

## A Life of Compassion

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Rich Nathan  
March 5 & 6, 2016  
The Good Life  
Luke 4:14-30

Most of you know the Dr. Seuss poem *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*.

Picture of the Grinch

The poem is about a Grinch who hated Christmas so much, that he decided to ruin it for the entire town of Whoville by stealing all their presents, and their trees and decorations, and all their Christmas dinners.

Now, the reason the Grinch hated Christmas so much is told in the first few verses of the poem.

Every Who down in Whoville liked Christmas a lot  
But the Grinch who lived just North of Whoville did not!

The Grinch hated Christmas! The whole Christmas season!  
Now, please don't ask why. No one quite knows the reason.  
It could be, perhaps, that his shoes were too tight.  
It could be his head wasn't screwed on just right.  
But I think that the most likely reason of all  
May have been that his heart was two sizes too small.

Over the past few weeks, Vineyard Columbus as an entire church community from preschoolers to elementary school kids, middle schoolers, high schoolers, young adults, and older adults have been exploring the theme of The Good Life, what it is and how we can find it. We have over 700 small groups meeting throughout central Ohio watching videos on The Good Life in workplaces all over our city, in homes, in apartments, we have table groups where over 200 singles are meeting here on Friday evenings. Thousands of us are doing personal devotions five days a week on different aspects of The Good Life.

We've seen so far that The Good Life involves a life of calling, discovering who God made you uniquely to be and responding to his unique call on your life. We've also discovered The Good Life also involves living a life of character. It's not enough to have accomplishments or a great resume or a certain kind of personality to live a good life, at the foundation of living a good life we need character. One synonym we used for character was integrity. Living an integrated life so that you aren't at war with yourself.

That your deeds and your words match up. There's a consistency between who you are in church and who you are at home and the workplace. There's a consistency between who you are when you are alone and who you are when you are in public. That your life is whole cloth, it's integrated.

Today we're going to look at a third aspect of living The Good Life, the life God created us to live. I've called today's talk "A Life of Compassion". I could subtitle it "How to Grow Your Heart".

Let's pray.

Luke 4:14-20

14 Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about him spread through the whole countryside. 15 He was teaching in their synagogues, and everyone praised him.

16 He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. He stood up to read, 17 and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written:

18 "The Spirit of the Lord is on me,  
because he has anointed me  
to proclaim good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners  
and recovery of sight for the blind,  
to set the oppressed free,

19 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

20 Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him. 21 He began by saying to them, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

Now, I have repeatedly said that in order to live a good life, we need a model. We are all imitators, we all shape our lives around some picture of what we find attractive, what we find desirable. We shape our lives around a vision of what captures our hearts. I would suggest to you that there is no one who is more attractive, no one who will captivate your heart more than Jesus Christ. To know Christ is to know the kindest person you will ever meet. He is the best friend you will ever have. He is the most faithful, the most truthful, the most generous, the most forgiving, the most shocking, the most surprising, the most authentic, the most wonderful and admirable person in the history of the world. One of the characteristics of Jesus that we read about over and over in the Gospels is that he is an incredibly compassionate person.

I. A model of big-heartedness

There are dozens of passages in the gospels that speak about Jesus' compassion. Here's what we read in Matthew 9: 36,

Matthew 9:36

When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.

And, again in

Matthew 15:32

Jesus called his disciples to him and said, "I have compassion for these people; they have already been with me three days and have nothing to eat. I do not want to send them away hungry, or they may collapse on the way."

How would you define compassion? Have you ever been around a truly compassionate person? How would you describe them?

## II. The definition of big-heartedness

The word compassion is used over 8 dozen times regarding God, if you are looking at an English Bible, and hundreds of times if you consider synonyms for compassion like mercy or pity. But in the Bible, both in the Old Testament and the New Testament, there are some incredibly rich, emotion-laden words to describe the compassion of God and the compassion of Jesus Christ.

