

The Compassion Gap: Understanding Jesus' Words and Depth of Meaning

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Preface

I've been concerned in the last few years about what I consider to be a theological distortion of Jesus' teaching, and example of expressing deep compassion. There's an interesting aspect to both the Greek terms that Jesus uses as well as the original Meg that he spoke. One of my favorite theological professors suggested that a good meaning of the Greek term Jesus' meaning of compassion was experiencing a "quiver and your liver." That's close to the terminology of having "bowels of compassion."

One of the challenges of translating Jesus' original Aramaic language words into Greek is that the original meanings expressed a physical process that the Greek turns into a noun as if it is a thing and that introduces potential for misinterpretation.

Floating around on the Internet these days about the "sin of compassion" which, in my opinion, is a distortion of the very teachings of Jesus and the Early Church as they understood those teachings. This is not the first occasion in the history of the church that this distortion has happened. It seems to arise whenever it feels threatened and needs to align itself more with nationalism than with being a living reflection of the kingdom of God.

It's one thing for this distortion to be floating around on the Internet and quite another for it to be taught in Christian churches by pastors who have all the resources they need to discover it is a fallacy. Sitting by and watching without saying anything It's no longer possible and my "don't mistake my theology degree for a Google search" led me to write this.

Introduction: Recovering the True Meaning of Compassion

The way we understand compassion today has been shaped by translation choices made centuries ago. Jesus' original teachings in Aramaic carried deep emotional and theological significance, but as they were translated into Greek, then Latin, and eventually English, subtle shifts in meaning occurred. Some of these shifts enriched the meaning, while others distorted it.

Additionally, theological frameworks such as Augustine's *Ordo Amoris* (Order of Love) reshaped the application of compassion, sometimes in ways that conflicted with Jesus' radical teachings. Today, these distortions continue, particularly among Christian Nationalist movements that use *Ordo Amoris* to justify prioritizing certain groups over others. This book explores Jesus' original Aramaic words for compassion and their depth of meaning, how Greek translation effectively captured the emotional and physiological aspects of compassion, the limitations of Latin and English translations, the evolution of Augustine's *Ordo Amoris* and its historical misapplications, and practical lessons from Jesus' compassion that can be applied today.

Part 1: The Compassion of Jesus in His Own Words (Aramaic Origins)

Jesus spoke in Aramaic, the common language of first-century Jews. His words for compassion carried profound meaning, deeply rooted in cultural and theological contexts. The term "Ethraḥam" (ܐܬܪܚܡ) derives from the root "raḥam" (ܪܚܡ), meaning "womb," symbolizing a deep, nurturing, and motherly love that compels action. Another word, "Kamar" (ܕܟܡܪ), conveys emotional stirring or yearning, often tied to compassion and pity. "Reḥem" (ܪܚܡ) is another term frequently associated with mercy, often in relation to God's covenantal love.

When Jesus encountered suffering, His response was not just intellectual concern but an overwhelming, visceral emotion that demanded action. In Mark 1:41, when Jesus healed a leper, He was described as being "moved with compassion." This phrase likely reflects the Aramaic term "ethraḥam," indicating an intense, gut-wrenching love. Similarly, in Mark 8:2, Jesus expressed compassion for the hungry crowd, not merely feeling for them but actively providing for their needs. In the Parable of the Good

Samaritan (Luke 10:33), the Samaritan is "moved with compassion"—likely a reflection of the term "reḥem"—highlighting selfless action over social and religious barriers.

Part 2: Greek Translation – A Powerful Expression of Compassion

When Jesus' words were translated into Greek, the term "σπλαγχνίζομαι (splanchnizomai)" was chosen, capturing the visceral, emotional, and physiological depth of His Aramaic expressions. The Greeks understood emotions as deeply connected to physical sensations, often described as being felt in the bowels or heart. Thus, "splanchnizomai" effectively mirrored Jesus' original intent, as it conveyed not only deep emotion but also the physical response that compelled action.

