Bible Study: Session One

Session goal: Explore how as individual members of the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12), we show love and compassion to people in need whom God has set before us. We practice deeds of mercy, both planned and unplanned, to bring hope and encouragement to others and to bring honor and praise to the God whose love motivates us to show love to others.

Kindness: How “Random” Can it Be?
Perhaps you have seen the message in a public service advertisement or on a bumper sticker: “Practice Random Acts of Kindness.” This is an idea that has appeal for us as individuals. We seldom form groups and elaborate plans to perform random acts. You and I help fix a flat tire, reunite a lost child in a department store with his parents or carry a neighbor’s grocery bag that was one-too-many because those are needs that often occur when we are by ourselves — and needs to which we can respond as individuals.

What do you think of when you imagine yourself performing a “random act of kindness”? Do you see yourself in the stereotypical “Boy Scout” role, helping a little old lady across the street? Do you see yourself being called upon to respond to an emergency situation?

Large or small, our acts of mercy flow from our living faith in Christ. We respond to His love for us by acting in love and compassion toward others.

List one or more ordinary acts of kindness you have done in your station in life. If it’s helpful to your study, group members may wish to share their experiences.

An Unplanned — and Uncharacteristic — Act of Kindness

THE GOOD SAMARITAN


1. Was the act of kindness a “random act”? Discuss. What excuses might have been offered to avoid acting?
2. What was the flaw in the young expert in the Law’s understanding of the Law — specifically the commandment to love your neighbor as yourself?
3. An act of compassion responds to a need. Discuss how the story of the Good Samaritan effectively illustrates this.

LUTHER: FAITH DOESN’T ASK IF GOOD WORKS ARE TO BE DONE.
Faith is a divine work in us that transforms us and begets us anew from God, kills the Old Adam, makes us entirely different people in heart, spirit, mind, and all our powers, and brings the Holy Spirit with it.

Oh, faith is a living, busy, active, mighty thing, so that it is impossible for it not to be constantly doing what is good. Likewise faith does not ask if good works are to be done, but before one can ask, faith has already done them and is constantly active … Faith is a vital, deliberate trust in God’s grace, so certain that it would die a thousand times for it. And such confidence and knowledge of divine grace makes us joyous, mettlesome, and merry toward God and all creatures (Martin Luther, Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, IV. 10f., Tappert, Pages 552-53).

LUTHER: BAPTISM, “STATION” AND “ORDINARY ACTS OF KINDNESS”
God has given every saint a special way and a special grace by which to live according to his baptism. But baptism and its significance He has set as a common standard for all men, so that every man is to examine himself according to his station in life, to find what is the best way for him to fulfil the work and purpose of his baptism… (Treatise on Baptism, 1519).
Whose Need is Met?
THE OUTCOMES OF COMPASSIONATE ACTS

Read Matt. 6:1–4.

1. It feels good to be recognized for the acts of kindness we do. What are the dangers in doing good for the sake of recognition? Who is to receive praise and honor for our acts of kindness?

2. It feels good just to be able to do something compassionate for someone else. Is there also a danger in doing acts of kindness for the way they make us feel? Is it ever possible to have the wrong motivation in our desire to do the “right thing”? How might Paul answer this question? (See Romans 7:21ff.)

3. What comfort do you find in this statement by Luther? “The sin which remains after baptism makes it impossible for any good works to be pure before God. For this reason we must hold boldly and fearlessly to our baptism, and hold it up against all sins and terrors of conscience, and humbly say, ‘I know full well that I have not a single work which is pure, but I am baptized, and through my baptism God, Who cannot lie, has bound Himself in a covenant with me, not to count my sin against me, but to slay it and blot it out’” (Treatise on Baptism).

4. How does God respond to acts of kindness done in secret?

Faith — Compassion's Heart and Soul

1. Does this passage promise that salvation can be achieved through acts of kindness? If not, why not?

2. What evidence suggests that those who performed acts of kindness were unaware of the consequences of their actions (or were not doing them for personal recognition)?

3. How does this passage illustrate the relationship between faith and works of kindness?

Bearing Each Other’s Burdens
Read Gal. 6:1–2. Within the family of faith in Christ, the Church, special deeds of compassion are possible. What burdens might be referred to in this passage? What can we do to aid our fellow believer? Why?

Prayer Thoughts
Suggestions for prayer: that God will grant His grace and mercy to empower us to seek to serve others in love; that God will continue to present opportunities to help others in need; that God will grant wisdom and guidance to determine the most appropriate ways to help others; and that God will use us according to His will, helping others in ways we may never realize or understand.