In speaking of God in the Old Testament, there is a wonderful Hebrew word "racham"

Racham = to have mercy upon

...which means to have mercy upon, to be compassionate towards. This word "racham" which is one of the characteristics of God, is closely related to another Hebrew word "racham"

Rechem = womb

...with mean "womb." Here is the idea. God has a feeling of pity or compassion towards people in need that is similar to the connection that a mother has towards the child of her womb. God feels towards people in need the same as a mother feels towards her small, helpless baby, the child of her womb.

In the New Testament there are a number of words that are translated "compassion," but probably the most colorful one is the Greek word "splanchna"

Splanchna = innards

It's related to the word "splachnizomai" which means "compassion". Splanchna refers to your spleen, your liver, your kidneys, your guts. So over and over when it says that Jesus felt compassion towards a leper, or Jesus who is our model had pity on a blind man who was calling out for mercy, or Jesus saw a woman weeping over the death of her only son and was moved to do something, the New Testament says Jesus splachnizomai, was moved with compassion. He was moved from the depths of his guts. Today we don't speak so much of someone moved from the guts or the liver – we would say someone is moved from the heart. That's why I have translated compassion as big-heartedness.

When used of God, the word compassion or mercy expresses the thought in Karl Barth's wonderful phrase

The personal God has a heart

God is not like the force in Star Wars. The God who revealed himself in Jesus Christ is personal and he has a heart. The simplest synonym for compassion that I can come up with is big heartedness. They say about a compassionate person, "They have a huge heart!"

I met a man today at our food pantry who spent the last 22 months living in a storage locker off of Morse Rd. No heat. No electricity. Right here in our city. Living in a storage locker.

Well, why don't we have compassion on such people? Why don't we feel the same compassion that Jesus felt toward people in need? Towards the poor? Towards those who are homeless? Towards the sick? Towards the outsider? Towards those who are being kicked around and pushed around and abused by people and forces too strong for them? Why don't we share Jesus' big heart?

Like the Grinch who stole Christmas, our hearts are two sizes too small.

Our hearts are two sizes too small

God has an infinitely large heart. So, what shrinks the heart?

III. A shrinking of the heart

There's an easy way to tell if Jesus is present somewhere. Let's read v. 16-19 again

Luke 4:16-19

16 He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. He stood up to read, 17 and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written:

18 “The Spirit of the Lord is on me,  
because he has anointed me  
to proclaim good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners  
and recovery of sight for the blind,  
to set the oppressed free,  
19 to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

How can you tell if Jesus is present? Well, wherever Jesus is present, the Gospel is always going to be preached. Wherever Jesus is present, sick people are going to be healed. Wherever Jesus is present, sinful people are going to be forgiven. Wherever Jesus is present, poor people are going to be helped. When there is preaching and healing and forgiveness and justice for the poor, Jesus is there! Compassionately, pouring out his mercy, displaying his huge heart. A church that has the spirit of Jesus in their midst is going to demonstrate the big heartedness of Jesus toward the world.

What shrinks the heart?

A. The heart is shrunk when we reduce the Gospel to only a spiritual message

Christians for centuries have reduced the message and ministry of Jesus to an exclusively spiritual message.

Luke 4:18

“The Spirit of the Lord is on me,  
because he has anointed me  
to proclaim good news to the poor.

We say, “Who are the poor? Who gets the good news?” Well, those are the spiritually poor. Not the materially poor. Not the people who are being evicted from their homes. Not the folks whose stuff is out on the street. Not the people who are laid off. Not people living in a storage locker. Jesus doesn’t have anything to say to them, he just wants to speak to the spiritually poor. Those who acknowledge their need and are dependent on God.

Luke 4:18

He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners  
and recovery of sight for the blind

Who are the prisoners? We also spiritualize this. Jesus doesn't want us to go into real prisons, you know, prisons with bars and razor wire. Jesus is not interested in us working for criminal justice reform. We spiritualize this – he's come to set those who are imprisoned to sin and to guilt free. But that's all.

