabulously wealthy could afford to have their clothes dyed in this very expensive dye.

He was clothed in purple and linen, which was also very expensive. Apparently, his house was gated. You see this kind of style in the third world and even in this country more and more with the rise of gated communities. But I have come upon this particularly in the third world, in India and Haiti and throughout Asia. Wealthy people live behind these high walls and gates for their protection from the masses. It keeps the riff-raff away. It keeps the riff-raff out.

Now, who is Lazarus? Lazarus is the very picture and embodiment of misery. It says, "At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus." Apparently, he was unable to walk. He was a cripple, paralyzed, perhaps from some untreated accident.

In my travels in the third world, what you will often see is folks who have untreated injuries. There has been an absence of physical therapy, so many, many people will have withered limbs. One leg and then another leg that looks not much wider than a dog's tail just attached; or an arm that is just hanging there useless. This man maybe had lost the use of both of his legs because it says that he was laid at... The Greek word almost implies that he was flung in front of this gate; dumped, if you will, in front of this gate. He didn't get there by his own power. He was covered by sores. He was probably unable to properly care for himself, perhaps like a patient in a nursing home, who gets covered with bedsores. He is not able to turn or move very successfully.

And then there are the dogs. It says, “Even the dogs came and licked his sores.” His misery is compounded by these wild dogs that run in packs in third world countries. When you read about dogs in the New Testament, they are not generally talking about little golden retriever puppies that have just come out from a bath and are blow dried – shampooed hair with Bath and Body Works products and have a little blue bow around their necks. We are not talking about fluffy little golden retriever puppies. The dogs in India or in the Middle East or in Africa or Haiti are more like really large rats that are very scrawny. Many of them have no ears because their ears have been bitten off in fights. They have no tails. Some of them are limping around on three legs. They are covered with sores. And these pack dogs are coming and harassing him.

Lazarus’ neediness is shown by Jesus’ choice of his name. His name is Lazarus, which means “God is my helper.” In other words, here is a man who has no one in the world to assist him or help him, other than God. He has no human being to look to; no one to whom he can appeal for assistance; he is a man utterly without friends or loved ones. God alone is his portion. The rich man has a huge slice of this world. He has taken a big bite out of life. Lazarus doesn’t even get the crumbs, the scraps. He has nothing.

It is important for us to note that the Bible doesn’t say that there is something intrinsically wrong with being wealthy, that if you are wealthy you are automatically immoral. That if you live in a large house and dress in nice clothing there is something profoundly wrong with you. On the other hand, if you have very little, that your poverty automatically translates into goodness or godliness. The Bible is not a communist document. It doesn’t create class envy. It doesn’t suggest that all of the wealth of the wealthy is simply made on the backs of the poor. Indeed, the Bible speaks of the righteous wealthy. And I just want you to see this because I am going to note in a moment that this man’s problem went beyond his wealth.

If you have a Bible, will you turn with me to Job 31:16. Here is what Job says about himself before he lost all of his wealth. “If I have denied the desires of the poor or let the eyes of the widow grow weary, if I have kept my bread to myself, not sharing it with the fatherless – but from my youth I reared him as would a father, and from my birth I guided the widow – if I have seen anyone perishing for lack of clothing, or a needy man without a garment, and his heart did not bless me for warming him with the fleece from my sheep, I have raised my hand against the fatherless, knowing that I had influence in court, then let my arm fall from the shoulder, let it be broken off at the joint. For I dreaded destruction from God, and for fear of his splendor I could not do such things.”

Job was a wealthy man. The difference between Job and this rich man in Jesus’ story is that Job’s life was marked by generosity and compassion toward the poor and this rich man’s life was marked by stinginess and an utter lack of

compassion. Listen to me now. Do you know if you were to try to come up with one characteristic of the Devil you couldn't do a lot better than saying that he is by nature stingy. The rich man was a man energized by the enemy. The characteristic of hell is stinginess.

