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*Simple Compassion*

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introduction

# hunger

**W**hat does it mean to walk with God? I mean, where do you go on this walk? What happens along the way?

Growing up evangelical, I came to understand that my “walk with God,” which well-meaning people asked me about all the time, was measured by the benchmarks of whether I had a “quiet time,” which consisted of careful Bible study and prayer, and how skillfully I sidestepped certain sins. While study and prayer are admirable disciplines, and sin avoidance is certainly preferable to going looking for trouble, I still have to ask, Did these practices form me into the image of Christ? Did they satisfy my hunger for God?

I remember, even as a teen, deeply desiring to grow spiritually. I wondered if I was making progress and, if so, how I would know.

The practices of my youth—study, memorization, prayer—launched my spiritual journey well. These simple tools formed me, and continue to do so. Still, eventually, I found myself hungry for more.

That hunger showed up as a rather basic question: what is the point of spiritual growth? Where was my “walk with God” taking me? What did God want? Did he just want me to obey him, like a child? You could make a case for that, I suppose, but I kept thinking there had to be more to faith than just obeying the rules.

Long ago other people asked that same question. What matters? What should our lives be about if we are following God? God answered through the prophet Micah, “He has shown all you people what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God” (Mic. 6:8).

When I first heard this verse, I was in my early twenties, coming back into the church after a few years of staying away, wrapped up in myself and my doubts. Even with all my childhood years of memorizing and studying the Bible, I didn’t remember hearing Micah’s words. As I read the verse this time, the simplicity stirred me. It invited me away from legalism and guilt into a simple compassion.

Even so, I wasn't sure how to live it out. It sounded so simple, yet almost too difficult at the same time. I was still trying to make space in my life for God. I found it immensely challenging to do the just "walk humbly" part, since for several years my life had been almost entirely focused on myself. "Stumble proudly" was accurate of me.

So I needed church, and it needed me. As I became reacquainted with the God who had never really left me, I found myself drawn to contemplative practices of the Christian faith—solitude, silence, meditation on Scripture. I wanted to go deeper with God; I wanted to supplement my intellectual understanding of facts *about* God with a deeper experience *of* God. I was hungry for deeper relationship. I began reading a wide variety of authors, venturing beyond the works of C. S. Lewis, Philip Yancey, and A. W. Tozer, which had informed my high school and college years. I read Dallas Willard, Richard Foster, Henri Nouwen, and David Benner. A few years later I was mentored and taught by some incredible teachers, including Ruth Barton and John Ortberg. I was on a fascinating inner journey. I meditated on Scripture; it spoke to me in a new and fresh way. I fell deeper in love with Jesus, spent time in solitude and prayer. I even tried fasting. I found ancient spiritual practices to be a way to revive my faith.

After years of doubt and cynicism, I was excited to be reconnected with God in a fresh way. Still, it felt incomplete. I knew that God wants me to live a life that matters not just to myself but also to others, to the world. This verse in Micah calls us to put faith into action; not just by "witnessing," as I called it growing up—talking about Jesus, with the intent of getting people to believe. I began to ask myself questions. What if the witnessing I did with my actions was just as important as the witnessing I did with my mouth? What if feeding someone physically was equally as important as feeding them spiritually? After all, Jesus declared loving God and loving your neighbor his "top two" commandments. Loving your neighbor does not just mean sitting at home thinking warm and fuzzy thoughts about the people next door. It means taking action to serve others.

In the last few years, I've become aware that my focus on spiritual formation had a purpose larger than myself, and in fact even larger than my individual relationship with Jesus. As I got to know Jesus more intimately, I noticed how deeply concerned he seemed to be for the poor. It

began to dawn on me that following him, really walking with him, would require more than just an intellectual or emotional exercise. It would demand action. As I searched the Old Testament, I became increasingly aware that every book included something about God's concern for the poor and for justice—not only justice that God metes out to sinners but also justice that fights against the systemic injustices of our world.

The deeper connection provided by spiritual practices such as solitude and prayer began to push me toward a desire to share with others the love I experienced. Beyond that, I realized that if I was being spiritually transformed, my actions and attitudes would be changed as well. Jesus was compassionate—in a confront-the-social-order, care-about-justice-for-the-poor-and-marginalized way. If the goal of Christian spiritual formation is to become more Christlike, then I should be more compassionate, more concerned for fighting against injustice.

My hunger for God would include a hunger for justice. If I were walking humbly with him, I would begin to love mercy and to act justly. These three strands intertwine into a single cord.

Spiritual growth leads us to understand our own spiritual poverty, our own need for grace, and God's amazing love. So this book will offer a thoughtful, unhurried approach that will allow you to rest in God's love and then inspire you to move from being filled with God's Spirit to pouring out God's love.

To read just one short chapter of this book a week is to offer God a year to mess with you, to equip and strengthen you, to live the adventure of following him. It is to let go of being too busy and bored all at the same time, to start living your faith. I'm inviting you to embark on an adventure in which God may change your thinking, may change your life.