Luke 4:18

He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners  
and recovery of sight for the blind

Who are the blind? Again, Jesus doesn't want to heal the actual physically blind, those with actual physical conditions. No, no. This text is only talking about the spiritually blind. Those who have not seen or acknowledged God's activity through his appointed Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth. The Gospel is reduced to a spiritual only message.

Certainly, at the heart of the Gospel is the message that Christ died on a cross as a substitutionary payment for our sins. He died in your place and in my place. He paid the infinitely large bill that you and I rung up with God so that those who have put their trust in Christ don't have to pay that bill. It's sheer grace, sheer gift, through the Gospel Christ says, "Let me pay your bill! Let me bear your guilt! Put your sins over my head. I will suffer in your place. I will bear God's judgment." While that message of Christ's death for us is at the center of the Gospel, does it fill out the whole circle?

Let me state this really simply – should all of a Christian's eggs be placed exclusively in the evangelism basket? Or should we also try to work for justice? Should followers of Christ help people to put actual food on their tables? Can we go out and along with evangelism help victims of domestic violence? Or victims of sex trafficking? Should we provide help and welcome to refugees who are fleeing wars and violence and persecution? Should we work to bring about racial justice? Should we try to reduce the number of abortions in America?

Or should we avoid all of these issues and simply go out and bring people to Christ? Believing that evangelism is the one way the world will change.

Many Christians believe that. They say, "Listen, if you want to change the world, just get people to accept Jesus and he will change people's hearts and that will change society." That will change families. People will no longer beat their wives or assault their kids or they will no longer get abortions if they receive Christ.

But is that true? That all we need is evangelism? Or do we also need to help people materially and practically? Do we need to more deeply challenge people to move beyond deeply ingrained patterns of prejudice and abuse and selfishness? Do we need something beyond Christian conversion?

Do you know the name of the most Christianized country in East Africa in the 1980's? The country that missiologists held up and said, "There is an example of an African country that is thoroughly Christianized." Do you know the name of that country? It is Rwanda. 80% of Rwanda was supposed to be Christian and 800,000 Tutsis were murdered by their Christian Hutu neighbors in a hundred days.

So what went wrong? One person gives us his deliberate thought:

We settled for conversion rather than transformation. We don't need to do better but we do need to do different. I'm not sure if we need any more church plants that are like the ones we have. We need a different kind of church.

What's the different kind of church we need? We need a church that embraces the entirety of the Gospel. A church whose heart is big enough to embrace both the spiritual message of the Gospel and the material message of the Gospel. We need a church that's full of compassion and full of compassionate people.

For those of you who say, "I have chosen to become a follower of Christ. I am a Christian." We know that just because we're converted doesn't mean we're transformed. There are lots of converted Christians that are still racists. There are lots of people who come to Christ who are still addicts. And there are lots of born again men and women who still use pornography and who are having affairs. Still have explosive tempers and are gossips and are greedy and selfish and callous towards those in need. And there's a lot of born again Christians whose hearts are like the Grinch's – two sizes too small.

Some churches swing in the entirely opposite direction and they shrink the heart by reducing the gospel to only a material message.

B. The heart is shrunk when we reduce the Gospel to only a material message

In verse 18 we read,

Luke 4:18

"The Spirit of the Lord is on me,  
because he has anointed me  
to proclaim good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners  
and recovery of sight for the blind

Some churches say that Jesus only came for the materially poor. If you are wealthy and well-off and you live in a nice suburban home, Jesus has nothing to say to you other

than you ought to feel guilty for having a lot of money. Or Jesus only came for actual prisoners, but not for those people who are imprisoned by regret for what they should have done or could have done or didn't do.

Why does the material-only Gospel shrink the heart? Why do churches that focus almost entirely on material and social problems produce shrunken-hearted people? For one thing, this whole passage is saturated with the Spirit and spiritual reality.

Look at this with me:

Luke 4:14

Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about him spread through the whole countryside.

