

EMPATHY

“the Comforter”

Key question

How important is empathy to the Christian message and life?

Key text

Hebrews 4:15

“For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin.”

Definitions

- Empathy is the “identification with and understanding of another's situation, feelings, and motives.”
- Empathy is your pain in my emotional side of life.
- “So long as you can sweeten another’s pain, life is not in vain,” *Helen Keller*
- **Empathy and Sympathy** – Sympathy has a connotation of intellectual understanding and pity while empathy implies deeply personal identification on an emotional level.
- **Empathy and Compassion** – Compassion is the action side of empathy. We feel empathy and show compassion.
- **Empathy and Discernment (Judgment)** – Empathy must not exclude sound judgment. While we need empathy to deeply love others, we cannot allow empathy to be the sole guide to our response to people.

A. The dangers associated with empathy

1. **The general lack of emotional sensitivity** – The inability to be deeply “in touch” with the
 - a. **The Sociopathic personality** – May not have the ability to share the feelings of others or to be aware of how they impact those around them.
 - b. **The Intellectual personality** – May objectify all of life and fail to appreciate the role of subjective emotions in life decisions.
2. **The misdirected emotional sensitivity** – Emotional health (being “in touch” with the feeling side of life) can be accompanied by immaturity in other areas.
 - a. **The Boundary challenged personality** – May empathize quickly, easily, and fully with those around them. But they can too easily allow the feelings of others to control their agenda without discerning the limits of their responsibility.

- b. The Narcissistic personality** – May be so preoccupied with their own hypersensitivity that they have little energy to direct to the feelings of others.
- c. Projection** – We can project our own personality, temperament, and experience onto others in ways that are unrealistic, harmful to them and ourselves. We are not all alike and we do not experience circumstances in the same way.

B. Illustrations

- **Hosea 1:2** “When the Lord first spoke through Hosea, the Lord said to Hosea, ‘Go, take to yourself a wife of harlotry and have children of harlotry; for the land commits flagrant harlotry, forsaking the Lord.’”
- **Acts 6:1-6** “¹ Now at this time while the disciples were increasing {in number,} a complaint arose on the part of the Hellenistic {Jews} against the {native} Hebrews, because their widows were being overlooked in the daily serving {of food.} ² And the twelve summoned the congregation of the disciples and said, "It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables. ³ But select from among you, brethren, seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task. ⁴ But we will devote ourselves to prayer, and to the ministry of the word." ⁵ And the statement found approval with the whole congregation; and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch. ⁶ And these they brought before the apostles; and after praying, they laid their hands on them.”
- **Acts 16:24-31** “²³ And when they had inflicted many blows upon them, they threw them into prison, commanding the jailer to guard them securely; ²⁴ and he, having received such a command, threw them into the inner prison, and fastened their feet in the stocks. ²⁵ But about midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns of praise to God, and the prisoners were listening to them; ²⁶ and suddenly there came a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison house were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened, and everyone’s chains were unfastened. ²⁷ And when the jailer had been roused out of sleep and had seen the prison doors opened, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, supposing that the prisoners had escaped. ²⁸ But Paul cried out with a loud voice, saying, "Do yourself no harm, for we are all here!" ²⁹ And he called for lights and rushed in and, trembling with fear, he fell down before Paul and Silas, ³⁰ and after he brought them out, he said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" ³¹ And they said, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you shall be saved, you and your household.””
- British statesman and financier Cecil Rhodes, whose fortune was used to endow the world-famous Rhodes Scholarships, was a stickler for correct dress--but apparently not at the expense of someone else's feelings. A young man invited to dine with Rhodes arrived by train and had to go directly to Rhodes’s home in his travel-stained clothes. Once there he was appalled to find the other guests already assembled, wearing full evening dress. After what seemed a long time Rhodes appeared, in a shabby old blue suit. Later the young man learned that his host had been dressed in evening clothes, but put on the old suit when he heard of his young guest’s dilemma.

C. Texts

1. Empathy is at the heart of the incarnation and therefore of God.

- **Heb.2:17-18** “therefore, He had to be made like His brethren in all things, so that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make

propitiation for the sins of the people. For since He Himself was tempted in that which He has suffered, He is able to come to the aid of those who are tempted.”

- **Heb. 4:15** “For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin.”
- **Lk.19:41** “When He approached Jerusalem, He saw the city and wept over it.”
- **I Sam.16:7** “Do not look at his appearance or at the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for God sees not as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.”
- **Psalms 23:4** “I fear no evil, for You are with me;”
- **Psalms 56:8** “You have taken account of my wanderings; put my tears in Your bottle. Are they not in Your book?”
- **John 4:7-26** Jesus expresses empathy for the Woman of Samaria by understanding her behavior and treating her with compassion before she understands or repents.
- **Isa.53:4** “Surely our griefs He Himself bore, and our sorrows He carried;”

2. Empathy is at the heart of God’s Spirit.

- a. As a **PARACLETE** “Comforter”, “Helper”, “Advocate” the Spirit is empathetic.
- b. The word literally means “called to one’s side as an aid” It is used in a legal context of a “legal assistant” or advocate (defense counsel). It also is used in a context of one who intercedes **I Jn.2:1** “And if anyone sins, we have an **Advocate** with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous;”
- c. **The Spirit prays** for and with the Christian knowing what is needed. **Rom.8:26-27** “²⁶ And in the same way the Spirit also helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for {us} with groanings too deep for words; ²⁷ and He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He intercedes for the saints according to {the will of} God.”

