

Hey, how about some empathy now? You know—empathy—where someone truly understands and connects with you over a particular predicament you are in, maybe a precarious situation, sometimes a tragedy. Some call empathy the stepping into the shoes of one who needs support in a difficult time.

Of course, sympathy, as a bit of a synonym, is feeling pity for someone, but that's often used in the sense of distance and some real dis-connection. Yeah, sympathy is when "those folks way over there in Kansas got hit by a tornado and no telling how long it'll take 'em to recover from that mess." But empathy is more "close-up" and personal, more connected, something like "Sally just lost her husband to cancer and I'm going to be spending a whole lot more time with her in the coming months...she's going to have a huge vacuum in her life that needs to be filled by people who love her."

The Bible has some interesting takes on empathy in word and deed... and, as always, is uniquely astute when we look at the whole package of empathy. And God's view of empathy is something that should be in the tool kit of every believer. Let's take a look...

Romans 12:15 (ESV) says, "Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep." This is the very picture of empathy called for in those moments of both lofty highs and dark lows. Of course, the joining in the rejoicing is far more enticing than joining in the weeping. But, from my experience, the joining in the weeping can be one of the most powerful demonstrations of Christ-like love we can ever display.

How about 1 Peter 3:8? "Finally, all of you, have unity of mind, sympathy, brotherly love, a tender heart, and a humble mind." Very good! But then the standard gets very personal. In Matthew 22:39, Jesus responded to the devious lawyer directly about God's great commands: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Tell me, is that the standard we truly default to when we hear of our neighbor's misfortune?

But this Biblical standard of love is not some loosey-goosey, ooey-goey instruction that smoothly works for every circumstance—for example, did Jesus have empathy for the always-condemning Pharisees? Hardly—they earned His scorn and correction! Hey, remember these amazing words when Jesus was teaching to the crowds and His disciples? "The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat, so do and observe whatever they tell you, but not the works they do. For they preach, but do not practice. They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger. They do all their deeds to be seen by others..." (Matthew 23:2-5a)

Wait, did you get the real gist of that? The scribes and Pharisees lay heavy burdens on others that they themselves are not willing to bear...and they do all their deeds to be seen by others! That's not empathy in either instance by these folks—burdening others instead of themselves, and then when they actually do something, they are really just striving after personal showmanship!

Immediately after that, Jesus goes on to speak directly to His targets within that audience. "But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut the kingdom of heaven in people's faces. For you neither enter yourselves nor allow those who would enter to go in. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel across sea and land to make a single proselyte, and when he becomes a proselyte, you make him twice as much a child of hell as yourselves." (Matthew 23:13-15) Wow! Yes, Jesus said that! So, Jesus had no empathy for those who misused or abused the office they were appointed to, and He directly called them out on that. So, true empathy is not a wide swath given freely to all—no, the proper use of empathy is one of deep discernment in each and every circumstance.

And therein lies the amazing irony of these very passages: Jesus was actually displaying deep empathy for the crowds and His disciples by calling out the corrupt Pharisees in public and in front of those hearing His words who had been victims of the very follies that the scribes and Pharisees had inflicted upon them all. Here's the point: properly-dispatched empathy can come in many different packages and approaches.

Along those lines, here's one of my favorites, recorded in Matthew 9:36. "When [Jesus] saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd."

In contrast to the crowds Jesus spoke to in Matthew 23 who had Pharisees who were shepherding them badly, very badly, in this case in Matthew 9, Jesus found people without a shepherd at all!

Of course, this directly reflects on Jesus' command for His disciples to have great empathy for those around the world without a shepherd at all! After all, Jesus has already shown the Greatest Empathy of all time on the Cross when He gave His life as a ransom for all (1 Timothy 2). And we have the truth right there in that same chapter that "God our Savior desires all people to be saved." Again, this is the capital G, capital E, *the Greatest Empathy of all time*, the seeing and acknowledging of billions this very day who are harassed and helpless in their sin and needing a shepherd...yeah, the Good Shepherd Christ!

So, it's in this way that Jesus then calls upon our personal empathy for the lost in His call for every one of His disciples to go forth with the Good News of the Gospel and make disciples around the world! Of course, this is the highest and best way to love our neighbors, whether they be next door or in the next country.

What's more remarkable about this is a distinction we rarely hear about when people talk about their leaders having empathy. In my Capstone course for senior students graduating with business degrees, many students have asked what the role of empathy is in leadership—for example, regarding executives in their lofty roles. And my response has always been this: at virtually all times, mature people must keep focused on long-term empathy, not unanchored short-term empathy! What's that, you might be saying? *That's right, long-term empathy must be the goal, empathy that often requires short-term sacrifice.*

For the CEO, that means the goal is that team members sacrificially co-develop their livelihood over the long-haul and share the fruits of harvesttime, all-the-while sacrificing in the short-term the tasks of tilling and seeding and watering for the sake of the long game. Yes, lavishing empathy to make others feel good in the short term without proper consideration of long-term effects simply sets up the organization for failure. The same is true for teaching. The best teachers and professors have little empathy for the here-and-now students' complaints about the difficulties and sacrifices of learning the key truths, principles and practices that, when well-learned, will pay great dividends for the students themselves in the future.

And the same is true with parenting, too, of course. Short-term empathy for the skinned knee from falling from the bicycle and for the jilted friendship, yes, of course...but the vast majority of learning of a child is rightly built upon the steady, relentless focus on the things of God and the other lasting things that drive long-term fruits. So, too, savvy parents focus on long-term empathy with a steady eye for high-functioning, God-serving, well-balanced results. All that is only yielded because those parents took necessary short-term sacrifices: they didn't mistake unsavvy empathy for needed hard work and sacrifice.

For the believer who's a witnesser, a discipler, a boss, a parent, a teacher, an elder, a true friend, it's indeed short-term empathy for the true tragedies and mishaps of others. But the long-haul requires the focus on long-term empathy and short-term sacrifice in serving that long-term empathy. Thus, the Father turned His head as Jesus hung on the Cross...but both acted in alignment and agreement that the Cross would manifest utterly unique very long-term empathy for all humanity.

One key point remains. Many people love to show very public short-term empathy for the downtrodden—but they do not pay the price for that themselves...yes, they force others to pay the price for their empathy instead. For example, political movements of the last two centuries like to "find" perceived injustices that, of course, must be remedied immediately by someone else—you know, the rich, the privileged, the well-positioned. Yes, this self-righteous posture routinely manifests in political structures like socialism and government cram-downs where *someone else* must pay for the empathy and the glory of the social-engineering politicians and bureaucracy! Yes, empathy is weaponized! *But Jesus did exactly the opposite!* Yes, Christ paid the full price up front Himself, then invited His disciples to share the good news that the Pharisees who abused their appointed offices were rightly supplanted by those who would herald that the new standard of God's grace and love! So, how about Christ's command to us for some of that long-term empathy for others around the world right now—yes, centering on the empathetic Gospel of Christ!

A&A: Application & Action

1. When you disciple, mentor, or teach others, are you focused more on short-term empathy and solutions...or the long-term empathy that often entails short-term sacrifices? Discuss.
2. What's your response to the ginning up and weaponizing of empathy into class and social warfare by some political movements and the politicians leading them? Discuss.
3. Why is it that relatively few American churches demonstrate little to no meaningful, long-term empathy for the billions of lost people around the world? Discuss.