

discipleship essentials

Essentials for Spiritual Leadership Study Guide

CHRISTIAN CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT

LESSON 4: MERCY AND COMPASSION

INTRODUCTION

This lesson is part of a Disciple Essentials module titled Christian Character Development. When Christians fail and ministries fall apart, it is often due to a lack of character development in the leader. A Christian leader must take character development seriously, because discipleship requires that we grow in Christ-like character. This module examines a number of Christian character traits that are necessary for developing servant leadership. We will look at what the Bible teaches about these traits, and examples of Jesus and others displaying them. Godly character should be evident in the life of every follower of Christ, especially those who are leading others.

The Study Guide is intended for an individual to look deeper into a specific lesson on their own. The lessons can be used in conjunction with other Discipleship Essentials materials, such as the video and audio productions found on www.discipleshipessentials.org.

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CHRISTIAN CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT

LESSON 4: MERCY AND COMPASSION

WHAT IS IT ABOUT?

This lesson explores the Christian character traits of mercy and compassion, how Jesus and others in the Bible exhibited them, and how we can develop them in our lives.

JUST SO YOU KNOW...

Some people are more naturally compassionate than others. They have empathy, the ability to feel with and suffer with people. They are in control of their own emotions and willingly express them. Some cultures and communities are more demonstrative of their emotions than others. Jesus was the only perfect human being, and since He exhibited compassion and mercy, it is God's will for us to do the same! Consider how your life and your community would be different if everyone exhibited these character traits!

GETTING STARTED

1. When you see someone suffering or going through a very difficult ordeal, what is the response inside your head and heart? Are you more likely to help, or avoid them?

2. What makes someone worthy of your time and attention?



STUDY

- ❖ **THE VIRTUES OF MERCY AND COMPASSION:** In previous lessons we have examined how right beliefs lead to right actions. Mercy and Compassion are not considered desirable in some cultures, but God thinks otherwise. Jesus demonstrated incredible mercy and compassion, and we, His followers, should do the same. When we are merciful and compassionate, we consider the lives of others to be of great value and concern to us.
- ❖ **MERCY:** Two ways that God expresses His love to us are through His grace and through His mercy. Grace and mercy are related. Very simply, grace is giving someone a gift they haven't earned, and mercy is withholding a punishment that is deserved. Instead of trying to 'get even' with those who have offended us, the one who shows mercy offers unconditional forgiveness.
 - What does the Bible say about the virtue of mercy? Read [Luke 6:36-37](#) and [Colossians 3:13](#). According to these verses, what is the basis for showing mercy towards others?

- **Mercy is not Excusing Sin:** While mercy chooses to forgive someone when it is not deserved, it does not excuse sin. Sin is breaking God's law, but mercy extends love instead of judgement (while still believing that sin is destructive and taking a stand against it).
- **Mercy is not Indulgent:** When we give others all of their wants and desires, we are not extending love and mercy to them. This is indulgence and in some forms can encourage sin and unhealthy behaviour. Mercy forgives but does not reward sin.
- **Mercy is not Vengeful:** When someone has wronged us, it is our natural response to seek vengeance or punishment. Mercy recognizes that we should be merciful to others. We all have sinned. None of us is righteous; therefore, we should not condemn others for their sin. Instead, we must forgive them.
- **Mercy is Loving Others:** Jesus commanded us to not only love our neighbour as ourselves, but to love our enemies as well! Loving your enemy, knowing they want to destroy you, is powerful. Mercy is extending love that has not been earned or deserved.



- Consider the virtue of mercy in your life. What do the following verses tell us about the danger of not being merciful?

Matthew 5:7	
Proverbs 14:21	
Matthew 18:21-22	
James 2:13	

- Who would be considered the sinful, unclean people of your community who ‘deserve’ wrath? How can you be merciful to them?

- Are most of your friends like you? Are they of the same religion, background, ethnicity and status? Are there people you won’t extend love to because of who they are and what they have done?

❖ **MERCY IN THE LIFE OF JESUS:** All of us have sinned against God and broken His law. We are born in sin, born as enemies of God and estranged from Him. Jesus not only taught about mercy, He extended it to us.

- **Jesus Displayed Love for his Enemies:** Jesus taught that we must not just love those who love us, but to also love our enemies (Luke 10: 30-37). Jesus performed miracles not only for His faithful followers, but even for those who wanted to kill Him (Luke 22:47-54).

Read Luke 23:33-35. How did Jesus respond to those who killed him on the cross? How was He merciful?



