



WHEN EMPATHY BECOMES SIN

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There are a lot of hurting people in the world today – confused people who are looking for answers, happiness, and ultimately hope. As Christ followers, we need to know how to respond to them as Jesus would.

Matthew 9:35–36 gives insight into how Jesus responded to the broken throughout his ministry on earth...

Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. (NIV)

Two things stand out in this text. The first is that when Jesus saw the crowds, he had compassion on them. That is our Lord's response to helpless and hurting people: compassion.

Second, Matthew tells us that Jesus saw these people as sheep without a shepherd.

This is significant because in those days, the average Jew knew the scriptures pretty well. They knew the Law and the prophets better than many American Christians know the Bible today.

Yet Matthew describes these people steeped in Scripture as helpless. Why? Because they knew God's Word, but they didn't understand or embrace his plan. They were confused and helpless like sheep without a shepherd.

If you've ever seen how sheep behave, you'll understand why they need a shepherd. Sheep simply aren't very smart. Just Google "sheep getting stuck" and watch a couple of videos and you'll understand what I mean.

They get themselves stuck in a pit or a ditch, and even after the shepherd rescues them, they'll often just fall right back in and get stuck again. This kind of sums up the Christian walk in a nutshell, doesn't it?

I've heard people say, "I don't need a church to be a Christian." And in a sense, that's true, but it's like saying, "I don't need a shepherd to be a sheep." Technically that's true. You don't need a shepherd to be a sheep, but it's a lot better for you to be a sheep with a shepherd.

Otherwise, you're likely to fall into pits, get eaten by wolves, and find yourself in all sorts of trouble that could have been avoided. We need shepherds because spiritual dangers lurk around every corner in this world, and Christians are more vulnerable now than ever before.



Fewer Christians read the Bible today than ever before. Fewer Christians in America attend church regularly than ever before. Fewer Christians sit under the teaching of a spiritual shepherd than ever before.

When you don't live as a devoted follower of Jesus, you leave yourself vulnerable to the schemes of the enemy. Less devotion results in greater confusion. It should come as no surprise, then, that Christians face so much deception and confusion in culture today.

One of the greatest deceptions of the enemy today is glorifying and elevating victimhood. This is an important strategy to identify. So I want to first establish some realities about this elevation of victimhood before we examine how Christians should respond to people's pain.

Obviously, there are people who really have been victimized, abused, treated unfairly.

When people are victimized, it should break our hearts, because it breaks God's heart.

But the elevation of victimhood you see today actually degrades those who have been truly abused. Because it's not about the pursuit of healing, but rather about amassing greater social power. And this all stems from critical theory, which has taken deep root in our society.

Critical theory lies behind radical gender ideology, radical feminism, gender dysphoria, transgenderism, fighting against the patriarchy, defunding the police, racial tension and division, radical environmentalism, anti-Christianity, and anti-nuclear family, to name a few of the movements it's birthed.

It affects the entertainment industry, universities, school systems, the corporate world, government, and sadly, even some churches.

What makes critical theory so insidious is that it elevates personal experience above anything else, including God's Word. Obviously, this poses a serious threat to believers because the more we drift from God's Word and from truth, the more vulnerable we are to the enemy's lies and attacks.

The devil, our real spiritual enemy, wants to keep you oppressed and deceived. He wants everyone to live in a constant state of offense, a victim who rebels against authority in a way that ushers in the destruction of society, but also ultimately the destruction of the soul.

During Jesus' trial, Pontius Pilate asked Christ, "What is truth?"

Jesus remained silent then, but he had shared the answer earlier in his ministry. In John 14:6, Jesus says, "I am the way and the truth and the life." There is truth and there is falsehood. The devil says that truth is whatever you want it to be and that authority figures who counter that view are oppressive and must be overthrown.



The Bible says authority is established by the ultimate authority, God. Romans 13:1–2 says:

*Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. **The authorities that exist have been established by God.** Consequently, whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. (NIV, emphasis added)*

That doesn't mean everyone in authority is doing a good job or that they have good character, but that God established the institutions of authority like government and the church to be a blessing that holds evil in check. And when we try to tear down those institutions, it causes havoc.

