

Compassion (Greek Word Study)

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Introduction

The Concise Oxford English Dictionary defines “compassion” as “sympathetic pity and concern for the sufferings or misfortunes of others.” *The Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary* defines “compassion” as “sympathetic consciousness of others’ distress together with a desire to alleviate it.”

In the NT, the concept of compassionate emotion is communicated by a particular Greek word family. Let us, therefore, consider the meaning and usage of the Greek noun *splagchnon*, along with the verb *splagchnizomai*. Additionally, two compound nouns should also be noted: *eusplagchnos* and *polusplagchnos*.

Greek Nouns

Splagchnon

Thomas defines [splagchnon] as “the inward parts (heart, liver, lungs, etc.), figuratively, the emotions” [4698].

BDAG say it identifies “(1) the inward parts of a body, including esp. the viscera, inward parts, entrails, literally; (2) as often in the ancient world, inner body parts served as referents for psychological aspects (see *kardia*, i.e., *heart*): of the seat of the emotions, in our usage a transference is made to the rendering heart, figuratively.”

Strong/Thayer say it refers to the “bowels, intestines, (the heart, lungs, liver, etc.).” In antiquity, “the bowels were regarded as the seat of the more violent passions, such as anger and love; but by the Hebrews as the seat of the tenderer affections, esp. kindness, benevolence, compassion; hence our heart (tender mercies, affections, etc.)” [4698].

This word occurs 11x in the NT (Luke 1:78; Acts 1:18; 2 Corinthians 6:12; 7:15; Philippians 1:8; 2:1; Colossians 3:12; Philemon 7, 12, 20; 1 John 3:17).

*Luke 1:78 ... 78 Because of the *tender mercy of our God, With which the Sunrise from on high will visit us, (NASB95)*

*Acts 1:18 ... 18 (Now this man acquired a field with the price of his wickedness, and falling headlong, he burst open in the middle and all his ***intestines** gushed out. (NASB95)*

*2 Corinthians 6:12 ... 12 You are not restrained by us, but you are restrained in your own ***affections**. (NASB95)*

*2 Corinthians 7:15 ... 15 His ***affection** abounds all the more toward you, as he remembers the obedience of you all, how you received him with fear and trembling. (NASB95)*

*Philippians 1:8 ... 8 For God is my witness, how I long for you all with the ***affection** of Christ Jesus. (NASB95)*

*Philippians 2:1 ... 1 Therefore if there is any encouragement in Christ, if there is any consolation of love, if there is any fellowship of the Spirit, if any ***affection** and compassion, (NASB95)*

*Colossians 3:12 ... 12 So, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a ***heart** of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; (NASB95)*

*Philemon 7 ... 7 For I have come to have much joy and comfort in your love, because the ***hearts** of the saints have been refreshed through you, brother. (NASB95)*

*Philemon 12 ... 12 I have sent him back to you in person, that is, sending my very ***heart**, (NASB95)*

*Philemon 20 ... 20 Yes, brother, let me benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my ***heart** in Christ. (NASB95)*

*1 John 3:17 ... 17 But whoever has the world's goods, and sees his brother in need and closes his ***heart** against him, how does the love of God abide in him? (NASB95)*

Eusplagchnos

Thomas defines [eusplagchnos] as a compound of *eu* [good, well] and *splagchnon* [the inward parts (heart, liver, lungs, etc.), fig. the emotions], meaning “tenderhearted, compassionate” [2155].

BDAG say it “pertains to having tender feelings for someone, tenderhearted, compassionate.”

Strong/Thayer define it as “(1) having strong bowels; (2) compassionate, tender hearted” [2155].

This word occurs 2x in the NT (Ephesians 4:32; 1 Peter 3:8).

*Ephesians 4:32 ... 32 Be kind to one another, ***tender-hearted**, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you. (NASB95)*

*1 Peter 3:8 ... 8 To sum up, all of you be harmonious, sympathetic, brotherly, *kindhearted, and humble in spirit; (NASB95)*

Polusplagchnos

Thomas defines [polusplagchnos] as a compound of *polus* [much, many] and *splagchnon* [the inward parts (heart, liver, lungs, etc.), fig. the emotions], meaning “very compassionate” [4184].

BDAG say it pertains “to a very high degree of affection and compassion for someone, sympathetic, compassionate, merciful.”

Strong/Thayer define it as “full of pity, very kind” [4184].

This word occurs 1x in the NT (James 5:11).

