

What if mercy matters more than empathy?

Christian compassion begins not with imagining another person's pain but with recognizing our shared dependence on grace.

by [Melissa Florer-Bixler](#) in the [July 2026](#) issue
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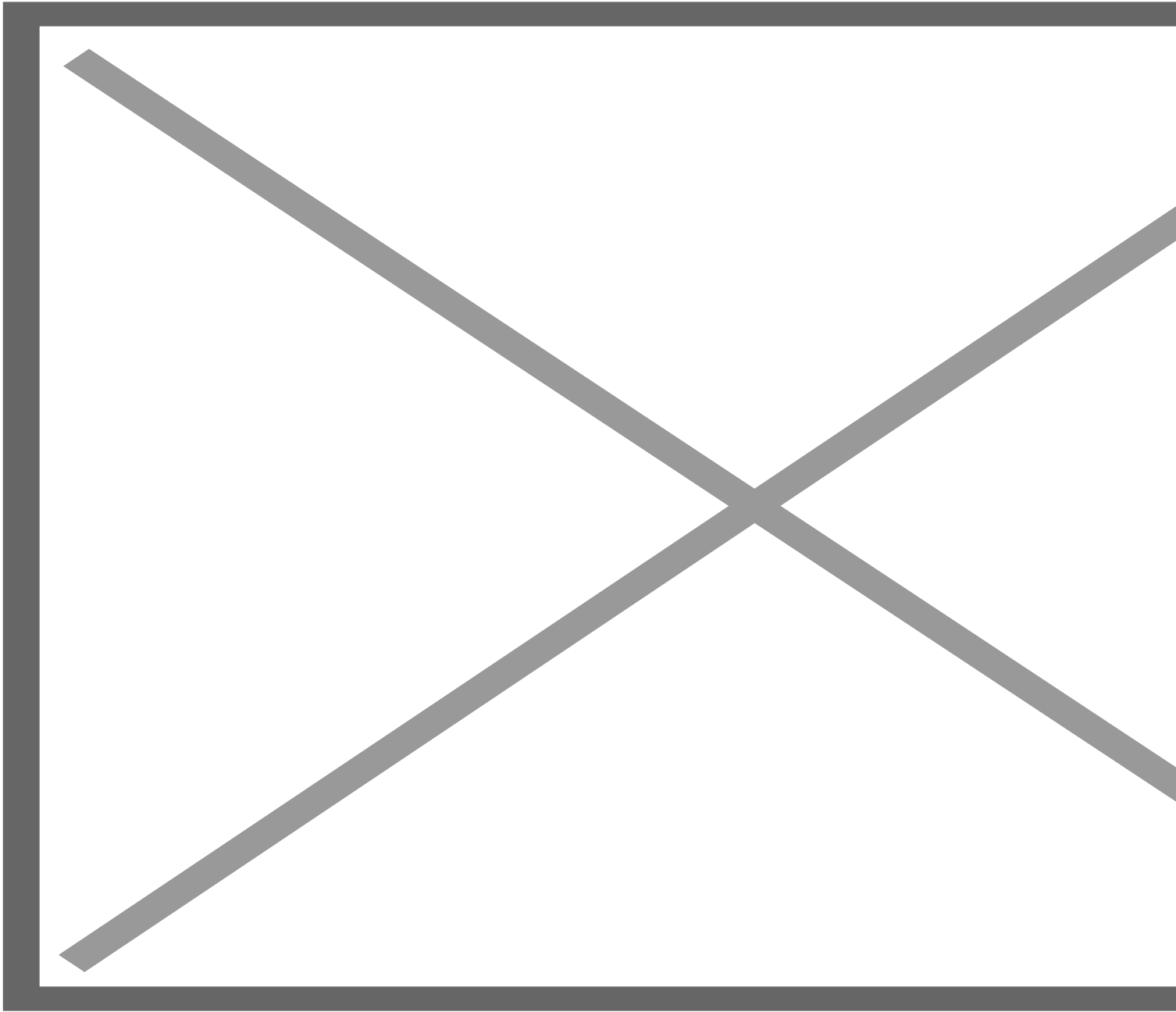


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Years before evangelicals began issuing warnings about “the sin of empathy,” Paul Bloom, a Yale psychologist, published a book warning against making ethical judgments based on identifying with others’ feelings. I read *Against Empathy* before I heard Christian conservatives warn that caring about LGBTQ people and immigrants led Christians to embrace anti-biblical public policy. But I had an uneasy intuition that Bloom was naming a real moral danger.