Submission to authority is where we find blessing and safety, which is why the devil wants you to rebel against all authority. The devil wants to drag you into victimhood, which is the opposite direction of where Jesus wants to take you, which is to victory.

Romans 8:31 says, *“What then shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us?”* Then in verse 37, we read, *“No. In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.”*

**In Christ we are not helpless, hopeless victims.
We've already overcome.**

With all of this in mind, I want to examine how we are to respond to the hurting people in our lives. As Matthew 9:36 shows, Jesus had compassion on people. So as his followers, we too are to show compassion, or sympathy.

The words sympathy and compassion come from the Greek and Latin, respectively. They mean the exact same thing – to suffer with.

One way to look at the Matthew 9 text is to think of Jesus seeing the people and say, “I hate that these people are hurting and confused, I'm going to walk through this with them.” Sympathy is a Christlike attitude, and we are commanded as Christians to show this same compassion to those who are hurting.

I remember a time in my life when I wasn't a very sympathetic person. I didn't experience a lot of hardship, and I would hear about other people who were hurting and, in theory, I cared. But emotionally I just didn't really feel much for them.

As I grew older and experienced more of life in the real world, with its hardship, pain, disappointment, and brokenness, I developed a deeper appreciation for it means to show sympathy – or a Christlike compassion for people in pain.



What changed?

I entered into the pain others felt, and as a result, I identified with their hurt. I heard a pastor once say he believes God allows pastors to suffer deeply so that they'll be able to love deeply. I can attest that by God's grace, this is true.

But I don't think God reserves this experience for pastors only. We all go through hardship. But God's promises are true, and we know that God works all things together for the good of those who love him and are called according to his purpose (Romans 8:28). One of the profound ways God works even terrible tragedies for good is using them to prepare you to minister to hurting people on behalf of Jesus.

Colossians 3:12–14 says:

Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.

The love we've received from Jesus and that we have for him binds us all together in perfect unity and makes us one.

While the world constantly tries to divide us into false categories, the Bible says that in Christ we are one and we're supposed to fight for unity and hold on to unity.

Maybe this seems like a lofty goal, but just stop and think for a minute. Wouldn't it be amazing if believers actually did what we're commanded to do? Imagine if you and I as followers of Jesus said, "I'm going to love and show compassion and be gentle and patient, not because other people deserve it, but because Jesus has treated me that way when I didn't deserve it."

The effect would transform lives and change our culture.

So... how do you sympathize like Jesus?

First, you suffer with the hurting. Jesus came down to earth from heaven and became a man who walked among us and experienced our pain. He entered into our hurt.



Secondly, you have to hold on to truth. Sympathy does not ignore truth. You can feel sympathy for others while acknowledging personal choices they may have made that led to their situation. Compassion might cause you to give someone the benefit of the doubt when they first come to you. But you have permission to ask clarifying questions and examine the facts to determine what is really going on. There are always three sides to every story: yours, mine, and the truth.

The goal for all believers is to identify Christ's perspective and act accordingly.

Third, you help those in need. It's not enough to pity people. You must put your compassion into action and help them, because that's what Jesus did. He didn't just sit in heaven and feel bad for us. He actually came and healed and fed and forgave and died for us, to help us in a way that only he could.

That's compassion. That's sympathy. And it's a trait the Bible commands us to embody.

But there's another concept that sounds a lot like sympathy which has become very popular in recent years in the culture. It's called empathy.

Whereas sympathy is to suffer with, empathy is to suffer in. The term was invented in just the last hundred years, and for a long time it communicated something like "trying to put yourself in someone else's shoes and see the situation or the suffering from their point of view."

Stated like that, empathy sounds even better than sympathy, like a more virtuous type of compassion, a more loving way to treat people. And maybe that is what it was originally, but this term empathy has been corrupted and co-opted by the critical theory, pro-victim agenda.

Many in our culture today promote empathy as good and sympathy as damaging or unloving. They'll teach that sympathy creates separation. We see this mentality permeating so much of our culture, and even many well-meaning Christians have adopted this view that empathy is superior to sympathy. But let's examine what the modern view of empathy tells us to do.