This book is a guide toward becoming a more compassionate person, a person who doesn't just talk about faith or social justice but is trying to live it out. Compassion flows from those who are so full of God's love that it simply sloshes onto everyone around them. When we act justly and love mercy, it strengthens our walk with God. When we walk with God, it leads us to love mercy (because we have been shown mercy) and to act justly (because we are becoming more like Jesus).

To become more merciful and just, we first must get a glimpse of how much we each matter, and of the fact that we can make a difference. If we think we can't do anything, our hunger for justice will soon diminish.

The first quarter of the book will focus on understanding our own worth (as deeply loved children of God) as a starting point for understanding the worth of others. In the second quarter, we'll look at simple ways to show compassion to those closest to us: our family and our neighbors. From there, the ripples continue to extend; in the third quarter of the book, we'll consider how to bring God's kingdom to a wider geographic area: the poor in our cities and towns. Finally, the last quarter of the book will offer steps of compassion on a global scale. As we go along, I hope that you'll begin to see that every person on the planet—whether she lives in a suburban mansion or a housing project, in Los Angeles or Sierra Leone—is deeply loved by God. Each person matters to God. Because that's true, we ought to matter to each other.

Over the next year, you'll get some practical guidance on how to love your neighbors, both those next door and those around the world. You'll see that a life of compassion consists, as Mother Teresa said, of small things done with great love. When we realize the worth of every person, we will move toward compassion and justice; we will wrestle with how to actually live it.

We'll look at what the Bible says about how we are to respond to poverty and suffering, and consider small steps we can take to grow in compassion for the poor and the marginalized. We'll listen to the stories of a variety of fellow travelers who have taken steps to grow in compassion and courage. These small steps of compassion *matter*. They make a difference in the world, and our faithful actions transform our hearts. They feed our souls so that they can grow.

Using this book is easy. Here's what I suggest: each week, read a chapter. They're stories about my life and about the lives of people I've met through my work as a journalist and a writer. Some are stories about women from history, including women in the Bible. Each story has Scripture woven in. Don't skip over the Bible verses (which is something I tend to do when using a devotional). Read them. Look them up in your Bible and read the context. During the week, reflect on what you've read. Maybe write the verses or quotes from the chapter in a journal or on note cards that you can carry around with you. Read over those notes once or twice during the week. Pray about what you've read.

If you are the type of person who likes a more structured approach, the group leader's guide in the back of the book will be helpful. There

you'll find an outline of the book, a list of Scripture references, and some suggestions for group structure. While I recommend reading this book with others, you can use the leader's guide even if you are reading on your own.

Each chapter ends with two action steps. The first is an individual compassion step, a question to get you thinking or something you can do to make a difference, to shine a light in the darkness of your neighborhood, your city, your world. During each week, engage with God via the questions or challenges in the compassion step. Listen to his voice and respond. Don't just think; take action as God leads.

The second is a community step. The Christian life is meant to be lived in community, and I hope that you are a part of a group of people who know, pray for, and care for each other. The community step will provide ways for groups to interact with this book, to discuss it, and to live out what they are learning. Of course, if you don't have a group, you can modify the community steps to do them on your own, but they work better with a group. Again, the leader's guide in the back will help you to use the community steps more effectively.

Don't skip those steps at the end, please. If this book is going to help you grow, you've got to take some action. Pray each week that God will provide you opportunities and that you will respond courageously to them. Just reading the book won't do much besides maybe entertain you or fill you with the longing to take action. Respond to that longing—take action!

This book is an invitation to make your life more interesting. Full disclosure also would require me to say that "interesting" might include "messy" or "complex." It could also mean "focused" and "meaningful." I want to help us to find a life that overflows with joy, a life that shines the light of Christ everywhere.

I'd love to have you visit me online ([www.kerivyattkent.com](http://www.kerivyattkent.com)) as you're reading and let me know how those action steps are going. My hope is that as you read, you will be infused with confidence and strength to change the world, one life at a time. Starting with your own.

part I

compassion  
begins with you

week I

## position

As I write this, the first American woman to run for president has just ended her campaign, a campaign which, although it did not lead to the Oval Office, people took seriously, and in which she gathered the support of eighteen million Americans. Another woman has received the vice presidential nomination.

This feels historic, yet other countries have had women presidents or prime ministers (the United Kingdom, for example, during Margaret Thatcher's time in office), and certainly throughout history both kings and queens have wielded great influence. Just a century ago, women in America did not have the right even to vote, let alone run for office. Prior to 1917, no women served in Congress. Today, sixteen of the one hundred U.S. senators are women, as are seventy-four U.S. representatives. In 2007 Nancy Pelosi became the highest-ranking elected woman in American history by becoming the first woman Speaker of the House of Representatives.

Beyond politics, how do we make a difference in the world? Some women exert influence in the corporate world, and many have risen to the rank of CEO, although members of that upper echelon are still predominantly male.

Women should never give up their quest to hold positions of power or influence in politics, business, or the church, if that is where God is calling them (which he sometimes does, because God calls all believers, without any gender bias).

