

Empathy Is Biblical

An **[RPM Ministries](#)**

[Truth and Love Blog](#) Mini-Series

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Introduction: A Word from Bob

There's been some controversy in Evangelical Christian circles this past year about "empathy," with some saying, "empathy is sinful" and others warning about the dangers of "untethered empathy." For 36 years (since 1985), I've equipped God's people for compassionate, *empathetic* one-another care. So, *biblical empathy* has been important to me long before the current controversy.

In this blog mini-series, rather than providing a negative critique of writings that say, "empathy is sinful," I'm seeking to offer a *positive* presentation of what the Bible says about empathetic one-another care. Simply stated:

- *I desire to present a brief, positive, biblical case for biblical empathy—what it is, why it is vital, and how we can minister Christlike empathy to one another.*

This connects well to my sense of calling and purpose with [RPM Ministries](#):

- *RPM Ministries exists to equip God's people with Christ-centered, church-based, comprehensive, compassionate, and culturally-informed resources by sharing a positive presentation of biblical counseling, one-another ministry, and daily Christian living.*

With this positive focus in mind, rather than "re-inventing the wheel," I'm taking this series from the culmination of 36 years of thinking about biblical empathy. I've developed this mini-series from several of my published works, including:

- [Gospel Conversations: How to Care Like Christ](#)
- [Consider Your Counsel: Addressing Ten Mistakes in Our Biblical Counseling](#)
- [God's Healing for Life's Losses: How to Find Hope When You're Hurting](#)
- [Grief: Walking with Jesus](#)
- [Beyond the Suffering: Embracing the Legacy of African American Soul Care](#)

If you'd like to read the original blog series at [RPM Ministries](#) and my [Truth and Love blog site](#), you can find each post at the links below:

- You can read Part 1 here: [Truth Without Empathy Is Sin.](#)
- You can read Part 2 here: [Rich Soul Empathy—Climbing in the Casket.](#)
- You can read Part 3 here: [How to Be a Miserable, Non-Empathetic, "Comforter."](#)
- You can read Part 4 here: [What Is Biblical Empathy?](#)
- You can read Part 5 here: [The Trinity As Our Model for Empathy.](#)
- You can read Part 6 here: [Empathy Is Theological Truth.](#)
- You can read Part 7 here: [Empathy's Companion: Encouragement to Hope in Christ Alone.](#)
- You can read Part 8 here: [4 Characteristics of Christlike Empathizers.](#)
- You can read Part 9 here: [15 Word Pictures of Biblical Empathy.](#)
- You can read Part 10 here: [Empathy Q & A.](#)

Part 1: Truth Without Empathy Is Sin

I continue to see writings that warn against “untethered empathy,” “untethered compassion,” and the “sin of empathy.” I disagree with the emphasis of these posts *because they reverse the Bible’s emphasis on speaking the truth in love*. They reverse the Bible’s emphasis on *rebuking the error of untethering truth from loving empathy*.

So, reluctantly—because I prefer avoiding such online controversies—I’m going to wade in. Here’s why:

The Bible consistently rebukes *truth untethered from loving empathy* especially when addressing how leaders minister to God’s flock.

Or, said positively:

The Bible consistently commands that shepherds always tether truth to love, compassion, comfort, tender care, and empathy—like Jesus.

Let’s put *our* emphasis where the *Bible* does—on rebuking the error of untethering truth from loving empathy.

The Bible Rebukes Untethered Truth: A Brief Bullet Point Biblical Journey

Let’s take a bullet point look at *how the Bible blends truth and love with an emphasis on commanding shepherds to tether truth to love, compassion, and empathy for their flock*.

1. Jesus reserves His most fierce rebuke for non-caring, unempathetic shepherds who talk truth but “tie up heavy, cumbersome loads and put them on other people’s shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them” (Matthew 23:4).
2. Jesus rebukes pastors-shepherds-leaders who neglect “the more important matters of the law—*justice, mercy, and faithfulness*. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former. You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel” (Matthew 23:23-24, emphasis added).
3. In the context of cross-cultural relationships that model how Kingdom citizens relate to people from different cultures, Jesus commands and commends pity, compassion, mercy, and cross-cultural active empathy (Luke 10:25-37).
4. Paul, in the context of pastoral shepherding, warns that we must tether truth to love: “but speaking the truth in love” (Ephesians 4:15). We must tether truth to *agape* love—Jesus-like sacrificial, giving, caring, compassionate, empathetic love.
5. Paul, in the context of pastoral ministry, insists that we must not give God’s people only Scripture, but also our own souls. “But we were gentle among you, just like a nursing

mother caring for her own children, so we cared for you. Because we loved you so much, we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well because you were dear to us” (1 Thessalonians 2:7-8).

6. In the context of how to relate to one another in the church, Paul warns against untethered truth. “Knowledge puffs up while love builds up” (1 Corinthians 8:1).
7. In the context of how to exercise mutual ministry in the church, and in the context of teaching truth with the eloquence of angels, Paul warns against untethered truth. “If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging symbol” (1 Corinthians 13:1).

In the context of pastoral training through the Pastoral Epistles—the seminary of the day:

8. Paul insists that the goal of truth-telling is love. Love is the *telos*, our purpose in shepherding. “The goal of this command is love, which comes from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith” (1 Timothy 1:5).
9. Paul describes the inner loving character of God’s shepherds: not violent, but gentle, not quarrelsome, but taking care tenderly of God’s flock (1 Timothy 3:1-7).
10. Paul commands pastoral leaders not to have “anything to do with foolish and stupid arguments” but to be “the Lord’s servant” who “must not be quarrelsome but must be kind to everyone.” Opponents “must be gently instructed” (2 Timothy 2:23-25).

The Trinity embodies Shepherding Care that is compassionate, comforting, sympathetic, and empathetic:

11. *God the Father* is “the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort” (2 Corinthians 1:3-4). Our Father never untethers truth from compassion and comfort.
12. *God the Son* is our Sympathetic High Priest who is able “to empathize with our weaknesses” and from whom “we receive mercy and grace to help us in our time of need” (Hebrews 4:15-16). Our Savior never untethers truth from empathy, mercy, help, and grace.
13. *God the Spirit* is our groaning Encourager Who groans with us in our suffering (Romans 8:17-27) and Who never leaves us as orphans but comes along side of us and inside of us to help us in our time of need (John 14-16).
14. Jesus embodies the perfect tethered infinite blending of truth and love—“full of grace and truth” (John 1:14).
15. In the context of applying gospel truth (Romans 1-11) to daily life (Romans 12-16), Paul highlights empathy as a core Christian calling: “mourn with those who mourn” (Romans 12:15).

16. In the context of the spiritual maturity of the body of Christ, Christians are commanded and encouraged to empathize with one another. “But God has put the body together, giving greater honor to the parts that lacked it so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it” (1 Corinthians 12:24-26).

Let’s Put Our Emphasis Where the Bible Does

Yes, of course, truth is essential, vital, foundational.

Yes, of course, love is essential, vital, foundational.

“‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it. ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and Prophets hang on these two commandments” (Matthew 22:37-40).

Yes, of course, truth and love/care/compassion/empathy must be tethered together.

Within the contexts of church shepherding leadership and the context of daily Christian relationships, *the Bible* emphasizes warnings against the danger of *untethering truth* from love, compassion, comfort, care, concern, and empathy.

Again, our main point:

Let’s put *our* emphasis where the *Bible* does—on rebuking the error of untethering truth from loving empathy.

Join the Conversation

I awoke at 2 AM thinking about this topic. From 2-3 AM, I crafted these 16 initial bullet points. I’m sure they’ll grow over time.

What additional biblical passages would you add that demonstrate that *the Bible highlights warnings against the danger of untethering truth from love, compassion, comfort, care, concern, and empathy?*

Part 2: Rich Soul Empathizing: Climbing in the Casket

Climbing in the Casket: A Biblical Picture of Empathy

Biblical empathy is *joining with sufferers in their suffering*. It is mourning with those who mourn (Romans 12:15) and suffering with those who suffer (1 Corinthians 12:24-26). In biblical empathy, we listen compassionately to another person's story of suffering and despair and we grieve with them, even to the point of experiencing their pain (2 Corinthians 1:3-9).