What are we talking about by stinginess? One thing that I see in the stingy person is a person who uses their wealth to control and dominate someone else rather than to release and bless them. You are not a generous person simply because you gave a lot, if in all of your giving there are dozens of strings attached. Unless you do exactly what I want and let me totally map out your life, I won't give you any money. You use your money or your wealth to control. You are a stingy person like the rich man in Jesus' story and not like Job. And very often people will end up rejecting your gifts saying, "I would rather not have your particular gift than have it with all the strings attached."

What is stinginess? The stingy person is a person who weighs out their gifts with great exactness. There is no abundance, no extravagance. They are the person who measures their tithes down to the dollar. Everything is done with great precision because there isn't an overflowing love that is generating this. They give out of duty, out of law, out of obligation, but not out of overflowing joy.

What is stinginess? The stingy person is always offended by teaching about giving. And always has their nose out of joint whenever any mention is made about money because they have an iron grip on their wallets and their hearts are closed.

The generous person is actually encouraged by teaching and exhortation about giving. The generous person says, "Yeah, wow, thanks, I really needed that. That was a great push."

I will bet this rich man was not only stingy in terms of his money, I will bet he was stingy in all of life – in compliments, in encouragements, in using his position to bless others. There is nothing wrong with wealth. But the question is are you a generous person, a releasing, blessing person or a stingy person?

Some of you might say, "Well, what does this have to do with me? I am no wealthy man or woman. I am no Abraham with his thousands of sheep or Job with his large estate. I live from paycheck to paycheck. I am getting hassled by my credit card company. My business is hassled by changes in insurance laws or government regulations. I kill myself to stay ahead of the competitors in business. I have to scrape and scrap in order to just get by." What does this story of the rich have to say to me or to you?

Perhaps the reason this man is described as a rich man is that he is a representative rich man. In some way or other every person is a rich man or woman. Virtually every one of us has a lot of something in our lives, and all of us

have some Lazarus in our lives whom we push to the back door and we dismiss and walk around outside of our gates. Maybe you are intellectually rich. You have had a great education. You love to read and discuss and debate. But you have no time for less educated Lazarus with his silly uninformed opinions and his lack of reading and intellectual rigor. For you, when you encounter these dull and dumb Lazaruses of the world, you overwhelm them with your superiority. We rich people who make others feel stupid or worthless or not capable of having an opinion worth listening to – have you ever done that? I have. Push them out by the back door somewhere.

Maybe your Lazarus is a fellow student in school, in your department, in your graduate program, who is just not very sharp. But the professors love your work and you are celebrated in your department and you have the job offers. You just don't have any time for stupid Lazarus, who is barely passing.

Maybe you are wealthy in love. You have a great family. You have loving friends. You are popular at your job or at school. You are surrounded by support. But then there is poor Lazarus, who sits alone at the lunch table or lives alone on your street. She is an angry widow that lives a couple of doors down that yells at the kids when they play in front of her house. Year after year she is growing more bitter.

Maybe the Lazarus in your life is the black sheep of your family. You know the sister or brother or child who has always been a problem from day one. The black sheep of your family – you know the one – who has always gotten in trouble or always had a problem, never did life the right way. But hey, we are busy, right? We can't exactly drop everything to call Lazarus up. Surely, we can be excused with not getting involved with our particular Lazarus. We are busy with our families. We are busy with our high demand jobs and our church commitments and prayer meetings where we are serving God. We can't exactly spend a bunch of time visiting with our Lazarus, can we? She is so needy. She is such a black hole of need. He is so annoying with his weird little habits and funny smell. He is so opinionated. She is such a talker and a complainer. There is always some other problem, some other ache and pain. I barely have enough time to pick up the phone or write a note. Surely, God will excuse me and let me off the hook, especially if I am busy doing God's work.

