



Compassion as a Spiritual Discipline

| *Indifference is the enemy.*

Goal for the Session

Participants will learn to view the practice of compassion as a discipline essential for the development of a vibrant spiritual life.

Preparing for the Session

- Familiarize yourself with the introductory material. Think about Wiesel's words on indifference and the application of this idea to our lives as adults.
- Think of personal stories when you "suffered with" another human being—especially someone outside of your circle of peers. How did walking in the shoes of another move you to a deeper understanding of the person's situation? Did it move you to act?
- Bring in four or five pairs of shoes—shoes that represent some kind of story. They do not need to be your own shoes—maybe a pair of beaten-up work boots, a pair of nursing shoes, a pair of shoes worn by a waitress or waiter, a pair of shoes worn by a homeless person, and a pair of hospital slippers. You might also find some shoes from another culture. You will use these shoes during the "Opening" exercise to get people talking about what it is like spend a day in another person's shoes. Become comfortable with the following questions: What would spending a day in this person's shoes teach you about the person and his or her culture, joy, pain, or work? Compassion is developing the ability to walk in another's shoes—to see and experience life from another person's perspective.
- Rummage through a few magazines and come up with some photographs that might evoke some kind of emotional response. These can be used to get people talking about the connections between feelings and action.
- Review the parable of the Good Samaritan. It is a good biblical story to read. The striking part of the story is that the Samaritan's heart is moved by the encounter. The Samaritan, in some way, "suffers with" the wounded man, which leads to his action.
- If you have a book or article about a person you think embodies compassion, bring it to the session.
- Arrange the classroom in a horseshoe configuration, with the participants facing a blackboard or dry-erase board. The configuration will keep everyone facing the front but will also encourage dialogue.
- Think of some personal stories you can tell that will create an atmosphere of trust and vulnerability. One or two illustrations demonstrating how "suffering with" another person (especially someone you did not know very well, misunderstood, or did not like) led to greater understanding and, ultimately, an act of compassion would be powerful.
- If the group is very small, you may need to act as a participant. If the group is very large, the group sharing time might be a greater challenge to facilitate, and people might be less inclined to share. You might want to designate some people to share ahead of time.

Teaching Tip

Some people might not be comfortable with the notion that the practice of compassion can be viewed as a spiritual discipline. Your participants might see little or no connection between feeling with others and growing in their personal faith. They might be content with church attendance, personal devotions, and private prayer. The value of these disciplines should not be diminished, as they are critical for our faith development. This lesson is to challenge participants to consider how intentionally engaging in acts of compassion can encourage spiritual growth. You might ask the following questions: What do you consider a spiritual discipline? Would you consider the practice of compassion a spiritual discipline?

Opening (10 minutes)

1. Thinking about Other People's Lives

As participants enter the room, provide each person with a pencil and piece of paper. Ask them to view the pairs of shoes and answer the following questions:

- How would you describe the life of the persons who wear the shoes?
- What struggles do you think they encounter on a daily basis?
- What would it be like to walk in any of their shoes for a day?

After five minutes have the participants return to the circle. Have them briefly share some of their observations. If time permits, ask them what they think the value of walking in another's shoes might be.

2. Prayer

Gracious and loving God, we are reminded in the Scriptures that you are compassionate. Thank you for identifying with your people in such a way that you feel and understand our pain. Help us today to understand what it means to be a compassionate human being. Teach us what it means to feel with others, so we will be compelled to serve, act, and love in your name. **Amen.**

Exploring (25 minutes)

3. Is Indifference the Enemy?

If participants have not read the handout, distribute it at this time and give them a few minutes to read the

"Introduction." If they have already read it, allow a few minutes for any questions to be raised and discussed.

Say: The author suggests that indifference is the enemy. He raises the point that in many horrific historical events, Christians have not acted to protect others against violence. Allow a brief discussion about this point. Is indifference really the enemy?

4. "Be Compassionate, as God Is Compassionate"

Point out this section of the Participant Handout. Remind participants that the author points to Jesus' teaching that rules are not as important as being compassionate toward one another.

Ask: What are some examples from the Bible where Jesus suggested not obeying rules in order to practice compassion? Allow participants to name some examples.

Now ask participants to think of some modern examples where they have seen people breaking rules in order to practice compassion. The author pointed out some rather extreme examples during the Nazi Holocaust. What are some others either big or small?

5. Sometimes Compassion Must Be Learned

The Oliners attempted to find out why some people are moved to action to help people in need while others are not. They found that the one characteristic of people who help others that sets them apart from those who do not is that they feel moved by pain. Somehow, they can feel the pain of others, and they can empathize with those who are in need. The Oliners then suggest eight processes that help lead to increased empathy.

Depending on time available and the size of your group, divide into groups of three or four people each. Give the groups five minutes to think of an example of each of these processes that they see practiced in your church or in their lives. After five minutes, allow time for a few responses to each process.

Responding (10 minutes)

6. Personal Reflection

Tell the group that they will now have some time to personally reflect on their own level of empathy and

ways they might increase empathy in themselves and perhaps in their families and community. Invite them to write their thoughts on their handout or on a piece of paper or simply to quietly reflect. You will ask three questions and give them time to consider them.

- On a scale of 1–10 (10 being the highest), how would you measure your level of compassion?
- Look at the final section of the Participant Handout where the author provides some examples of ways to increase levels of empathy. Do any of these seem like ways you might practice? What other steps might you take?
- What do you presently do to teach your children or grandchildren compassion? Are there ways you can be more intentional?

Closing (5 minutes)

7. Homework

Have the participants name a person in whose shoes they might try to walk this week. Write the person's name on a note card. Request the participants to keep the card in one of their books, in their briefcase, or on the dashboard of their car. Encourage the participants to “be compassionate as God is compassionate” as they leave for the week.

8. Prayer

Close with a prayer asking God to be with all who suffer and to help us never to be indifferent to suffering, as hard as that might be.

Teaching Alternatives

- *Picture identification:* Clip out pictures from various magazines that depict different scenes that might create feelings of empathy—a homeless person, a grieving person, a child searching for food, an auto

accident, a wounded soldier, and so on. If you are technologically savvy, you might make a brief PowerPoint presentation. As you show the pictures, ask the participants what feelings the pictures conjure. Would these feelings encourage the participants to act in any way? If so, how might they act? Discuss the connection between our feelings and our actions.

- *Compassion journal:* Some people keep prayer journals; other people keep gratitude journals. The purpose of these journals is to get into the regular practice of thinking about prayer and gratitude. What about challenging your participants to keep a compassion journal for a couple of weeks? Have the participants record events when they intentionally tried to identify with the feelings, pain, and sorrow of another. If they acted as a result of these feelings, have them record their acts of compassion. Have your participants write about how this discipline of intentionally walking in another's shoes is challenging their spiritual growth.

Key Scriptures

Proverbs 29:7

Matthew 9:36

Luke 10:25–37

John 11:38–44

Colossians 3:12

For More Information

Laurent A. Parks Daloz, Cheryl H. Keen, James P. Keen, and Sharon Daloz Parks, *Common Fire: Leading Lives of Commitment in a Complex World* (Boston: Beacon, 1996).

David Diggs, “We See from Where We Stand,” *PRISM Magazine*, May–June 2002. Article available at <http://www.beyond-borders.net/essays/WeSeeFromWhereWeStand.htm>.

Samuel P. Oliner and Pearl M. Oliner, *The Altruistic Personality: Rescuers of Jews in Nazi Europe* (New York: Free Press, 1988).