*James 5:11 ... 11 We count those blessed who endured. You have heard of the endurance of Job and have seen the outcome of the Lord’s dealings, that the Lord is *full of *compassion and is merciful. (NASB95)*

Greek Verb

Thomas defines [splagchnizomai] as from *splagchnon* [the inward parts (heart, liver, lungs, etc.), fig. the emotions], meaning “to be moved in the inward parts, i.e. to feel compassion” [4697].

BDAG say it means to “have pity, feel sympathy.”

Strong/Thayer say it means “to be moved as to one’s bowels, hence to be moved with compassion, have compassion (for the bowels were thought to be the seat of love and pity)” [4697].

This word occurs 12x in the NT (Matthew 9:36; 14:14; 15:32; 18:27; 20:34; Mark 1:41; 6:34; 8:2; 9:22; Luke 7:13; 10:33; 15:20).

*Matthew 9:36 ... 36 Seeing the people, He *felt *compassion for them, because they were distressed and dispirited like sheep without a shepherd. (NASB95)*

*Matthew 14:14 ... 14 When He went ashore, He saw a large crowd, and *felt *compassion for them and healed their sick. (NASB95)*

*Matthew 15:32 ... 32 And Jesus called His disciples to Him, and said, “I *feel *compassion for the people, because they have remained with Me now three days and have nothing to eat; and I do not want to send them away hungry, for they might faint on the way.” (NASB95)*

*Matthew 18:27 ... 27 “And the lord of that slave ***felt *compassion** and released him and forgave him the debt. (NASB95)*

*Matthew 20:34 ... 34 ***Moved with *compassion**, Jesus touched their eyes; and immediately they regained their sight and followed Him. (NASB95)*

*Mark 1:41 ... 41 ***Moved with *compassion**, Jesus stretched out His hand and touched him, and said to him, “I am willing; be cleansed.” (NASB95)*

*Mark 6:34 ... 34 When Jesus went ashore, He saw a large crowd, and He ***felt *compassion** for them because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and He began to teach them many things. (NASB95)*

*Mark 8:2 ... 2 “I ***feel *compassion** for the people because they have remained with Me now three days and have nothing to eat. (NASB95)*

*Mark 9:22 ... 22 “It has often thrown him both into the fire and into the water to destroy him. But if You can do anything, ***take *pity** on us and help us!” (NASB95)*

*Luke 7:13 ... 13 When the Lord saw her, He ***felt *compassion** for her, and said to her, “Do not weep.” (NASB95)*

*Luke 10:33 ... 33 “But a Samaritan, who was on a journey, came upon him; and when he saw him, he ***felt *compassion**, (NASB95)*

*Luke 15:20 ... 20 “So he got up and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and ***felt *compassion** for him, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. (NASB95)*

Physical Usage

Judas’ sad end illustrates the literal, physical meaning of the word (Acts 1:18).

*Acts 1:18 ... 18 (Now this man acquired a field with the price of his wickedness, and falling headlong, he burst open in the middle and all his ***intestines** gushed out. (NASB95)*

Characteristic of Deity

This spiritual quality is a characteristic of deity, being manifested by God the Father and Christ the Son (Luke 1:78-79; Philippians 1:8; James 5:10-11).

*Luke 1:78-79 ... 78 Because of the ***tender** mercy of our God, With which the Sunrise from on high will visit us, 79 To shine upon those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death, To guide our feet into the way of peace.” (NASB95)*

*Philippians 1:8 ... 8 For God is my witness, how I long for you all with the ***affection** of Christ Jesus. (NASB95)*

*James 5:10-11 ... 10 As an example, brethren, of suffering and patience, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. 11 We count those blessed who endured. You have heard of the endurance of Job and have seen the outcome of the Lord's dealings, that the Lord is ***full of *compassion** and is merciful. (NASB95)*

Duty of Disciples

Christians must manifest a spirit of compassion (Ephesians 4:31-32; Philippians 2:1-2; Colossians 3:12-13; 1 Peter 3:8-9).

*Ephesians 4:31-32 ... 31 Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. 32 Be kind to one another, ***tender-hearted**, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you. (NASB95)*

*Philippians 2:1-2 ... 1 Therefore if there is any encouragement in Christ, if there is any consolation of love, if there is any fellowship of the Spirit, if any ***affection** and compassion, 2 make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose. (NASB95)*

*Colossians 3:12-13 ... 12 So, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of ***compassion**, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; 13 bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you. (NASB95)*

*1 Peter 3:8-9 ... 8 To sum up, all of you be harmonious, sympathetic, brotherly, ***kindhearted**, and humble in spirit; 9 not returning evil for evil or insult for insult, but giving a blessing instead; for you were called for the very purpose that you might inherit a blessing. (NASB95)*

Though lacking in the lives of the faithless (2 Corinthians 6:11-13; 1 John 3:17-18), it is exemplified in the lives of the faithful (2 Corinthians 7:15; Philemon 7, 12, 20).