Friends, in some way or other, every one of us is a rich man or woman. It is not in property. And truthfully here in Vineyard many of us are wealthy in property. This is one of the reasons why we are finally going to get around to forming that group that I discussed with you on several occasions. A group that I have had in my heart for about 20 years. A group of folks who are making in the six figures who could get together with one another without envy, without fear, and challenge each other toward real generosity and greater simplicity of lifestyle.

But if we are not wealthy in property, then some of us are wealthy in friendships or we are wealthy in the respect of others. Or we are wealthy because we are loved or because we have the benefit of gifting and education. Or we are certainly wealthy because we do know Jesus Christ who is exceedingly wealthy. And into our lives God will bring a Lazarus. I will tell you there is not a one of us who doesn't have a Lazarus in our lives. Maybe they are an elderly relative who is in a nursing home. Maybe they are a brother or a sister with a major problem. Maybe your Lazarus is a single parent who hasn't a clue regarding how to raise their kids. Maybe your Lazarus is a person who has AIDS or some other disease that you find repugnant. Maybe your Lazarus is gay. Maybe they are mentally ill. Maybe they have Alzheimer's. But surely, there is someone in your life that you avoid, that you step around, that when you think of them you say, "No, I don't have any time or energy for that person." Surely, there is someone in your life that you have done very well in evading and avoiding.

Often, it is interesting, just as a side note, but truly the rich often salve their consciences as they avoid personal contact with their Lazarus' by being engaged in lots of activity on behalf of a mass of Lazarus'. Well, I can't get personally involved with that little scrappy beggar by my back door, but I am going to host a charity ball and give a large check to the Catholic Charities. I will make sure someone knows of my philanthropy.

Compassion shows up in our personal relationships, friends. Not in the great, grand and glorious things that you and I do that people take note of. It is in the personal, the mundane. Do you know not only is each of us a rich person, but at some time or other each one of us will be a Lazarus. That you will at some point have all of your security and all of your greatness and all of your gifts just ripped away so that the only one you can actually hope in is God. That you have nothing else in this world. Truly, friend, it seems that no one on earth can ever escape at some point being a Lazarus, being reduced and humiliated by your own dumb choices, perhaps.

Maybe you had an affair. Maybe you chose not to persevere in your marriage and you got a divorce. Maybe you got fired from a job. Maybe you have lost a spouse. Maybe things were just totally beyond your control.

It wasn't the result of your choices, but you like Job had the bottom drop out by things that were outside of your control. You lost a spouse. You had your fiancée break your engagement. You have a debilitating disease. At some point, we are all going to feel what it feels like to be Lazarus – to be needy and dependent; to have to rely on the generosity of others.

This story is a story about compassion. You know the Bible in the history of the church is replete with examples and glorious illustrations of people who were compassionate. If you are taking notes, I want to cite you one example. I could give you a dozen. But there was a man in the Old Testament named David, who

God said was a man after his own heart. In other words, David had a character that was very much like God's own character. When God looked at David, he saw a reflection of himself. And one of the things that characterized David was that David had a heart of kindness, a heart of compassion.

There is a wonderful story about King David in 2 Samuel 9 where David said, "Is there anyone still left of the house of Saul to whom I can show kindness for Jonathan's sake?" David meets up with the crippled son of Jonathan, this young man named Mephibosheth. When David said, "Is there anyone to whom I can show kindness?" his statement follows on the heels of his greatest victories. This statement in 2 Samuel 9 follows 2 Samuel 8, which describes David's victories over all of his enemies. He has defeated everyone in the surrounding countries. He is at the pinnacle of his success. Israel's borders are the largest they will ever be in the history of that nation. David's kingdom extends over all of modern day Lebanon, modern day Syria, modern day Jordan, portions of Egypt. He is sitting on top of the world and instead of being like most folks who are sitting on top of the world saying, "Now I am going to occupy myself with grand and large projects, my whole thing in life is vision." When he is sitting on top of the world, David says, "Is there anyone I can show kindness to?"

