

Jesus Showed Sympathy



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *2 Kings 13:23; Exod. 2:23–25; Luke 7:11–16; 1 John 3:17; John 11:35; Rom. 12:15; 2 Cor. 1:3, 4.*

Memory Text: “And when Jesus went out He saw a great multitude; and He was moved with compassion for them, and healed their sick” (*Matthew 14:14, NKJV*).

How much more tragic could it be? A 17-year-old girl, struggling with what most 17-year-old girls struggle with, except with so much more, took her own life. Who could imagine the parents' devastation?

Their pastor came over to the house. He sat down in the living room next to them and for a long time said nothing. He just immersed himself in their grief. Then he, the pastor, started sobbing. He sobbed until his tears ran dry. Then, without saying a word, he got up and left.

Sometime later, the father told him how much he appreciated what the pastor had done. He and his wife, at that time, didn't need words, didn't need promises, didn't need counseling. All they needed, right then and there, was raw sympathy.

“I can't tell you,” he said to the minister, “how much your sympathy meant to us.”

Sympathy means “with pathos,” and “pathos” is related to pity, tenderness, or sorrow. It means being “with” someone but in a profound way. Showing sympathy toward the sorrows of others takes the question of “mingling” with others to a whole new level.

Showing sympathy was also a crucial way that Jesus reached people.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, August 20.

Hearing the Groans

The universe can seem like a very scary place: vast, cold, and so big we sense our own insignificance and meaninglessness amid it. This fear has become even more prevalent with the advent of modern science, whose giant telescopes have revealed a cosmos much larger and vaster than our imaginations can readily grasp. Add to that the extravagant claims of Darwinism, which in most popular versions dismisses the idea of a Creator, and people can, understandably, struggle with a sense of hopelessness amid a vast creation that seems to care nothing about us.

Of course, the Bible gives us a different view of our place in the creation.

What do the following texts teach about God’s compassion toward His fallen and broken creation here on earth?

Judg. 2:16–18 _____

2 Kings 13:23 _____

Isa. 54:7, 8, 10 _____

Contrary to the popular notion of the God of the Old Testament as stern, mean, unforgiving, and uncompassionate, especially in contrast to Jesus and how He is represented in the New Testament, these texts are just a few of many in the Old Testament that reveal God’s compassion for humanity.

What does Exodus 2:23–25 teach us about how God deals with suffering?

God deeply cares about people (*see James 5:11*). This is a theme that is seen all through the Bible.

“His heart of love is touched by our sorrows and even by our utterances of them. . . . Nothing that in any way concerns our peace is too small for Him to notice. . . . No calamity can befall the least of His children . . . of which our heavenly Father is unobservant, or in which He takes no immediate interest.”—Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*, p. 100.

What kind of collective groans are going up toward heaven in your community, and how can God use you to sympathize with and to help those who are suffering?

Our Sympathetic Savior

As Jesus mingled with people during His earthly ministry, He encountered situations that revealed His sympathy and compassion for them. “He came forth, and saw a great multitude, and he had compassion on them, and healed their sick” (*Matt. 14:14, ASV*).

Read Matthew 9:35, 36 and Luke 7:11–16. What do they teach us about how true sympathy and compassion are made manifest?

The word *sympathy* also brings to mind other related words, such as *empathy* and *pity*. According to various dictionaries, *compassion* is pity, sympathy, empathy. *Pity* is sympathetic sorrow for one’s suffering. *Empathy* is the ability to understand or share the feelings of others.

Compassion and sympathy show that we not only understand what others are suffering but want to help alleviate and remedy the suffering.

When you hear about the sad things that have happened to people in your community, such as their house burning down or a death in the family, what is your reaction? Do you just mutter, “That’s so sad,” and then move on, which is so easy to do? Or are your sympathies aroused, *moving* you with compassion for them? True compassion will lead you toward comforting and actively helping friends as well as strangers in practical ways. Whether it is sending a sympathy card or showing even deeper sympathy by visiting and assisting with immediate needs, loving action is the clear result of true sympathy.

