

## Rhythms Week 5

### Cultivating the Virtue of Compassion by Engaging the Practice of Curiosity

What makes for a beautiful, compelling life? What characterizes and cultivates such a life? ***Rhythms of Renewal\**** is a program designed to help us grow in the virtues that characterize a beautiful and compelling human life by helping us engage in practices that cultivate such a life. This week, we will seek to grow in the *virtue of Compassion by engaging the practice of Curiosity*.

**Compassion** is “something many of us find easy to praise but hard to practice.”[1] Why? Because compassion hurts. The word “*literally means ‘to suffer with,’ which implies a basic mutuality in the experience of suffering.*” [2] Compassion involves receiving others in love, with all their imperfections, and relating to their experiences of suffering, failure, and perceived inadequacy with empathy, kindness, gentleness, and mercy.

Philosopher Michael Austin describes the cognitive, emotional, and active aspects of embodying the Christian virtue of compassion: believing that others are God’s image-bearers and beloved, and therefore are inherently worthy of love; feeling the pain of others’ experiences of suffering; and doing compassionate acts of helping others in distress.[3] Jesus exemplifies compassion consistently as he feels the pain of others (Matthew 9:35-36), heals the sick (Matthew 8:1-4), forgives sinners (Luke 19:1-10), welcomes the outcast (John 4:7-26), feeds the hungry (Mark 6:30-44), and weeps with the bereaved (John 11:32-36).

Therapist Chuck DeGroat argues that self-compassion is essential for both our own well-being and our ability to relate to others compassionately. “*Self-compassion gives our Inner Critic the day off. Self-compassion frees us from the slavery of narcissistic self-promotion and self-perfection. Self-compassion frees us to pay attention to the inner conversations we’re always having, as we debate which voice will decide the moment, the day, the future. Self-compassion allows us, in the end, to be imperfect.*” [4]

**Curiosity** is a practice that cultivates compassion toward ourselves and others. Asking good questions, listening well, embracing complexity, and living in the tension of uncertainty are all aspects of a deeply humanizing practice of curiosity that awakens awe and wonder within us, welcomes growth and change, and enables us to know ourselves and others well enough to show real compassion. When we transform our criticism and condemnation (of ourselves or others) into curiosity, we discover more of the complexity and commonality that move us to empathy - the real beauty, pain, and truth we often ignore when we are criticizing. When we trade our rigid certainties for curiosity, we recover our ability to learn, grow, and change as we open ourselves to God in an honest pursuit of wisdom and truth.[5]

In the words of St. John of the Cross, “*A soul will never grow until it is able to let go of the tight grasp it has on God.*” [6] Through a practice of curiosity, we shift our attention and energy away from defending what we think we have already grasped, so that we may discover more of what we do not yet know... and more of God.

Jesus's life and ministry were marked by a consistent practice of asking good questions and stoking the curiosity of his followers. In the Gospels, we see Jesus engaging questions 183 times - Why do you call me good? Who was a neighbor to the man? Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill? Who do you say that I am? Casey Tygrett reflects on how Jesus's artful practice of curiosity shapes his disciples:

*"For the majority of Jesus' 183 curious interactions, the disciples were seated on the front row. They asked, they heard, they watched, and they grew in wonder as Jesus opened up possibilities beyond imagination. As they grew, they also came to recognize they had a great deal more to explore. Curiosity didn't diminish in their time with Jesus; it took flight. That's what we're invited to. We're invited to the 'fellowship of those out of their depth.' We're invited to walk after the Jesus who asked instead of told, who prompted curiosity with his every teaching and action. Becoming curious, repenting, and rewriting our spiritual narrative through beautiful questions is also a discipline. It doesn't happen by accident. It happens when we create space for it."* [7]

A note of encouragement: Not ready to move on from Week 3? That is okay! Continue practicing the rhythm of Week 3 until you feel ready to move forward.

If you are ready for Week 4, read on. As always, do not feel the pressure to read everything or implement everything at once. Take your time with this rhythm over the week. Choose one or two questions to dwell on at a time. Choose one or two practices to implement at a time. Start where you are and let the Holy Spirit build your rhythms slowly. The hope is grow to be deep people over time, not all at once.

**1. REFLECT. Consider these questions on your own or with a prayer partner/group :**

- Why do you think curiosity is a practice that cultivates compassion?
- What does practicing curiosity have to do with trusting God?
- Who do you know who asks really good questions? What is it like to be with that person?
- Think of someone who is difficult for you to treat with compassion. How might you become curious about their life in a way that may move you to greater compassion?
- What might make the practice of curiosity difficult or even scary?