In [Gospel Conversations](#), I use a rather macabre image to capture the essence of this biblical ministry of empathy:

- *Climbing in the Casket*

I've developed this picture from 2 Corinthians 1:7-11, where Paul says he does not want his brothers and sisters in Christ to be ignorant about the hardships he had suffered. Paul goes on to say:

"We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life. Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death" (2 Corinthians 1:8b-9a).

When Paul despaired of life and felt the sentence of death, he wanted the Corinthians to "climb in his casket"—to identify with him in what felt like a death sentence.

In biblical empathy, another person's casket becomes our casket. Their sorrow becomes our sorrow because:

- *Shared sorrow is endurable sorrow.*

By identifying with our friends in their suffering, we communicate that:

- "It's normal to hurt."

We convey the reality that:

- "Our world is fallen and it often falls on us."
- "Our world is a mess, and it messes with our minds."

In empathy, we give people permission to grieve—permission to be candid like the psalmists in the lament psalms and like Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Climbing in the Casket: A Church History Picture of Empathy

In [*Gospel Conversations*](#), I equip people for one-another empathy from the Bible *and* for that great cloud of witnesses (Hebrews 11)—from church history. In Black Church history, Octavia Albert knew something about suffering and about comforting others in their suffering. Albert was an ex-enslaved college-educated African American pastor’s wife living in Louisiana. In the 1870s, she ministered to many other ex-enslaved men and women by recording their stories of suffering. One of those individuals was Charlotte Brooks. Of Brooks, Albert writes:

“It was in the fall of 1879 that I met Charlotte Brooks.... *I have spent hours with her listening to her telling of her sad life of bondage in the cane-fields of Louisiana.*”¹

If we would do what Albert did, then we would be miles ahead in our biblical empathy:

Spend hours listening to sad stories.

Rather than rescuing and compulsively trying to fix people, we need the courage and compassion to listen to stories of suffering. Like Job’s counselors did day after day—before they talked and became “miserable counselors” (Job 16:2).

As we listen to our spiritual friends’ earthly stories we need to empathize with them in their story. Empathy is not some secular Trojan Horse. It is a biblical word and a scriptural concept.

Think of the word: *em-pathos*: to enter the pathos or the passion of another, to allow another person’s agony to become your agony, to weep with those who weep (Romans 12:15) and suffer with those who suffer (1 Corinthians 12:24-26).

Notice how Octavia Albert allowed Charlotte Brooks’ *agony to become her own*.

“Poor Charlotte Brooks! I can never forget how her eyes were filled with tears when she would speak of all her children: ‘Gone, and no one to care for me!’”²

Albert pictures for us the essence of biblical empathy: *climbing in the casket*.

Not only must we feel what another person feels, we need to express and communicate that we “get it,” we feel it, *we hurt too*. Consider how Octavia Albert does so with Aunt Charlotte.

“Aunt Charlotte, *my heart throbs with sympathy, and my eyes are filled with tears, whenever I hear you tell of the trials of yourself and others.*”³

What Albert modeled in 1879, the Church has long called “compassionate commiseration.” Don’t let these two beautiful, powerful words intimidate you.

Co-passion: to share the passionate feelings of another.

Co-misery: to partner in the misery of your spiritual friend.

Aunt Charlotte describes the result of Octavia Albert's ministry in her life.

"La, me, child! I never thought any body would care enough for me to tell of my trials and sorrows in this world! None but Jesus knows what I have passed through."⁴

Octavia Albert was *Jesus with skin on*.

Her care gave Aunt Charlotte a human taste of Jesus' care—a taste Charlotte thought she would never receive this side of heaven.

Biblical empathy—we suffer along with those who suffer (1 Corinthians 12:26). We suffer in the soul of another person, feeling with and participating in their inner world while remaining ourselves. We seek to understand their outer story and their inner story from their perspective. In summary:

- Biblical empathy involves incarnationally entering into another person's soul and experiencing their suffering as they experience it.

Join the Conversation

In your life, who has "climbed in the casket" with you?

In your ministry to others, how have you been "Jesus with skin on" by incarnationally entering into another person's soul and experiencing their suffering as they experience it?

Part 3: How to Be a Miserable, Non-Empathetic, “Comforter”

Slamming the Casket Shut: How *Not* to Empathize

If empathy is climbing in the casket (Part 2: [Rich Soul Empathy—Climbing in the Casket](#)), then slamming the casket shut pictures its opposite. We can learn how **not** to empathize from bad examples—such as Job’s “miserable comforters” (Job 16:2).

- “Miserable” means troublesome, vexing, and sorrow-causing.
- They were the opposite of “comforters”—a word that means consoling, sympathetic, feeling deeply the hurt of others—empathy.

Instead of grace connecting, Job’s miserable comforters practiced *condemning distancing*. When we combine their bad theology (Job 42:7) with their cold hearts (Job 16:2), it is not at all surprising that they lacked relational competency.

They communicated *superiority*. “We’re better than you. You’re inferior to us” (see Job 5:8; 8:2; 11:2-12; 12:1-3; 15:7-17).

They communicated *judgmentalism*. “It’s *not* normal to hurt! Your suffering is due to your sinning!” (see Job 4:4-9; 15:2-6).

They offered *advice without insight and discernment*. “Here’s what I would do if I were you.” “Do this and life’s complexities will melt away.” “I have the secret that will fix your feelings and change your circumstances” (see Job 5:8; 8:5-6; 11:13-20; 42:7).

Non-Empathy Is Sin

Eliphaz (Job 4-5, 15, and 22) is the master of *discouragement and dismay*. He provides Job with *conditional love* while he curses God. Eliphaz teaches that God is good to the good, but bad to the bad. He does not know grace. He does know works: “You can manipulate God into being good to you by being good to him.” What a petty God Eliphaz worships. Eliphaz says to Job, “Don’t live *coram Deo*. Don’t tell God your heart. Be surface.” He misinterprets Job’s words as venting rage at God rather than soul-sharing with God.

Bildad (Job 8, 18, and 25) has a somewhat right theology with a very wrong application. “The issue is your sin!” Seeing only sin, he is wrong in Job’s case. For God, the issue was Job’s response to him in his suffering. The issue was Job’s privileged opportunity to be a universal witness to God’s goodness. The issue was not Job’s sinfulness. Bildad does not know the man he calls “friend.” He labels (and libels) Job “the evil man who knows not God.”

Zophar (Job 11 and 20) also presents a works righteousness. He believes that good works can cover shame.

Job's View of His Miserable, Non-Empathetic, "Comforters"

How does Job view their counsel?

- He longs for the devotion of his friends (6:14), which they aren't.
- He calls them undependable brothers (6:15), which they are. They can't handle Job's doubts, treating the words of a despairing man as wind (6:26).
- He feels they say, "Forget it! Smile!"
- His dread remains. "If I say, 'I will forget my complaint, I will change my expression, and smile,' I still dread all my sufferings, for I know you will not hold me innocent" (Job 9:27-28).
- He experiences their total lack of empathy. "Men at ease have contempt for misfortunate" (Job 12:5).

Miserable comforters (Job 16:2) they are. Rather than communicating that "it's normal to hurt," they increase Job's hurt. Having no compassionate discernment, they claim that his wounds are self-inflicted. "How we will hound him, since the root of the trouble lies in him" (Job 19:28).

They crush Job's spirit through their long-winded speeches, argumentative nature, lack of empathy and encouragement, failure to bring relief/comfort, and their closed-minded, arrogant, superior, hostile attitudes based upon wrong motives and a condemning spirit (Job 17:1-5).

Of them, Job concludes, "These men turn night into day; in the face of darkness they say, 'Light is near'" (Job 17:12). They are like the counselor who says, "Don't talk about your problems, don't think about your suffering, and don't remember your past hurts. Forget those things which are behind!"

They have no dark-night-of-the-soul vision, no 20/20 spiritual vision, and no long-distance vision; so they have to call the darkness light. Job, however, has long-distance vision. His heart yearns for God and he knows that he will see God (Job 19:25-27).

Job feels no rapport, no connection, with them:

"They torment me, crush me with words. I sense their reproach as they shame me. They exalt themselves. I feel so alone when I am with them. So alienated and forgotten. Here's how my 'spiritual friends' make me feel: alienated, estranged, forgotten, offensive, loathsome. All my intimate friends detest me; they have turned against me, having no pity on me" (author's paraphrase of Job 19).

They are unwise. They offer nonsense answers because they're not paying attention to life, not learning life's lessons.