While we are not all called to such aspirations, we are called to show Christ's compassion to the people around us. We are called to be difference makers. How can we do this from whatever position we find ourselves in?

The Bible says that when we begin to mature spiritually, we become steadfast, not "blown here and there. . . . Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ" (Eph. 4:14–15).

One of the great heroines of the Bible, Esther, made a difference by speaking truth. A corrupt king chose her to be one of his concubines, against her will. She went from a reluctant, scared teenager to a woman who risked her life to speak the truth. Her willingness to risk telling the truth saved a nation. We can learn a lot about how to make a difference by looking at her life.

Read the story for yourself, in the book of Esther in the Old Testament.<sup>1</sup> Here's the Cliff's Notes version of just part of the story:

King Xerxes falls in love with Esther and makes her his queen. Unfortunately, the king is led astray by his evil sidekick, Haman. He is tricked into ordering the genocide of the Jews, who he does not realize are Esther's people. Esther's uncle challenges her to ask the king to repeal his edict, though such a request could result in her death. He says to her, "Do not think that because you are in the king's house you alone of all the Jews will escape. For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father's family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?" (Est. 4:13–14).

Esther is afraid but agrees that she must act to save her people and herself. How? Consider her strategy: she does not rush in and demand anything. First, she goes to the source of all truth. She begins her quest to speak the truth with prayer and fasting, asking God for wisdom. She courageously tells her uncle, "Go, gather together all the Jews who are in Susa, and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my attendants will fast as you do. When this is done, I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish" (Est. 4:16).

So often I want to speak the truth first and pray later (which means that my prayers end up focused on damage control necessitated by my rashness). Wise women know that God is in control and that his wisdom is the key to their success. The first step of making a difference by speaking the truth is prayer—heartfelt, focused prayer. The first step in speaking wisely is realizing that your own wisdom is not enough; you need God's wisdom. You need the light of his truth to flow through you. Prayer is what gave Esther both courage and an amazing plan for winning the king's favor. Read the story for yourself—Esther's strategy, combined with God's amazing provision, is brilliant. She is a perfect illustration of what James wrote five centuries later: "If any of you lacks

wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you” (James 1:5).

Notice how God gives wisdom: not just to a few, not just to the perfect, not just to the powerful, but to anyone. To *all*. He gives that wisdom unconditionally, liberally, “without finding fault,” without nitpicking or bias. As *The Message* translation puts it, “If you don’t know what you’re doing, pray to the Father. He loves to help. You’ll get his help, and won’t be condescended to when you ask for it. Ask boldly, believingly, without a second thought.”

While you may not have been chosen to be queen, you do have power and influence in your neighborhood, in your workplace, in your family, in your church. And who knows? Perhaps you’ve been given whatever influence you have for such a time as this.

Esther’s decree “If I perish, I perish” is a huge turning point for her. Prior to that she had seemed rather passive, basing all of her actions on her uncle’s directions. She mostly seemed to let things happen to her, rather than making things happen. Then her uncle’s challenge, “Who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?” brings something forth in Esther. At that moment, she shifts from follower to leader. From shy girl to decisive woman, a woman who, by telling the truth, saves her people from destruction. The first truth she tells is this: before we act, we must fast and pray.

Every woman matters—including you. Things need to be done in your own heart and home, in your neighborhood, in your city, in this world. God has equipped you to do them. He’s not going to force you. If you pay attention, you’ll notice that his invitations to change the world are all around you. You matter and can make a difference. Believe it, and have the courage to act on that belief.

You can make a difference by simply being who you are, by bringing your whole and best self to the table. Developing your gifts and using them will transform not only you but also the people around you.

This book is about making a difference. Do you think you cannot change the world? Is there some situation you are facing that you’ve convinced yourself you can’t do anything about? Look to Esther’s example: begin by fasting and praying. Ask God for wisdom.

Then pray you’ll be both winsome and wise, and ask God for opportunities to speak the truth where it needs to be spoken. You may not

think you are in “royal position,” but you are! You are a child of the King. You have a position from which you can wield influence. You have more power than you realize, because if you have accepted God’s invitation of adoption, you are fully his child and filled with his Spirit. You are filled with his light and love, and that light wants to shine through you. And if you don’t let that light of truth shine, it will come from some other place, some other person who is willing to speak truth. Why not let it shine through you?

### **Compassion Step**

Are you facing a situation you don’t know how to handle? Are others looking to you to step up in a circumstance in which you feel inadequate? Have you prayed about it? Not just talked to God about it but listened to his guidance? Read Esther’s story in the Bible. Then spend some time in prayer. You may even want to fast as you pray. As this chapter noted, “The first step of making a difference by speaking the truth is prayer—heartfelt, focused prayer.”

### **Community Step**

Have group members read the book of Esther in the Bible before you meet. For your meeting, rent the video of the Veggie Tales version of this story, called *Esther: The Girl Who Became Queen*. Believe it or not, this is a funny, well-crafted video that appeals to all ages. Watch it together. Discuss the story. What can you learn from Esther? What do you have in common with her? What situation do you need to fast and pray about and then speak truth in?