**2. UNMASK THE CORE LIE:** Recognize the power of a core lie we often believe: *"I need to avoid pain."*

Distraction, self-deception, and self-defense are all obstacles to our becoming curious, compassionate people. We fail to notice the needs of others (or our own!) because we are endlessly distracted by our phones, mental chatter, and over-stuffed schedules. We deceive ourselves into believing impossibly easy answers to hard questions because we don't like sitting in the tension of uncertainty. We stop asking questions of people we find difficult in order to avoid the discomfort of disagreement. After all, it's much easier to dismiss a simplistic

caricature of our neighbor than the real, complicated person who is both dignified and difficult. We defend our egos by choosing to ignore painful feedback about how others experience us, and we avoid becoming curious about ourselves because the idea of change feels too costly to be worth it.

Beneath all of these is a core lie we tell ourselves: "I need to avoid pain." When we believe this, we begin to see other people's suffering as a threat to our own happiness and well-being, not as an opportunity to help. We look for ways to escape whatever situation feels threatening. We retreat into what we know, whatever feels comfortable, whatever we use to self-soothe or distract ourselves, whatever narrative makes us feel better about ourselves, or whatever rationalization helps us justify not caring enough about our neighbor to ask questions or offer help.

Read the anti-Psalm [8] below as a way to reflect on this.

### Anti-Psalm 25

God, I don't trust you; I'm not opening myself up to you or others -  
I'm not going to be vulnerable. I'm not going to put myself in a position  
where I could be embarrassed or insulted.  
You won't vindicate me in the end.  
That's why I have to hyper-manage my image and reputation -  
so I won't be put to shame. So I won't get hurt.  
That's why I have to hide and lie;  
those who practice vulnerability and honesty  
will experience rejection and shame.  
I'm not putting myself through that. For what? That would be insane.  
Also, I'm not interested in learning from God or God's people.  
I'm writing my own story; I'm charting my own course.  
I don't need any more of God than I already have.  
I know all I need to know about God's ways;  
I've read the Bible. I've studied some theology.  
I've been around the church. Been there, done that.  
If God is anything like the religious people I know,  
then it's safe to say that he isn't compassionate and forgiving,  
and whatever "wisdom" he's peddling isn't for me.  
It all seems irrelevant to my real life anyway.  
Here's the deal -  
if God's way doesn't match my own personal agenda,  
I'm not going that way. I'm going to do my own thing.  
I'm going to climb the ladder, and I don't want to be tied down by anyone or anything  
that might limit my freedom, encroach on my happiness, or cause me pain.  
It's not like I'm a bad person or anything. I'm a good person.  
I don't need to apologize for anything. If you have a problem with me,  
I don't want to hear it. That's your problem.

Of course, if I have a problem with you,  
I'll be completely justified in holding my grudge as long as I want.  
Because you are a problem. I don't want advice,  
and I definitely don't need any antiquated religious instruction  
about what I should or shouldn't be doing with my life.  
People who talk about having a "relationship" with God are so weird.  
If religion makes them happy, good for them;  
but I'm not interested, and God can't do anything for me.  
My eyes are on my own life - my future, my happiness, my plans.  
Sure, I have my own problems - I have known pain,  
and I sometimes feel like I'm all alone...  
That's why I keep busy. That's why I distract myself.  
That's why I self-medicate. I take refuge in those things.  
God doesn't do anything to help me.  
And I don't need him to help me.  
I'm fine.  
I just need to avoid the things that hurt, protect myself,  
and focus on what makes me happy.  
That's the pathway toward a fulfilling life;  
the self-directed, self-driven exodus out of all my troubles.

Notice the core lie at work in your life. Where in your life do you notice yourself believing the lie: "I need to avoid pain?" If that doesn't feel like your core lie, what do you think it might be? Ask the Spirit to give you wisdom. Become curious about your believing the core lie. What do you feel when you are believing this? What thoughts or behaviors accompany or follow this belief?

**3. REMEMBER THE CORE TRUTH.** Avoiding pain is not the recipe for living a fulfilling life. To avoid pain is to avoid love. Rather, the way of life is the way of the cross in fellowship with Jesus. God joins us in our suffering, redeems our suffering, and "comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God" (2 Corinthians 1:4). "As I have loved you, so love one another," says Jesus (John 13:34), as he instructs his disciples to enter compassionately into the complexities and sufferings of others.

#### Psalm 25

To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul.  
O my God, in you I trust; do not let me be put to shame;  
do not let my enemies exult over me.  
Do not let those who wait for you be put to shame;  
let them be ashamed who are wantonly treacherous.  
Make me to know your ways, O Lord; teach me your paths.  
Lead me in your truth, and teach me,  
for you are the God of my salvation;