Here is the application for us. Vineyard Columbus right now is in its hey-day. We are building a very large new sanctuary. By God's grace, several thousand people have been added to this church in just the last 2-3 years. Last year nearly 900 people became part of this church. We are having 130 people join the church this weekend from our last newcomers' class. Vineyard Christian Fellowship of Columbus is right now in its hey-day. We are like King David, like the wealthy man. We are at the top of our game. In our position, can we have the heart of King David and say, "Is there anyone we can show kindness to? Can we as a church be not so preoccupied with the great, grand and large plans that we really would as individuals have time for the Lazarus'? I think God wants that kind of a church.

I love stories of compassion, especially by people in this church. Let me share with you what compassion looks like.

I want to tell you a story about two guys. I am going to call them Bob and Greg. Bob and Greg were gay partners and they were both infected with HIV and living with AIDS. Bob had met some people who attended Vineyard and began asking spiritual questions. These folks invited him to their small group and the Lord began speaking powerful words of love to Bob. He accepted Jesus as his Savior and he took the steps to walk in obedience. He left Greg and moved in with his parents. Greg still came by to see him, but he didn't understand the change in his former partner and he especially hated the Vineyard because they got between him and his lover. Eventually, Bob died of AIDS. Greg was living in a nursing home in Columbus when a couple of volunteers from Project Compassion, our ministry to those who have HIV and AIDS, came to visit him.

Greg was slowly dying from AIDS. His faithful friend, one of the volunteers, took him places, spent time with him when he was lonely. He found out later on that she was a member of the Vineyard and he told her exactly why he didn't like her church. But Greg liked her because she was patient and showed him love. Trust was built between them. Eventually, he committed his life to the Lord and both Bob and Greg died knowing the Lord because folks in this church took great measures in reaching out and personally touching their two lives. In practicing the compassionate life, some of you will want to call Sharon Fryer and find out more about Project Compassion, our ministry to those with AIDS and who are HIV positive.

Or how about this story. There is a woman I am going to call Sylvia who is 57 years old and mentally ill. She has been at a particular nursing home here in town for almost 6 years. We have an outreach to that nursing home. Sylvia is aching to go home and is often depressed. Recently she was admitted to one of the hospitals. One of the women in our church went to visit her. Sylvia's hands are stained with tobacco. She coughs all the time. She grabs this woman's hands and tells her of her fears, her desires to be out there in the real world. The woman from our church said that she always just wants to cry when she gets together with Sylvia because Sylvia is so desperate. She asks for backrubs. She is mentally ill, but she asks that the Bible be read to her. This last visit a nurse came in and said, "Do you want to be changed now?" Sylvia said, "No, not until my minister – that is what she calls this woman who visits her from our church, her minister – leaves." And then she grabs the girl from our church and kisses her and says, "Thank you for not forgetting about me. My family has forgotten about me, but you haven't." The woman from our church said, "I prayed so much to the Lord for her to make a provision for Sylvia, to comfort her in her loneliness." In her testimony she writes, "But I know that God has a plan to ease Sylvia's loneliness and her isolation and I am part of that plan."

Sylvia is her Lazarus. Like Bob and Greg were a couple of other people's Lazarus'.

I said at the front end that there is a lot of confusion about the meaning of compassion today. And much of what goes by the name compassion is actually just standardless, thoughtless charity that often does more harm than good. The problem in the 19th Century was that as a result of the rise that has become known as the social gospel, preachers and churches and charities emphasized God's love, but not God's holiness. They urged charity without a challenge. They declared that any kind of challenge to people, any demand placed on people, any conditions for receiving something was cruel. The new kind of charity is a charity without challenge, a charity without demand, a charity that is really indiscriminate.