“You have not wisely paid attention to how things work in the real world. Your academic knowledge, your theologizing, is out to lunch. How can you console/comfort me with your vain nonsense, since your answers are falsehood? You are wrong about life, about me, and about God!” (author's paraphrase of Job 21).

They are “sin-spotters.” They know confrontation only. Thus, they become co-conspirators with Satan the accuser who condemns men and curses God.

God's View of Miserable, Non-Empathetic, Comforters

What was God's view of their counsel?

After speaking to Job, Yahweh says to Eliphaz.

“I am angry with you and your two friends because you have not spoken of me what is right as my servant Job has” (Job 42:7).

They failed to speak of God's generous goodness and grace. Their God was a tit-for-tat God who could be easily manipulated by and impressed with works.

One of our greatest failures in counseling is being miserable, non-empathetic counselors who speak wrongly of God while we speak to one another.

One of our greatest failures in counseling is being miserable, non-empathetic counselors who minimize God's good heart.

Join the Conversation

In your hurt, have you experienced “miserable comforters” who slammed the casket shut on your pain and grief?

If so, what impact did their miserable counseling have upon your soul and upon your relationship to the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort?

Part 4: What Is Biblical Empathy?: 3 Marks of Biblical Empathy

Mark #1: Biblical Empathy Is “As If” Relating

Rich soul empathy involves our capacity for “as if” relating. The Church Father, Ambrose, wrote:

“Show compassion for those who suffer. Suffer with those who are in trouble *as if* being in trouble with them.”⁵

Soul empathy requires *compassionate imagination*. We need to imagine what it is like for our friends to experience their suffering. To understand others with intimate knowledge, we must read into their experiences asking:

“What is it like to experience and perceive the world through their soul, their eyes, their feelings?”

Hebrews 2:14-18 and Hebrews 4:15-16 teach that empathy is not less than, but more than, intellectual. It is also experiential. Biblical, Christ-like empathy shares the experiences of another, connecting through common inner experiences. Such soul sharing occurs by way of incarnation—entering another’s world and worldview.

Mark #2: Biblical Empathy Is Shared Sorrow

As one-another ministers, the more human we are, the more real, the more fully alive and passionate, the more we will tune into others. Then we’ll experience a sympathetic resonance no matter the melody, dirge, minor or major key, or discordant note.

When our soul is attuned to others, then we “pick up their radio waves, the vibes of their inner reactions.” Having accomplished this, we need to go the distance. We need to communicate to our spiritual friends in a way that helps them to “have empathy with our empathy.” They need to feel that we feel with them. Otherwise, their sorrow is not shared, it is simply “understood.” When both our “soul radios” are tuned to the same frequency, then we can share our soul friends’ experiences. We share their sorrows by climbing in the casket with them, and they know we are there.

While death is separation; shared sorrow is connection. It is the stitch connecting the wound. It is the healing balm. However, shared sorrow must never be a healing replacement. It must not replace grief.

Shared sorrow does not purpose to eliminate sorrow, to rescue, or to cheer up. Shared sorrow purposes to help another to face and embrace sorrow—face-to-face with Christ.

Mark #3: Biblical Empathy Is *Koinonia* (The Fellowship of Suffering): Progressively Intense Connection/Communion

Effective soul empathy includes several “levels.”

1. *Level One Empathy*: “How would that affect an image bearer?” Here we seek to understand the other person through God’s eyes. A foundational level of empathy, it builds upon a *universal* biblical understanding of people.
2. *Level Two Empathy*: “How would that affect an image bearer like me?” Here we seek to understand another person through our eyes. A filtering level, we use our life as a filter through which we relate God’s truth to our friend’s life. We prayerfully ponder what it would be like for us if we were facing what they are facing.
3. *Level Three Empathy*: “How would that affect an image bearer like *this particular person*?” Here we *understand the other person through their eyes*. We move from *universal* to *unique* empathy. In this final, deepest level of soul empathy we need to:
 - *Adopt Their Soul Experience*: We replace our internal frame of reference with theirs. We seek to sense what it is like to be him—through his longings, perspective, motivations, feelings.
 - *Express Their Soul Experience*: We express in our own words what we sense they have communicated about their longings, perspective, motivations, and feelings about the situation.
 - *Encourage Them to Accept Their Soul Experience*: We nudge them to acknowledge their own inner responses to their outer situation. We help them to verbalize how they are responding internally.
 - *Help Them to Evaluate Their Soul Experience*: We want to help them to begin to assess how they are responding to their suffering, how near or far their perspective on their situation is from God’s perspective, how near or far the motivations of their heart are from God’s will, and how well or poorly they are facing their feelings face-to-face with God.

I’m sure you’ve detected that empathy is much more than a hug. It also is more than trying to sense how someone feels. Biblical rich soul empathy is a *comprehensive* sensing of what the whole person longs for in their situation, what they think about their situation, what their goals are in their situation, *and* then how they feel about their situation.

Rich soul empathy like this not only helps us to better understand how our friend is responding to her suffering. It helps *our friend* to better understand and honestly face her inner responses. We become a mirror reflecting back to our friend what is going on in her

soul. The more clearly she understands her inner responses, the more powerfully and profitably she can take her soul to the Shepherd of her soul.

Join the Conversation

In your hurt, who has cared for you with “as if” relating?

In your hurt, who has shared your sorrow?

In your hurt, who has joined you in the fellowship of your suffering?

Part 5: The Trinity As Our Model for Empathy

Soul Care in Light of the Ultimate Soul Physician: Trinitarian Empathy

A.W. Tozer famously explained that:

“What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about”
(*The Knowledge of the Holy*, 1).

I would add that:

As one-another ministers, the most important thing about us is our biblical view of God.

Today I’d like to talk about one aspect of God’s relationship to us—our Empathetic Counselor. The Trinity’s comforting care for the suffering is the model and motivation behind our ministry of empathy to one another.

Let’s Empathize Like the Father of Compassion and the God of All Comfort

Paul uses the Greek word for “comfort” ten times in 2 Corinthians 1:3–7. Do you think comfort may be the theme of these verses?

He begins developing his theme by presenting a crystal clear image of God.

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, 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” (2 Corinthians 1:3-4).

All comfort is ultimately sourced in God. The flip side of that is to say that worldly comfort—comfort not sourced in God—is ultimately empty, vain, hollow comfort.

Empathize Like Our Compassionate Father

The Greek word for “compassion” means to feel another person’s agony—empathy. People in Paul’s day used the word to signify *empathetic lament*. He is the “Father” of compassion—He is known by and characterized by co-passion/empathy.

Isaiah 63:9 tells us that *in all Israel’s distress, God too was distressed*. God laments our pain; God aches when we ache; He weeps when we weep.

Is this our image of God when life is bad? In our suffering, do we see God as our Father who empathetically and sympathetically laments with us?

Is this our functional image of God as Christian friends? When suffering friends or counselees come to us, do we sympathetically lament with them? This involves their pain becoming our pain—we feel their inner suffering as if it were our own—we empathize.

Empathize Like Our Comforting Father

God is the “God of all comfort.” The word for “comfort” pictures God caring for us and fortifying us. He gives us His strength to endure. Paul and others used the word *comfort* to picture:

- A lawyer advocating for a client.
- A mother wrapping her arms of protection around her child.
- A soldier standing back-to-back with a comrade in danger.

In the midst of our suffering, is this our image of God? In our suffering, do we see God as our Advocate, as our Protector, as our Ally?

Is this our functional image of God as Christian friends? When suffering friends or counselees come to us, do they experience us as their caring advocate, as their concerned protector, as their *empathetic ally*?

Let’s Empathize Like Jesus Our Sympathetic/Empathetic High Priest

Jesus is the Wonderful Counselor (Isaiah 9:6). And our Counselor is the man of sorrows, acquainted with grief (Isaiah 53:3).

Our Empathetic High Priest

The New Testament picture further develops this Old Testament image. Jesus is our sympathetic/empathetic High Priest.

“Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to *empathize with our weaknesses*, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. Let us then approach God’s throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need” (Hebrews 4:14-16).

Jesus identifies with us—empathizing and sympathizing with us. And as we turn to him we receive grace, mercy, and help in our weakness, neediness, suffering, and sinfulness.

“Jesus shared in our humanity *so that* he might be a merciful and faithful High Priest. Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins

of the people. For because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted” (Hebrews 2:17–18).