NOTES

LUTHER: THE LORD’S SUPPER AS SOURCE AND STRENGTH OF LOVE FOR OUR NEIGHBOR

There are those, indeed, who would share the benefits but not the cost, that is, who gladly hear in this sacrament that the help, fellowship and assistance of all the saints are promised and given to them, but who, because they fear the world, are unwilling in their turn to contribute to this fellowship, to help the poor, to endure sins, to care for the sick, to suffer with the suffering, to intercede for others, to defend the truth, to seek the reformation of the church and of all Christians at the risk of life, property and honor. … They are self-seeking persons whom this sacrament does not benefit. Just as we could not endure a citizen who wanted to be helped, protected and made free by the community, and yet in how turn would do nothing for it nor serve it. No, we on our part must make others’ evil our own, if we desire Christ and His saints to make our evil their own; then will the fellowship be complete and justice be done to the sacrament. For the sacrament has no blessing and significance unless love grows daily and so changes a man that he is made one with all others (Treatise on the Blessed Sacrament, 1519).

BIBLE STUDY: SESSION ONE

Witness Always. MERCY FOREVER. Life Together.
Bible Study: Session Two

Session goal: Explore how as the body of Christ, i.e., congregations and other Christian entities, we demonstrate love and compassion to those in need. Explore how we share God’s love through emergency response in the United States and abroad, as well as through intentional efforts to reach into communities, both domestic and international, to help people improve their standard of living.

Many Members, One Body

ACTING TOGETHER FOR GOOD

One of the privileges with which God has blessed the Church is that of caring for people in need. The Church may respond to need in the same way an individual might — alleviating the suffering of one person or family in a single situation or providing funds for emergency supplies in a disaster. But the Church also is equipped to respond to ongoing or chronic needs. Congregations and faith groups bring comfort and hope to countless struggling people by offering a variety of programs, including:

- Counseling
- Housing/shelter
- Food pantries
- Literacy/English as a Second Language
- Job skills
- Immigrant/refugee resettlement

The list is long and illustrates how fervently the Lutheran church has embraced its long tradition of seeing to the needs of those in distress.

Your Plenty Will Supply What They Need

Read 2 Cor. 8:1-14.

1. Why does Paul tell the Corinthians about the generosity of the Macedonian churches? Discuss other scriptural examples of sacrificial giving. What does I John 3:16–17 say is the motivation for such giving?

2. What was the attitude of the Macedonian churches toward “sharing in the service to the saints” (verse 4)? What is our attitude? A Christian care organization often uses the slogan, “Live simply, so that others may simply live.” How is this idea related to our attitude toward giving?
3. What does it mean for the churches to have given “themselves first” (verse 5)? How can that be done?

4. What does it mean to “excel in the grace of giving” (verse 7)?

5. How important is it for a person to follow through on his or her desire to help (see verses 10–12)?


6. The congregations in Macedonia and Achaia provided gifts that Paul was planning to take to Jerusalem to help the poor there. How do congregations make use of agencies to distribute aid to people in need outside their communities?

7. Is there a connection between spiritual gifts and material giving (See Rom. 12:3-8)? Explain.

Whose Need is Met?

Paul relates to the church at Corinth that the Macedonians pleaded urgently for the “privilege of sharing in the service of the saints.” As Spirit-motivated servants of Christ, we have a desire — a need — to share God’s love through kindness to others. In fact, it has been said that our need to give is far greater than God’s need to receive.

Arriving in a poor farming community high in the Andes Mountains, a visitor was excited to see a powerful North American-made tractor parked beside the farmers’ meeting place. He learned it had been donated by a group in the United States. He also learned that the village’s farmers were unable to put it to practical use. They explained that this generous and well-intentioned gift was destructive to the fragile topsoil of the altiplano; furthermore, they couldn’t afford the fuel to operate it.

1. Whose need was met in the giving of the tractor? Suggest alternatives that might meet both needs — of giver and receiver — more efficiently.

2. Many U.S. congregations enjoy planning mission trips in which a group of members travel to a foreign mission site and help build, plant or provide health services. The people served often value these visits because they give tangible evidence of the U.S. congregation’s concern for them. Discuss the needs that such a mission trip is designed to meet. What are potential drawbacks to a mission trip such as this? (What might large shipments of clothing do to local clothing manufacturing company, for instance?) How does our desire to be good stewards influence our desire to help those in need?

Prayer Thoughts

Suggestions for prayer: that God will continue to make us evermore what He has declared us to be, as the body of Christ; that God will foster unity in our churches and Lutheran organizations; that as the body of Christ we use our resources to reflect the love and compassion of our Lord; and that our efforts to help others will be sincere and be pleasing to Him, forgiven of any sin and all sin which accompanies them.