

“The Ripple Effect”

I want to start with a question from an article by Nicholas Kristof. The question is...**Which of these two fictitious people would you rather be?** Richard is an ambitious 36-year-old commodities trader. He lives in Hawaii. He is healthy. He is fantastically handsome. He lives alone in a house with a pool. He has dated a series of gorgeous women, who any man in his right mind would be happy to be seen with. His job is stressful, but he spent Christmas in Tahiti. He is free to indulge in passions like reading, marathon running, writing poetry, and is currently composing a poem about the Haiti earthquake.

Lorna is a 64-year-old woman. She lives in the opposite of Hawaii. She is overweight, missing several front teeth. She is on regular dialysis, but that doesn't impede her social life or babysitting her grandchildren. She's a retired school assistant, very close to her 67-year-old husband, and is much respected in their church for directing music ministries and leading the semi-annual blood drive. Lorna believes in tithing, and in the last few days has organized a drive to raise \$10,000 for Haiti.

Now the first question is...*Which of these two people would our society put forward as an example of the good life?* Which one would companies want to use as a spokesperson for them to say, "If you buy our product, you can have their life?" Richard or Lorna? Next question...*Which one is more likely to be happy, Richard or Lorna?*

Now there are all kinds of research on this. Gender has no impact on happiness. Climate and weather have no impact on happiness. Location has no impact. There are happy people in Branson. They're not really bright people, but they're happy. Beautiful people are not happier than folks that society judges to be ugly. Younger people are actually a little bit less happy than older people. It turns out that joy is tied to things that surprised researchers...volunteering, donating, giving blood, serving others, being generous with your finances, and people with a vital faith in God tend to be more joyful than those without faith.

Dr. Stephen Post heads an institute that actually funds high-level research on human compassion. They've done studies at over 44 major universities. This is what he writes, "The remarkable bottom-line of the science of compassion is that giving protects overall health twice as much as aspirin protects against heart disease." Post says, "The benefits of compassion to your physical health alone are so strong that if compassion was not free, pharmaceutical companies would herald the discovery of a stupendous new drug called Give-Back instead of Prozac, and they would run TV ads about the power of compassion to enhance your life."

It turns out that Lorna will most likely live longer, be happier, have more friends, experience more purpose, and nurse fewer regrets than Richard. But that's not what matters most. One more question, which person is more like God...Richard or Lorna?

We're launching as a church this weekend into *The Ripple Effect*. I hope and I pray...I believe that over these next weeks, God is going to touch our church. And if you let him, God is going to touch your heart, and your passion and ignite something in you and in me that will rock our life and change our world. But today we're **not** going to talk in this message about the things we're going to do. We're **not** going to talk about projects or partnerships. We're **not** going to talk about human efforts. We're going to talk about the character of our God because God is a certain kind of person with a certain kind of character, and our main calling as followers of Jesus, is to come to know God, and love God, and trust God, and abide with God through Jesus. Now that will have consequences. We'll get to those, but we're going to start with our God. We're going to look at some character qualities of God, and here's what I want you to do.

I want to invite you to rate God on a ten-point scale, about these character qualities. Write it on your program. You could do it in your head if you want to, but write down where you place God on a rating of one to ten, so that we all get really clear on what is the character of our God. The first quality is this...**How compassionate is our God?** Where would you rate God on a compassion scale one to ten? And what is compassion? **“Compassion is the character quality of understanding the suffering of others and striving to do something about it.”**

Listen to what the Bible says because we don't have to guess about God's compassion. The psalmist says, "**The LORD is gracious and righteous; our God is full of compassion. The LORD protects the unwary; when I was brought low, he saved me**" (Psalm 116:5-6).

So God has the character quality of seeing the suffering of people and then doing something about it. How about you? Sometimes I struggle with this. The warning light for me that my compassion tank is about empty is that everything becomes an interruption. I'm working on my message for Sunday and I get a phone call from someone who's got a need. I'm nice on the phone, but inside I'm thinking, "OK, how can I help this person and wrap this up so I can get back to my message on compassion?" For you and me, a lack of compassion looks like choosing not to see the suffering of others, pretending it doesn't exist, and therefore thinking there's nothing for us to do. Or maybe a lack of compassion looks like getting a small peek at the suffering of others and thinking somebody else will take care of it.

That's so different than the character of our God because compassion is central to God's character. God is always looking for those who are suffering and doing something about it. You see this all over the place in the Bible especially in Jesus. Jesus is so known for his compassion that crowds of people would bring sick and suffering family members, friends, and relatives to him and the text says Jesus had compassion on them and healed their sick.