Fortunately, people and aid organizations tend to compassionately respond to big disasters. However, sometimes we may not pay as much attention to the “smaller” misfortunes and disasters that deeply affect someone.

Jesus didn’t just show sympathy but took that sympathy to the next level: compassionate action. We, of course, are called to do the same. Anyone can feel sorrow or sympathy for someone’s misfortune. The question is, What action does that sympathy lead us to perform?

While eating breakfast, a man was listening to his wife read from the news about a tragedy in another country that had left thousands dead. After talking for a few moments about how terrible it was, he then changed the subject and asked whether the local soccer team had won the match the night before. In what ways are we all somewhat guilty of the same thing, and what, if anything, can we do about it?

Walking in Their Shoes

Read Colossians 3:12, 1 Peter 3:8, and 1 John 3:17. What are these texts saying to us, and how can we reveal this compassion in our lives?

Compassion comes from the Latin word *compati*, which means “to suffer with.” As we ourselves have suffered, we also can understand the sufferings of others; and, no doubt, just as we often crave compassion and sympathy in our suffering, we should be willing to do the same for others in their need, as well.

We saw in an earlier lesson the story of the good Samaritan. As He highlights the example of the Samaritan, Jesus says, “But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him” (*Luke 10:33, NIV*). This pity, or compassion, drove the Samaritan traveler to act on behalf of the injured victim. The priest and the Levite likely asked themselves, “If I help this man, what will happen to me?” The Samaritan might have asked himself, “If I don’t help this man, what will happen to him?” In this story the Samaritan unselfishly takes the perspective of the victim and takes action. He risks his safety and his wealth for a stranger. In other words, sometimes being a Christian involves risks and can be, potentially, very costly.

Look at the story of the prodigal son from this perspective as well (*Luke 15:20–32*). What does the prodigal’s father do that makes him vulnerable to criticism and family strife? The compassionate embrace, the robe of belonging, the ring of trust, the sandals of freedom, and the call for celebration reflect the selfless joy of a father who is willing to sacrifice all for the sake of his prodigal son’s restoration. *Prodigal* means wasteful, reckless, extravagant, and uncontrolled. This kind of behavior certainly describes the path of the son in this story. But stop for a moment and consider that, in response to the return of the prodigal, one could justly claim that the father in this story puts all dignity aside and recklessly bestows everything he has on his disheveled son. In the eyes of the older sibling, the father is wasteful, extravagant, and uncontrolled. The father becomes prodigal at the sight of his repentant son, and his heart of compassion triggers the emptying of all resources necessary to restore him.

This level of sympathy and compassion involves setting self aside, and it can make us vulnerable to whatever comes as we suffer with someone and endeavor to move him or her toward restoration. In short, true compassion and sympathy might come with a cost.

Jesus Wept

“Jesus wept” (*John 11:35, NIV*).

What does this verse tell us, not just about the humanity of Jesus, but how in that humanity He related to the suffering of others? *See also Rom. 12:15.*

In John 11:35 Jesus demonstrated sympathy, empathy, and pity from His core. Even though He was about to raise Lazarus from the dead, the grief of a family with whom He was very close affected Him physically and emotionally.

However, Jesus was weeping not only over the death of a dear friend. He was looking at a much bigger picture, that of the suffering of all humanity because of the ravages of sin.

“The weight of the grief of ages was upon Him. He saw the terrible effects of the transgression of God’s law. He saw that in the history of the world, beginning with the death of Abel, the conflict between good and evil had been unceasing. Looking down the years to come, He saw the suffering and sorrow, tears and death, that were to be the lot of men. His heart was pierced with the pain of the human family of all ages and in all lands. The woes of the sinful race were heavy upon His soul, and the fountain of His tears was broken up as He longed to relieve all their distress.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 534.

Think about her words: Jesus, in ways that none of us ever could, saw the “pain of the human family in all ages and in all lands.”