- **Jesus Forgave Freely:** Knowing that sin was the ultimate offence against God, Jesus still forgave freely. Anyone who repented and accepted Him through faith was forgiven! Jesus had mercy on them (Mark 2:17, Matthew 9:2, Luke 7:47-48).
- **Jesus Offered Underserved Second Chances:** Jesus was merciful and extended forgiveness to those who repented. Peter denied Jesus, yet Jesus restored him and gave him a great purpose (John 21:15). Sinners were encouraged to live a new life (John 8:10-11).
- ❖ **BIBLICAL EXAMPLES OF MERCY:** While we might admire a leader who administers justice and law, God praises those who show mercy to others. It demonstrates humility and love, and places the good of others before selfish ambition.
 - **King David:** When King David came to power, all of Saul’s family were killed. David sought out Jonathan’s son to whom he could show kindness. Mephibosheth was lame, afraid for his life, and probably faced rejection. David restored him to a respectable life and gave him a place at his table. He also gave him all of Saul’s property and servants to care for it. None of this was deserved, but David showed mercy on Mephibosheth because of his love for Jonathan (2 Samuel 9:1-13, 21:7). David knew he had received mercy from God, and could extend this mercy through love to others (2 Samuel 24:14, Psalm 116:1).
 - **Jonah:** God gave Jonah the job of pronouncing judgement on the people of Nineveh. Jonah did not want to warn them of God’s wrath because they were sinners and he felt they did not deserve the mercy of God. Jonah didn’t see Nineveh the way God did – he was putting his own will first, until God taught him an important lesson. Through the calamities Jonah suffered, he learned that God had mercy on him, and would be merciful to the Ninevites. God, in His mercy and compassion, gave them an opportunity to repent (Jonah 3:10).
 - What stands out to you most in these examples? What was the outcome of these acts of mercy?

- ❖ **COMPASSION:** The word ‘compassion’ means to ‘suffer with’ or to come alongside a person and feel what they feel. When we are compassionate, we do not insulate ourselves from the suffering and pain of others. We enter into it with them hoping to bring about some relief or encouragement. A compassionate person sees value in the life of the sufferer, and desires that



in time they will be restored. In order to possess true compassion, we must understand what it is and what it isn't.

- What does the Bible say about the virtue of compassion? Read [Ephesians 4:32](#) and [Colossians 3:12-13](#). What is the basis for our compassion towards others?

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- **Compassion is more than Pity:** Pity is a feeling of sadness because of another person's suffering. Sincere pity should lead to helpful action ([Mark 1:4](#)). Too often, however, pity is not sincere but only a fleeting thought. We think, 'I am glad I am not in their place!' That kind of pity is self-focused. We want others to be relieved of their suffering because their pain makes us uncomfortable. When we pity someone, we must never see them as beneath us and thereby elevate ourselves through their suffering.
- **Compassion is not Commiseration:** Commiserate means "with lament". It is appropriate in every culture to share sympathy and condolence at a time of grief and loss. But when we see others suffer or hurt, it isn't appropriate to share with them our own troubles. Commiseration has come to mean 'sharing together mutual woes'. When we truly have compassion, we are there to help them and share *their* burden, not leave them with our own.
- **Compassion is not Selective Favour:** Having compassion only on those closest to us is very limiting. If we only love our friends and families, we have a shallow compassion and are not moved by the needs of a suffering world. Loving and desiring the best for everyone, even our enemies, is what God calls us to!
- **Compassion is Active Love for Others:** Compassion is always accompanied by action. Compassion is the belief that others' lives have value, and are worth our personal sacrifice. Having compassion means entering into the suffering of others, feeling their sorrow and heartache, and helping them in their distress. Compassion causes us to act on their behalf.
- Consider the virtue of compassion in your life. What do the following verses tell you about the ways we should be compassionate?

Philippians 2:3	
1 Corinthians 13:1-13	
Galatians 6:2	



- There is an incredible amount of suffering in the world. How can we discern where God would have each of us show compassion?

- How do other people help you when you are suffering or in need? What does it mean to bear one another's burdens? What is effective relief – simply keeping company and listening with a loving heart, or action that reduces suffering? Are both sometimes necessary?

❖ **COMPASSION IN THE LIFE OF JESUS:** The very act of God the Son being born as a human being on earth and living an ordinary life was an act of deep compassion! God saw the suffering of mankind and entered into it with them. While the suffering of other people cannot be transferred on to us, Jesus did this very thing when he took the sins of all people on Himself!

- **Jesus had compassion regarding spiritual needs:** Jesus knew that people's spiritual needs were more important than their physical needs. He addressed their spiritual needs through His actions and words.
- Read [Mark 6:34](#). What moved Jesus to compassion, and what did He do as a result?

