

September 17, 2006
 If Only We Could Trade Places, Then You'd Understand
 Hebrews 4:14-16 / Romans 3:31-39 / Job 16:1-21

Today we come to a passage which points out one of the most repeated themes in the Book of Job — the need for a suffering saint to find someone, somewhere, who will merely listen, shed a tear of empathy, and tell him (or her) that they understand their plight.

That's all Job wants. Nothing "BIG." No educated, professional, psychiatric advice. No profound insights followed up with a miracle diagnosis and cure. No. Just a simple willingness to listen, empathize, and try to understand what the other person is going through.

Yet, when you think about it, that's a gift most of us can find hard to give. Not because we don't want to, but because truly LISTENING (earnestly and attentively to a person suffering over an extended period of time) can take an enormous amount of focus, energy and time. And likewise, EMPATHY and UNDERSTANDING also require a tenderness of spirit, and a sensitivity of heart, that is difficult for rushed people, weighed down by numerous obligations and busy schedules to generate.

When our calendars are full, and our pace of life is rushed, it does make it nearly impossible to connect emotionally with people. The busier, and more distracted and more self-absorbed we are (because of the frenetic pace of American life), the less possible empathy becomes, because we often lack the time to listen, and let people pour out their hearts, so we can try to feel what their feeling — which is what empathy is.

And Paul tells us that empathy should characterize us as Christians, when he writes in Romans 12:15: ***"Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep."*** Or in other words, be so sensitive to where people are at that you feel and exude happiness when they're happy, and you feel their pain and weep when they weep.

When people like Job have "faces red with weeping" as we are told in verse 16; when they are in agony have "Black rings under their eyes" as we are told Job did in verse 16b — their tears and grief should reduce us to tears. In fact, if we could sit with someone who is mourning the loss of their 10 children (as Job had), and hear them express their grief with tears running down their cheeks, and remain dry eyed and unmoved, like Job's friends, it's not an indication that we're strong and together, but rather, an indication that something is wrong with our heart, or our spirit. Because Paul says we should weep with those who weep. Their tears should drive us to tears.

To remain dry-eyed in the presence of one in tears is probably a sign that we need to ask God to heal our hearts, and make them more tender, and more loving, and more sensitive — more empathetic. More able to feel what others are feeling — even as men!

And likewise, when others experience some spiritual victory, or finally achieve some long standing goal, or receive some unexpected gift and are elated and bubbling over with joy, Paul says, we should rejoice with them! Their happiness and joy should warm our hearts and bring a smile to our face! We should be as excited and happy about their achievements as they are! That's what Paul tells us: "Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep."

And although that IS what Job needs, and that IS what the Bible says he should have received from his friends, that's NOT what he got! Instead he got preached at (v. 3), argued with (v. 4), and mocked (v. 4b). (To "shake their head at him" (as he implies they have been doing in v. 4b), is similar to what we might do when we hear someone say something, and then have this degrading look on our faces, and shake our heads in disbelief that anyone would say something so stupid or ridiculous!)

Job is looking for empathy, encouragement and understanding, but instead he gets getting nothing but insults, speeches, criticism, correction, and rebuke. Which leads him to say in verses 4-5:

"I also could speak like you if you were in my place (in other words, its easy to hit a man when he's down!) I could make fine speeches against you, and shake my head at you. BUT," he says, (I wouldn't do that) "my mouth would encourage you; comfort from my lips would bring you relief."

Its Job basically paraphrasing the Golden Rule and saying — "I would do unto you, what I wish you would do unto me." And that's not all. He's also voicing the desire of every suffering person — the desire to have their friends encourage, and comfort and bring relief to them, by their empathetic, tender hearted listening and comforting, encouraging words. And the reason he needs that from them, is because he knows he can't bring comfort, encouragement and relief to himself by his own words (v. 6). Whether he speaks or remains silent, his pain does not go away.

