

August 2, 2020

“Empathy”
Romans 12:15

FCF: Talking past one another

PROPOSITION: (anchor) The Lord calls us to be people of empathy.
(magnet) We must strive to grow in this.

SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION:

I’ve pretty well given up on talk shows. They’re either silly and frivolous or just all talk and no hearing. At the risk of sounding like a crank, it’s usually just a few folks on a split screen or at a table shouting at one another. Not talking with each other but shouting at one another. If someone walked in and suggested “active listening,” no one would have a clue what they meant.

Everyone is talking past each other. And when you look at our society today, you might think we’ve been trained and catechized by those talk shows. We’re all talking past each other.

SCRIPTURE READING: [Romans 12:9-16](#)**PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION****SERMON INTRODUCTION:**

Trace the theme. One spouse says to the other, “You’re oblivious, just cut off from me.” A teenager cries out to their parents, “I don’t need a lecture. I need you to listen.” Within a friendship, one party finally says, “I’m always here for you. But you never ask about my hurt.” In our culture, whether it’s COVID-19 or racial injustice, there’s no room for nuance. We’re all fixated on our stances and give little thought to our common concerns. What’s the theme?

A lack of empathy. It comes down to a lack of empathy. Empathy underlies compassion, that “feeling with” and moving towards. Empathy comes before that and drives it. Literally, it is a “feeling into.” It’s the ability to imagine and experience the thoughts and emotions of another person. It’s feeling what others feel. It’s what Paul urges in Romans ([READ Romans 12:15](#)).

Over the last few weeks, we’ve been looking at the spiritual pandemic of racism. That’s bad enough. Let me suggest that, when it comes to showing true concern one to another, we are walking in a spiritual desert. And we can see it playing out all around us. But the Lord calls us to be a people of empathy. He calls us to be a people of empathy. We must strive to grow in this.

How? By looking at these three things. The who, the why, and the what of empathy.

I. THE WHO OF EMPATHY

First, the “who” of empathy. Our guide, our model and pattern, in this is Jesus Himself.

A) As God Incarnate

Jesus is God incarnate, the One described in the prophets ([READ Isaiah 40:9-11](#)). He comes not just as a conquering king or even a benevolent benefactor but as shepherd. The Good Shepherd.

B) In His Earthly Ministry

1. A common occurrence

We see this Shepherd’s good care in His earthly ministry ([READ Matthew 9:35-36; 14:13-14](#)). Some forty times, Jesus is described as looking at people, really seeing them as they really are.

2. A beautiful moment

Here's one beautiful moment ([READ Luke 7:11-15](#)). In that world, a mother's greatest joy was to have a son. And her greatest sorrow was to lose him. She was already a widow. She is on the edge of utter desolation. Jesus experiences her pain. His heart goes out to her. And He acts.

Jesus is the "who" of empathy. He is our guide, our model and our pattern.

Application:

All others are glimmers and reflections of this deep wellspring in the desert. This guide is God Himself in the flesh. Which means that any situation where we don't know what empathy would look like - whether in a viral or a spiritual pandemic - we have but to ask. Just to ask.

The Lord calls us to be a people of empathy. We must strive to grow in this.

II. THE WHY OF EMPATHY

Jesus is the "who" of empathy. And the "why." He is our reason, our motive and cause. And we can think of that in three ways, three ways equal in importance but growing in intensity.

A) Obedience

The first is a call to obedience. That's part of the motive ([READ Colossians 3:12-13](#)). This call to empathy is a call to obedience, grounded in who and whose we are. This appeals to the will.

B) Imitation

There is also the call to imitation ([READ John 13:34-35; Ephesians 5:1-2](#)). We are to love as we have been loved. How has He loved us? We are to think on that, which is an appeal to the mind.

C) Overflow

But the third is from an overflow, an appeal to the emotions ([READ Philippians 2:1-2](#)).

1. Not casting doubt

Now Paul is not casting doubt here. He knows these things to already be true of his readers.

2. But connecting the dots

But he wants them to connect the dots. It's as though he's saying, "Given that these things are true, these other things should be present in you as well." Such fruit comes from such a root.

