According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the original definition of *compassion* is “suffering together with another, participation in suffering” (197). This definition is derived directly from the word itself—*passion* from the Latin *pati*, meaning “to suffer,” and *com*, also Latin, meaning “together, in association with.” True compassion, then, is “suffering together.” But what has compassion become? According to the updated Webster’s Third International Dictionary, *compassion* is “deep feeling for and understanding of misery or suffering and the concomitant desire to promote its alleviation.” As Olasky puts it, “one demands personal action, the other a ‘feeling’ that requires a willingness to send a check” (197).

As a believer living in the 21st century, it is easy to feel stuck when faced with situations that Biblically call for compassion. The Bible calls for a deep, change-focused, Christ-motivated compassion, but society condemns change as judgment. How do we show true compassion to the homeless that live on our streets, the broken families in our broken neighborhoods, and those hurting in and around our churches every week? For those of us heavily involved in these types of ministries, it is easy to feel either spiritually and emotionally overwhelmed, or grow desensitized and burnt out. In his book, *The Tragedy of American Compassion*, Olasky turns our heads back to the example of the past with the hopes of teaching us how to be Biblically compassionate and love our neighbor well. He argues that, in the past,

People didn’t used to be so foolish as to think that providing food would sure anything except hunger, nor so shallow as to think that physical hunger was more important than
the other human hungers, nor so blind as to ignore the interaction between the way that one helps and the effects of that help of the human spirit and human behavior (Murray, preface, XV).

Let us look back to the past to learn how we can compassionately solve the problems of the present.

**Early American Model of Compassion: 1620-1875**

Some of the earliest manuscripts of serving the poor in America date back to Plymouth, William Bradford’s writings in 1620. When someone was ill, the community would gather around them with no regard to their own health, making food, mending and washing the sick man’s clothes, making their fire, and completely supporting him or her to health. Throughout the next hundred years, these patterns in communities remained. If a child was orphaned, his neighbor unofficially adopted him. If a woman was widowed, she was found suitable work and supported by the town in times of need. The vulnerable were not isolated, but surrounded by a tight network of community.

To the same extent that compassion was shown to those with true need, strictness was shown to those who took advantage of giving. If a man refused to work, he would not eat. This was supported in firm religious beliefs of the sinful nature of man and of a merciful, just, Theistic God. Because of man’s sin, it was not assumed that man would naturally want to work. Mankind drifts towards sin, so would be pressured by the community to come back to God from slothfulness by seeking work and supporting the family. If the slothful did not do this, charity would sometimes need to be withheld, but mercy was stretched out to the sick, dying, and to those who desired change in their lives according to God’s commandments. Help was nearly always given in kind—food, coal, clothing, and etcetera—instead of money, and the point of aid was always to find work or relieve a short, difficult time (i.e. extreme sickness). All of these sentiments were supported collectively through the sermons, writings, and even the laws of the time. Even when workhouses and charity schools began to arise, the rules remained shockingly strict as compared to today’s standards, and the goal was Christlikeness shown through a work ethic motivated by God’s mercy and justice.
In all of this, the strongest focus besides the mercy and justice of God was on the family. “Nothing that could contribute to the breakup of families, or to the loss of the family’s central role as support of its members, was encouraged” (13). The society was held up by a proverbial stool of God, family, and neighborhood. These, along with hard work that supported these concepts, held society together and kept nearly everyone from falling through the cracks.

Overall, this era of meeting needs was marked by seven major marks—affiliation, bonding, categorization, discernment, employment, freedom, and God (101). The vulnerable were affiliated and bonded together with those who helped them, whether that be family, church, or community. Those helping the vulnerable used discernment by offering help that would empower the individual and lead to employment. An emphasis on freedom was present, a freedom that meant the opportunity to work and worship without the restriction of the government. All of these values were tied together by faith in a just, merciful God—a God who valued self-restraint, frugality, and industry, but also mercifully saved sinners from their (apart from Christ) irreversible state.

Changing of the Tides: Late 1800s through the Early 1900s and Social Darwinism

As institutions began to develop and cities urbanized, the tides slowly began to change. Even though problems such as homelessness, fatherlessness, and poverty were being addressed in a healthy way, the problems seemed to increase. Homelessness grew, abandoned and abused women tried to keep their homes, and sickness spread in the overcrowded urban centers of the U.S. Those who continued to pour themselves out for the poor became tired. Slowly, widespread program like soup kitchens and non-investigated aid grew. Though these programs were still societally criticized, many knew of no other alternative for changing the wider society. Eventually, the idea of Social Darwinism took a foothold—that man’s struggle was an economic struggle like that of the animals—the non-deserving would die off leaving room for the deserving. In the early twentieth century, this ended up creating an “intellectual party of anticompassion” in society, government, and higher education.