Deeply Moved and Troubled

What Hebrews describes, Jesus models in His ministry. We think of John 11 and tend to focus on verse 35, “Jesus wept.” A moving verse, no doubt, and certainly indicative of Jesus as a man of sorrows and as our empathetic High Priest, but we sometimes miss the verses that precede and follow John 11:35.

“When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come with her also weeping, he was *deeply moved* in his spirit and *greatly troubled*” (John 11:33).

“Weeping” portrays sobbing, wailing aloud, bewailing—this is intense emotion. And Jesus joins Mary’s weeping; He joins and empathizes with her intense emotions.

Jesus is “deeply moved”—a word that pictures a horse snorting with anger. It means to be moved with anger, to have indignation, to groan against. Jesus is angry with death, angry *against* death—and He’s going to do something about it! In His spirit, Jesus is “greatly troubled.” This phrase depicts a storm stirring up, agitating, roiling, and troubling waters.

As we weep and wail, do we see Jesus deeply moved and greatly troubled over our suffering? Do we experience Jesus empathetically loving us as He empathetically loved Mary, Martha, and Lazarus?

“So the Jews said, ‘See how he loved him!’” (John 11:36).

Our view of Jesus will directly impact how we minister, relate, counsel, and convey Him to those around us. Do we counsel like the Wonderful Counselor? Do friends or counselees experience us as able to sorrow with them, as acquainted with grief—ours and theirs—as sympathetic and empathetic, as deeply moved and greatly troubled on their behalf, as empathetically loving them deeply?

Let’s Empathize Like the Holy Spirit Our Divine Comforter

The disciples’ hearts were troubled when they learned that Jesus would be leaving (John 14:1–6). Because they were feeling abandoned, Jesus promised them, “I will not leave you as orphans” (John 14:18).

But how could Jesus leave them *and* not leave them? By sending them another Counselor, another Comforter, another Advocate, another Helper.

“And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you.... These things I have spoken to you while I am still with

you. But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid” (John 14:16–18, 25–27).

The Greek word for “Helper” is the noun form of the word we saw for comfort in 2 Corinthians 1: *parakaleo*. The Holy Spirit is our Divine *Parakaletic* Counselor living within us. He is our Encouragement Counselor. He is our Comforting Counselor.

The Spirit practices his *parakaletic* counseling, in part, by grieving, groaning, and empathizing with us.

“Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words” (Romans 8:26).

The Spirit identifies with us in our weaknesses, advocates for us in our struggles, and groans with us in our suffering.

Do we care like our Divine Comforter? Would our friends or counselees describe us as consoling, comforting, empathizing, and encouraging? Would they experience us as identifying with them, advocating for them, and groaning with them?

Let’s Consider Our Calling to Empathize Like the Trinity

In the immediate context of God the Father as our Comforter, Paul commands us to comfort one another.

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, 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*” (2 Corinthians 1:3–4).

We *are to be* biblical comforters who empathize with one another because the Ultimate Soul Physician—the Trinity—is our Comforter who empathizes with us.

Join the Conversation

How could the Trinity be our model for biblical empathy?

Do we empathize with one another like our compassionate, comforting Father?

Do we empathize with one another like our sympathetic, empathetic High Priest?

Do we empathize with one another like our groaning, empathetic Holy Spirit?

Part 6: Empathy *Is* Theological Truth

Feedback and Pushback

I've been quite encouraged by the positive feedback on this mini-series. For example, I asked on Facebook and Twitter if people would be interested in my collating this series into a free PDF (this document). In response, I had more "likes" and positive comments than on most anything I've written about.

At the same time, one or maybe two people have said something like:

"Okay. You've covered empathy. Now, isn't it time to move on from 'this *love* stuff' and write about 'some *truth* stuff?'"

I actually like when people "pushback." It encourages me to think more deeply and to engage a topic *even more* biblically.

All Biblical Truth *Is* Theological Truth

So today's post is an extra, unplanned, post in this mini-series. First, here's what I'm wanting to communicate in a "big picture" way:

- "Empathy **is theological truth!**"
- "Since empathy is biblical—as this series has been demonstrating—and since the **Bible is truth**, then, of course, empathy **is** theological truth.
- "All of the Bible is theological truth—including when those **truths are about how Christians relate to one another.**"
- "It is a **biblically false dichotomy** to somehow claim that truth about human relationships is less theological than any 'other' biblical topic."

Second, here's what I'm wanting to communicate specifically in today's post:

- "The Bible covers empathy in almost all, if not all, of the **core systematic theology doctrines.**"
- "The Bible addresses empathy in **in the heart of Paul's 'most theological' treatises—Romans 8.**"
- In Romans 12:15, the Bible applies empathy as central relational truth-to-life **in the heart of Paul's application of Romans 1-11.**

Empathy and Systematic Theology

In classical, historical systematic theology, there are 10 primary doctrinal areas. Quickly and briefly, let's see how several of those systematic theology categories address empathy.

1. Theology Proper: The Doctrine of God the Father

We saw in Part 5, [*The Trinity As Our Model for Empathy*](#), how God the Father models empathy.

2. Christology: The Doctrine of God the Son

We saw in Part 5, [*The Trinity As Our Model for Empathy*](#), how God the Son models empathy.

3. Pneumatology: The Doctrine of God the Holy Spirit

We saw in Part 5, [*The Trinity As Our Model for Empathy*](#), how God the Spirit models empathy.

4. Soteriology: The Doctrine of Salvation

We saw Part 5, [*The Trinity As Our Model for Empathy*](#), how Christ as our Savior and High Priest relates to us with empathy.

5. Hamartiology: The Doctrine of Sin

Here's where I want to focus a bit more time.

- Empathy is needed **because of our fall into sin.**
- A failure to see the need for empathy is a **failure to see the deep impact of sin and the suffering sin causes.**

Jesus clearly saw and taught the deep impact of sin—and the suffering it causes, and the empathy that is therefore needed.

“In this world you will have trouble” (John 16:33).

“Trouble”—to be pressed, squeezed, squashed, crushed by the weight of the fallen world which falls on us—suffering.

It is within Jesus' “Farewell Discourse” in John 13-17, that Jesus introduces the Holy Spirit as our *Parakaletic Comforter/Counselor* who dwells within us to empathize with us, encourage us, enlighten us, and empower us (John 14-16).

Paul clearly saw and taught the deep impact of sin—**and the suffering it causes, and the empathy that is therefore needed.** In Romans 8:17-25, Paul highlights the cosmic,

universal suffering that all creation—especially humanity—suffers and endures. We groan inwardly as in the pains of childbirth (8:22-23). It is within this context that the Holy Spirit empathizes with us as He intercedes for us through wordless groans (8:26).

Empathy is necessary because of the doctrine of hamartiology. In other writings, I've called this *the doctrine of sufferology*—the biblical/theological teaching on the cause, care, and cure of suffering.

6. Eschatology: The Doctrine of Last Times/Eternal Life

Within Romans 8:17-27 and this theological context of the Spirit's empathetic groaning with us and for us, Paul highlights eschatology. "...the glory that will be revealed in us..." (8:18). "...the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God..." (8:21). "...we groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies..." (8:23).

As we'll do in Part 7 of this series, Paul relates empathy for current suffering to encouragement provided by future hope.

Empathy is taught throughout the various systematic theology doctrines...

Empathy Is at the Heart of Paul's Theology—Romans 8

Theologians ancient (the Church Fathers, Luther, Calvin) and modern (Sproul, Piper, Packer) have declared Romans to be the most richly theological biblical book. Those same theologians have described Romans 8 as the pinnacle of Pauline theology.

And what did we just see Paul address in Romans 8? Romans 8 highlights:

- Sin and suffering
- Salvation
- Cosmic and personal groaning over sin and suffering
- Cosmic and personal longing for final redemption
- The Spirit's empathetic groaning for us as we suffer, groan, and grieve

What can we conclude from this?

- Empathy is not tangential to Pauline theology.
- Empathy is central to Pauline theology—because Paul understands and teaches the deep impact of sin, the suffering it causes, and the empathy that it requires.

- Empathy agrees with God’s hatred of sin and the evils of sin-induced suffering.
- Theologians who lack empathy are not Pauline theologians.
- Theologians who minimize the theological and practical need for empathy, are not Pauline theologians.