Jesus and His work in our lives, is the great "why," the reason and motive, of empathy.

Application:

Guilt is never enough. It doesn't change our behavior patterns because it doesn't reach the heart. Guilt is never enough. Think of it this way. As a white man, I should ask my black brother what it's like to be pulled over because of his skin color, to have that "other talk" with his son, to be looked at suspiciously in the department store or be treated dismissively on the car lot.

Not everyone has these stories but many do. And they cannot be dismissed. So I should ask. But I should ask not out of guilt but out of empathy, this "feeling into" because of Jesus.

The Lord calls us to be a people of empathy. We must strive to grow in this.

III. THE WHAT OF EMPATHY

Which takes us to the “what” of empathy, of how this plays out. What might it mean to see someone’s pain? To see and act, to weep with those who weep? Let’s look at a parable. Jesus did “show and tell” with empathy ([READ Luke 10:25-37](#)). What is neighbor love?

A) *How to See*

1. The context

Let’s start with how to see. Given its bad reputation, to be left bleeding and dying on the Jericho Road was not a surprise. The surprise comes with who Jesus casts as the hero of the story. For a Jewish person to speak of a “Good Samaritan” would be like our speaking of a “Good Taliban.”

2. The contrast

That context is important. As is the contrast of responses. The priest and Levite, the religious pros, pass by. But not the Samaritan ([READ Luke 10:33](#)). He sees not a problem but a person.

B) *The Risk of Seeing*

1. The details of the story

Which takes us from how to see to the risk of seeing. Think of the details. This man interrupts his schedule and empties his wallet. He risks being misunderstood. Think of the cost of all this.

2. The broader lessons

So what are the broader lessons? It’s easy to look away. But love means losing control of our rights and resources. The master becomes the servant. It’s utterly disruptive. It’s why Jesus tells the story. And it settles any lingering questions about what true spirituality should look like.

This is the “what” of empathy. This is the shape it can and is meant to take.

Application:

Now there are as many possible applications here as there are needs in this world. But, specifically, how does this connect to questions on racial reconciliation? Let me make a few suggestions as to the shape such empathy might take, especially towards those of color ([READ](#)):

- Willingness - to listen, not assuming we understand the experience of another person.
- Humility - to ask. And to interrogate our “triggers.” To re-examine our long held assumptions and positions.
- Openness - to let go of whatever might be the source of another person’s pain. And then to put it away.
- Commitment - to defend and advocate, to speak up and to leverage what we can for needed change.

Those are just a few suggestions. Jesus has shown us both how to see and the risk that comes with seeing. It is indeed disruptive. Such love means losing control of our rights and resources.

The Lord calls us to be a people of empathy. We must strive to grow in this.

CONCLUSION:

The noble traveler is the idea that travel makes you more open-minded, kinder and more tolerant. You hear it in Mark Twain’s travel book (1869), *The Innocent Abroad* ([READ quote](#)):

Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness, and many of our people need it sorely on these accounts. Broad, wholesome, charitable views of men and things can not be acquired by vegetating in one little corner of the earth all one’s lifetime.

Which all sounds great. But as a recent *National Geographic* story pointed out ([READ quote](#)):

But if travel truly were fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness, wouldn't more of the 1.4 billion annual international tourists (pre-pandemic) have made the world kinder and less biased by now?

Not to say change is impossible. Travel can indeed broaden our perspective. Recent discoveries in neuroscience show that we are indeed wired for empathy. And studies have shown that it is possible for us to grow, to improve, to make strides in this "feeling into." So change is possible.

But how? The best answer is one that goes deepest. John Stott noted ([READ quote](#)):

Love never stands aloof from other people's joys or pains. Love identifies with them, sings with them and suffers with them. Love enters deeply into their experiences and their emotions, their laughter and their tears, and feels solidarity with them, whatever their mood.

The Gospel gives us the vital who, why, and what. The Lord calls us to be a people of empathy.

We must strive to grow in this.

PROPOSITION: (anchor) The Lord calls us to be people of empathy.
(magnet) We must strive to grow in this.