We ourselves barely can stand to think about the pain of those whom we know or with whom we are close. Then add to that the pain of others that we read about in the news. And yet, we have here the Lord, who knows things in ways that we don’t, weeping over the collective grief of humanity. God alone knows the full extent of human woe and sorrow. How thankful we should be that we get only faint glimpses of that sorrow, and sometimes even that seems too much for us. Try to imagine what must have been stirring the heart of Jesus at that time.

General William Booth, founder of the Salvation Army, said, “If you can’t cry over the city, we can’t use you.”—Roger S. Greenway and Timothy M. Monsma, *Cities: Missions’ New Frontier* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Pub. Group, 2000), p. 246. What should those words say to each of us?

Another Kind of Comforter

“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 tribulation, that we may be able to comfort those who are in any trouble, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God” (2 Cor. 1:3, 4, NKJV).

What is Paul telling us here about how our own suffering can help us be more effective in showing sympathy and comfort to those around us? How have you experienced (if you have) the reality of these words in your own life?

The word *comfort* comes from the Latin *com* (together, with) plus *fortis* (strong). As Christ strengthens us in our suffering, we can pass this strength to others. As we have learned from our own sorrows, we can more effectively minister to others in theirs.

Churches generally have members who suffer and members who comfort. This combination can transform your church into a “safe house”—a “city of refuge” (see *Numbers 35*) as well as a river of healing (see *Ezek. 47:1–12*) that flows to the community.

Showing sympathy and comfort is an art. Here are some suggestions:

- Be authentic. Listen more than you speak. Be sure your body language reinforces your attempt to sympathize and comfort.
- Show sympathy out of your individual personality. Some people give sympathy by quietly crying with the troubled person. Others don’t cry but show sympathy by organizing something that is a comfort to the bereaved.
 - *Being* a presence is often more important than speaking or doing.
 - Allow people to grieve in their own way.
 - Become acquainted with the stages of processing grief that people often go through.
 - Be careful about saying “I know how you feel.” Chances are that you don’t.
 - There is a place for professional counseling.
 - Don’t say “I’ll pray for you” unless you really intend to do so. When possible, pray with, unhurriedly visit with, and share encouraging Bible promises with suffering ones.
 - Organize support groups (if available) at your church or in your community.

Further Thought: Read Deuteronomy 24:10–22, Jonah 3, Malachi 3:17, Matthew 15:32–38, Mark 6:34–44, Galatians 6:2, Hebrews 10:32–34. Read Ellen G. White, “Be Sympathetic to All Men,” p. 189, and “Thoughtful of Others,” p. 193, in *My Life Today*; “The Privilege of Prayer,” p. 100, in *Steps to Christ*; “This Is Pure Religion” and “The Parable of the Good Samaritan,” chapters 4 and 5, in *Welfare Ministry*.

A few families with their small children got together during a holiday and made packages of food and toiletries to give out to the many homeless in their city. After working for a few hours, they got into their cars, went to the city center, and, in about a half hour, distributed the goods. They then went off to a museum and, afterward, out to dinner. As they were walking back to the cars, one of them said, “I’m glad we did this. But do you realize that by now most of those whom we fed are probably hungry again?”

No question, there are so many people out there who need comfort, sympathy, and help that it can seem overwhelming, almost to the point where one could think: *What’s the sense of doing anything? We can barely make a dent!* Numerous problems exist with that line of thinking, however. First, if everyone thought that way, no one would help anyone, and the needs, as terrible as they are, would be even worse. On the other hand, if everyone who could help others would, then the needs, as terrible as they are, wouldn’t be as bad. Second, we have never been told in the Bible that human pain, suffering, and evil would be eliminated this side of heaven. In fact, we have been told the opposite. Even Jesus, when here, didn’t end all human suffering. He did what He could. We are to do the same: bring comfort, sympathy, and help to those whom we can.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 How can your church be made into a safe, healing place for the brokenhearted?
- 2 Discuss in class the following quote: “Many wonder why God doesn’t act. God wonders why so many of His people don’t care.”—Dwight Nelson, *Pursuing the Passion of Jesus* (Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 2005). Do you even agree with the premise of the challenge? If so, what can we do to change?
- 3 Look at this quote from Ellen G. White: “Kindly words simply spoken, little attentions simply bestowed, will sweep away the clouds of temptation and doubt that gather over the soul. The true heart expression of Christlike sympathy, given in simplicity, has power to open the door of hearts that need the simple, delicate touch of the Spirit of Christ.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 9, p. 30. What should this tell us about the incredible power for good that kindness and sympathy can have as we reach out to help the grieving?