According to the National Council for Mental Wellbeing, the following are the keys to empathy:

First, if someone's hurting, you should listen non-judgmentally.

You are to just listen and accept everything as the person says it. It sounds nice on the surface, but what it requires you to do is turn off the part of your brain that sees the difference between right and wrong.

Secondly, you have to remove all of your biases and preconceived notions.

When you're listening to someone sharing their point of view, you have to set aside your own views and preconceptions. That may sound good on the surface, but that would even include your preconceived Christian notions. So even though you believe marriage is between a man and a woman because the Bible says so, empathy says, "You have to let that bias go in order to be empathetic to LGBT people." That's clearly a problem.



Thirdly, you validate their feelings and experiences.

Whatever a person feels is right and however they say it happened, we're to accept that's how it happened. If you ask questions like, "Well, what did they say? What did you do?" That's not being empathetic.

Finally, you should listen without giving advice.

Don't give advice. Just listen. Maybe on some levels it sounds polite, and it's nice to have someone just listen to you so you can get something off your chest. But that's not how Jesus had compassion on the crowds. He didn't just listen to their problems. He rebuked them, he corrected them, he spoke the truth to them, and he did all this to help them.

That is the model for empathy according to our culture today. Let's contrast that with biblical sympathy. Imagine you have a loved one who's hurting. They're feeling bad, struggling, depressed, or anxious. As a Christian, you have compassion and want to help them. And it's like they are drowning in quicksand.

So what do you need to do?

You have to hold on to solid biblical truth so you can reach out and say, "Take my hand. I'm standing on a firm foundation, and I can help you out of that pit."

That's what Jesus did. He saw us. We were drowning in sin. He came to earth, but he never divorced himself from the truth. He was the truth. He perfectly upheld the law. And he reached out to us and said, "I've come to save you. I am the firm foundation. Take my hand, and I will pull you to safety." That's biblical sympathy.

Empathy, on the other hand, says you have to get in the pit with someone. You've got to become them. You've got to let go of the truth, all your preconceived notions, and you've just got to agree with someone in whatever they say. You have to try to feel what they feel. You might think that sounds loving, and in a sense, it could be motivated by love. You get down in a pit with someone, in the trenches with them.

But what's the problem if you both get in the pit? You both end up stuck.

You can't actually help someone if you're as helpless as they are.

Now, some Christians will defend this modern notion of empathy by quoting verses like Romans 12:15, that says, "*Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep*" (ESV). These believers maintain that empathy is simply weeping with those who weep.



But the context of that passage matters. Just a couple verses prior in Romans 12:9 it says *“Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good”* (NIV).

Yes, we weep with those who weep, but we cannot stop holding on to biblical truth, because that’s what makes our love genuine. It’s not loving to agree with someone’s delusion.

Empathy without integrity leads to catastrophe. We want to feel, we want to love, but we can’t let go of truth. We’ve got to hold on to something solid no matter what.

That means pastors have to have a higher allegiance to the truth than to their church members. A husband has to have a higher allegiance to the truth than to his own wife. Parents have to have a higher allegiance to the truth than to their own kids.

That might sound coldhearted, but remember, this is not just an ideology. The truth is a person. The truth is Jesus. So that means I care about my church family, I care about my wife, I care about my kids, but I can’t let go of Jesus no matter what.

I have to hold onto something solid. I cannot compromise on what is true according to God’s Word to go along and get along.

So what does it sound like to have compassion with conviction when you’re talking to the hurting? First it says, “I won’t condemn you, but I must judge rightly.”

People don’t often understand the difference between judging and condemning, and they’ll often quote everyone’s favorite verse, “Judge not, lest ye be judged.”

You have to understand that when the Bible talks about judging, there’s two different types of judging and different words being represented. When it says judge not, it’s really talking about the sentencing part of the legal process – condemnation. So I’ve got to judge rightly, but not condemn.

Empathy says, “Listen non-judgmentally and don’t make any right or wrong judgments.” But real biblical compassion holds on to the truth and says, “Look, I’m not trying to condemn you spiritually or beat you. But I am seeking to judge rightly.”

