

ENDORSEMENTS

“Having traveled and worked closely with Gayla, I can say that she is passionate about Jesus Christ with all of her heart, soul, and mind. She is a missionary who constantly reaches out to those with whom she comes in contact. She has a gift for communicating the message of God’s Word, a passion for sharing it with those who don’t know, and making learners of those who do. Her life is a genuine demonstration of active compassion.”

—**Iris White**, managing editor of *BaptistLIFE*, Baptist Convention of Maryland/Delaware

“Gayla brings a lifetime of missional living to *Active Compassion: A Calling to Care*. She takes you on a lifelong journey with her missionary stories. Gayla shares great examples of being the feet of Jesus in real-life situations. *Active Compassion* as we go in His name—we all need to do this!”

—**Kaye Miller**, national WMU president, 2005–2010

“*Active Compassion* is a beautiful depiction of kingdom living. Parker is both storyteller and teacher as she challenges us to make a difference in the lives of others. She reminds us of what is most important—know Jesus and make Him known.”

—**Tasha Levert**, PhD, conference speaker, worship leader, counselor, and author of *Stories of Hope for the Sleep Deprived*

“John told us that true love is more than words. True love manifests itself in active compassion. Gayla Parker models that active compassion from the missions field in the Philippines to the streets of Baltimore where she lives. Learn active compassion from a practitioner.”

—**David Lee**, executive director, Baptist Convention of Maryland/Delaware

“As you read Gayla Parker’s new book, you will come to know her heart, soul, and compassion for God’s people. She writes with a heart that stirs your emotions, relating to everyday situations that we all experience in one way or another. It will inspire, give insight, and will certainly bless you, as you continue your journey in the Lord.”

—**Dr. Jan Bagwell Johnston**, Monroe, Louisiana

“Gayla Parker’s passionate relationship with Jesus Christ has made her a difference maker. The pages of this book will draw you closer to Christ as well as compel you to pursue a lifestyle of active compassion.”

—**Debbie Smith**, WMU director, Dudley Shoals Baptist Church, and former International Mission Board missionary

“Have you ever seen someone that you thought of as a ‘superwoman’? Through the years Gayla has been like a superwoman to me. Gifted in singing, baking, sewing, speaking, teaching, and loving people. The more I grew to know and love Gayla, the more I realized that it was His nature within her that caused her to be her best for His glory. She has a storehouse of experiences, but thrives on people knowing Christ and growing to be more like Him. I would certainly use the word *active* to describe her. There is not a passive bone in her body. How appropriate that she would write about active compassion. Her life embodies this in all she does.”

—**SC**, longtime missionary

“Gayla Parker’s experiences have prepared her to speak with authority on bringing friends to Christ, even if we have to make a hole in a roof.”

—**Andrew Westmoreland**, president, Samford University, Birmingham, Alabama

Active
COMPASSION

Active
COMPASSION
A CALLING TO CARE

By: Gayla Parker

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DEDICATION

To my husband and sons who have filled my life with more blessings than I can count; they are truly amazing men who walk every day with Christ.

To my husband, Freddy, who has loved me unconditionally and who has taught me what it really means to live out our faith while serving others.

To our three sons, Allen, Nathan, and Jesse, who have always been willing to give away their favorite homemade cookies, and give up video game time so the teenagers who swamped our home could play. Our sons amazed me as they adapted to life overseas, and continue to amaze me today as they live out their faith as adult men.

To our three daughters-in law, Christina, Alisha, and Katy. You were prayed for when our boys were born. Thank you for walking alongside our guys, serving our Lord together.

To our mission family in the Philippines who continues to go where no one has gone to take others to the feet of Jesus.

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The Paralytic and Me



Walking barefoot in the sand. Waves splashing over feet. Stepping on a stone. New socks. Warm blankets. Things that we enjoy on occasion but more often take for granted were unfamiliar to the paralytic we read about in Mark 2:1–12. He spent much of his life on a floor mat, unable to walk or run or have any sensation of touch in his legs.

We don't know much about this paralytic. We don't know his name, or why his family was not around to help him. We don't know if he was one of many beggars at the city gates every day, or what his life was *really* like. We don't even know why the four men who carried him to the feet of Jesus had active compassion for him.

We do know, however, that his life was changed forever because the four men cared enough for him and had faith enough in the healing power

of Jesus to take action. These men not only had compassion for someone who was pitiful, they acted on that compassion. When we put action with our compassion, we have *active compassion*. Sometimes we are the giver of active compassion, and other times we are the recipient of active compassion. But either way, there is nothing quite like it!

There was a difficult time in my life when I was the recipient of active compassion, and it changed me forever. In the fall of 1994, for six weeks of my life, I learned what it was like to be paralyzed. During those weeks, no one was sure if my condition would be permanent or temporary. I learned a lot about myself, my family, my God, my faith, and active compassion.

