



**Lesson 6**

Ask the class what they know about the Stanford prison experiment. This was a famous psychological experiment performed in 1971 that has been heavily discussed ever since then. (You might want to read up on it ahead of time yourself.) Provide a few key details to jog the class’s memory if needed.

Here’s *Wikipedia’s* summary, though you may want to put it in your own words:

The Stanford prison experiment (or SPE) was a study of the psychological effects of becoming a prisoner or prison guard. The experiment was conducted at Stanford University from August 14 to August 20, 1971, by a team of researchers led by psychology professor Philip Zimbardo. It was funded by the US Office of Naval Research and was of interest to both the US Navy and Marine Corps as an investigation into the causes of conflict between military guards and prisoners.

Twenty-four male students out of seventy-five were selected to take on randomly assigned roles of prisoners and guards in a mock prison situated in the basement of the Stanford psychology building. The participants adapted to their roles well beyond Zimbardo's expectations, as the guards enforced authoritarian measures and ultimately subjected some of the prisoners to psychological torture. Many of the prisoners passively accepted psychological abuse and, at the request of the guards, readily harassed other prisoners who attempted to prevent it. The experiment even affected Zimbardo himself, who, in his role as the superintendent, permitted the abuse to continue. Two of the prisoners quit the experiment early and the entire experiment

was abruptly stopped after only six days. Certain portions of the experiment were filmed and excerpts of footage are publicly available.6

Basically, when people got artificially put into positions of power, any compassion they might have had disappeared.

6 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stanford_prison_experiment>

* + -  *Why do you think those selected as guards acted like this?*
    -  *Do you think our natural instincts are to shun compassion and act harshly?*

In today’s lesson, we’re going to explore compassion from a biblical perspective, and we’ll see

how positions of power relate to the word.

So far in this series, we’ve looked at *specific verses* where the Exodus 34:6-7 statements about



God are repeated – either word for word, or with at least some of the elements present. Those qualities are

* Compassionate and gracious
* Slow to anger
* Abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands
* Forgiving
* Punishing the guilty

In the rest of this series, we’ll look at each quality more closely and ask how (if at all) God’s

*people* are called to imitate and live out these qualities of *God*.

There are several Hebrew and Greek words related to compassion. The one used in Exodus 34:6 is *racham* (pronounced “raham,” with a hard “h”), and it is related to the Hebrew word for womb. Let’s look at some scriptures where it is used to help us get a better sense of the word.

*Read Psalm 103:13*

 The psalmist compares God to a compassionate father. Like a father showing compassion to his children, God shows compassion to those who fear him.

*Read Isaiah 49:15*

 Here, Isaiah compares God to a mother who (of course) can’t forget the baby nursing at her breast and who (of course) has compassion on the child she has just brought into the world.

o The people of Israel are in exile, and God, like a mother, will have compassion on them and will not forget or forsake them.

*Read Psalm 145:9*

 Here, we read a simple but grand statement: God has compassion on “all he has made.”

*Read Zechariah 10:6*

 Note all the *actions* that will result from God’s compassion:

o Strengthening Judah

o Saving the tribes of Joseph

o Restoring these people

 Compassion is not just a *feeling* of sympathy/empathy for someone. It is accompanied by action – often, *undeserved* action.

Note that in some translations, this Hebrew word gets translated as “mercy.”

 “…may God almighty grant you *mercy*” (Gen 43:14).

 “I will return to Jerusalem with *mercy*” (Zech 1:16).

Interestingly, unlike other words for compassion, *this* particular one always refers to the feelings of a more powerful entity towards a less powerful one. (So, God can have compassion on humans, but humans can’t have compassion on God – at least using this word, which is found in Exod 34).

This takes us back to our opening about the prison experiment. In that story, once people were given power (even artificially), their compassion (if they had any before) went out the window. But the Bible says that compassion is *specifically* manifested from powerful people toward less powerful people. When we realize how closely the word “mercy” is related, and that biblically, it’s the *same* word, this makes sense. A *weak* person can’t show mercy toward a *strong* one. But the *opposite* is true.

This isn’t just about physical strength. It’s about any position of power or control: bosses,

parents, dominant races/nationalities, colonizing nations vs. colonized nations, etc.

* + -  *How does this compare/contrast with how we might typically use the*
    - *word “compassion”?*
    -  *Name some other sets of people that could show compassion for others.*
      * *Judges to defendants*
      * *Natives to immigrants*
      * *Rich to poor*
      * *Teachers to students*

Now that we’ve seen some examples of God’s compassion, and we’ve seen how the word is

used, we should start coming up with some kind of definition of compassion.

* + -  *From what we’ve seen so far today, how would you define “compassion”?*
    -  *What does it mean to feel this emotion? What actions are usually accompanied by it?*

The Greek word (used in the New Testament) for compassion is also related to the Greek word for inward parts (i.e., guts). So both the Hebrew and Greek words for compassion have to do with a sort of gut feeling that goes deep inside your soul – and might even affect you physically.



*Read Matthew 9:36; 14:4; 15:32*

 Here are some instances where Jesus had *compassion* on crowds gathered to see him.

*Read a few verses before and after the ones above. What actions does*

*Jesus perform as a result of his compassion?*

*Read Luke 15:20*

 This is perhaps the most direct story about God’s compassion.

 God is pictured as the father who, when he sees his wayward son returning home, has

*compassion* on him – so much so that he runs to the son, hugs him, and kisses him.

* + -  *What kind of wrongs had this father endured from this wayward son?*
    -  *What emotions might we expect him to demonstrate instead of compassion?*

*Read 2 Corinthians 1:3*

 In this verse, Paul calls God the “Father of compassion and the God of all comfort.”

*How are compassion and comfort related?*

As we’re seeing, the NT usage of compassion is consistent with the OT.

*Now that we’ve looked at the NT for a bit, how might our definition of*

*“compassion” continue to evolve?*

Paul’s letter to the Colossians contains an explicit command to imitate God’s compassion.

*Read Colossians 3:12*

Paul tells his readers to clothe themselves with “compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience.”

*Is this a list, or do these qualities have something in common?*

As we bring the lesson into our own lives, let’s consider some ways to imitate God’s

compassion.

* + -  *What are some common circumstances we encounter where compassion would be especially helpful for us to show?*
    -  *Does showing compassion to someone imply endorsement of everything a person has done?*
    -  *In what relationships are you the dominant/powerful one? (Are you a parent? A teacher? A boss? A citizen of a powerful nation? A member of the majority in any sense? Think along those lines.) How should you show compassion in that relationship?*

Remember Paul’s words: clothe yourself with compassion (Col 3:12). This week, consider who needs (not necessarily *deserves*) your compassion.

As a class, say Exodus 34:6-7 out loud together:



*“ The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation.”*