*2 Corinthians 6:11-13 ... 11 Our mouth has spoken freely to you, O Corinthians, our heart is opened wide. 12 You are not restrained by us, but you are restrained in your own ***affections**. 13 Now in a like exchange—I speak as to children—open wide to us also. (NASB95)*

*1 John 3:17-18 ... 17 But whoever has the world's goods, and sees his brother in need and closes his ***heart** against him, how does the love of God abide in him? 18 Little children, let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth. (NASB95)*

*2 Corinthians 7:15 ... 15 His ***affection** abounds all the more toward you, as he remembers the obedience of you all, how you received him with fear and trembling. (NASB95)*

*Philemon 7 ... 7 For I have come to have much joy and comfort in your love, because the ***hearts** of the saints have been refreshed through you, brother. (NASB95)*

*Philemon 12 ... 12 I have sent him back to you in person, that is, sending my very ***heart**, (NASB95)*

*Philemon 20 ... 20 Yes, brother, let me benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my ***heart** in Christ. (NASB95)*

Exemplified in the Ministry of Jesus

The quality of compassion is exemplified in the ministry of Jesus.

Preaching and Teaching

Jesus demonstrated compassion in preaching and teaching (Matthew 9:35-38; Mark 6:33-34).

*Matthew 9:35-38 ... 35 Jesus was going through all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every kind of disease and every kind of sickness. 36 Seeing the people, **He *felt *compassion for them, because they were distressed and dispirited like sheep without a shepherd.** 37 Then He said to His disciples, “The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. 38 “Therefore beseech the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into His harvest.” (NASB95)*

*Mark 6:33-34 ... 33 The people saw them going, and many recognized them and ran there together on foot from all the cities, and got there ahead of them. 34 When Jesus went ashore, **He saw a large crowd, and He *felt *compassion for them because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and He began to teach them many things.** (NASB95)*

Feeding the Hungry

Jesus demonstrated compassion in feeding the hungry (Matthew 15:32-38; Mark 8:1-9).

*Matthew 15:32-38 ... 32 And Jesus called His disciples to Him, and said, “**I *feel *compassion for the people, because they have remained with Me now three days and have nothing to eat;** and I do not want to send them away hungry, for they might faint on the way.” 33 The disciples said to Him, “Where would we get so many loaves in this desolate place to satisfy such a large crowd?” 34 And Jesus said to them, “How many loaves do you have?” And they said, “Seven, and a few small fish.” 35 And He directed the people to sit down on the ground; 36 and He took the seven loaves and the fish; and giving thanks, He broke them and started giving them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the people. 37 And they all ate and were satisfied, and they picked up what was left over of the broken pieces, seven large baskets full. 38 And those who ate were **four thousand men**, besides women and children. (NASB95)*

Mark 8:1-9 ... 1 In those days, when there was again a large crowd and they had nothing to eat, Jesus called His disciples and said to them, 2 “I ***feel *compassion for the people because they have remained with Me now three days and have nothing to eat.** 3 “If I send them away hungry to their homes, they will faint on the way; and some of them have come from a great distance.” 4 And His disciples answered Him, “Where will anyone be able to find enough bread here in this desolate place to satisfy these people?” 5 And He was asking them, “How many loaves do you have?” And they said, “Seven.” 6 And He directed the people to sit down on the ground; and taking the seven loaves, He gave thanks and broke them, and started giving them to His disciples to serve to them, and they served them to the people. 7 They also had a few small fish; and after He had blessed them, He ordered these to be served as well. 8 And they ate and were satisfied; and they picked up seven large baskets full of what was left over of the broken pieces. 9 About **four thousand** were there; and He sent them away. (NASB95)

Healing the Sick

Jesus demonstrated compassion in healing the sick (Matthew 14:13-14; 20:29-34; Mark 1:40-45).