for you I wait all day long.  
Be mindful of your mercy, O Lord,  
and of your steadfast love,  
for they have been from of old.  
Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions;  
according to your steadfast love remember me,  
for your goodness' sake, O Lord!  
Good and upright is the Lord;  
therefore he instructs sinners in the way.  
He leads the humble in what is right,  
and teaches the humble his way.  
All the paths of the Lord are steadfast love and faithfulness,  
for those who keep his covenant and his decrees.  
For your name's sake, O Lord, pardon my guilt,  
for it is great. Who are they that fear the Lord?  
He will teach them the way that they should choose.  
They will abide in prosperity,  
and their children shall possess the land.  
The friendship of the Lord is for those who fear him,  
and he makes his covenant known to them.  
My eyes are ever toward the Lord,  
for he will pluck my feet out of the net.  
Turn to me and be gracious to me,  
for I am lonely and afflicted.  
Relieve the troubles of my heart,  
and bring me out of my distress.  
Consider my affliction and my trouble,  
and forgive all my sins.  
Consider how many are my foes,  
and with what violent hatred they hate me.  
O guard my life, and deliver me;  
do not let me be put to shame, for I take refuge in you.  
May integrity and uprightness preserve me,  
for I wait for you.  
Redeem Israel, O God,  
out of all its troubles.

Become curious about believing the core truth. What do you feel when you are believing the truth instead of the lie? What thoughts or behaviors accompany or follow this belief?

**4. FOOD FOR INSPIRATION & IMITATION.** Look at how Jesus exemplifies curiosity and compassion in John 20:11-18.

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb;

and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

### **5. Questions for Prayerful Examination**

- When you think about becoming the person you long to be, what do the virtue of compassion and the practice of curiosity have to do with your becoming that person?
- How do you think practicing curiosity might help you become a better friend, neighbor, family member, ally, spouse, parent, roommate, or co-worker?
- What do you find inspiring about Jesus' life of curiosity and compassion, and what's one way that you can imitate Jesus's practice of asking good questions in your own life this week?
- In light of this conversation, where in your life do you need God's help right now?
- What Did Jesus Ask? Pick a question that Jesus engages with his disciples, and then wrestle with that same question as a group:
  - What do you want me to do for you? (Mark 10:36, 51)
  - Who do people say the Son of Man is? Who do you say that I am? (Matthew 16:13-20)
  - Who is my neighbor? (Luke 10:25-37)
  - How many times should I forgive? (Matthew 18:21-22)

### **6. MICROPRACTICES FOR THE WEEK.**

Arrow Prayers. We'll offer some of these each week. The title comes from Sally Lloyd Jones, whose "Jesus Storybook Bible" many of us have loved and used. The idea is that prayer doesn't have to be complex to be meaningful and real. Here are some "arrow prayers" for this week's practice:

- Father, help me turn my criticism into curiosity today.
- Jesus, give me self-compassion that matches your compassion toward me.
- Holy Spirit, stir up wonder within me.
- Jesus, help me love others as you love me.
- Lord, open my eyes, and I will see.

Habit Stacking. Habit-stacking is the practice of adding a new habit onto something you

already do habitually (e.g. brushing your teeth, doing the dishes, or walking to work), a term we learned from James Clear in *Atomic Habits*. Some ideas:

- As you walk, run errands, or drive to work, pay attention to what you are feeling or thinking. Become curious about your emotions and thoughts. Focus on one that seems important, and contemplate it. Where in your body do you feel it? What sensations accompany it? Ask God to be with you in your contemplation.
- At the dinner table, ask one another about what was difficult today. Practice curiosity and compassion by listening attentively. Also share your joys.

#### Practices for Community & Mission

- Ask someone in your City Group, workplace, or neighborhood about how they grew up. Become curious about the earlier chapters of their life. Ask open-ended questions that extend the conversation (e.g. “What was that like for you?”).
- If you know of someone in your city group or neighborhood going through something difficult, check in with them during the week. Ask how they are doing, and take the time to really listen. Offer companionship and empathy, not advice or explanations.
- Everyone is an expert in their own experience. Become curious about your neighbor’s or co-worker’s life, and ask them about something that’s important to them.
- Start a “questions journal” to keep track of questions that linger in your mind and heart. Ask others in your community group what questions they would put on their list.

#### Sources Cited

[1] Michael W. Austin, “Compassion,” Pages 185-203 in Austin and R. Douglas Geivett, eds., *Being Good: Christian Virtues for Everyday Living* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 200.

[2] Kristin Neff, *Self-Compassion* (New York: HarperCollins, 2011), 191.

[3] Austin, 187-97.

[4] Chuck DeGroat, *Wholeheartedness: Busyness, Exhaustion, and Healing the Divided Self* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 46.

[5] See Peter Enns, *The Sin of Certainty: Why God Desires our Trust More than our “Correct” Beliefs* (New York: HarperOne, 2016), 204-06.

[6] Quoted in Casey Tygrett, *Becoming Curious: A Spiritual Practice of Asking Questions* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 2017), 27.

[7] Tygrett, 26.

[8] We got the “anti-Psalm” idea from Dr. David Powlison, “Anti-Psalm 23,” which we use as a model for exploring the Psalms devotionally as windows into both our own hearts and the mercy of God.