He tries to make it go away by going into another lengthy lament in verses 7-17 where he says he feels that God has it out for him. But it does no good, because he knows that no one feels his pain. HIS face is red with weeping and HE has dark shadows under his eyes, but THEIR faces are dry and THEIR hearts unmoved.

What would have helped minister relief to him? Hearing his friends say with tears streaming down their cheeks:

"I hear you Job, although I can't even begin to imagine how much it must hurt (to have lost everything and now be in such constant, unrelenting physical agony), but I can understand how you'd feel the way you do. I've never suffered what you're suffering, and I'd never want to, but I do want you to know my own heart is hurting because of the pain and agony you're suffering, and I am here for you if you need me or want someone to unload on."

THAT would be empathy. But that's NOT what Job got! That would have encouraged him, and brought him some degree of comfort, and relief. But instead, all he got were verbal spankings, belittling rebukes, wagging fingers, and shaking heads from people who didn't understand, and couldn't relate, and thus couldn't help, because they had never suffered as he had.

And that's what I want to speak about today: What our response should be to suffering saints, and how that can be cultivated in our hearts.

So **FIRST**, in relation to what our response to suffering should be (both initial and ongoing)-- it should be one of mercy. In Isaiah 61 we are told that one of the signs that the Spirit of God was on Isaiah, and would be upon Jesus Christ, is that he would "bind up the brokenhearted," and "comfort all those who mourn."

To Jerusalem, after her 70 years of slavery in Babylon, God says to Isaiah, *"Speak tenderly to Jerusalem..."* Why? Because she has already suffered double for all her sins. She is struggling and hurting, and as Isaiah goes on to point out, when God's people are in that state He deals gently with them: *"A bruised reed He will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out."*

In other words, if we are to imitate God's response to the suffering, hurting, bowed down, and grieving we must deal with them tenderly and sensitively!

And the message remains the same in the NT. *"Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy."* *"Be merciful,"* says Jesus, *"just as your Father in heaven is merciful."* And again as we read in Jude 1:22, *"Be merciful to those who doubt..."*

Even when Jesus told the Parable of a Good Samaritan and concluded by asking which of the three people responded correctly to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers (the two Jews or the Samaritan), the answer was clear: *"It was the one who had mercy on him."*

Mercy should always characterize our response to the hurting. In fact, mercy should always characterize us regardless of whether people are hurting or not! When the Pharisees got angry at Jesus because He healed on the Sabbath and ate with sinners and tax collectors, His response was to send them back to Hosea 6:6 and tell them: "Go and learn what this means: *'I desire mercy and not sacrifice.'*"

Which means Mike Mason is right when he says:

"Any theology that does not bring comfort and encouragement to the hearts of the downtrodden is bad theology. For the sign of true faith is mercy toward others... The chief reason for being suspicious of the theology of Job's friends is that it is so obviously lacking in mercy."

And here's where we need to pause and ask ourselves:

Have we, as a result of going this far into Job, become more compassionate, or more empathetic, or more under-standing? Have we become more able to encourage, and minister comfort and grace to hurting people? Because if we have not, then we've missed the whole point of Job, and the last eight months of preaching has all been in vain!

In fact, if studying the Bible in general has not made us more compassionate and gracious, then we have studied in vain, or missed the whole point of what was there, and like the Pharisees, need to hear Jesus say to us: *"Go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice.'*" (Hosea 6:6)

Which brings us to our **SECOND** point. How do we become people who love mercy? How do we become more empathetic and tender? How does the fruit of kindness, and gentleness become a greater part of who we are? How do we become people of tenderness who can by our very demeanor minister comfort and relief to others? People who relieve pain instead of inflicting it?

And the answer may be more simple than we thought — (though not exactly what we'd prefer to hear)! Paul shares it with us in the same chapter we looked at last week from II Corinthians 1, where we read (listen carefully):

"Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of all compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those with the same comfort we ourselves have received from God. 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, and if we are comforted it is for your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer."

