

“Pity, Compassion”  
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The noun “pity” occurs only once in the AV of the NT (Matt. 18:33, RV “mercy”), and once in RV (James 5:11). The adjective “pitiful” occurs in AV (James 5:11 and 1 Pet. 3:8, RV “tender-hearted”). The Greek equivalents for these words are ελεειν (ελεαν), ευσπλαγχνος, πολυσπλαγχνος. The word “compassion” is of much more frequent occurrence, being represented in the following 21 passages of the two versions: Matt. 9:36, 14:14, 15:32, 18:27, 20:34, Mark 1:41, 5:19 (RV “mercy”), 6:34, 8:2, 9:22, Luke 7:13, 10:33, 15:20, Rom. 9:15, Phil. 2:1 (AV “mercies”), Col. 3:12 (AV “mercies”), Heb. 5:2 (RV “bear gently”), 10:28 (AV “mercy”), 10:34, 1 John 3:17 (AV “bowels”), Jude 22 (RV “mercy”). The adjective form “compassionate” occurs in 1 Pet. 3:8 (AV “having compassion”). The Greek words corresponding to these are σπλαγχνα, σπλαγχνιζεσθαι, οικτειρειν, οικτιρμος, ελεειν (ελεαν), συμπαθης, μετριοπαθειν. It should be noted that the noun σπλαγχνα is found in the original with different translations in the following cases: Luke 1:78 (“tender mercy”), 2 Cor. 6:12 (AV “bowels,” RV “affections”), Phil. 1:8 (AV “bowels,” RV “tender mercies”), Philemon 7, 12, 20 (AV “bowels,” RV “heart”). The noun οικτιρμος occurs in Rom. 12:1 (“mercies”), 2 Cor. 1:3 (“mercies”), the adjective οικτιρμων in James 5:11 (RV “merciful,” AV “of tender mercy”). ελεειν and ελεος occur numerous times with the standing translation “to have mercy,” “mercy.” συμπαθειν occurs in Heb. 4:15 (“to be touched with the feeling of”).

Of these several Greek words μετριοπαθειν may be left out of account, since in the one passage where it occurs (Heb. 5:2) it has nothing to do with compassion. It signifies literally “to have a medium-emotion.” While this may be in contrast to utter lack of sympathy, the context in our passage compels us to understand it in contrast to excess of indignation against sin. Hence RV has the correct rendering “who can bear gently,” whereas AV, “who can have compassion,” translates the word as if it were equivalent to συμπαθειν.

The other words are distinguished in their meaning as follows: σπλαγχνιζεσθαι is from σπλαγχνα = the *viscera nobilia* of the chest (heart, lungs, liver, spleen). This word denoted in classical Greek the seat of all violent passions, and the passions themselves, but the Hebrew קִדְמוֹת for which the LXX σπλαγχνα is the equivalent, stands only *sensu bono* for the seat of the tender affections and then for the affections themselves. Both in classical and in biblical Greek, therefore, σπλαγχνα covers more than “compassion.” Tittmann (*de Synonymis in Novo Testamento*, p. 68) is quite correct in claiming this wider sense for Luke 1:78 and Col. 3:12, where σπλαγχνα is the generic concept, which is more specifically determined by the genitives ελεους and οικτιρμων. We may add Phil. 2:1, where σπλαγχνα and οικτιρμοι are coordinated (“bowels and mercies”). σπλαγχνα is also used in a general sense in 2 Cor. 6:12, 7:15, Philemon 7, 12, 20. The verb σπλαγχνιζεσθαι seems to be a coinage of the later Greek. It does not even occur in the LXX except in the active form σπλαγχνιζειν in 2 Mac. 6:8 = “to eat the inwards.” Its specific sense in the NT is that of a strong inward movement of sympathetic feeling aroused by the sight of misery. The notion of intentness upon affording relief remains in the background, much more so than in ελεειν. From this strong emotional coloring of the word is to be explained the fact that in the Gospels it does not occur in the appeals addressed by suffering persons or their friends to Jesus, except in Mark 9:22, where the critical nature of the case necessitates an appeal to the profoundest compassion of Jesus. In ordinary cases the appeal naturally employs the word in which the impulse to help is most clearly connoted, and this is ελεειν. To express the strength