Luke 4:18

"The Spirit of the Lord is on me,  
because he has anointed me  
to proclaim good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners  
and recovery of sight for the blind

Without the Holy Spirit watering our hearts, flooding our hearts, filling our hearts, our hearts shrivel up, they dry up. Like the Grinch's heart, they shrink to two sizes too small. If spiritual reality is not constantly on our radar screens, we will stop bringing about material justice.

There's a wonderful woman named Francis Perkins, whose story David Brooks tells in great new book, *The Road to Character*. Francis Perkins was the first woman cabinet officer and she is the longest serving cabinet officer in US history. She served as Labor Secretary the entire 12 years of Franklin Roosevelt's presidency, and then she went on to serve in the cabinet under President Truman. She had a huge heart for the poor. For those who were marginalized. She learned early on that she could not keep going in her work with the poor if she didn't take extended time away to pray, to refuel spiritually and to focus her attention entirely on God.

She made a really helpful distinction in her heart. She thought to herself, "When a person gives a poor man shoes, should you do it for the poor man or should you do it for God?" Perkins decided that you need to do it for God. Because the poor person will often be ungrateful and you will lose heart if you rely on an immediate emotional reward for your work. But if you do it for God, you'll never grow discouraged. You don't want your heart shrunk by the bruises and rejections and misunderstandings that you will inevitably experience in doing ministry.



So many people step out of ministry for extended periods of time and maybe some of you are in this place right now because you've been hurt.

Because you encountered misunderstanding or ingratitude or your contribution wasn't acknowledged or you had harsh domineering leadership or whatever. May I, with all affection, encourage you to step back in? If you are involved in some kind of ministry, to keep going, but stop doing things for the sake of people or for the sake of the church or the sake of justice and to start doing things for the sake of Christ. Then you will experience The Good Life. If you can truly say, "I'm doing this unto the Lord," your heart won't shrink.

What shrinks the heart?

C. The heart shrinks when we reduce God's mercy to only people like us

You know, initially, after people heard Jesus, they responded with favor to his message. Here's what we read in verse 22

Luke 4:22

All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips. "Isn't this Joseph's son?" they asked.

They were saying, "This is incredible! God has sent Messiah into the world to help his chosen people! Good news is preached to us, he's going to release us Jewish people from our enemies, the Romans! He's going to intervene on our behalf. Yes, yes, and triple yes. We like that message, Jesus!"

But Jesus goes on and says this

Luke 4:25-27

<sup>25</sup> I assure you that there were many widows in Israel in Elijah's time, when the sky was shut for three and a half years and there was a severe famine throughout the land. <sup>26</sup> Yet Elijah was not sent to any of them, but to a widow in Zarephath in the region of Sidon. <sup>27</sup> And there were many in Israel with leprosy in the time of Elisha the prophet, yet not one of them was cleansed—only Naaman the Syrian."

He says, "You know what? God's favor is not just confined to people like us. I've come in the tradition of the prophets. Elijah, who left Israel, and ministered to Gentiles in Sidon. I've come in the tradition of Elisha who cleansed leprosy, but not in Israel." He cleansed the leprosy of a pagan general in Syria. Now, how did the people respond?

Luke 4:28-29

<sup>28</sup> All the people in the synagogue were furious when they heard this. <sup>29</sup> They got up, drove him out of the town, and took him to the brow of the hill on which the town was built, in order to throw him off the cliff.

They want to kill him. The heart is shrunk whenever we restrict God's mercy to people like us. However you define "us". God wants to show mercy, of course, to Americans, but he doesn't care about people living in other countries. Let them fend for themselves. God wants to show mercy to people of our race, but certainly not other races. God wants to show mercy to people who are moral just like us, or who have our views of politics.

But if you start expanding the circle of God's mercy to different kinds of people like Jesus did – to foreigners and immigrants and refugees, to people with a different religion. If you start saying that God may want to show mercy to Muslims, or people in prison who have made mistakes, or to people who are in the other political party, the reaction is going to be really negative from people whose hearts have shrunk two sizes.