Empathy Is at the Heart of Paul’s Application of the Theological Truths of Romans 1-11

In Romans 12, Paul moves from the “theological indicatives” (truths about Christ, salvation, and our Christian lives in Christ) to the “theological imperatives” (truths about how we then shall live in and for Christ).

He begins, “therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy...” (Romans 12:1). In view of every theological truth that Paul taught in Romans 1-11, how should we live?

What answer do we find just a few verses into this theologically-rich application section?

“...mourn with those who mourn...” (Romans 12:15).

The Greek word behind “mourn” means to weep with, to share grief with, to lament with. It comes from a powerful, intense root word meaning to weep aloud, to express uncontainable, audible grief. It’s used in other biblical passages for weeping and wailing; even for screaming out our grief. It denotes bewailing on behalf of another—mourning for and with others.

“Mourn” is synonymous with words that mean to howl, to wail, to cry out in a dirge or lament—to give verbal expression of grief on behalf of another. It is to express grief by inarticulate or semi-articulate sounds—to groan.

Empathy is at the heart of Paul’s grand theological truths as expressed in Romans 1-11 and as applied in Romans 12.

Join the Conversation

Paul understands and teaches the deep impact of sin, the suffering it causes, and the empathy that it requires. What would it look like in one-another ministry to follow Paul’s practical, pastoral theology?

Part 7: Empathy's Companion: Encouragement to Hope in Christ Alone

From Climbing in the Casket (Empathy) to Celebrating the Empty Tomb (Encouragement)

Several times in our biblical study of empathy, we've examined 2 Corinthians 1:8-9a:

"We do not want you to be *uninformed*, brothers, about the troubles we experienced in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, *far beyond our ability to endure*, so that *we despaired of life itself*. Indeed, *we felt we had received the sentence of death*."

Sometimes we want to ignore empathy and the casket experiences of life. Not Paul. He didn't want the Corinthians to be ignorant about how he despaired of life and felt the sentence of death—his personal casket experience.

Yet, Paul did not stop at the casket. Notice the rest of verse 9, and how Paul moves to the empty tomb, to the resurrection, to the God who raises the dead:

"But this happened *so that* we might not rely on ourselves *but on God, who raises the dead*."

Empathy never "closes the casket shut." Instead:

Biblical empathy always invites the resurrected Christ into the casket!

Empathy Encourages Movement from Self-Reliance to God-Reliance

Empathy's "endgame" is *not* our friend saying to us, "*You're the most caring person in the world!*"

No, empathy's endgame *is* our being "Jesus with skin on" and pointing our friend to God, so that they say, "*The Trinity is the most empathetic Being in the universe!*"

Empathy's endgame is *not* our friend relying on us.

No, empathy's endgame, as 2 Corinthians 1:9b describes, is our friend not relying on us, not relying on themselves, but relying on God who raises the dead—the *God of resurrection hope*.

Think of the relational journey with a hurting, suffering person like this:

- They find themselves in a casket experience of human loss in our fallen world.
- Through empathy, we compassionately (co-passion) join them in their casket of loss.
- Our empathetic care encourages them to lament to the caring Trinity.

- They invite the God who raises the dead into their casket experience—clinging to Christ alone.

Empathy & Encouragement Throughout Church History

Long before any modern debate about the essential value of empathy, believers were practicing one-another soul care through the twin arts of *sustaining empathy* and *healing encouragement*. (See [Gospel Conversations: How to Care Like Christ](#) where I develop this church history from books such as Clebsch and Jaekle's *Pastoral Care in Historical Perspective*.)

Sustaining Soul Care:

- Empathy
- Climbing in the Casket
- Permission to Grieve
- Life Is Bad
- Entering the Earthly Story of Suffering
- Shared Sorrow Is Endurable Sorrow

Healing Soul Care:

- Encouragement
- Celebrating the Empty Tomb
- Promotion of Growth
- God Is Good
- Entering God's Eternal Story of Hope
- Cropping Christ Into the Picture

Church history pictures for us *pivoting* back and forth between the earthly story and the eternal story—one foot at all times in both worlds.

We *listen with both ears*: one to our friend's temporal story of hurt and the other to our Father's heavenly story of hope. Biblical one-another soul care resides between both worlds—empathy and encouragement.

Satan seeks to misuse suffering to "*crop Christ out of the picture*"—to shrink our perspective and decimate our hope. That's why in suffering, we need to encourage one another by "*cropping Christ back into the picture*."

We pray for our friend the same prayer that Elisha prayed, "Lord, open his eyes that he might see" (2 Kings 6:17). We pray Ephesians 1:18, that the eyes of their heart might be enlightened that they may know the hope to which they are called. We stretch our friend to the eternal story with an eternal perspective and with eyes wide open to the God who raises the dead.

Follow the Spirit: Romans 8:17-27 *Before* Romans 8:28

Having supervised pastors, lay people, and counselors for almost four decades, I can tell you that our typical problem is *not with too little empathy!* No, time after time, consistently, pastors in particular, race right past empathy and try to cram in encouragement. In other words:

- *We unwisely try to tell people's God's eternal story before we've even listened to our friend's earthly story.*

This is the opposite of what the Spirit does!

We race first to Romans 8:28 and the truth that God works all things together for good. But what comes before Romans 8:28? Eleven verses about suffering come before Romans 8:28. Including the relational truth that the Spirit grieves, groans, and empathizes with us.

Let's be like the Holy Spirit in empathizing as the foundation for encouraging.

A Testimonial: *The Power of Patient, Persistent Biblical Empathy*

People, especially "Type A" pastor type people, often ask, "But how does sustaining empathy really help? Why not go right to healing hope?"

I like to turn that question around:

- What happens if we race past empathy, moving directly to encouragement?

So, I asked a pastor friend—who I counseled for almost half a year. With his permission, I share these personal, pastoral insights into the power of patient biblical empathy.

My Question #1: "How would it have **short-circuited** the process in your life if I had **raced us to hope**, before climbing in the casket with you?"

My Friend's Answer: "It would have **prevented** me from **appropriately grieving** things I needed to grieve. I tend to be one who tries to **stuff negative feelings** and simply presses forward, but I had gotten myself to a place where I couldn't keep doing that. If you would have raced to hope, it would have **reinforced an unhealthy pattern in my life**, and it would have **extended** my struggle with depression. I would have either **faked hope** (because a good Christian is supposed to be hopeful!), or I would have **concluded that I am hopeless.**"

My Question #2: "How did it help you and minister to you when I **patiently** stayed with you in your pain and hurt?"

My Friend's Answer: "It communicated great care for me that you were willing to be patient and take the time to do this. *I didn't feel like a project to fix.* I didn't feel like you were too busy. This was a *tangible expression of God's love and care for me.* You were *Jesus with skin on,* and this helped me to *experience and grasp* what I know to be true of God, but had lost sight of."

My Question #3: "How did **climbing in your casket** prepare the soil of your soul for celebrating the empty tomb?"

My Friend's Answer: "Like Paul in 2 Corinthians 1:8-9, I needed to sit in my casket *in order to* truly see the Lord who raises the dead *as my only hope.* This season reminded me how desperate I am for His resurrection power, which in turn leads me to celebration that Jesus is risen and His power really is available to me. My joy was increased *because I experienced the depth of my need coupled with* seeing the abundance of Christ's provision. All of this came home to me in a very practical, concrete way."

My Question #4: "Why was it important for us to start with **inviting lament and groaning together**, rather than to start with a focus on 'suffering well' or hoping in God?"

My Friend's Answer: "This was *crucial* because I needed to be *raw and honest with God.* To *bypass* lament would have *hindered the real, intimate relationship with the Father that I needed renewed in order to hope in Him.* In other words, lament was what I needed to walk through during this season of suffering—living face-to-face with God rather than turning away from Him."

Empathy surely has a companion—encouragement.

But brothers and sisters, please, don't race past empathy.

Please don't demonize empathy.

Empathy softens the soil of the soul, preparing the soul to cling to Christ alone.

Join the Conversation

In your life, who models the "both/and" of empathy and encouragement? Who models both climbing in the casket with you and celebrating the empty tomb with you?

In your ministry to others, how can you practice patient, persistent empathy as a foundation for careful hope-giving encouragement?

