



## GROWING IN EMPATHY AND COMPASSION

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*When we are willing to be a little more vulnerable, and others handle our hearts with care, we discover that knowing and being known are part of our design. - Ed Welch*

### **Empathy and Compassion: Why They Matter**

One of the most powerful ways that we can demonstrate love and care for another—and be relationally connected—is to be compassionate and empathetic. You can think of compassion and empathy as a way of getting in the boat with a friend who is lost at sea and helping them navigate back to safety, rather than standing on the shore telling them where to go or judging them for being in the boat in the first place. Empathy is the ability to understand and identify with the feelings of another without being judgmental. Compassion demonstrates concern for another that is paired with a motivation to help. You can think of empathy and compassion as teammates that work together to help diffuse the power of shame.

When someone exposes their true self, whether in the form of sharing a painful experience, remembering a past trauma, confessing sin or expressing strong emotion about a difficult situation—they are putting themselves at risk of being wounded by how others respond to their vulnerability. How we respond matters.

Sometimes even telling the story makes them feel as if they are right back in the middle of the event—even if it happened years ago. It's important to stay engaged with them for as long as it takes to help them know that they are seen, heard, and loved.. This may take a while, or even take place over several conversations. There is a time and place for gently offering wise counsel, to throw them a truth life-line, but we do not need to be too quick to offer what they are not yet able to hear.

During these intense moments, our brains actually stop functioning in the interconnected way in which they are designed. Our ability to listen to reason or be analytical is impaired when strong emotion takes over. Research has shown that in that moment, a compassionate response grounds us. It has that capacity to settle, soothe, and reset our minds. Empathy and compassion are powerful weapons in disarming shame.

For some of us, this is easy. Our natural bent is to respond empathetically and show compassion when someone shares

something with us. For others, it is more difficult. Our tendency is to withhold care and concern.

### **Here are some of the reasons that we are tempted to withhold empathy and compassion. Which ones do you identify with?**

- We don't have all the facts
- The story doesn't make sense
- We think we need to match their emotions
- We don't agree with their assessment of the situation
- We think they are overreacting
- We wouldn't be feeling or reacting this way if we were in the same situation
- We question whether or not their emotions are valid
- We equate being empathetic or compassionate with enabling
- We believe that giving direction is more beneficial than offering empathy and concern.
- We are uncomfortable—listening to their story may stir something in us we have not yet dealt with

### **Growing in Empathy and Compassion**

These are skills and responses that we have to practice and develop. In order to help us grow, we need to identify some *non-empathetic* and *non-compassionate* ways in which we may respond to others.

### **Here are a few examples:**

- Minimizing: "It could be worse" or "At least ..."
- Over-spiritualizing/using Bible verses as spiritual Band-Aids: "God uses all things for our good"
- Quick problem solving: "I know what you can do, try ..."
- Blaming: "You brought this on yourself, if you had only ..."
- Making it about you: "That's nothing! Let me tell you about when I ..."
- Silence or changing the subject: ignoring or not acknowledging what the person shared

- Enabling: being sympathetic and/or over-identifying without eventually pointing them to truth

*Put an x beside the responses that are most hurtful to you when others have used them on you. Draw a Circle around the ones that you tend to use on others.*

These responses sound familiar, especially in a group setting. They minimize a person's pain and shut them down. There is nothing worse than a "vulnerability-hangover" after you have shared a part of yourself, yet are filled with regret because of the way someone responded or failed to respond to you.

Let's take a closer look at two of these: *enabling* and *quick problem solving*.

*Enabling* responses are hyper focused on identifying with the person's pain without ever offering the wisdom and direction they may need in order to find their way out of the hole. This type of response can leave a person weak and in a helpless and hopeless state.

*Quick problem solving* responses are hyper focused on the solution but ignore the pain a person may be experiencing. This type of response might even increase a person's feelings of shame, failure, and isolation.

On their own, both of these responses lack true compassion and concern. These two responses are often more about our own discomfort with suffering than they are about helping the other person. We will vacillate between enabling and problem solving depending on our own personality, our relationship to the person who is suffering, our schedules, and a variety of other factors.

We can each learn to be more empathetic and compassionate. It takes awareness of our relational tendencies as well as a willingness to learn.

### **Empathetic responses acknowledge what a person is feeling and makes room for their experience:**

- I don't know what to say, but I am really glad you told me.
- Thank you for sharing that with us. You are very brave. I know that took a lot of courage.
- It sounds like you are in a really hard place.
- I know that hurts.
- I am really sorry you were treated this way.

Compassionate responses are similar and communicate a deep concern paired with a desire to help. Some examples might be, *how can I support you right now? What do you need?* Compassion extends beyond just asking what is need-

ed but moving to provide the care that person may need. We want to be a stable support as someone walks through a difficult season.

Remember, in these moments you don't have to agree with their assessment of the situation, how they are feeling, or even how they are reacting. You are also not trying to make your emotions match what they are feeling, or carry the weight of what they are feeling. In fact, you might have to distance yourself from the emotional intensity in order to be able to respond compassionately. A healthy response to another's pain that is framed by empathy and compassion will communicate that you acknowledge and understand what they are experiencing, but also that you are willing to help them through it in practical and meaningful ways.

Acknowledging someone's pain is just the beginning. Empathetic and compassionate care requires our time, energy, patience, courage, wisdom and reliance on the Spirit. We cannot be in a hurry if we are going to care for one another well!

### **Coming Alongside Others**

Empathy and compassion invite others into a safe relationship with us—where they can be known and vulnerable. With this posture, we can help others tell their shame stories and receive the healing and honor that God is offering. It also opens the door to provide guidance and direction as we lovingly and patiently walk with them.

Responding in this way plows up the soil of a wounded heart and makes it fertile ground to begin planting seeds of truth. God often uses this relational connection to fight the lies that shame may tell and replaces them with the truth about who God is and what he is offering.

### **Jesus: Our Compassionate Savior**

The gospels are full of encounters where Jesus crosses the boundary between the clean and the unclean. In these accounts, we get to see how he engages those who are covered in shame with both truth and grace. We often find him touching, stooping, searching, or listening for the one who has touched him or called his name. He does not push them away. In fact, he comes near. He is not ashamed to identify with weakness, sin, or brokenness. He is not ashamed to identify with us.

### **Scripture is filled with passages that give us a glimpse of this compassionate Savior:**

- The LORD must wait for you to come to him so he can show you his love and compassion. For the LORD is a faithful God. Blessed are those who wait for his help. Isaiah 30:18

- For the Lord has comforted his people and will have compassion on them in their suffering. Isaiah 49:13
- Have mercy on me, O God, because of your unfailing love. Because of your great compassion, blot out the stain of my sins. Ps 51:1
- Then a despised Samaritan came along, and when he saw the man, he felt compassion for him. Luke 10:33

As we go through this study together, we will see this Jesus—our compassionate Savior!! Not only does he identify with us in our shame, but he takes it on himself and in return, gives us his honor. He is our way out of shame.

### **Our Compassionate Savior**

- Psalm 103
- Psalm 91:14-16
- Matt.9:36
- Mark 1:41
- John 1:14
- Heb. 2:14
- 2 Cor. 5:21
- Heb.10:10-11:25
- I John 3:17
- Luke 7:13
- Luke 10:33
- Luke 15:20