“Remember Your Faith”: Part 1

Pierre stumbled down the red-dirt road, following others who walked in front of him. He didn't know where he was going, but he knew that he had to get away from the death that pursued him.

Pierre was nine years old when the Rwandan genocide took the lives of 800,000 Rwandans and destroyed the life he had known. Pierre's father, a pastor, had gathered his nine children together and told them solemnly, “I don't know what will happen. If you live, you must remain faithful to God. Remember the Sabbath. Remember your faith.”

When soldiers came, the family fled to the church for refuge. But the soldiers set fire to the church. Pierre could still smell the smoke, and could still hear the screams of those dying around him. Somehow he had managed to escape the building and flee without being shot. But what had happened to his family? He didn't know.

Pierre followed others who fled to neighboring Burundi. He survived in a refugee camp until he was told that it was safe to return to Rwanda. Once again, he walked the dusty road, this time toward his home.

He found his town. He found a pile of ashes where his church had been. He found bones. Somehow he knew that only he had survived. He was alone. His father's words rang in his heart. “Stay faithful to God, no matter what.”

Pierre's aunt, who lived in neighboring Uganda, came searching for his family. She took Pierre home to live with her. Together they built a new life. Over time, the sharp pain of his loss became a dull ache. His faith in God grew stronger. Then, without warning, his aunt died in an accident. Once more, Pierre was alone. He was 14 and didn't know what to do or where to turn. All he had was his faith.

The Rwandan government provided free education to genocide survivors, and someone helped Pierre enroll in high school. He shared a room with two other boys, Esdras and Deo, who had lost their families in the genocide too. The three boys became as brothers, bound together by loss and tragedy.

Pierre finished high school and was awarded a full scholarship to study at a national university in Rwanda. But he turned down the offer. He wanted to study at the Seventh-day Adventist university in Kigali, even though his genocide survivor benefits wouldn't pay all his costs. “You're crazy!” his friends told him. “Take the scholarship!”

To be continued in next week's Inside Story.

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *Matthew 14:14*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Recognize the vital importance in Christ’s method of ministry of showing sympathy to others through word and action.

Feel: Experience the joy of showing unselfish kindness and sympathy to those who are struggling.

Do: Take practical steps to demonstrate Christ’s compassion and love in dealing with others.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: Being Right and Kind

A In what ways do you think the church may sometimes appear to non-church members as unsympathetic?

B How is it possible to stand up against sin but also be seen as sympathetic to people committing those sins?

C What factors do you think can work to undermine our sympathy for others?

II. Feel: Feeling Sympathy

A How can we show sympathy to people without being condescending or treating them like a “charity case”?

B What can we do when we know someone is in need but find it difficult to feel sympathetic because of his or her behavior?

III. Do: Showing Sympathy

A Prayerfully ask yourself if there is anyone to whom you may have been unkind or unsympathetic. Ask God to give you the strength to apologize and make restitution.

B What steps can your church take to show sympathy to people in your community?

► **Summary:** Our world is full of people who are tired, lonely, and discouraged. Sometimes something as simple as a sympathetic ear can make all the difference in their lives. In His ministry, Jesus showed us how to show sympathy—by being gentle and kind, listening and healing.

