

# *Empathy and the Pure Love of Christ*

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In response to a lawyer's question, "Who is my neighbour?" Christ told the parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:29–37). I'm sure you remember the story of the man who was robbed, stripped of his clothing, beaten, and left half dead by the side of the road to Jericho. Both a priest and a Levite saw the man but ignored his need, passing by on the other side of the road. Finally a man from Samaria stopped to help. Now, what was the difference between the three men—the priest, the Levite, and the Samaritan? They were all men of good intention and subscribed to a similar moral code. What motivated the Samaritan differently?

The priest had a very important responsibility as a mediator between the people and God. He was, by definition, close to God, whereas the people, because of their sins and infirmities, were distant from God. Perhaps he wished in this case to distance himself from the man, thus not polluting his priestly role. The Levite was probably a temple worker and may have been late for his shift. He wouldn't have had time to stop. We don't know the occupation of the Samaritan. We do know, however, that Samaritans were regarded as inferior and were despised by the Jews. Christ emphasized that the response of the Samaritan was motivated by "compassion" (Luke 10:33). Perhaps

that compassion came from the Samaritan's own experience of being ignored and mistreated. He must have known something of what that half-dead man by the side of the road was feeling. We call such regard for another person's feelings empathy. I believe empathy was the motivating force behind the Samaritan's charitable actions.

Empathy has been a key factor in my own emotional and spiritual growth, as well as my professional success as a social worker. Within the context of empathy, my profession has made me a better Christian, and my spiritual values have made me a better professional. This morning I would like to share a little about my understanding of the importance of empathy and discuss four ways in which we can enhance our ability to feel and convey empathy.

As an introduction to my topic, allow me to share an important childhood memory. I was sitting on a bench with other children waiting for Primary to start. (I must have been about four or five years of age.) Admiring the brand-new shoes I was wearing for the first time that day, I was not bashful about sharing my pleasure

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with the other children. Helene Jones (I still remember her name) could take only so much bragging. She finally responded, “We don’t like new shoes. We like our old shoes.” What a shock that was for me. How could anyone not like new shoes? Then it occurred to me that my new shoes looked different through Helene’s eyes than they did through mine—a lesson in empathy. I was forced to borrow Helene’s lenses and ask myself how I would feel if she were bragging about her new shoes to me.

Harper Lee elaborated on this lesson in the book *To Kill a Mockingbird*. In this story an inexperienced teacher punishes Jean Louise, or Scout, unfairly on the first day of school. That evening, Scout’s father, Atticus, explains empathy to her:

*If you can learn a simple trick, Scout, you’ll get along a lot better with all kinds of folks. You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view . . . until you climb into his skin and walk around in it. [Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960; reprint, New York: Warner Books, 1982), 30]*

1. *Empathy is enhanced by borrowing different lenses through which to view circumstances or events—seeing things from different perspectives.* As a visual aid, I brought along a map of the world. Can you find the United States? There is something familiar about this map, but it doesn’t look quite right, does it? Australia is not supposed to be at the top. Let’s turn the map around. Does that look more familiar? When my Australian friends first introduced me to an upside-down map of the world, it was an interesting realization for me that the directions north and south and up and down on the map were simply arbitrary decisions made by someone many centuries ago. Maps or pictures look different depending upon your orientation—your perspective.

Now, let’s go back to the story of the good Samaritan. I’m wondering how that picture of the man by the side of the road looked different

to the Samaritan than to the priest and the Levite. The priest and the Levite were probably focused on something else—they hardly noticed the man. But the Samaritan viewed that scene through lenses colored or cleansed by his own painful learning experiences. He saw the pain and was compelled to act.

Because of our unique set of personal experiences, we have been conditioned to look at people from different perspectives. We could all be looking at the same person. Some of us would see the background. Others would see the clothing the person is wearing. And some would notice the facial expression and imagine what the person might be thinking or feeling. I am reminded of God’s admonition to Samuel in the Old Testament: “The Lord seeth not as man seeth; for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart” (1 Samuel 16:7).