and inward character of the feeling the English versions often render “to be moved with compassion,” but neither AV nor RV consistently (cf. the two versions in Matt. 20:34 and Mark 6:34). The verb is predicated both of God (Jesus) and of man. Its object is not merely physical but also spiritual distress (cf. Mark 6:34, Matt. 9:36 with 14:14). *ελεειν* and *ελεος* are distinguished from *σπλαγχνιζεσθαι* by the implication of the intent to help. The same difference exists between *ελεειν* and *οικτειρειν*, the latter being the word that in classical Greek comes closest to *σπλαγχνιζεσθαι*. So far as the element of feeling is concerned, both *σπλαγχνιζεσθαι* and *οικτειρειν* are stronger words than *ελεειν*. *οικτειρειν* is connected with *οι* and *οικτος* and denotes such sympathetic feeling as seeks expression in tears and lamentation. On the other hand, *ελεειν*, being connected with *ιλαος*, *ιλασκεσθαι*, is the stronger word, so far as the impulse and readiness to afford relief require expression. A criminal begs *ελεος* of his judge, whereas hopeless suffering can be the object of *οικτιρμος* (cf. Grimm-Thayer, 1890, p. 203). This is, however, a valid distinction between *ελεειν* and *οικτειρειν* for classical Greek only. In biblical Greek it scarcely holds true that *οικτειρειν* carries no implication of the intent to help. In the LXX it is not seldom equivalent to *ελεειν* in this respect (cf. Ps. 102:13, 14). For the NT *οικτειρειν* is almost a negligible quantity, the verb occurring only in Rom. 9:15 (= Ex. 33:19). It is there predicated of God; the adjective occurs of men in Luke 6:36, of God in James 5:11.

That *ελεος*, notwithstanding its strong practical connotation, has none the less a rich ideal content appears from its frequent equivalence to *ἔλεος*, “lovingkindness.” It is not bare pity aroused by the sight of misery, but has a background of antecedent love and affection. In this respect it also differs from *οικτειρειν*, which in the LXX stands usually for *οἰκτιρο*. This feature is of importance soteriologically. Trench (*Synonyms of the NT*, pp. 166-171) represents the *ελεος* as preceding the *χαρις* in the movement of the Divine mind towards the sinner, whereas in the order of manifestation the *χαρις* would come first. This overlooks the association of *ελεος* with *ἔλεος*. The word was not colorless but had acquired from *ἔλεος* the sense of pity inspired by affection. Inasmuch as the same element of affection is present in *χαρις* likewise, the latter also can be said to underlie the *ελεος* (cf. Eph. 2:4: God is rich in *ελεος* *δια την πολλην αγαπην*). The order in the epistolary salutations (*χαρις και ελεος*) is therefore not merely the order of manifestation, but also a reflex of the order in the Divine mind (1 Tim. 1:2, 2 Tim. 1:2, 2 John 3). As in the case of *σπλαγχνιζεσθαι* so with *ελεειν*, the exciting cause can be spiritual distress as well as physical. Heine (*Synonymik des neutest. Griechisch*, p. 82) observes that *ελεος* cannot have reference to sin. It would be more accurate to say that *ελεος* has no reference to sin as such, but can have reference to sin in its aspect of misery, as is proved by Matt. 5:7 (*ελεηθησονται*, eschatologically) 18:33 (with parabolic allusion to God’s forgiveness), Rom. 9:15, 16, 18, 11:30, 31, 32, 2 Cor. 4:1, 1 Tim. 1:13, 16, 1 Pet. 2:10. Particularly in the Epistle to the Hebrews the “sympathy” of Christ has primary reference not to the suffering of believers in itself, but to the suffering in its moral aspect as exposing to temptation, whence also its first effect is the shielding from sin or the propitiation of sin: 2:17, 18 (“a merciful . . . high priest to propitiate the sins of the people”) 4:15, 16 (“that we may obtain mercy and grace”) 5:8, 9 (sympathetic appreciation of the nature of obedience on Christ’s part for the benefit of those who have to obey). Wherever *ελεος* is applied to spiritual salvation the aspect of sin as misery inevitably enters into the conception, and with this the further idea of the unworthiness of the recipient and the gracious character of the Divine mercy. It is perhaps different, as regards the latter element, in the miracles of the Gospels. Here the question may be raised, whether the regular translation by “mercy” does not unduly suggest the moral worthiness of those who were helped, and whether “pity” would not more faithfully reproduce the associations of the original.