Learning Cycle

►STEP 1—Motivate

Spotlight on Scripture: *Matthew 14:14*

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: When we engage in mission, it is crucial to analyze our motives and purpose. Some people are motivated to witness because they feel they have to or because they want to see good baptismal figures. However, we are called to a higher motivation—to witness because we have love, sympathy, and compassion for people.

Just for Teachers: This week, explore with your class how showing sympathy is more than thinking kind thoughts and saying comforting words. Showing sympathy means responding in tangible ways that demonstrate love, care, and compassion.

Opening Discussion: Facebook, the world’s largest online social networking site, has more than one billion active users. If it were a country, it would be competing with China as the most populous nation on earth. Facebook users can post photos, contact friends, and make comments. One of the most widely used features is the ability to click a thumbs-up icon that says “Like”—a quick and easy way to acknowledge appreciation of something that a friend or acquaintance has posted, without having to write a word.

Although this is a hugely popular feature, it doesn’t fit well simply to click “Like” when someone posts that they have been diagnosed with cancer or that a family member has died. And so, in late 2014, Facebook executives and engineers considered adding a new feature—a “sympathy” button. Reportedly the idea was that people would have the option to choose a “sad” mood when posting, which would then mean a “sympathize” button would appear as an alternative to the “like” option.

In one sense, having this proposed feature would be an improvement. In another sense, it is another indicator that our increasingly online digital “reality” is distancing us from true human contact. In times past, if someone were in emotional, physical, or spiritual distress, friends and neighbors would visit that person to comfort and bring sympathy. If that were not possible, they could perhaps phone the person—or at least send them comforting thoughts in a letter. Then the greeting card industry streamlined things by producing sympathy cards. So, instead of having to take time to compose your own words of sympathy, you could simply buy a card, use their prepackaged thoughts, sign your name, and put it in the mail.

Facebook may soon make that process even slicker. You won’t have to

visit anyone, talk to him or her, write a note, or express any words at all. You would just have to click “Sympathize”—and go about your business without giving it another thought.

Thought Questions:

- ❶ How important is the “personal touch” in showing sympathy?
- ❷ What, if any, are the potential downsides when a Christian says to someone, “I’ll be praying for you”?

►STEP 2—Explore

Just for Teachers: In previous lessons, we have seen how Jesus, after delivering the magnificent Sermon on the Mount, came down and put what He had preached into practice. In this lesson, take the opportunity to explore with your class the ways in which Jesus showed sympathy to people as He mingled with them.

Bible Commentary

I. Jesus Showed Sympathy (*Review with your class Matthew 14:14.*)

The word *compassion* in this verse is translated from the Greek word *splangchnistheis*, which William Barclay describes as “the strongest word for pity in the Greek language.” He points out that it derives from the word *splangchna*, which means the bowels. According to Barclay, “it describes the compassion which moves a man to the deepest depths of his being. In the gospels, apart from its use in some of the parables, it is used only of Jesus.”

In Matthew 8 and 9, we see specific ways that Jesus shows compassion and sympathy to people.

1. A Roman centurion approaches Jesus and asks Him for help (*Matt. 8:5*). But when you look closely at the text, you see that he does it in an indirect way—he doesn’t ask for help outright. Instead, he presents the problem to Jesus: “ ‘Lord,’ he said, ‘my servant lies at home paralyzed, suffering terribly’ ” (*Matt. 8:6, NIV*). Let’s remember that the Roman centurion is a Gentile and a representative of Roman occupation. So, Matthew shows us how, yet again, Jesus’ love extends past His fellow Jews to embrace all of humanity. Jesus reads between the lines of the centurion’s statement and shows His sympathy: “ ‘Shall I come and heal him?’ ” (*Matt. 8:7, NIV*).

No doubt the centurion is well acquainted with Jewish purity laws, which forbade Jews not only from eating with Gentiles but from even entering their houses. And so, sensitive to this fact, the centurion tells Jesus that there is no need for Him to physically go to his house—all Jesus has to do is say the

word, and his servant will be healed. Even though the purity laws would have posed no barrier for Jesus—He always prioritized ministry to people over rigid adherence to Jewish laws—He rewards the centurion’s faith and immediately heals his servant.