Part 8: 4 Characteristics of Christlike Empathizers

The Christlike Character of the Empathetic Christian

Over the course of the past seven blog posts we've explored the "relational competencies" of biblical empathy—what it's like to "climb in the casket" with a fellow sufferer. However, we have to realize that:

- Competencies or skills apart from Christlike character are like working on the outside of the cup and ignoring the more important matters of the inside (see Matthew 23:25-26).

Or, as I like to say it:

- Ministry competency without Christlike character is like one corpse practicing cosmetic surgery on another corpse (cf. 1 Corinthians 13:1-8).

That's why in today's post we'll each prayerfully ponder the question:

- "What type of person do I need to be in order to offer Christ's sustaining comfort and compassionate empathy to others?"

Characteristic #1:

Christlike Empathizers See God as Their Compassionate, Comforting Father

In Part 5 ([The Trinity As Our Model for Empathy](#)), we explored 2 Corinthians 1:3-4a:

"Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles."

As we saw in that post, the Greek word for "compassion" means to feel another person's agony—empathy. People in Paul's day used the word to signify *empathetic lament*. He is the "Father" of compassion—He is known by and characterized by co-passion/empathy.

Isaiah 63:9 tells us that *in all Israel's distress, God too was distressed*. God laments our pain; God aches when we ache; He weeps when we weep.

Is this our image of God when life is bad? In our suffering, do we see God as our Father who empathetically and sympathetically laments with us?

God is the "God of all comfort." The word for "comfort" pictures God caring for us and fortifying us. He gives us His strength to endure. Paul and others used the word *comfort* to picture:

- A lawyer advocating for a client.

- A mother wrapping her arms of protection around her child.
- A soldier standing back-to-back with a comrade in danger.

In the midst of our suffering, is this our image of God? In our suffering, do we see God as our Advocate, as our Protector, as our empathetic Ally?

Put negatively:

- The non-empathetic Christian does not see God as their Father of compassion and their God of all comfort.

Characteristic #2: Christlike Empathizers Admit Their Own Helplessness

Sustaining comfort always starts with the person in need being willing to call out for aid, summoning help, beseeching rescue. Paul alerts us to our neediness when he tells us that God comforts us in all our *troubles* (2 Corinthians 1:4) “Troubles” means to press, squash, squeeze. It’s used of the pressures of life that squeeze the life out of us, that crush us—that bring us to a faith point—either we cry out to God or we retreat from God.

In a similar way, Psalms 34:17-18 tells us:

“The righteous cry out, and the LORD hears them; he delivers them from all their troubles. The LORD is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.”

The world says, “God helps those who help themselves.”

The psalmist and Paul say:

“God helps those who admit they can’t help themselves. He comforts those who humbly cry out, ‘I can’t handle my suffering on my own. I need your help, Father.’”

God invites us to verbalize our suffering, our neediness.

Notice how facing our helplessness relates to comforting others.

“Who comforts us in all our troubles, *so that* we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God” (2 Corinthians 1:4, emphasis added).

When we are weak—admitting our powerlessness to God, crying out for His comfort—then we are strong—empowered to empower others. God comforts and empowers us in our weakness so that we can comfort and empower others in their weakness.

Put negatively:

- The non-empathetic Christian refuses to acknowledge their spiritual weakness and desperate need for God.

**Characteristic #3:
Christlike Empathizers Face Their Suffering Face-to-Face with Christ**

There's a third important empathizing principle tucked away in verse four. We tend to think, "For me to help another person, I must have gone through *the same* situation or *the identical* trial." For instance, we think, "For me to help someone struggling with alcoholism, I must have battled alcoholism in my life."

That's not what this verse teaches. Notice it again. "Who comforts us in *all* our troubles, so that we can comfort those in *any* trouble with the comfort we ourselves have *received* from God" (2 Corinthians 1:4, emphasis added).

- *Whatever* my trouble is, if I've taken *that* trouble to Christ, then *his infinite* comfort in *my* life supplies me with the power to comfort *you* with *any* trouble in *your* life.

My ability to help you is not based upon what I've gone through; it is based upon my going through suffering face-to-face *with Christ*. Because God is infinite, I do not need to experience the same situation or soul pain as you. I need to have experienced the same comforting Father in my suffering.

Paul develops his thinking further in verse 5 when he says, "For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows."

- Only comfort-receivers spill over and overflow into comfort-givers.

When we're the type of person who turns humbly to God in our suffering, then we become the type of person who tunes into others. We become Jesus with skin on. Then we offer small tastes of what it is like to be comforted by Christ. Of course, as we do this, we don't point people to ourselves, we point people to Christ who is the Ultimate Comforter.

Put positively:

- The most powerful comfort-givers are the most Christ-dependent comfort-receivers.

Put negatively:

- The non-empathetic Christian chooses to face their suffering without Christ-dependence.

**Characteristic #4:
Christlike Empathizers Share Their Sorrows with Others**

Notice what happens when the body of Christ offers Christ's empathy and comfort to one another.

“For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows. If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation; if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer. And our hope for you is firm, because we know that just as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our comfort” (2 Corinthians 1:5-7).

Together we are empowered by the fellowship of Christian endurance. Or, as we described it previously, *shared sorrow is endurable sorrow*.

Do we believe that for *others* but not for *ourselves*? Do we encourage others to be open with the body of Christ about their struggles, but we keep our battles and wounds hidden from others?

Stated positively:

- Powerful empathizers not only turn to Christ, they turn to the body of Christ.

Paul describes the result as *patient endurance*. It's the Greek compound word, *hupomeno*, meaning *remaining under*. We can remain under pressure without giving into pressure. The word has the sense of resilience—the ability to turn setbacks into comebacks. It is more than just patience as we think of it. It is courageous endurance. It has the active significance of energetic successful resistance. It is spiritual heroism in the face of pain, the firm refusal to give in or give up, the brave determination to stop retreating and to start forging forward.

But it is *not* spiritual individualism. The heroic Christian is *not* the person who never asks for help. Instead, the heroic Christian and the effective sustaining comforter is the person who knows that they can only endure sorrow by inviting others to share in their sorrows.

Put negatively:

- The non-empathetic Christian chooses to face their suffering without mutually depending on the body of Christ.

Join the Conversation

Though I typically like to keep things positive, it seems appropriate today to ask ourselves some hard questions about our Christlike character as empathizers. Maybe we can think of these as: *An Empathy Heart Check-Up*.

- *Empathy Heart Check-Up 1:* Does my heart show any evidence of being a non-empathetic Christian who does not see God as my Father of compassion and my God of all comfort?
- *Empathy Heart Check-Up 2:* Does my heart show any evidence of being a non-empathetic Christian who refuses to acknowledge my spiritual weakness and my desperate need for God?
- *Empathy Heart Check-Up 3:* Does my heart show any evidence of being a non-empathetic Christian who chooses to face my suffering without Christ-dependence?
- *Empathy Heart Check-Up 4:* Does my heart show any evidence of being a non-empathetic Christian who chooses to face my suffering without mutual dependence on the body of Christ?

Part 9: 15 Word Pictures of Biblical Empathy

Common English Definitions of Empathy and Sympathy

A couple of quick, obvious overview points:

- In all languages, words have more than one meaning/definition.
- Many words have overlapping meanings with some differences and some similarities—“empathy” and “sympathy” would be examples.
- No Hebrew or Greek word from the Bible translates directly to one specific word in English.

In English, *empathy* and *sympathy* are often confused, and with good reason. Both words deal with the relationship a person has to the feelings and experiences of another person. Both *sympathy* and *empathy* have roots in the Greek term *páthos* meaning “suffering, feeling.”

Sympathy is the older of the two English terms. It entered English in the mid-1500s with a very broad meaning of “agreement or harmony in qualities between things or people.”

Since then, *sympathy* has come to be used in a more specific way. Nowadays, *sympathy* is largely used to convey commiseration, pity, or feelings of sorrow for someone else who is experiencing misfortune. This sense is often seen in the category of greeting cards labeled “sympathy” that specialize in messages of support and sorrow for others in a time of need. You feel bad for them, but you don’t know what it is like to be in their shoes.

Empathy entered English a few centuries after *sympathy*—in the late 1800s—with a somewhat technical and now obsolete meaning from the field of psychology. Psychologists began using *empathy* as a translation for the German term *Einfühlung* and the concept that a person could project their own feelings onto a viewed object.