Marvin Olasky, who I mentioned at the front end, described his experience of living out in the streets of the city of Washington for several days and of asking

for a Bible, said in a wonderful book that I would encourage you to pick up. We have a few copies in our bookstore. It is called *The Tragedy of American Compassion*. Olasky said that one of the problems of modern charity is that it demands so little of the poor and also demands so little of the wealthy. We write a check to a charity. We participate in a jog-a-thon. We watch our favorite comedian or rock star on a telethon and that entertains us and we call up and make a contribution. So little is asked of us in the modern American practice of compassion. And so little is asked of the poor.

Friends, the compassionate life is a really challenging life. It actually requires personal involvement with a Lazarus. Let me read to you another story from our nursing home ministry.

There is a man named John that we have gotten to know. John is slowly dying. He is in a wheelchair, but is only in his 50's. He has many health problems and I think he is dying of liver cancer. John often cries about his fear of death and of having to die alone. One Thursday, he looked particularly bad. His ankles were painfully swollen. He had a catheter, but was completely exposed. John also has many open sores. I watch my friend, Chris, minister to John, lay hands on his dirty face, hug and tear up with him. Small group leaders, make sure you sign up our group for our Church Without Walls program through Fruit of the Vine.

She didn't walk around Lazarus. There is a demand. And, indeed, a demand on those asking for help.

One of the members of the Vineyard recently donated a home for the church to use on behalf of unwed mothers. He just gave it. Here is a note from one of the residents from this home. I love this because I think it sums up what I am talking about today. The woman writes:

My name is Fran, a recent resident of Mary's House (that is what our pro-life ministry calls this particular home – Mary's House, a House for Unwed Mothers, like Mary the Lord Jesus' mother). Before being taken in, I was sliding away from the life that God intended for me. I ended up pregnant, unwed and in financial disaster from making wrong choices. My real family washed their hands of me and luckily I kept my job through my pregnancy. But I was given a chance by a few caring people who I knew nothing of, nor they of me. They said that what people like me needed is someone to give them a chance to turn around. Well, turn around is exactly what I did. By Mary's House providing me with housing, I was able to pay off my debts, allowing me to keep my baby and my mind free from all the miry pits I could have fallen into. Mary's House gave me furniture, hope, a car when mine blew up, and a stern, but loving hand to guide me. (Oh, I love that. Not indiscriminate do-goodism, but a firm and loving hand to guide me) They haven't criticized my choices as long as they were the right ones. I have been in retail, but am looking toward a day care profession so that I can learn more about children and be closer to the beautiful 8-month old son God has

entrusted me with on earth. I have decided faith and love of God will be the provider and not money or big titles. The people at Mary's House have been supportive in all that I do and have protected me and my baby. I have a long way to go to be a good mother and a Christian. But at least now I have hope.

I want to close with this. Developing a heart of compassion, real compassion, not the standardless, easy giving, but high demand involvement and commitment to some Lazarus in your life. There are few things you could do that would more imitate the Lord Jesus Christ and God our Father, than really getting connected to some unlovely person and allowing God to fill you with racham. The Hebrew way of expressing the tender love of a mother for the child of her womb. We say, "Holy Spirit, free us from our avoidance, from our stinginess, from our unwillingness to be vulnerable. Help us, O God, to be motivated by the motivation of Jesus," splachnizomai – your innards seized with compassion.

One of our commitments in developing The Life of a Disciple is to grow a church of people who are characterized by the compassion of Jesus Christ. Though he was wealthy, Jesus became a Lazarus for our sakes. Born in a stable, lived as a poor man. He was rejected by everyone. Spit at, stripped naked. Jesus was nailed to a cross where he dies, utterly forsaken. But Christ didn't remain a Lazarus, he rose powerfully from the dead after three days and then ascended into heaven where he opened up the way to have a deep intimate personal relationship with God. You can have a relationship with God through Christ, who is alive today. It doesn't matter if you've lived life as a rich man or woman or Lazarus or something in-between. Let's pray.