In the next chapter in Matthew, Jesus is healing and teaching crowds for three days, and then he says to his disciples, "I have compassion for these people. They have been with me three days and have nothing to eat. I do not want to send them away hungry, or they may collapse on the way." These are poor people. It's not just that there are no restaurants. They're hungry. They may die. So Jesus says to his disciples, "You bring me what you can, and then I'll multiply what you bring, and together we'll feed them. I want to feed people's bodies. I want to feed people's souls."

By the way, over these next weeks, God may be prompting you about people whose bodies and souls are hungry in our world because there are a lot of them. So on a scale of one to ten, where does God grade out on compassion? How does compassion fit into the character of our God?

Second quality...**How committed is God to justice?** Where does justice fit in God's character? And by justice we're talking specifically about God's concern for those who are oppressed. In fact, one of the most important things that ancient Israel taught about God is that God is passionately committed to justice.

The Psalmist says, "**The Lord works righteousness and justice for all the oppressed**" (Psalm 103:6). Sometimes the ancients would express this in very concrete ways. "**Honest scales and balances are from the Lord. All the weights in the bag are of his making**" (Proverbs 16:11). God hates scams and rip offs and dishonesty. God gets angry when systems are rigged, when people use power to exploit other people. God is so committed to justice he sent a group of people called prophets who were this relentless moral and spiritual force in the ancient world.

For example, when God's people, the Israelites, started to oppress others, God called it out. God said through the prophet Amos, "**For three sins of Israel, even for four, I will not turn back [my wrath]. They sell the innocent for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals. They trample on the heads of the poor as on the dust of the ground and deny justice to the oppressed.**" (Amos 2:6-7). Where there is injustice, God will bring justice whether that's on our enemies or us. So on a scale of one to ten, what would you give God on the justice scale?

Then the next character quality is generosity...**How generous is God?** Where does he grade out there? The opposite of being generous is being selfish. Anybody in this room ever get selfish? My wife makes the most awesome desserts. And most of the time they don't look real fancy. She usually makes them in a beat up old metal pan that we've had since we got married. But the most delicious, ooey, gooey, usually chocolately, stuff comes out of that beat up old pan. And whenever there's the last piece, I want it. I want it bad! There's this thing that comes over me that wants me to believe that this is the last ooey gooey treat that I will ever have in front of me and I have to have that last piece! But I know I can't just grab it. I'm pastor for God's sake! So if there are people around I'll mumble my magic words, "You all don't want this do you?" It's

my Jedi mind trick. My subtle way to influence you. "You don't want this do you?" "No, Aaron, I have no desire for that gooey deliciousness, my desire is for you to enjoy it."

I can be so selfish, and dessert is just the little stuff. I can be even less generous with my time, my concern, my money. The author of the book of James says, **"Every good and perfect gift comes from above from the Father of all Lights" (James 1:17)**. In other words, you have never received any good thing that did not come to you out of the generosity of God--from your body, to every moment of your life, every bite of food you've ever eaten, the clothes you wear, your education, the people you know. That's a generous God who has given that all to us. And God is always trying to spark generosity in us. **"He who gives to the poor will lack nothing, but he who closes his eyes to them receives many curses" (Proverbs 28:27)**

I love this commandment. God says to Israel, "If you come across your enemy's ox or donkey wandering off, be sure to take it back to him. If you see the donkey of someone who hates you fallen down under its load, don't leave it there. Be sure you help him with it." God is saying even if there's somebody you don't like and something bad happens to their animal, they have bad fortune, develop the kind of generosity of spirit that says, "I want to help out. I want to give."

How generous is God? The most famous verse in the Bible, **"God so loved the world he gave his one and only Son that whoever believes in him might not perish, but have everlasting life." (John 3:16)**. God loved. God gave his Son. Where would you rate God on the generosity scale?

How about this one...**How loving is God?** You know one of the most remarkable statements in the Bible is just this simple. **"God is love" (1 John 4:16)**. Here's the ultimate expression. **"God demonstrates his love for us in this, while we were still sinners, Christ died for us."(Romans 5:8)**.

A while back I noticed a mole that I had never had before. It was like it wasn't there one day, and the next day there it was. I had a checkup scheduled not long after I noticed it and I told the doctor. He looked at it and scheduled me an appointment with a surgeon to have it cut out. The surgeon did it at his office. I'm lying there, and the surgeon comes in with a couple of interns to watch. He gets right after it--a couple of injections to numb the area, daub it with some orange stuff. It was on a place where I could actually watch. And he starts to cut away. While he's cutting he asked, "Are you doing OK, Aaron." I said, "I'm fine, but should I be able to feel my left leg?" I love to mess with doctors—not real bright, am I?!

Tests came back that these were highly irregular cells. Kind of pre-cancerous. The kind you don't want on or in your body because really bad things can happen.