And let me just confess to you that I am in the shrunken heart category. And so are you. We all struggle with the infinitely large heart of God. At some point, we all want to say, "No, that's too much mercy! Too much grace! You are going to fail. Not mercy to that group. Not mercy to that person!"

Wherever we choose to deny God's mercy to another human being - whenever we refuse to be a conduit of God's mercy to another person, should he ask that of us - at that point we're choosing to shrink our hearts.

How do we grow our hearts? You know, in the poem regarding the Grinch

That the Grinch's small heart grew three sizes that day!

It is possible for even Grinches like us to grow our hearts three sizes to experience the Good Life of compassion that God created us to live. How do our hearts grow?

#### IV. A growing of the heart

##### A. Our hearts grow when we see ourselves as potentially needy

Life in this world is really vulnerable. When we are comfortable and everything is going really well for us, we can't imagine ourselves to be poor or to be desperate or to need help or to be reliant on the mercy of anyone else. We can't imagine it. But unexpectedly horrible things happen to nice, comfortable people.

About six years ago, I took a trip to the Middle East. I traveled not only in Israel, but also in Lebanon and Jordan and Syria. And I visited some of the loveliest homes I've ever been in in the suburbs of Damascus. Elegantly furnished suburban homes. Where I ate and chatted with some of the brightest, most urbane people I have ever been around. College professors and journalists and politicians, every one of whom spoke three or four languages. Most of their homes are gone now. They've had to flee. There was no hint at the time of the coming crisis.

Part of the reason I care about the refugees fleeing from Syria is I got to meet many of these amazing folks before they were refugees. I found they were just like you and me. Wonderful people who love their families and care about our world.

During the recession seven years ago, I received emails from many of you in the congregation. It is good to read back over these old emails. We have such short memories that bad things can happen to people like us.

Let me read to you a few of the emails.

December 19<sup>th</sup> my husband went to work as he usually did. Because it was so close to Christmas, he knew that he would need to ask for his commission check because his office would be closed for the following week. He was told that he would not be receiving his commission and that he would no longer receive his monthly salary. In short, he was laid off. When he came home that evening he was a defeated man. How were we going to pay our bills? How could they keep his commission? How were we going to feed and take care of our nine-month old baby? How were we going to keep our house?

I also lost my job when a 3-alarm fire destroyed the building in which I was employed. My husband has sent out his resume hundreds and hundreds of times, applying for any job that he might be qualified for. He is an educated, smart and honorable man. He has applied for jobs in sales, management, and even in law enforcement all over the country. The mortgage company refused to work with us. Each week that goes by tests our faith more and more. At this point we are just hoping to get out from under our house without having it foreclosed. We are stressed and stretched and scared. I don't know how much more of this I can handle.

Here's another one:

On Friday, February 13<sup>th</sup>, my husband's employer for over 20 years informed him that his job was eliminated and that he would be permanently laid off. Things were just beginning to look up for us. We were in the process of getting a home of our own and all of our bills paid off. I'm scared for my husband; it seems that he is depressed. I pray that the Lord gives me the strength to believe that his plans for me are good and that

we are not alone. I'm to the point where I will do almost anything to get the money we need. I was a single mom before I met my husband and I did a number of things that I am not proud of...but as I look at the money I made then, I find myself thinking that I could go back to doing those things.

We could be victimized. We might need help.

B. Our hearts grow when we get near to the suffering

You know, we don't have mercy on an issue. We debate issues. You quote your editorial writers or blogs. I can quote my favorite writer. You quote some talking head on a news show. Someone else can quote another talking head. We could debate all day about those in need. Debating the issues will never grow our hearts. But getting near to people who are really suffering will.