3. Empathy is at the center of an ethic based on love.

- **Matt.7:12** “In everything, therefore, treat people the same way you want them to treat you, for this is the Law and the Prophets.”
- **Rom.12:15** “Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep.”
- **Rom.13:9** “For this, *You shall not commit adultery, you shall not murder, you shall not steal, you shall not covet*, and if there is any other commandment, it is summed up in this saying, *You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*”
- **Gal.6:2** “Bear one another’s burdens, and thereby fulfill the law of Christ.”
- **I Pet.3:8** “To sum up, all of you be harmonious, sympathetic, brotherly, kindhearted, and humble in spirit;”

4. Empathy is vital to Christian community.

- **Heb.13:3** “Remember the prisoners, as though in prison with them, and those who are ill-treated, since you yourselves also are in the body.”
- **Rom.15:1** “Now we who are strong ought to bear the weaknesses of those without strength and not just please ourselves.”

- **I Cor.12:26** “And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it.”
- **II Cor.11:29** “Who is weak without my being weak? Who is led into sin without my intense concern?”
- **Eph.5:25-31** “²⁵ Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her; ²⁶ that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, ²⁷ that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she should be holy and blameless. ²⁸ So husbands ought also to love their own wives as their own bodies. He who loves his own wife loves himself; ²⁹ for no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ also {does} the church, ³⁰ because we are members of His body. ³¹ *For this cause a man shall leave his father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife; and the two shall become one flesh.*”
- **Phil.2:4** “do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others.”
- **Gal.6:1** “¹ Brethren, even if a man is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; {each one} looking to yourself, lest you too be tempted. ² Bear one another’s burdens, and thus fulfill the law of Christ. ³ For if anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself. ⁴ But let each one examine his own work, and then he will have {reason for} boasting in regard to himself alone, and not in regard to another. ⁵ For each one shall bear his own load.”

5. Empathy is an important part of effective ministry.

- **II Cor.1:3-11** “³ Blessed {be} the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort; ⁴ who comforts us in all our affliction so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. ⁵ For just as the sufferings of Christ are ours in abundance, so also our comfort is abundant through Christ. ⁶ But if we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; or if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which is effective in the patient enduring of the same sufferings which we also suffer; ⁷ and our hope for you is firmly grounded, knowing that as you are sharers of our sufferings, so also you are {sharers} of our comfort. ⁸ For we do not want you to be unaware, brethren, of our affliction which came {to us} in Asia, that we were burdened excessively, beyond our strength, so that we despaired even of life; ⁹ indeed, we had the sentence of death within ourselves in order that we should not trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead; ¹⁰ who delivered us from so great a {peril of} death, and will deliver {us,} He on whom we have set our hope. And He will yet deliver us, ¹¹ you also joining in helping us through your prayers, that thanks may be given by many persons on our behalf for the favor bestowed upon us through {the prayers of} many.” (II Cor.2:1-4)

D. How to develop empathy

1. **Listen – Jas.1:19** “be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger”
2. **Observe** – There are many things that can be best learned by observing body language, circumstances, cultural norms, etc. Simply projecting onto others our narrow experience may not lead to true empathy.

3. **Imagine** – Projection, when isolated from discernment, can be harmful in relationships but it is also (at a fundamental level) vital to empathy. We learn to empathize by imagining ourselves in the shoes of another.
4. **Parenting** – Empathy is learned early in life as we experience it from our parents and as we are encouraged to develop it by them. When this does not take place, it may leave the person (in adult life) to struggle to develop deep empathy for other. For this reason parents should show and tell their children the way of empathetic connecting.
5. **Suffering** – It is almost impossible to develop deep empathy without personal suffering on many fronts. Paul makes this clear in 2 Corinthians 1:3-11.

Questions

1. **Specific facts you should know.**
 - a. Why is empathy such an important part of the Christian life?
 - b. Where does the Scripture illustrate empathy as a part of God's nature?
 - c. What are the four specific commands given to believers in their relationship with the Spirit?
2. **Issues that you should be able to discuss.**
 - a. How can empathy be misunderstood?
 - b. How is empathy to be developed?
 - c. When is projection unhealthy?
3. **Questions you should wrestle with.**
 - a. To what extent should empathy control a loving response to others?
 - b. How important is empathy in prayer?