2. A group of men bring a paralyzed man to Jesus on a mat (*Matt. 9:2*). No doubt this suffering man is apprehensive and nervous—how will Jesus respond? Jesus looks down at him and says, “ ‘Take heart, son: your sins are forgiven.’ ” Jesus—so gentle, so kind, so sympathetic.

3. A ruler kneels in front of Jesus, asking Him to please raise his daughter from the dead (*Matt. 9:18*). Jesus immediately gets up to go with him. On the way, a woman who has been suffering for 12 years from hemorrhaging reaches out from the crowd to touch the fringe of His garment (*Matt. 9:20, 21*). Luke, in his account, says that Jesus turns and says, “ ‘Who touched me?’ ” (*Luke 8:45*). No doubt the woman must have been deeply embarrassed at being suddenly exposed in front of the crowd. But Jesus sympathetically defuses the situation by speaking to her gently and kindly: “ ‘Take heart, daughter,’ he said, ‘your faith has healed you’ ” (*Matt. 9:22, NIV*).

4. At the end of the chapter, Matthew beautifully summarizes the sympathetic stance from which Jesus looks at and engages with people: “When He saw the multitudes, He was moved with compassion for them, because they were weary and scattered, like sheep having no shepherd” (*Matt. 9:36, NKJV*). Again Matthew uses the word *splanghnistheis*.

Consider This: When we talk about mission, we sometimes use such expressions as target populations, baptismal goals, and outreach strategies. Rather than looking on people with the sympathy that Jesus showed, we fall into the trap of seeing them simply as potential baptismal candidates. What can we do to prevent this from happening?

►STEP 3—Apply

Just for Teachers: Explore with your class the phrase, “Love the sinner; hate the sin.” When early Christian theologian Augustine of Hippo first used the expression, it went something along these lines: “With love for humanity, but hatred for sin.” That expression has a certain resonance and meaning that has been lost today. In saying that we “love the sinner, hate the sin,” how might we run the risk of sounding condescending? How does this expression imply that “the sinner” belongs to a group separate from us? The truth is that we are all sinners (even though we have accepted God’s forgiveness and asked Him to change our lives). What danger is there in defining someone by his or her sin—such as calling someone a drunkard, forgetting that she might also be a mother, a daughter, a friend? The distinction between “sin” and “sinner” isn’t simple in

our personal lives and relationships—it’s difficult to separate a person from what they do. And it seems that in some Christian circles, we hear the “love the sinner” cliché most often when talking about homosexuals or adulterers but not when we’re talking about materialists, gluttons, or the proud.

Thought Questions:

① How can we show sympathy to people who are living sinfully without implying that we accept their behavior?

② How do we “call sin by its right name” without projecting a sense of superiority?

③ In what ways has Jesus shown sympathy to us in our own struggles?

►STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: Discuss with your class various ways that we can show sympathy to people—visiting them, calling them on the phone, giving them a hug, sending a gift, helping in practical ways. Take the opportunity to talk about the importance of the personal touch.

Activity: During the week leading up to your Sabbath School class, purchase a box of blank greeting cards and, if you have the budget, postage stamps, as well.

Step 1. Invite class members to share experiences of when someone has shown sympathy to them and how much that meant.

Step 2: Give each of your class members blank cards and pens and invite them to think of someone—preferably not a church member—to whom they can write a short note of encouragement or sympathy. It might be a neighbor, a work acquaintance, or even a family member. It could also be somebody they haven’t met but who is going through a difficult time. Encourage them to show Christlike sympathy in their words.

Step 3: After they have finished, give each one of them a stamp (if applicable) and encourage them, when they get home, to address the envelope and send off the card. In a couple of weeks, you will be able to discuss any responses they may have received.

Step 4: Encourage each class member to think of someone whom they can visit and encourage during the week.