That’s what Jesus says in John 7:24. *“Do not judge by appearances, but judge with right judgment”* (ESV). The Bible commands us to judge with right judgment. We have to look at situations and ask questions. Sometimes we’ve got to step back and say, “Is that what happened? Or do we need to reexamine the facts?” That’s what God commands us to do.

Empathy says, “Get in my shoes. See things from my viewpoint. And accept the world as I’ve determined it to be.” This leads to more and more hurt. It’s okay to try to see things from someone else’s perspective. But it’s not okay to let their perspective override God’s.



In John 5:30 Jesus models this for us. He said, *“I judge only as I hear, and my judgment is just, for I seek not to please myself but him who sent me”* (NIV). So when you’re looking at a situation, you’re looking for God’s view. That’s the only way to arrive at a just judgment.

Empathy says, “feel what I feel.” But sympathy sometimes has to say, “Actually, it’s your thinking that’s wrong.”

Proverbs 3:5 says, *“Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding”* (NIV).

In other words, the way I see it might not be what it actually is, so I can’t trust in my view or my perspective or even my feelings. I need to trust in the Lord and what he says is right.

The most clinically successful form of therapy is cognitive behavioral therapy. It says that all people have the tendency to develop cognitive distortions where what we feel and think become misaligned with reality.

The only way for you to be free is to get your mind back in alignment with your reality rather than trying to alter reality to fit what you think. You bring your mind back into alignment with reality.

How do you help people get their thinking back into alignment with reality? You have to tell them that the way they’re seeing or perceiving something is wrong. That’s what compassion and sympathy do, they realign someone’s thinking with reality so that person can actually heal.

Finally, sympathy doesn’t just say, “I’m here for you.” It offers a path out... a path to freedom and healing.

I love the story in 1 Kings 19 when Elijah was afraid and fled for his life. He went out alone into the wilderness and sat down under a solitary broom tree and prayed that he might die. But as he was sleeping, an angel touched him and told him, “Get up and eat.” And the Lord said to him, “Go, return on your way.”

He literally sat down under a tree and basically said, “Kill me, Lord. I’m so sick of all this. I just want to die.”

Empathy says to get down under the tree and just die with them.

But God didn’t do that. He sent an angel to say, “Hey, man, get up. You need a snack. You’ll feel a lot better.”

And then God said, “You’re not going to die here. Get up. I’ve got good things for you to do. Time to go on your way, time to move forward, time to make progress. You can’t stay stuck in the past. Let’s go. Get up. Let’s move.”



Jesus loved us so much that he came to rescue us like a shepherd going after a lost sheep, but he never became exactly like us. He remained fully God and totally righteous. He loved us enough to confront our lies and correct our thinking by speaking the truth.

When we were dead in sin and miserable and hopeless and defeated, God didn't change reality to make us happier sinners. He changed us so that we could be righteous and conformed to the image of his son.

In Psalm 34, it says, *"The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit."* I believe God's Word that when you're hurting and brokenhearted, the Lord is close to you in a special way. The Holy Spirit is called our Comforter, and when you're hurting, he comforts us in a way that only he can.

But Jesus does so much more than comfort us. Here's what he said he came to do in Luke 4:18–19:

*"The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to set the oppressed free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."*

He didn't just come close to the brokenhearted, he came to heal the brokenhearted. He didn't just come to comfort the oppressed. He came to set them free and make them victorious through faith. And the same work Christ came to accomplish then is the same miraculous work he wants to do in countless lives today.

Take Your Study Further

For verses about holding to truth: 1 Corinthians 13:6, Philippians 4:8, 1 John 3:18

For passages about God's compassion: Lamentations 3:32, Psalm 103:13, Matthew 20:29–34, James 5:11

Read Joe Rigney's article titled "The Enticing Sin of Empathy," which inspired Ryan's sermon.

Resource based on the message "When Empathy Becomes Sin" by Ryan Visconti. Used with permission. Learn more about Ryan at <https://generation.church/meet-ryan-and-amy/>