Other Greek terms related to compassion include "ἔλεος (eleos)," which refers to mercy and divine kindness leading to action; "οἰκτεῖρω (oikteirō)," which expresses pity or sorrow; and "συνπαθέω (sumpatheō)," meaning "to suffer with," the root of the English word "sympathy." These terms, particularly "splanchnizomai," preserved the full emotional weight of Jesus' teachings, ensuring that His compassion was understood as an active, deeply felt response.

For example, in Mark 1:41, when Jesus healed the leper, the Greek text describes Him as "moved with compassion" using "splanchnizomai." This mirrors the Aramaic "ethraḥam," conveying intense emotion that leads to immediate action. The power of this word choice is evident throughout the Gospels, where it describes Jesus' empathy, His response to human suffering, and His deep sorrow over the brokenness of the world. Far from being a mere intellectual or passive feeling, compassion in Jesus' teachings is portrayed as an overwhelming force that demands engagement.

Part 3: From Greek to Latin – A Shift Toward Pity

When Christianity spread to the Roman world, Jesus' teachings were translated into Latin, and the depth of His compassion began to shift. Latin lacked a direct equivalent to "splagchnizomai," leading translators to use terms such as "misericordia," which emphasizes pity and sorrow rather than gut-wrenching emotional movement. Another term, "compati," meaning "to suffer with," is the root of the English word "compassion," but it fails to fully convey the physical and emotional depth originally present in the Greek and Aramaic.

During this period, Augustine introduced *Ordo Amoris*, or the "Order of Love," a framework that ranked love hierarchically: God first, then family, then community, and finally, outsiders. While this ordering had theological rationale, it created a shift from Jesus' universal compassion to a structured prioritization of love. Whereas Jesus' compassion broke social and religious barriers, *Ordo Amoris* was later used to justify exclusion and tribalism.

Part 4: From Latin to English – Compassion Redefined

As Latin texts were translated into English, further distortions arose. The King James Bible (1611) used terms such as "compassion," "pity," and "mercy" inconsistently, leading to variations in interpretation. Over time, "mercy" became associated primarily with legal forgiveness rather than deep, active love. Some modern translations have softened Jesus' radical compassion, making it seem more passive than its original meaning.

Additionally, some modern Christian Nationalist movements have misused *Ordo Amoris* to justify prioritizing one's own people over others. By emphasizing a hierarchy of compassion, they distort Jesus' radical inclusivity. The Parable of the Good Samaritan directly contradicts such exclusions, demonstrating that true love is boundary-breaking. Jesus did not rank people based on identity or nationality—He demonstrated that love and mercy must be extended to all.

Conclusion: Applying Jesus' Compassion Today

Jesus' original words were deeply physical, emotional, and universal. The Greek translation effectively preserved this depth, but later Latin and English translations introduced distortions that shifted the focus from action-driven compassion to passive

pity. Ordo Amoris changed how compassion was applied, sometimes in ways that conflicted with Jesus' teachings. Today, as we navigate discussions about love, justice, and inclusion, we must return to Jesus' example. Compassion must be active, boundary-breaking, and universal, just as He demonstrated.

Key Takeaways

1. Jesus' Aramaic words for compassion carried deep, physical, and relational significance, compelling action rather than mere sympathy.
2. The Greek translation preserved the emotional and physiological depth of compassion, particularly through "spagchnizomai."
3. The Latin translation introduced terms like "misericordia," shifting the focus toward pity and sorrow rather than action.
4. Augustine's Ordo Amoris created a hierarchy of love that was later used to justify exclusion rather than inclusion.
5. Modern misapplications of Ordo Amoris, particularly in Christian Nationalism, distort Jesus' radical, boundary-breaking compassion.
6. To follow Jesus' example, compassion must be universal, active, and unbound by social or political divisions.

By reclaiming the original depth of Jesus' teachings, we can better understand how to live out true, transformative compassion today.