My husband and I were missionaries in the southernmost island in the Philippines, serving in General Santos City. We loved the city and the Filipinos who served alongside us in our ministry. As far as we were concerned, we would live there until retirement. Just when we were comfortable—our house was in order with all the rooms’ decor to my liking and the last picture had been hung; our boys were doing well; and life was going smoothly—everything changed. Isn’t it funny how it always seems to work out that way? I’m almost afraid to hang the last picture these days because it seems that is when God brings about a change.

One September morning, I woke up with extreme back pain. My first thought was *a hot shower would help*. My next memory is being on the floor in the shower, unable to get up. A disk in my back had ruptured, a minor injury by today’s standards.

I was paralyzed because the swelling had pinched my spinal cord in half like pinching a drinking straw. On that morning, we had no idea what had happened. General Santos has no ambulance service, so my husband carried me to our car and drove me to the hospital. The only piece of equipment there was an x-ray machine. The doctor thought that my back was broken, but the x-ray did not confirm his diagnosis. His next thought was a ruptured disk, but that did not explain the paralysis. For the next two weeks, I stayed in my bed at home, battling intense pain with anti-inflammatory medications, and hoping that whatever was wrong would correct itself.

During those early weeks, the pain did not allow for much sleep, so I decided to bury myself in God's Word. That's when I looked on the story of the paralytic with new eyes. Suddenly, I realized the frustration he must have felt every day with no hope of anything better. I realized how humiliated he must have felt on occasion. I realized the huge impact that the active compassion of four men had on his life. And I imagined what it would have been like to be healed. Were it not for the four men, the paralytic might not have been healed.

Today, there are 6 billion people who have never heard the name Jesus. They may not be physically paralyzed, but they are certainly spiritually paralyzed. They are living with the frustration of life without the grace of God. They are living without hope. We can make a difference simply by living lives of active compassion.

BE PRESENT

The four men were present for the paralytic. Just being there can sometimes be enough. As we traveled into remote villages, we heard over and over again, “No one has ever come here to be with us.” Just our presence was a strong enough witness to stir their interest in hearing about Jesus.

My son, Nathan, reminded me during the early days of my injury how important just being there is. Sometimes he sat quietly for hours in my room instead of going outside to play with his friends. He said, “I just want to be with you, Mom. We can talk if you want.” He was expressing active compassion.

During those hours, I began to wonder how many talks with my sons had I missed because I was picking up clutter, making beds, or mopping up footprints? How many talks with God had I missed because of my busyness? How many opportunities of simply being present had I missed because of my “to-do” list?

Nathan ministered to me in a way he will never know when he sat with me. He gave me the chance to reevaluate my own life. So often we place our value on all that we do, instead of who we are in Christ. It is not a long “to-do” list that determines our value. What a blessing it is to know that who we are in Christ is enough!

There are people just waiting for someone to be present in their life. Hospital patients, nursing home residents, homeless, unreached people groups around the world, pregnant teens, urban poor, rural poor, victims of violent acts, victims of natural disasters,

parents with terminally ill children, children with terminally ill parents, victims of human exploitation, the mentally ill, the parents of autistic children, children of addict parents, parents of addict children, prostitutes, widows, widowers, the stock broker that lost it all, the Muslim, the Buddhist, the Mormon, the atheist—the list of people all in need of a follower of Jesus to be present in their lives is endless.

Just being present may be an easy thing to do, but it may well be one of the most important things we do as believers. It is the first introduction of Jesus. It is the encouragement that can get a believer through their most difficult trial. We may not know all the right words to say, but that is OK, because simply being there is more than sufficient. Just being present through someone's difficult situation is active compassion.

Nathan sitting with me all afternoon is an unforgettable moment in my life. Our presence may be that unforgettable moment in the life of someone searching for hope.

Just as I enjoyed Nathan's presence, Jesus enjoys those times with us when we are in His presence. He loves when we simply sit with Him. To be truly present with others, we should first take time to be present with Jesus—a lesson Martha had to learn many times over.

In Luke 10:38–42, we read about a woman who learned that being in the presence of Jesus is enough. Martha, like so many of us, was all about getting everything done on the “to-do” list. Jesus wasn't primarily interested in her busyness; He was interested in their time together.

In John 11, Martha was the one running out to meet Jesus and complaining to Him about her brother's death. In John 12, she is serving dinner, being busy and "useful" when Mary comes in and pours perfume on the feet of Jesus as an act of worship. All three instances are reminders to Martha of the importance of just being with Jesus.

Granted, leaving the laundry for an indefinite period of time is never a good idea. However, leaving it for another day to spend time with our Lord, a family member, a child, a friend, a patient, can be a life-changing experience.