Matthew 14:13-14 ... 13 Now when Jesus heard about John, He withdrew from there in a boat to a secluded place by Himself; and when the people heard of this, they followed Him on foot from the cities. 14 When He went ashore, **He saw a large crowd, and *felt *compassion for them and healed their sick.** (NASB95)

Matthew 20:29-34 ... 29 As they were leaving Jericho, a large crowd followed Him. 30 And two blind men sitting by the road, hearing that Jesus was passing by, cried out, “Lord, have mercy on us, Son of David!” 31 The crowd sternly told them to be quiet, but they cried out all the more, “Lord, Son of David, have mercy on us!” 32 And Jesus stopped and called them, and said, “What do you want Me to do for you?” 33 They said to Him, “Lord, we want our eyes to be opened.” 34 ***Moved with *compassion, Jesus touched their eyes; and immediately they regained their sight and followed Him.** (NASB95)

Mark 1:40-45 ... 40 And a leper came to Jesus, beseeching Him and falling on his knees before Him, and saying, “If You are willing, You can make me clean.” 41 ***Moved with *compassion, Jesus stretched out His hand and touched him, and said to him, “I am willing; be cleansed.”** 42 Immediately the leprosy left him and he was cleansed. 43 And He sternly warned him and immediately sent him away, 44 and He said to him, “See that you say nothing to anyone; but go, show yourself to the priest and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, as a testimony to them.” 45 But he went out and began to proclaim it freely and to spread the news around, to such an extent that Jesus could no longer publicly enter a city, but stayed out in unpopulated areas; and they were coming to Him from everywhere. (NASB95)

Casting Out Demons

Jesus demonstrated compassion in casting out demons (Mark 9:14-29).

*Mark 9:14-29 ... 14 When they came back to the disciples, they saw a large crowd around them, and some scribes arguing with them. 15 Immediately, when the entire crowd saw Him, they were amazed and began running up to greet Him. 16 And He asked them, "What are you discussing with them?" 17 And one of the crowd answered Him, "Teacher, I brought You my son, possessed with a spirit which makes him mute; 18 and whenever it seizes him, it slams him to the ground and he foams at the mouth, and grinds his teeth and stiffens out. I told Your disciples to cast it out, and they could not do it." 19 And He answered them and said, "O unbelieving generation, how long shall I be with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring him to Me!" 20 They brought the boy to Him. When he saw Him, immediately the spirit threw him into a convulsion, and falling to the ground, he began rolling around and foaming at the mouth. 21 And He asked his father, "How long has this been happening to him?" And he said, "From childhood. 22 "It has often thrown him both into the fire and into the water to destroy him. **But if You can do anything, *take *pity on us and help us!**" 23 And Jesus said to him, " 'If You can?' All things are possible to him who believes." 24 Immediately the boy's father **cried out and said, "I do believe; help my unbelief."** 25 When Jesus saw that a crowd was rapidly gathering, He rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, "You deaf and mute spirit, **I command you, come out of him and do not enter him again.**" 26 After crying out and throwing him into terrible convulsions, it came out; and the boy became so much like a corpse that most of them said, "He is dead!" 27 But Jesus took him by the hand and raised him; and he got up. 28 When He came into the house, His disciples began questioning Him privately, "Why could we not drive it out?" 29 And He said to them, "This kind cannot come out by anything but prayer." (NASB95)*

Raising the Dead

Jesus demonstrated compassion in raising the dead (Luke 7:11-17).

*Luke 7:11-17 ... 11 Soon afterwards He went to a city called Nain; and His disciples were going along with Him, accompanied by a large crowd. 12 Now as He approached the gate of the city, a dead man was being carried out, the only son of his mother, and she was a widow; and a sizeable crowd from the city was with her. 13 **When the Lord saw her, He *felt *compassion for her, and said to her, "Do not weep."** 14 And He came up and touched the coffin; and the bearers came to a halt. And He said, "Young man, I say to you, arise!" 15 The dead man sat up and began to speak. And Jesus gave him back to **his mother.** 16 Fear gripped them all, and they began glorifying God, saying, "A great prophet has arisen among us!" and, "God has visited His people!" 17 This report concerning Him went out all over Judea and in all the surrounding district. (NASB95)*

Emphasized in the Message of Jesus

The quality of compassion is emphasized in the message of Jesus.

Parable of the Unforgiving Servant

Jesus emphasized the necessity of reciprocal compassion in the parable of the unforgiving servant (Matthew 18:21-35).

