

Do You Have Compassion for Your Lost Neighbor?

For the last few days, I've been reading James Emery White's new book, [*Meet Generation Z: Understanding and Reaching the New Post-Christian World*](#). It is a summary study of the largest generation in American history, and (according to researchers) likely the last distinguishable generation that we will ever see, due to the increasingly rapid pace of substantive change in our culture.

The purpose behind the book is to identify the characteristics and worldview common to this generation, which currently makes up 24.9 percent of the population, and to suggest methods that will be needed to reach them with the good news of Jesus.

The challenges of leading people to Christ are great, no matter which generation we are talking about, but they are even more substantial with Generation Z, because they represent the first truly post-Christian generation in our country's history. Many individuals in this group have absolutely no experience of the gospel. They have never been part of a church, they have no knowledge of scripture, and they live with a purely secular worldview. This means they do not have the basic underlying framework that previous generations have had, and which has been an essential component of evangelistic efforts in America.

Unless we in the church change our methods (not our message), this generation will be lost; indeed, they already are, according to the statistics.

We Have a Compassion Problem

Though the church faces many challenges to the spread of the gospel, one of the greatest challenges is a loss of compassion for the lost among Christians.

I don't mean **empathy**. According to [Edwin Friedman](#), the word empathy did not enter into the English language until the 1930s, and it's original use implied the act of placing one's self (mentally and emotionally) inside a piece of artwork.

Somewhere along the way, it came to mean placing one's self mentally and emotionally in another person's situation. In other words, to feel another's pain. And because none of us likes to feel pain the result of this sort of empathy is usually a desire to remove whatever is causing the other's pain, either by removing the other from the painful circumstances, or more often, removing the thing which is causing pain in the first place, whether that is a physical stressor, an emotional stimulant, or a spiritual malaise.

The problem with this, of course, is that pain is necessary to growth. And our cultural aversion to pain has led to generations with an increased sensitivity to it. It should come as no surprise that we now live in an age, where a person can be socially ostracised, fired from their workplace, or even charged legally for expressing ideas, which are emotionally painful or offensive to others. And the problem is only getting worse.

The solution to the problem is not to find ways to become more accommodating to this cultural shift. The world does not need more empathetic Christians.

What the world needs is more Christians who have genuine compassion for their lost neighbors.

Compassion is a genuine concern for the sufferings and misfortunes of other people, and it is closely linked in scripture with the following responses: mercy, kindness, and love.

But right now, Compassion seems to be in short supply among God's people.

A lack of compassion was God's complaint against the prophet Jonah, and is arguably the point of the whole story, even though we tend to trivialize it by focusing on the big fish. At the very end of the story, in chapter four, we find Jonah sitting on the east side of the city of Ninevah, waiting to see what God would do to them.

Jonah was mad. God had sent him to this place to declare God's coming judgment and wrath for their wickedness, something the judgmental Jonah was looking forward to seeing. But something unexpected happened. Unlike Israel, who never seemed to listen to her own prophets when God sent them, the people of Ninevah took seriously what Jonah said to them. They repented of their sin, ceased their wicked ways, and everyone, from the king down to the animals, fasted, while the people prayed for God's forgiveness. As a result of their penitence, God changed his mind and chose to preserve the city.

So, there sat Jonah in a huff, like a spoiled child, grumbling at God for not following through with his original plan to destroy the city. Jonah felt like God had made a fool of him. He was thinking only of himself.

Jonah lacked compassion.

God taught Jonah a lesson by causing a plant to grow quickly and give him shade, and then just as quickly killing that plant with a worm, so that Jonah would feel the full heat of the sun. Johna's response was to complain even louder. Bitterness had taken hold in his heart.

Then God called him out on it. He said, "Jonah, you feel sorry (pity/compassion) about this plant that only lived a brief time, even though you didn't plant it. But Ninevah has more than 120,000 people living in spiritual darkness. Shouldn't I feel compassion for such a great city?"

Jonah only felt pity for himself, really. But God was calling him to feel compassion for those who were lost. The book ends here, and we never find out if Jonah's heart was transformed. My fear is that it was not, because my experience has been that followers of Jesus still often lack compassion for anyone but themselves.

Viewing the lost like Jonah leads to judgment, condemnation, and the desire to see God's wrath poured out. But this is rarely, if ever, because of a concern for God's righteousness. It is usually out of a selfish concern; Christians want to feel better about themselves.

Compassion, on the other hand, leads to a genuine outpouring of mercy, kindness, and love toward people, who are already hurting. Compassion causes a heart to cry out for God's mercy on behalf of others. It seeks to offer the hand of friendship, through kindness. And it pours out such overwhelming love that

maybe, just maybe, the recipients of that love will turn towards the God of all love and be saved.

Let's dispell the myth that compassion equals compromise. God did not ask Jonah to change his convictions about righteousness and sin, and he isn't asking the church to change ours. Like Jonah, he is asking us to consider those who live in spiritual darkness – to really look at them – and to have genuine concern for their plight. Then trust in God's mercy, even as we become conduits of his grace.

If we have any hope of reaching Generation Z (or any generation) with the good news of Jesus, we must become more compassionate towards our lost neighbors.