In anti-racism organizing, I’d witnessed what psychologists call the empathy gap: White people persistently underestimate the pain of Black people, with devastating consequences. Last year, Karrie Johnson was minutes away from giving birth and in obvious distress when a hospital nurse peppered her with questions and insisted that she complete her paperwork before being admitted. She’s not an exception. Health practitioners routinely downplay or ignore the reported pain of Black women like Johnson, leading to them being four times as likely to die in childbirth as White women.

The racialization of empathy also shapes judicial outcomes. One summer, after a Black man confessed to the murder of a White child, conservative activists in my state used empathy bias to reframe the tragedy as a racial murder. The public pressure campaign was aimed at White mothers like me. When the choice was framed between identifying with a Black man who confessed to murder or with White parents who were grieving a White child like mine, the activists were counting on my racial formation to decide for me.

Unlike the evangelicals who denounce empathy as a sin, Bloom doesn’t believe we should stop trying to understand others’ emotions or stop acting politically with the care of those we don’t understand in mind. Instead, Bloom is ambivalent about the moral weight we assign to empathy. Empathy can improve social cohesion and is a building block for good moral reasoning. And, as I have experienced, empathy can be marred by bias, or it can focus our attention on one person rather than on the social or political forces that harm all of us. Treating empathy as a silver bullet, our highest moral good, is doomed to fail us at ethically crucial moments.

But I have a harder time agreeing with Bloom’s conclusion: Instead of empathy, we should prize moral decisions based on compassionate but deliberative reasoning. Compassion, Bloom explains, doesn’t rely on my ability to discern someone’s feelings accurately. Whereas empathy is just as likely to leave us overwhelmed and fleeing from another person’s pain, compassion considers the other’s needs, takes them into account, and responds in kind. I may not know what it feels like to be facing starvation, and I may find it impossible to get inside the experience of someone struggling with addiction, but I can rationally assess others’ needs and respond.

I suspect that rationality is freighted with many of the same problems as empathy. How someone presents information changes how I understand the ethical stakes of a decision. Our rationality itself is bounded—no one has access to every piece of information before deciding. And I’m certain that cognitive bias affects what I believe is rational decision-making: I look for proof to validate my already existing beliefs every time I fill out my bracket for March Madness.

Thomas Aquinas understood the complexities of following Jesus, who taught us to love strangers while also sensing the strong pull of loving relationships with those closest to us. After all, we simply have more opportunities to love those in our nearest orbit. Because of this, we can’t devise a universal rule to guide every decision we make about caring for others. Instead, we can orient our decisions within the love of God, which, unlike our emotions or rationality, is not constrained by scarcity. Love is drawn from an inexhaustible well. The more we drink, the more like it we become. Mercy is the activation of this love. I am merciful because I am a creature to whom God has extended mercy, indefinitely and perfectly.

This year, the Republicans in my state are working to tarnish the image of a Senate candidate over a COVID-era settlement with the NAACP that allowed for the release of certain imprisoned people. The lawsuit attempted to

mitigate the devastating impact of the highly contagious virus on overcrowded prisons and argued that incarcerated people's rights were being violated within the prison walls. Most of those released were convicted of nonviolent crimes and already nearing release; others were medically vulnerable. Despite this, Republicans are leveraging the empathy gap to incite the outrage of White voters.

A rally against the settlement included one protester who stood out from the rest. The White, college-age man was dressed in an orange jumpsuit, a caricature of those released during the pandemic. Well-kempt, his jacket and tie peeking out from beneath the costume, he looked nothing like the women I knew who'd received early release, women battered by institutionalization, medical neglect, and separation from their loved ones.

But his mockery of incarcerated people did not lead me to think about all those freed during the pandemic and supposedly out to harm people like me. It had the opposite effect: I saw how much this young man and I have in common with incarcerated people, not in our ability to project onto their experience but in the truth that none of us is innocent. Were we to be judged by our deeds, we each would be found wanting. Instead, we are creatures of grace, made and kept by forgiveness. This anchors our moral reasoning when we decide who is dangerous, who should be punished, when we confront questions of real societal harm and accountability.

I was reminded of Aquinas's warning that "those who deem themselves happy, and so far powerful as to think themselves in no danger of suffering any hurt, are not so inclined to compassion." For Thomas, mercy arises not from identifying with others' feelings but from the recognition that we are each in a state of deficiency. Daily we participate, in ways known and unknown, in the destruction of those whom God loves. The way back to compassion, Aquinas teaches, is not to occupy the feelings of others but to recognize their failings as our own. We are creatures who live by mercy, by the gratuitous gift of love extended to us by God and others.