Empathy has now come to be used in a broader way than it was when it was first introduced. The term is now most often used in a dual way:

- First, in a meaning that overlaps with sympathy, empathy includes feeling compassion and sorrow with another person.
- Second, in a meaning that is richer and deeper than sympathy, empathy includes the capacity or ability to imagine oneself in the situation of another, experiencing the emotions, ideas, or perspective of another person. This is empathy as putting yourself in the shoes or the soul of another person.

Empathy and Sympathy in Counseling

In counseling, *sympathy* is observation and acceptance of what someone else is going through. Sympathy is the emotional reaction of the listener.

In counseling, *empathy* involves a deeper level of experiencing someone else's feelings as one's own. It is the "as if relating" that the Church Father, Ambrose, wrote about (see Part 4). Empathy involves a fellow feeling, a fellow sharing, a fellow suffering. Empathy is the ability to feel intimately what the other person is feeling. It is not just to understand what they are going through, but also being able to walk in the other person's shoes—or soul. Empathy focuses on truly seeking to intimately know what the person in pain is experiencing.

Think of the prefix "sym" and its meaning—"with, or together with." Placed with "pathos" or passion/feeling/experiencing, sympathy is "to feel with or for another person." That's good and beautiful.

Then consider the prefix "em" and its meaning—"in, into, or put into." Together with "pathos," empathy's linguistic root meaning is "to feel into another person," or "to place yourself in another person's soul," or "to put yourself into another person's soul," or "to enter into the experience of another person."

Both words—*sympathy* and *empathy*—are good, useful terms. I use them both—often interchangeably. But I prefer *empathy* because of the depth and richness of the word—especially that emphasis on soul-to-soul connecting and intimate understanding of another person's inner experiencing. I also prefer *empathy* because of how many biblical words overlap with the English word empathy (see below).

Empathy and Sympathy in the Current Controversy

If I correctly understand the concerns of the folks writing about "untethered empathy," one fear they have is that a person may *so* connect and *so* identify with another person's experience that they might never move toward helping the person assess their experience biblically. This faulty approach to people-helping would imply that whatever the person is experiencing becomes "gospel truth." Instead of this "malpractice" of "empathy," in biblical counseling and biblical empathy we patiently and compassionately journey with a grieving person sharing our souls *and* sharing together gospel truth (1 Thessalonians 2:7-8).

This is what we saw in Part 7: *encouragement is empathy's companion*. In empathy, we see life from our friend's perspective. In encouragement, we help our friend to see life from God's perspective. Empathy and encouragement go hand-in-hand.

And we saw in Part 4 that in the deepest level of *biblical empathy*, we: a.) adopt their soul experience, b.) express their soul experience, c.) encourage them to accept their soul experience, and d.) help them evaluate their soul experience. As we said in Part 4:

- *Help Them to Evaluate Their Soul Experience:* We want to help them to begin to assess how they are responding to their suffering, how near or far their perspective on their situation is from God's perspective, how near or far the motivations of their heart are from God's will, and how well or poorly they are facing their feelings face-to-face with God.

No biblical counselor that I know of suggests untethering biblical empathy from biblical encouragement.

Even most models of "secular counseling" address the potential misuse of empathetic connection. They use therapeutic concepts such as "therapist differentiation," "counselee/counselor individuation," "fusion," "enmeshment," and "boundaries" to explain that while counselors connect deeply with counselees through empathy, the counselor also maintains objectivity and seeks to help the counselee assess their own experiences.

15 Biblical Portraits of Empathy (and Sympathy)

I'll keep to bullet points in this final section of today's post because we've covered biblical portraits of empathy throughout our blog mini-series. Again, I believe many biblical terms convey the ideas behind the English terms *empathy* and *sympathy*. And I believe that the biblical terms match up even better with the modern ideas of *empathy* than they do with the modern usages of *sympathy*.

1. *Shared Sorrow:* Biblical empathy is *joining with sufferers in their suffering*. It is mourning with those who mourn (Romans 12:15) and suffering with those who suffer (1 Corinthians 12:24-26). Their sorrow becomes our sorrow.
2. *Climbing in the Casket:* Empathy includes listening compassionately to another person's story of suffering and despair and then grieving with them, even to the point of experiencing their pain. Another person's casket experience of loss becomes our casket of shared pain.
3. *Compassionate Commiseration:* As we identify with people in their suffering (co-passion and co-misery), we communicate that "it's normal to hurt" and we give people "permission to grieve."
4. *Em-Pathos:* To enter the pathos or passion of another, to allow another person's agony to become our agony (Romans 12:15; 1 Corinthians 12:24-26).
5. *Jesus with Skin On:* We suffer in the soul of another person, feeling with and participating in their inner world while remaining ourselves. We seek to understand their outer story and their inner story from their perspective. Like Jesus, and representing Jesus, we incarnationally enter into another person's soul and experience their suffering as they experience it (Hebrews 2:14-18; Hebrews 4:15-16).

6. *As If Relating*: “Show compassion for those who suffer. Suffer with those who are in trouble *as if* being in trouble with them.”⁶
7. *Koinonia: The Fellowship of Suffering*: Seeking to grasp what it is like to experience and perceive the world through another person’s soul, eyes, and feelings by adopting their soul experience, expressing their soul experience, encouraging them to accept their soul experience, and helping them to evaluate their soul experience (1 Corinthians 12:24-26).
8. *An Invitation to Lament*: By reflecting back what another person feels and by reflecting the empathy of Christ, we become a mirror of clarity. The more clearly another person understands their own inner responses, the more powerfully and profitably they can take their soul to the Shepherd of their soul—facing their feelings face-to-face with Christ.
9. *Compassion*: To feel another person’s agony; to lament empathetically; to be distressed when another is distressed; another person’s pain becoming our own; experiencing another person’s suffering as if it were our own (2 Corinthians 1:3-4; Isaiah 63:9).
10. *Sympatheo*: To have fellow feelings with, to be touched and moved with the feelings of another’s infirmities, to share in the sufferings of another, to experience tender compassion with another, to experience the painful experiences and miseries of another (Hebrews 4:14-16).
11. *Deeply Moved and Troubled*: To be moved with groaning and even indignation over the suffering of another, to be agitated, stirred up, and troubled at another person’s trouble, (John 11:33-36).
12. *Racham*: This Hebrew word for loving, loyal compassion can be translated “the innards being moved and twisted in pain and pity”—being distressed when another is distressed (Isaiah 63:9).
13. *Splanchnizomai*: To be moved with emotion and pity for someone in pain that leads from understanding to actions to help alleviate the pain; to enter intimately into the pain of another (Mark 1:41; Mark 6:34; Mark 8:2; Mark 9:22; Luke 7:13; Luke 10:33; Luke 15:20).
14. *Mourning with Those Who Mourn*: To weep with, to share grief with, to lament with. To weep aloud, to express uncontainable, audible grief. Weeping, wailing, and even screaming out in sympathetic lament with another’s pain—bemoaning on behalf of another—mourning for and with another person in their agony (Romans 12:15).
15. *Groaning*: To howl to wail, to cry out in a dirge or lament, to give verbal expression of grief on behalf of another. To express grief by inarticulate or semi-articulate sounds—to groan (Romans 8:17-27).

Join the Conversation

Considering the English meanings of the words *sympathy* and *empathy*, who has sympathized with you and who has empathized with you? Has one of those been more powerful for you than the other?

Of the 15 biblical portraits of empathy (and sympathy), which ones do you think you most want to develop further in your one-another ministry to others?

Part 10: Empathy Is Biblical Q & A

Commencement

Unlike some counselors, I never label my final counseling session the “termination” session. I shudder just typing the word “termination.” Instead, I tend to call the final session the “commencement” session. Like a high school or higher ed commencement service, the word commencement pictures not so much an ending, but rather the first stage of a *new beginning*.

So today, in Part 10 of this RPM Ministries blog mini-series, let’s consider this “Our Commencement Post.” We’re wrapping up and sending you away on the first stage of an ongoing journey of *Jesus-like biblical empathy for one another*.

To “commence” well, I thought it might be helpful to formulate today’s post in a Q & A format in which I’m seeking both to summarize what’s gone before and to recommend what might come next.

Question #1:

“Remind us, Bob, what motivated your writing this series on *Empathy Is Biblical*?”