Now there is sin in me, and it's ugly, and it's toxic. If I were left to my own strength, my own spiritual capacity, it would destroy me. **"The wages of sin is death." (Romans 6:23)**. But Jesus said, "I will bear that pain. I will pay that price. I will experience that death, so that you can experience my life." That's not just love; that's costly love. That's self-sacrificing love for somebody who didn't deserve it, didn't earn it, and didn't merit it. How loving is God?

Okay that is the short list of the character of our God. Now how many of you gave God 10s right across the board? For anybody who didn't, you might want to think it out again. Here's the deal...as we live with God, as we abide with God, as we come to know him and worship him and love him and talk to him, and spend our days with him, his character begins to spill over into us. That's part of what it means to abide in him, to be rooted in him. The love that we have received through Christ that we are receiving through Christ then becomes the love we give to other people, the compassion we give to other people, the justice we want to bring for other people. That's the ripple effect.

When you receive love from God, God will touch your heart. God will fire up your passions. God will activate your gifts. God will call you to demonstrate his character in some part of our city, or our world, that desperately needs it and I want to tell you. I love being a part of a church that does that. This church has been rippling for a long time. We have people who visit people in nursing homes. They visit, and love, and encourage. We have a group of men, God's Workforce, who help people with home repairs who can't, or can't afford to, do it themselves.

We have people who are working for Watered Gardens delivering things to poor families, or sorting cloths, or helping cook food. We have people tutoring underprivileged kids at Cecil Floyd, and people working

at the Community Clinic. And a whole bunch of people who have volunteered to be lunch buddies for kids in need—so many in fact that the school is having a hard time getting to everybody and getting you trained—if that's you, please be patient!

We have people building habitat houses, and people working against human trafficking. And people who help pregnant women and girls through their unwanted pregnancies so they can know they don't have to have abortions. We have people who can't get out of their homes, but they pray for hours every day. This is a rippling church. God has set things up so that when his character ripples out from us, we find the blessed life.

Generous people are less prone to illness, depression, isolation, and anxiety than self-focused people. A Berkley study over a five-year period found people who volunteer for two or more organizations had a 44 percent lower chance of dying during that period than people who weren't serving. That's why our new motto for our serving ministries is "Serve or die." Catchy, isn't it?!

One study found that teenagers, who actively volunteer get better grades, use less drugs, less alcohol, experience less unwed pregnancy. One study found that praying for other people reduces the impact in old age of health difficulties for the people who prayed. I mean, who thought this stuff up?! Who set things up so that the compassionate life is also the blessed life? God. It was his idea! It's life in the kingdom.

But, it's really important at the outset of this that we understand that we don't love in order to get the blessing. We love because he first loved us. There is no way to receive love without giving it, or it just gets stopped up. Offer love and then watch for God. Offer love and then watch for God. Get ready for the Ripple Effect.

Because here's God's plan. It began with Jesus. He manifested the character of God, preached the gospel, healed the sick, fed the hungry, taught the confused, gave sight to the blind, cleansed the leper, welcomed the outcast, forgave the sinner, spoke truth to power, gave righteousness to the scandalized, and scandalized the self-righteous, gave power to the marginalized, and marginalized the power mongers, gave hope to the hopeless, love to the loveless, peace to the peace less, joy to the joyless, lived, taught, died on the Cross, rose from the dead, ascended to his Father. His character rippled out to a few followers. They lived out these character qualities and suddenly the rich and the poor, the slave and the free, the male and female, Jews and Gentiles, became brothers and sisters. Nobody ever did that. Nobody even thought of doing that. Jesus did.

But then they weren't focused mainly on themselves, his plan is that he is going to turn them loose. They will do what he did with his Spirit living in them. Hit the streets. Beat the bushes. They will look for suffering, and trouble, and poverty, and sickness, and despair. And when they find it, then God's love, God's character is going to flow through them and they will offer what they have in Jesus' name. It happened.

That little group of followers was like Jesus conduits. And they all died, but the movement kept growing. Jesus is saying, "I'm not done yet." How the Church, how the world is waiting for followers of Jesus who say, "We're not just about gathering here and doing our own little deal, we're going to do what that church did. We're going to hit the streets. We're going to beat the bushes." Jesus is saying, "Saint Paul's, Salvage Yard, I am not done yet. I'm going to turn you loose."

So this is the beginning of the ripple effect. What you do now is you pray, "God what are you doing in your world and how can I be a part of it?" You watch. You listen. You stay really close to God. And his character is going to flow through us and he is going to turn us loose. And for today that is the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I thank Rev. John Ortberg, Senior Pastor of Menlo Park Presbyterian Church, for his resources in this message.