- **Jesus had compassion regarding physical needs:** Jesus was concerned with the suffering and pain of individual people. Jesus was busy with important plans, but He stopped to heal the sick because relief and reconciliation were dear to His heart. Jesus raised the dead because of His compassion on those who mourned. The miracles demonstrated the power and the heart of God ([Matthew 14:14](#), [Matthew 15:32](#), [Luke 7:13](#)).
- **Jesus suffered with those who suffered:** Jesus didn't condemn those who suffered or mourned – He helped them. When he saw Mary and Martha mourning the death of Lazarus, their brother, He did not chastise them for their lack of faith. He cried with them even though He knew He would raise him with a single word ([John 11:32-44](#)).

❖ **BIBLICAL EXAMPLES OF COMPASSION:** Many other people in the Bible were compassionate, and displayed empathy that led to action.



- **The Good Samaritan:** While this was probably a fictional person in a story Jesus told, it clearly demonstrates compassion for us. The Samaritans and the Jews were enemies. A man from Samaria saw a Jewish man hurt, penniless and lying by the side of the road. He did not see him as a problem or an interruption in his day, but rather he had compassion on him. He didn't just toss some money at the man's feet, but physically took him to a place of safety and met his needs ([Luke 10:25-37](#)). The man on the street was viewed as being of value and was treated with compassion. The Samaritan felt empathy, which resulted in costly action.
- What is most remarkable to you about this example? What costly action have you taken to help someone in need?

❖ **EVALUATE YOUR OWN MERCY AND COMPASSION:** Both mercy and compassion help us to see value in the lives of others. We are responsible to look after our own personal needs. However, sometimes we may have to do without some of our wants and comforts in order to extend mercy and compassion to others. This can cost us time and money, but we will be rewarded with more than just a warm feeling in our heart. We will be blessed as we love and care for individuals regardless of their life circumstances. Choosing mercy and compassion is to see others as God sees them.

- Consider the difficulties you might have in practising these virtues. Our actions are a direct result of our beliefs. Are your beliefs about others Biblical? Does God value everyone, even those who are disobedient to Him? Is God able to save anyone who comes to Him in repentance? Does God care about the suffering of others?

Consider God's thoughts on compassion. Read [Psalm 34:18](#), [Psalm 56:8](#), [1 Peter 5:10](#). How does this prompt you to respond to suffering?

- Consider the following attitudes and behaviours which are actually hate and pity in disguise. Are any of these evident in your life? Are you making excuses about not following the clear teaching of Jesus to be merciful and compassionate?
 - o Impatience with others who sin
 - o Reluctance to forgive, fearing it will encourage bad behaviour
 - o Having no friends of different status, background or ethnicity
 - o Not asking people in your church about what is going on in their life
 - o Giving a little money to a charity only to make you feel good



- o Believing you are not good at comforting those who mourn, and leaving that job to someone else
 - o Holding someone's past mistakes and sins against them
 - o Knowing about the suffering of someone, but not even praying for them
- Consider a time in your life when you were in need of mercy and compassion. Did anyone offer it to you? If so, what did they do and how did it change your circumstances?

- Why is it easier to be compassionate to those we already know and love, and are in similar circumstances as ours? What should we learn from the example of the good Samaritan? How does God demonstrate His heart of mercy and compassion for all people?

SUMMARY

- ❖ Mercy is the act of loving others and withholding judgement they might deserve in order to display the love of God. A merciful person does not excuse or ignore sin, but desires to restore people to a right relationship with God.
- ❖ Compassion is deep concern for others that leads us to action, based on the belief that their lives have value and are worth our time and personal sacrifice.
- ❖ When we believe that the lives of others are just as important and valuable as our own, we will begin to act in ways that honour and help them in their suffering.



REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Consider the scenarios below. For each, reflect on these questions:

- o What would your natural response to this situation be?
- o How would a person who has mercy and compassion respond to this situation?
- o What might the results be of demonstrating mercy and compassion in this situation?

An employee of yours has served you faithfully, but has made a grave mistake which has cost you time and money. They ask for your forgiveness and a chance to prove themselves again. You are angry and desire to demonstrate your authority, and you wonder if you can risk having them fail you again.

You have the opportunity to join a group that ministers at the local prison, sharing the truth of God's Word but also bringing practical items to them. You know that some of the worst offenders are in this prison, and you believe that justice demands they serve their time. You hesitate to interact with people who are such great sinners.

There is a man in your town who you always avoid. He is harsh, angry, and disagrees about everything. You have had arguments in the past, and you think it is wisest to avoid him. A severe storm causes the roof of his shop to collapse, and he is now left without livelihood. You could gather some men from your church to help repair and restore it, but he has never shown interest in the Gospel, and you may be met with insult and ridicule if you attempt to help.