Years ago, Marlene and I lived in an impoverished area of town here in Columbus for several years. Our neighbors were a poor family. The children had different dads. Because we lived there for a number of years, we really got to know the children. The daughter, in particular, attached herself to us because she was a middle child and just got lost in the shuffle. It didn't seem like her family paid much attention to her.

We moved. A few years later, at age 15, she showed up at our church. She was carrying an infant and she said to Marlene, "Look, Marlene, I'm a mama!" I almost burst into tears right there. As I saw this little girl, 15-years old, trying to be an adult. She's a "mama". Debating the issue of teen pregnancy will never grow your heart. Getting to know a child who had a baby, getting near an actual human being who is trying to find a job after doing their time and paying their debt to society. When you see your child in an orange jumpsuit, when you become friends with an actual Muslim and they're no longer just a scary story on the news, when someone who is your best friend gets cancer and has no health insurance. You watch them cutting their pills in half because they can't afford to take the recommended dose – it's getting near to people that grows our hearts.

You know, the issue of the global poor and international sex trafficking of kids is so far removed from the reality of most of our lives. Some of the people here in Vineyard Columbus have gotten the chance to get near to suffering children in Cambodia. A ministry was started a number of years ago by a guy who is part of a Vineyard church in Clintonville, the Central Vineyard. His name is John McCollum. He started a ministry called Asia's Hope. It provides family-style residential care for orphan children who are at high risk of sexual and economic exploitation in Southeast Asia. Every one of Asia's Hope's homes is completely supported and funded by a church community.

This past October, Vineyard Columbus opened up a home in Cambodia which now provides a loving family, a home, food and schooling for 20 orphaned Cambodian children.

Here's the story of Asia's Hope Cambodia's National Director, Savorn Ou.

If you're interested in learning more about orphan care here at Vineyard Columbus, you can go to the volunteer counter in the lobby at Cooper Road. We also have printed material in the lobby at all of our campuses.

Here's the last thing

C. Our hearts grow when we help someone out

I have found that my heart doesn't grow when I just talk about something. My mind grows. I can learn some facts. I can become aware of something that I wasn't aware of before, but it doesn't really grow my heart. I have found that my heart grows when I actually do something. When I help someone out. I've discovered that my heart is attached to my hands and my feet.

Because this campaign is all about us experiencing the Good Life. It is the desire of this church's leaders that every one of us would grow our hearts and become more compassionate people by actually doing something. Not just talking or discussing or listening to a message.

After significant prayer, it was decided to put together a ministry that we're calling Transitions Ministry

What we want to do is collect household goods for vulnerable individuals and families who are transitioning into housing. Who is transitioning into housing? Veterans who have served our country and who for one reason or another find themselves homeless. They need help setting up a home. Women and children who are fleeing domestic violence. They need help setting up an apartment. Men and women who have paid their debt to society, they are released from prison. They need help in getting back on their feet. Refugees who are coming into our country, fleeing war, fleeing persecution. They need help in setting up a home.

There is lots of help available in our community in getting people furniture through the Salvation Army. Getting people clothes. But there are huge gaps, huge holes, that we at Vineyard Columbus want to fill. Some items are simply not provided by almost any agency in our city.

So, pull out your insert from your bulletin. We want to collect baskets of household items. Individuals, you can create your own basket. Small groups, you may want to put

together a basket or two – a bedroom basket, a bathroom basket, a kitchen basket. You can bring one item, you can fill multiple baskets. You can mix and match baskets. Don't bring anything that's not on the list.

We're collecting these baskets on our Good Life Celebration Weekend on weekend of March 19 and 20 at all of our campuses.

Over the next two weeks, I want to encourage every single person who is listening to me right now and every single group here at the church to help someone out. Get some of the items on the list. Your children are also receiving a child-specific list. Have your kids spend some of their money, if they have any money, to buy some of the items on the list. Bring your child shopping with you to help you pick out these items. Give God permission to grow your heart.

The Good Life is a big hearted life. The Good Life is a life of compassion.

Let's pray.

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Rich Nathan  
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