Jesus said to Martha, "Martha, Martha . . . you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed." So often we are upset about many things when our focus should be on the One—Jesus. When our focus is on Jesus, then active compassion becomes an extension of Him.

- ♥ Read Luke 10:38–42; John 11:17–44; and John 12:1–8.
- ♥ What lessons can you learn from the lives of Mary and Martha?
- ♥ What are the busy things you can let go of in order to spend time with Jesus?
- ♥ What are the busy things you can let go of in order to spend time with others?

Making a difference requires being present in the lives of others. Spending time with our children,

family members, friends, or those in need requires a conscious choice. Decide now what your plan will be to make it happen and write it down.

There is space in the back of this book to journal.

BE A FRIEND

The friendship the four men had with the paralytic made an eternal difference. They are not alone in the category of friends who make a difference. David and Jonathan in the Old Testament had a unique friendship. Jonathan came to the aid of David when he was in danger. Only a trusted friend could be that bold! Perhaps it was his active compassion for David that gave him the boldness to say the hard things David needed to hear.

A former Muslim once told me about saying the hard thing to his family—“Jesus is the only way to heaven.” Their reaction was harsh. He was shot in the side by one family member. Another family member cut his throat with a knife. And another hit his head repeatedly with a rock. He had all the scars to prove his experience. But he said something I will never forget, “I would rather tell them the truth in love than keep silent in fear. Telling them the truth may lead to more beatings or even death, but my eternity is secure. My silence may be less dangerous for me, but it will be deadly for them because my silence will ensure their eternity in hell. So, I will keep loving them by telling them the truth.” What an example of what it means to truly be a friend!

Mary and Elizabeth in the New Testament had a very special bond. Both women were expecting babies

who would change the world. But the circumstances of their pregnancies were vastly different. Elizabeth was old for childbearing, but she was at least happily married. Mary, on the other hand, was very young and not yet married. Just imagine how difficult it must have been for Mary to tell her cousin that (by proper, modern, western standards) she was virgin who was expecting. Who would believe such a thing?! There must have been an incredible level of trust between these two women. Their time together in those early months of pregnancy must have felt like a wonderful gift from God. Elizabeth's encouragement and acceptance of Mary was active compassion at work.

Throughout the weeks of my paralysis, many friends were there making a difference in my life and in the lives of those who were watching. Two weeks after my back injury, I was still not walking. The decision was made to transfer me to a larger city with better medical care. We found out that the local airlines would not transport a patient. Plan B was a call to a New Tribes missionary pilot, Martin Burnham, whom I had never met. Martin would fly from Malaybalay to General Santos, and then fly me from General Santos to Davao City. Martin's plane was not large enough to carry our entire family, so my husband and three boys traveled by car. Suzie, a missionary friend who lived in Malaybalay, heard about the plans and made the decision to join Martin on his flight so that I would not be making the trip alone. What a wonderful expression of active compassion that turned out to be!

Suzie was expecting her fifth child. When she arrived at the makeshift runway, Martin was herding

cattle off the field. Before he could get to his plane, the cattle would be back in the middle of the runway. Only on the missions field do you encounter these problems! Suzie took over cattle duty and ran the cattle off the runway while Martin started the engines on the plane. It took many tries in the heat to accomplish the task, but at last the cattle were off the field; Martin had the plane started; Suzie was on board; and they were taking off, headed to General Santos. I had no idea she was coming, but I wept when I saw her on the plane and laughed when I heard about the cattle. Her active compassion had already reminded me of God's provision of friends.

Suzie was not the only friend who came to my aid that day. When the plane landed in General Santos, I was not the only one waiting at the airport. The Filipino pastors who worked alongside us were there. Many of them had walked for four to six hours to get there. It was their active compassion that drove them to make that hike and take me to the feet of Jesus through their prayers. They had prayed for many years that God would send them a missionary. God answered their prayers by sending the Parker family. Now it appeared God was taking their missionary away. If God had answered their prayers by sending us to General Santos, then surely He would answer their prayers and bring us back. Before the plane left the General Santos airport that day, the pastors gathered around the plane and prayed for God's healing, protection, and deliverance back to our home. I may have been the missionary, but the national pastors were the real heroes.

Martin had taken all but two seats out of his plane. He placed a mattress on the floor of the plane where I laid on the journey to Davao. Moving me from our truck to the mattress on his plane was painful, but it had to be done. The whole ordeal was an emotional and stressful time. Martin seemed to know that it was time for a little humor. Flying is not my favorite thing, but that day I laughed through the entire flight. I even laughed when he suggested that he fly upside down so that I could enjoy the beautiful view. Really, I could have done without seeing the view! His humor was active compassion.