*Matthew 18:21-35 ... 21 Then Peter came and said to Him, “Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?” 22 Jesus said to him, “I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven. 23 “For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. 24 “When he had begun to settle them, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. 25 “But since he did not have the means to repay, his lord commanded him to be sold, along with his wife and children and all that he had, and repayment to be made. 26 “So the slave fell to the ground and prostrated himself before him, saying, ‘Have patience with me and I will repay you everything.’ 27 “And the lord of that slave ***felt *compassion and released him and forgave him the debt.** 28 “But that slave went out and found one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and he seized him and began to choke him, saying, ‘Pay back what you owe.’ 29 “So his fellow slave fell to the ground and began to plead with him, saying, ‘Have patience with me and I will repay you.’ 30 “But he was unwilling and went and threw him in prison until he should pay back what was owed. 31 “So when his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were deeply grieved and came and reported to their lord all that had happened. 32 “Then summoning him, his lord said to him, ‘You wicked slave, I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. 33 ‘Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow slave, in the same way that I had mercy on you?’ 34 “And his lord, moved with anger, handed him over to the torturers until he should repay all that was owed him. 35 “My heavenly Father will also do the same to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart.” (NASB95)*

Parable of the Good Samaritan

Jesus emphasized the necessity of neighborly compassion in the parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:30-37).

*Luke 10:30-37 ... 30 Jesus replied and said, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among robbers, and they stripped him and beat him, and went away leaving him half dead. 31 “And by chance a priest was going down on that road, and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. 32 “Likewise a Levite also, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. 33 “But a Samaritan, who was on a journey, came upon him; and when he saw him, he ***felt *compassion,** 34 and came to him and bandaged up his wounds, pouring oil and wine on them; and he put him on his own beast, and brought him to an inn and took care of him. 35 “On the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper and said, ‘Take care of him; and whatever more you spend, when I return I will repay you.’ 36 “Which of these three do you think proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell into the robbers’ hands?” 37 And he said, “The one who showed mercy toward him.” Then Jesus said to him, “Go and do the same.” (NASB95)*

Parable of the Prodigal Son

Jesus emphasized the necessity of restorative compassion in the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32).

*Luke 15:11-32 ... 11 And He said, "A man had two sons. 12 "The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the estate that falls to me.' So he divided his wealth between them. 13 "And not many days later, the younger son gathered everything together and went on a journey into a distant country, and there he squandered his estate with loose living. 14 "Now when he had spent everything, a severe famine occurred in that country, and he began to be impoverished. 15 "So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. 16 "And he would have gladly filled his stomach with the pods that the swine were eating, and no one was giving anything to him. 17 "But when he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have more than enough bread, but I am dying here with hunger! 18 'I will get up and go to my father, and will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in your sight; 19 I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me as one of your hired men." ' 20 "So he got up and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and ***felt *compassion for him, and ran and embraced him and kissed him.** 21 "And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' 22 "But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet; 23 and bring the fattened calf, kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; 24 for this son of mine was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found.' And they began to celebrate. 25 "Now his older son was in the field, and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. 26 "And he summoned one of the servants and began inquiring what these things could be. 27 "And he said to him, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has received him back safe and sound.' 28 "But he became angry and was not willing to go in; and his father came out and began pleading with him. 29 "But he answered and said to his father, 'Look! For so many years I have been serving you and I have never neglected a command of yours; and yet you have never given me a young goat, so that I might celebrate with my friends; 30 but when this son of yours came, who has devoured your wealth with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him.' 31 "And he said to him, 'Son, you have always been with me, and all that is mine is yours. 32 'But we had to celebrate and rejoice, for this brother of yours was dead and has begun to live, and was lost and has been found.' " (NASB95)*

Conclusion

God has been compassionate toward lost mankind (Luke 1:78-79; Philippians 1:8; 2:1-2; James 5:10-11).

*Luke 1:78-79 ... 78 Because of the ***tender** mercy of our God, With which the Sunrise from on high will visit us, 79 To shine upon those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death, To guide our feet into the way of peace." (NASB95)*

*Philippians 1:8 ... 8 For God is my witness, how I long for you all with the ***affection** of Christ Jesus. (NASB95)*

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*James 5:10-11 ... 10 As an example, brethren, of suffering and patience, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. 11 We count those blessed who endured. You have heard of the endurance of Job and have seen the outcome of the Lord's dealings, that the Lord is ***full of *compassion** and is merciful. (NASB95)*

We should be likeminded toward one another (Ephesians 4:31-32; Colossians 3:12-13; 1 Peter 3:8-9; 1 John 3:17-18).

*Ephesians 4:31-32 ... 31 Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. 32 Be kind to one another, ***tender-hearted**, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you. (NASB95)*

*Colossians 3:12-13 ... 12 So, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of ***compassion**, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; 13 bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you. (NASB95)*

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*1 John 3:17-18 ... 17 But whoever has the world's goods, and sees his brother in need and closes his ***heart** against him, how does the love of God abide in him? 18 Little children, let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth. (NASB95)*