Though we don't often emphasize the point (especially when witnessing to unbelievers!) the Bible does make it clear that suffering is part and parcel of what God uses to train, and mold, and develop Christian character in us. Paul says as much in Romans 5:1-5 where he tells us that *"trials work patience."*

Or Romans 8:17 where he states: *"Now if we are God's children, then we are heirs — heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in His sufferings, in order that we may share in his glory (His "glory" being the display of his nature and attributes)."*

In other words, there are some aspects of Christlikeness (empathy and compassion and the ability to offer comfort to the suffering) which can only be worked in us through suffering.

Not long ago I was speaking with some friends who were struggling with the pastor of their church who is kind of "hard," and lacking in compassion, and has a difficult time dealing with struggling people — apparently conveying the idea that suffering people simply need to stop feeling sorry for themselves, suck it up and move on. That is, he seems to lack the ability to relate to the struggling, or feel compassion and empathy for suffering people. And when I was talking to my brother about it the other day, I said:

"I think the problem is that he's never really suffered any significant trauma or discouragement in his life."

He grew up in a well-off family, is good looking, in excellent health, has never been unemployed, has a good marriage, is innately gifted, a good speaker, confident and very intelligent.

But that's the whole problem! People who have never struggled tend to lack empathy for those who do. People with no fear of heights have a hard time empathizing with those who can't bring themselves to stand at the very edge of a 1000 foot deep ravine on a windy day! The fine-tuned athlete has a hard time feeling compassion for the person who can barely move because they have a herniated disk in their back. And the all A student who grasps concepts immediately has a hard time being patient or relating to the person who has to be told the same thing 3-4 times before they get it!

That's why J. C. Metcalfe could once write in relation to those who would desire to minister to others:

"It is those who have plumbed the depths of failure to whom God inevitably gives the call to minister to others. Without a bitter experience of their own inadequacy and

poverty (Lk. 22:54-62) they are quite unfitted to bear the burden of spiritual ministry. It takes a person who has discovered something of a measure of his own weakness to be able to be patient with the shortcomings of others."

He's right. Paul said the same thing: Our ability to minister comfort to others who are struggling comes out of our own personal experience of having suffered. "God comforts us in all our troubles so that we can comfort those in trouble with the same comfort we ourselves have received from God."

Such suffering produces what Henri Nouwen once called "*Wounded Healers*." Leaders or Ministers who walk with an Emotional Limp, and have been through the School of Hard Knocks.

And as much as we don't want pain and suffering, there is a sense in which true Christian compassion and empathy and tender-heartedness can't be developed apart from it. I would never wish suffering upon anyone, but there is a sense in which I believe that pastor I mentioned will remain emotionally detached and unable to relate to struggling Christians unless he goes through some severe struggle, trauma, or painful experience that enables him (as Metcalfe put it) "*to discover something of a measure of his own weakness*."

If you want to be able to help the hurting, and minister grace and comfort and relief to the suffering, it is almost impossible apart from some experience of suffering.

And if you have, "Don't let your pain go to waste!" Because so often it is NOT having all the answers (or thinking you have all the answers, as with Job's friends!) that makes you able to minister to others. What makes you able to minister comfort, encouragement, and relief to the suffering is the shared experience of having suffered what they have suffered.

Let me give you an example. Helen Roseaveare, a well-known missionary to the Belgian Congo was once asked to speak at the Urbana Onward Missions Conference in Illinois—a conference that often attracts 10-15,000 young people every 2 years. And as she contemplated what she would share, she felt God laying it on her heart to share something she had rarely shared before in private, never mind in public.

So, sensing the leading of God, she told this group about the summer of 1964 when civil war broke out in the Congo, and Simba rebels took over the missionary compound where she served. For more than 2 months they allowed her to continue her work unhindered, living in relative security.

Then one night in late October, rebel soldiers forced their way into her house, and began a night of sheer terror. She was brutally and repeatedly raped without mercy. She felt dirty and unclean, and violated beyond words—like she had lost her purity before God and that there was no reason to go on living. “After all,” she said to herself, “how could I ever minister for God after that.”