In Davao, friends were present. You think hospital food in America is bad! In the Philippines, breakfast is rice and the head of the fish. Lunch is rice and the middle of the fish. Supper is rice and the tail of the fish. Ben and Pam came to the rescue with homemade pizza for supper. Not only did they feed me daily, but they kept my children for two weeks. Glen and Marvella were taking care of insurance issues. Stan prayed over me every day. Susan brought me books to read. Linda, our nurse, checked my charts with every visit. Shirley found Dr Pepper for me—nothing short of a miracle! My youngest slept under my hospital bed so he would be close. My husband slept every night in a hospital chair by my bed.

Friends whom I knew intimately and friends I knew casually were there. What my friends did for me in the Philippines can be done every day in whatever city we live in—praying, caring, meeting needs, laughing, and crying.

Have you ever wondered why so many people spend time in neighborhood pubs and bars? My guess

is they are looking for friends with active compassion. As believers, we can fill that gap. Is there someone you see on a daily basis in need of a friend? Could it be that such a person will meet Jesus through your friendship?

Acceptance is sometimes what true friendship is about. Just to clarify, I'm not talking about the acceptance of sin, but the acceptance of the person. Betty is a volunteer who works with HIV/AIDS patients. In spite of their illness and lifestyle, Betty offers her friendship and concern. It is through her acceptance and love that many have found a relationship with Jesus Christ and found the courage to change their lifestyle.

- ♥ Read the story of Jonathan and David in 1 Samuel 19–20. List the characteristics of a good friend found in their story.

- ♥ Read the story of Mary and Elizabeth in Luke 1:39–56. Why do you think Mary had such confidence in her friendship with Elizabeth? How had the Holy Spirit prepared Elizabeth for Mary's visit?

- ♥ What can you learn about your own friendship and the kind of friend you are through their stories? What are the ways you express active compassion in those relationships?



REFLECTIONS

Four weeks into the paralysis, I was once again moved to a larger hospital in a larger city. Two weeks later, it was clear that I would be leaving the Philippines for the United States on a stretcher.

There was nothing that was easy during those six weeks. But I would not trade a single day for the lessons I learned about God, His love, His provision, His deliverance, and the importance of active compassion. My experience with paralysis was brief in comparison with the paralytic in the Book of Mark. I wonder if, like me, he would not trade a single day because of the miracle he experienced as a result of his paralysis. If he had not been paralyzed, he would not have been taken to the feet of Jesus. Perhaps he might not have met Jesus at all. This hard thing in his life was the very thing that brought him great joy on the day of healing. Like me, he learned about God, His love, His healing power, His grace, His provision, and His deliverance.

As for me, the day after our arrival in the United States, I was in surgery with a very gifted and talented neurosurgeon. When I woke in the recovery room, the surgeon, nurses, and anesthesiologist were all there waiting with anticipation to see if my legs had regained any feeling. It was an exciting moment when indeed my legs were working. The surgeon thinks I was healed because of his exceptional skills. But I know the truth. While he was good, God is great!

For sure, there is not much we know about the paralytic in the Book of Mark. But after my six weeks with paralysis, I understand better the sheer joy he must have felt when he was healed. What if his friends had not had active compassion? What if they had not carried him to the feet of Jesus? He never would have known what it was like to be in the presence of Jesus. He never would have known the blessing of friends. He never would have known the joy of being healed both physically and spiritually. The crowd would not have seen a miracle. Mark 2:12 says, “This amazed everyone and they praised God, saying, ‘We have never seen anything like this!’” Multiple lives changed, bringing praise to God, because a few had active compassion for a friend.

- ♥ What do you think life would have been like for the paralytic we read about in Mark 2:1–12? (no wheelchairs, embarrassment to his family, etc.) Do you pass by people every day that may be living life with similar challenges? Have you taken time to be their friend?
- ♥ Why was his healing so amazing? (perhaps he was considered not worthy of healing, this was the first time the crowd saw Jesus, etc.)
- ♥ What event or circumstance in your own life has led you to feeling amazed by the acts of God through that experience?

- ♥ List all the ways that God proved faithful in your circumstance. Keep the list nearby as a reminder of the power of God.

ACTS OF COMPASSION



- ♥ Contact the children's floor of your local hospital and offer to volunteer a few hours a week to read to children, clean the playroom, bring reading material to parents, or perhaps snacks for the staff.
- ♥ Nursing homes are often under staffed and have residents who have few or no visitors. A few hours a week just sitting and reading the local newspaper to a resident or listening to a little music with a patient can turn a hard day into a wonderful day.
- ♥ There may be any number of reasons a person is paralytic. Regardless of the reason, the needs are the same. Rehabilitation Centers, Handicap Olympics Program, and schools with disabled children have a long list of needs for volunteers. Call and ask how you can be a part and begin making a difference.
- ♥ When you see a car with a handicap tag or pass a paralytic in the store, take a few minutes to breathe a prayer for that person and their family.