- First, as I’ve noted, I’ve equipped God’s people for compassionate, empathetic one-another soul care since 1985. So, writing about empathy was really “re-writing” about one of my passions.
- Second, scores of my readers directly asked (implored) me to write about empathy because they were confused and concerned about the various recent online writings about “empathy is sin” and “untethered empathy.” I resisted their pleas for some time because I don’t like to wade into online controversies. But then I recalled the focus of my *RPM Ministries*:

*To equip God’s people with Christ-centered, church-based, comprehensive, compassionate, and culturally-informed resources by sharing a **positive** presentation of biblical counseling, one-another ministry, and daily Christian living.*

- Third, that’s when I decided to craft this series with this motivation/purpose:

I desire to present a brief, positive, biblical case for biblical empathy—what it is, why it is vital, and how we can minister Christlike empathy to one another.

Question #2:

“So, Bob, were you ‘targeting’ anyone as you penned these blog posts?”

- No. I don’t like that word “targeting.” It implies an intent to harm, hurt, or hinder.

- Did I have a “target audience”? Yes. As I just mentioned, my target audience primarily were those Christian brothers and sisters who expressed confusion and even hurt as they read posts about “empathy is sinful.” I wanted to provide these brothers and sisters with *a biblical case for biblical empathy*—that’s my “target.”

Question #3:

“Bob, is there even a need for a reminder that empathy is biblical?”

- Yes, because of the *message of Scripture*. Long before the current controversy, way back when I was a Bible college and seminary student, I was struck by all the times the Bible warns against truth without love and all the times the Bible rebukes shepherds who lack compassion and empathy for their flock. That’s why I wrote Part 1: [*Truth Without Empathy Is Sin*](#). Recall our summary of Part 1: Let’s put *our* emphasis where the *Bible* does—on rebuking the error of untethering truth from loving empathy.
- Yes, because of the *current context*. In equipping and supervising well over 1,000 pastors and seminary and Bible college students, and well over 1,000 lay Christians, it is clear that *we need more equipping in empathy, not less equipping in empathy*. As a biblical counseling supervisor of Evangelical Christians, less than 1% of the time do I need to remind pastors/students to “speak truth.” However, with a huge percentage of pastors/students, *I do need to remind and equip them to speak truth in love with biblical empathy*. The crying need of the day is for more equipping in biblical empathy, not less. I’ll never forget a conversation over a dozen years ago with one of the founders of the modern biblical counseling movement. He had been using my equipping materials, including lessons on biblical empathy. He shared with me:

“Bob, my father was a man with uncontrolled emotions. So I swore off all emotions and my biblical counseling equipping was focused on truth. Teaching your materials on empathy has revolutionized how I counsel and how I equip others to counsel. The biblical counseling world needs more help in equipping our people for compassionate, loving, empathetic one-another ministry.”

I agree. Our biblical counseling world, our seminary training world, our pastoral ministry world, and our Evangelical Christian world all need more equipping in empathy, not less focus on empathy.

Question #4:

“But, Bob, why *not* directly critique those saying that *empathy is sinful*?”

- First, I’ve read a batch of those posts. And before penning this series, I talked to a couple of the writers. And since beginning this series, I’ve had interactions with a few more of those article writers. So, I have engaged those brothers. But those were private interactions.
- Second, others have directly addressed those blog posts about “empathy is sin.”

- Third, as I noted, the focus of my ministry is not a negative critique of others, but rather a positive biblical presentation of truth (the best I understand it).
- Fourth, in providing this mini-series, I'm wanting my readers to be like the Berean Christians in Acts 17 who studied the Scriptures, studied what Paul said, studied what others were saying, and as mature Christians came to their own biblical conclusions. Read my posts. Read the posts on untethered empathy. And assess everything you read through the grid of God's Word.
- Fifth, clearly there is a growing amount of content out there about "empathy is sinful." I thought that the time was right to provide some blog post content about "empathy is biblical." Then people can compare and contrast and come to their own biblically-based "Berean" decisions.
- Sixth, I've read responses by the "empathy is sinful" authors to posts that directly challenged their ideas. I've not seen fruitful results from such confrontational, combative blog interactions. It seems to me that people tend to "double-down" and "dig in their heels" during these online challenges.

Question #5:

"Well, Bob, is there anything you would say or have said in interaction with the folks writing about *empathy is sinful*?"

- First, I'd encourage them to change their title. I get the fact that a title like *Empathy Is Sinful* can get people's attention. I even get the thinking that the concept of empathy has the potential to be misused—by so empathizing that one could untether empathy from truth.
 - ✓ As I've said, I don't see the Bible having that emphasis on untethered empathy. Nor do I see biblical counselors practicing untethered empathy. Nor do I see most secular therapists practicing untethered empathy.
 - ✓ Let's make some comparisons.
 - "Love" could be misused to "enable" people to continue down an unhealthy and unholy path. But would we really call something "biblical love" if it winks at sin? So I doubt that we would write a series of blog posts entitled, "Love Is Sinful."
 - Emotions are God-given, God-designed, and beautiful, yet they can be mishandled. But would or should we label a series of blog posts, "Emotions Are Sinful?" Or, would such a title confuse and concern people about the biblical nature of emotions? Would not such a title sound like it was demonizing all emotions?
 - We can misdirect our desires, but we should not write a series of blog posts on "Desires Are Sinful." That would not be biblically accurate—because desires are

God-designed and can be beautiful, or can become sinful, but they are not in and of themselves sinful.

- We could write a series of blog posts saying, “Anger Is Sinful.” But that would not be biblically accurate as it implies that all anger is sinful. Yet the Bible commands us, “Be angry but sin not.”
- ✓ Again, I understand the rhetorical power of “Empathy Is Sinful.” But for all the reasons outlined throughout this series, I would ask folks to reconsider the use of the title and concept, “Empathy Is Sinful.” Would it be so hard to humbly make that change? Wouldn’t a change in title communicate the point more clearly without causing such hurtful confusion and unnecessary consternation?
- Second, I’d encourage them to talk more about “Truth Untethered from Loving Empathy” than about “Untethered Empathy.” If you’ve read Parts 1-9 of this blog mini-series, then you know why I would encourage this...
- Third, I’d encourage them to invite their readers to read this blog mini-series and the free PDF resource that collates all 10 of these posts. The writers of the “Empathy Is Sinful” posts, could say:

“We’ve said all along that there is good empathy and a good use of empathy/sympathy/compassion. If you want to read someone who highlights a positive biblical presentation of biblical empathy, check out Bob Kellemen’s blog series and PDF resource *Empathy Is Biblical*.”
- Fourth, I’d say, “I appreciate the intent of what you are trying to do. I get that you are wanting to caution people not to *so* empathize with others that they drown out the need for truth.” Then I’d say, “You do realize that most counselors don’t do that, right? And you do realize that what you’re really talking about is the ‘mis-practice’ or ‘malpractice’ of empathy, not the healthy, biblical practice of empathy? And while you mention biblical empathy briefly in some of your posts, since people seem to not be getting that message, you may want to highlight more the truth that *empathy is biblical*. You’re really saying, ‘*Bad empathy is bad.*’ I think everyone would agree with that. Now say more about the value and need for biblical empathy...”
- Fifth, I’d say, “Given the scriptural warnings against harsh, uncaring, non-empathetic shepherds, and given the cultural context of our day of domineering, spiritually abusive pastors, please caution your many readers—especially your readers who are pastors and pastors-to-be (seminary students)—against the lack of biblical empathy. Please encourage your readers—and all pastors—to practice Trinity-like compassionate empathy” (see Part 5: [The Trinity As Our Model for Empathy](#)).

Question #6:
“Bob, what’s your final desired ‘take-away’ for your readers?”

- It’s the same as my original purpose:

I desire to present a brief, positive, biblical case for biblical empathy—what it is, why it is vital, and how we can minister Christlike empathy to one another.

- So, my desired take-away is that all Christians—especially pastors and seminary students training to be pastors—would learn how to minister Christlike empathy to God’s sheep.

Join the Conversation

You’ve read my Q & A.

How would you answer any of the questions you read?

What question would you ask me?

Sources Cited

¹Octavia Albert, *The House of Bondage*, 2.

²*Ibid.*, 15.

³*Ibid.*, 28-29.

⁴*Ibid.*, 27.

⁵Quoted in, Thomas Oden, *Classical Pastoral Care*, Vol. 3, p. 8, emphasis added.

⁶Quoted in, Thomas Oden, *Classical Pastoral Care*, Vol. 3, p. 8, emphasis added.