Evangelicals at this time realized that the only way to combat Social Darwinism was
through many small “points of light” (privatized aid organizations deeply investing in people and empowering them towards a strong work ethic) and that government and individuals needed to stop giving out bad aid. Even through the 1880s, organizations, churches, and newspapers continued to criticize Social Darwinism and its effect on aid, but moving into the twentieth century, the problems only continued. Overcrowding worsened, poverty escalated, and society declined. Eventually, a paradigm shift occurred: society must be the problem with the world, not man. Man must be basically good, just oppressed by an evil society— “the only reason some people did not work was that they were kept from working, and the only reason some lied about their needs was that they were forced to lie” (120). These “Social Universalists” wanted a new society and had a new Gospel to get them there—the Social Gospel (121). Instead of saving each individual, they wanted to save society. The problem is that “any time the charitable emphasis moved from the person to the mass and from souls to stones, government became the popular engine of progress (129).

Welcome Big Brother: Twentieth Century Changes

    Government—many believed this must be the new solution. Large-scale programs and organizations were the only way to change the oppressive ills of society. Taxes increased and government bureaus, departments, and organizations commenced their work. For the first time in U.S. history, schools of social work were established, along with a “new social work religion” to go along with them. This “modern theological liberalism” erased sin and blamed oppressive environments and a harsh society. If an individual was out of a job, no matter the circumstances, it was not his or her fault. If one struggled with substance abuse, it was an ill of society, not their own responsibility. If someone wanted housing, the government should honor that desire. If a woman became pregnant outside of marriage, she did not need to get married or adopt out her child, but should be provided for by her new husband—the state. Affiliation or bonding, categorization or discernment, employment or freedom, and especially God, were no longer needed.

    As one might have guessed, this new worldview ran into a few issues. First off, it was not immediately accepted by the masses or the impoverished it was meaning to help. It would
take another generation to be comfortable with this welfare state. Second, the high taxes were unsustainable in comparison to the number of individuals that were coming out arguing their rights for government support. Third, the Great Depression. Half a century later, however, after America was pulling itself up from a war, the Great Depression, and more war, many felt they had no place to turn but back to government. The picture of an evil, oppressive society was only painted more colorfully throughout the first half of the twentieth century, so many Americans turned back hopefully to the government. Mainline churches joined the rhetoric, particularly the National Council of Churches (NCC), arguing that poverty was still with us because of “the influence of unrestricted economic individualism” (171). And if poverty was socially caused, it could be socially eliminated—cue government.

Throughout the 70s and 80s, social mobility, private (challenging and non-entitlement based) organizations, and marriage suffered. Instead of being forced to work one’s self out of poverty, one could fairly comfortably be supported by the government, thus pausing social mobility for many (the essential birth of generational poverty in the U.S.). Small organizations that still valued God and work did exist, but were few and far between. Those needing help could simply choose not to go to them, but go down the street to the government office where no hard questions would be asked. The family structure was deemed as less needed; if a girl had a child, she did not have to be married or fall back into her own family to be provided for. She could get government assistance. Her baby’s father felt less pressure to be married, not being forced to provide as the only option.

The Legacy of the Twentieth Century and Critical Evaluation

Overall, throughout the twentieth century, old values were replaced with the new, and consequently, what was deemed as “compassionate” shifted. To “help” individuals, nothing needed to be known of their background and no empowerment needed to be done. Ask too many background questions and suddenly an infringement on the Fifth Amendment is made. Simply drop a few pennies in a Styrofoam cup—that became compassion. We celebrate that America is a compassionate, giving society, but what we do not realize it that we are actually stingy,
not because we refuse to spend more government money (we’re actually doing quite well there, thank you), but because we no longer offer the poor our time and a challenge. Our willingness to do so shows whether we care for hearts, minds, and souls, or just bodies—and as a society, we fail the test. (198)

Yes, as believers living in the twenty first century, we are fighting an uphill battle. Out of the degradation of marriage, feminism and other lifestyles attacking marriage have flourished. Entitlement has become a right, not based on anything of consequence, but simply the “goodness of man” and his right to receive anything he wants. The family is crumbling (or has crumbled) and affiliation with the hurting is all but non-existent.

We laugh at honor, and are then amazed to find traitors among us. We castrate, then bid the geldings to be fruitful. Similarly, when the poor are left with neither incentive nor penalty, we are surprised to find them immobile. When many children grow up without knowing a father either on earth or in heaven, we are surprised to find them wilding in the social wilderness. (230)

Olasky’s book gives an amazing overview of how we have arrived at where we are today. As he summarizes in his last chapter, the call for healthy compassion today is to suffer with, to provide affiliation and community to the hurting. Relationship leading to empowerment of the whole person—that is what changes lives. It is slow, hard, and time-consuming, but it is the only way lives are permanently changed. Suffering with will be attacked by liberals committed to “delegated compassion,” as well as by conservatives unwilling to get their hands dirty and be compassionate. What better way, as believers, than to live this calling in the community of the church, giving affiliation to those hurting in our midst and discerning the deeper problems of individuals we help. Entitlement will only create dependence, but empowerment and the transforming power of Christ will bring freedom.