Yet the answer to her question came when she was thrown into captivity with a beautiful young Catholic nun who had suffered the exact same thing. The nun was distraught, and in trying to comfort her Helen said to her: “If you know Christ is living in you, no one can touch your inner purity. No living man can destroy or harm that...,” after which she shared that she herself had been raped many times during her captivity as well.

Who would think that any good could come from such a horrible experience? Yet you know what? After she finished sharing that with all those at the conference, a line of about 20 young women came forward, many with tears in their eyes, and some for the very first time sharing with her their own stories of how they also had been raped. Why with her? What was the draw? They had found in her a companion in their own suffering. They found one who they knew could empathize and understand.

HOW ABOUT YOU? Do you have some painful experience which could be used to minister to others? Don't let it go to waste!

Which brings us to our **LAST** point. That a merciful demeanor is cultivated in us by an awareness of the fact that we have ourselves been the recipients of unspeakable mercy. Knowing that **WE** (sinful as we are) have been forgiven by God, even though we have committed innumerable offenses against His infinite majesty and holiness, makes us more aware of our need to forgive others.

In fact, when Peter asks Jesus how many times he must forgive his brother for sinning against him, and Jesus responds by saying “***Seventy times seven***” or 490 times (and I believe it means for the same offense) Peter recoils!

And how does Jesus respond? By telling him a parable about an unmerciful servant who owed his master millions of dollars, could never have repaid the debt, and thus pleads for mercy and begs his master to forgive the debt. And the master does.

Then he goes out and finds a fellow servant who owed him a hundred denarii (about 5 dollars), grabs the man, begins choking him, and yelling at him, refuses to heed his pleas for mercy, and has him thrown in prison until he pays the last penny.

And the key to the parable comes when the master finds out, and says to the unmerciful servant: ***“Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant, just as I had mercy on you?”*** In other words, ***“If I (God in the parable) cancel your infinite sin debt against me, shouldn’t you cancel the insignificant sin debt others have committed against you?”***

The answer to Peter’s question is simply this: Realizing how much we have been graced, and how much mercy has been shed upon us, is what softens our hearts and makes us not only see the need to be merciful with others, but able to be merciful with others.

Mike Mason is right again, therefore, when he points out that:

“As soon as you start looking down on your brother, and being scornful or critical of him, your behavior gives you away, proving that you have fundamentally failed to grasp the astounding breadth of God’s mercy as it has been shown to you. For if you had really grasped it, then that same mercy would automatically flow out of you to others.”

Notice he does not say the unmerciful person hasn’t received mercy. He says they have ***“fundamentally failed to grasp the astounding breadth of the mercy shown to them.”*** Or in other words, the astounding truth of the Gospel’s message of God’s grace to them hasn’t yet washed over their heart and done what it was intended to do — turn their heart of stone into a heart of flesh; their hard heart into a tender heart — making the believer merciful, just as their Heavenly Father is merciful.

And let me just add this in **CONCLUSION**: Even if we (like Job) can’t find anyone who will listen, empathize and understand, we do have one we can go to at any time, for anything, and know we will be heard, and understood.

As Job tells us in verses 19-21, speaking of Jesus: ***“Even now my witness is in heaven; my advocate is on high. My intercessor is my friend, as my eyes pour out tears to God. On behalf of a man He pleads with God, as a man pleads for his friend.”***

What did the author of Hebrews say?

“We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are, yet without sin.”

Even if no one else in the world understands, Jesus does. He sympathizes or empathizes with you in your struggles, because ***“He Himself was tempted in every way just as you are, yet without sin.”***

And likewise, Paul says in Romans 8:34, that, "Jesus is at the right hand of God interceding for us."

Have you ever considered that? Your Savior and Lord is in heaven right now praying for you. You're in His heart, and in His prayers even now as I speak! Take comfort in that my friends —
When no one else understands, Jesus does.