Empathy is looking on the heart—a deep understanding of the feelings of others. Empathy should not be confused with sympathy, which is sharing the same feeling. In professional counseling we don’t want too much sympathy because it takes away our objectivity and our ability to be useful. An example of sympathy that is not useful is a husband who has morning sickness along with his pregnant wife. (I have been told it does happen on occasion.) This husband has a perfect understanding of what his wife is experiencing because he shares the feeling—he is sick, too, but he is in no condition to be useful in helping her while she is sick. Social workers must understand and respond to the breadth and depth of all kinds of feelings while remaining objective and able to help.

As a social work educator I try to be like Atticus Finch. I teach my students that they cannot help a client unless they have a good understanding of how that client feels. So we work in class at developing the skill of empathy. We practice identifying feelings by asking ourselves, “If I were in that situation, how would I feel?” Then we practice conveying

that understanding by verbalizing the acknowledgement “You must be feeling mad, sad, glad, angry, etc.”

There is nothing quite like the feeling of being completely understood by another person. In fact, feeling understood may be more important to a client than getting specific help in resolving a problem or accomplishing a task.

In supervising my students’ beginning experiences as professional counselors, I find a common theme. Inexperienced counselors generally focus prematurely on identifying and solving the client’s problem—such as failing grades, failing relationships, substance abuse, etc. These student counselors often come to supervision sessions frustrated—wondering why they can’t get the client to recognize the problem, accept responsibility, or be motivated to change. As the student and I watch the videotape of the counseling session together, I find myself asking the same question over and over again: “What do you think the client is feeling right now?” As these novice counselors become more sensitized to the feelings of their clients and acquire skills in conveying that understanding with empathetic responses, we usually see progress. We find that the clients—even those with the most profound problems—have remarkable ability and motivation to change and to solve their own problems once they really feel understood.

I need to insert a caveat here: There is much more to professional counseling than simply conveying empathy. However, without empathy, you don’t get very far.

Understanding with depth and sensitivity how another person might feel is not easy. You have to be able to relate to experiences in your own life to imagine another person’s feelings. For example, I am fascinated by the Lord’s directive to the Israelites in Exodus 23:9: “Thou shalt not oppress a stranger: for ye know the heart of a stranger, seeing ye were strangers in the land of Egypt.” The Lord used the principle of empathy in teaching the children of Israel, even when

they were not ready for the higher law introduced later by Christ.

2. *Empathy is enhanced by valuing our own life experiences and using them to help us understand the feelings of others.* We don’t have to have the same life events to feel the same feelings, but we do have to have experiences in our lives that teach us about the range of feelings. Our personal experiences that make us feel afraid, excited, frustrated, or angry become our teachers and give us tools to connect to other people.

As a professional counselor I learned that I could use my own personal experiences to not only feel empathy for my clients but also to provide perspective (different lenses through which to view the world) to help my clients see beyond failure, anger, or fear to the possibility of hope and resolution. Let me illustrate by sharing one useful experience.

Many years ago, when I was a little thinner and more physically fit, I completed a 30-day wilderness survival course. During the third week of that extraordinarily rigorous experience, we were left in groups of four or five students (without an instructor) and expected to find our way from one point on a topographical map to another point (a distance of about 50 miles). After two days of trudging through the snow in the tops of the Henry Mountains in southern Utah and getting lost on several occasions as we made our way down into the valley, my companions and I were extremely grateful on the third day to be able to identify our location with certainty. We arrived at a stream in the middle of a beautiful meadow. All we had to do was follow this river to our rendezvous point. It would be impossible for us to get lost again. So we gleefully walked along the riverbank, stopping occasionally to enjoy the scenery. The river was wide, slow, and shallow. When we chose to switch to the other side, it was easy to cross the stream by jumping from rock to rock. There came a time, however, when there was no bank. What started

out as a grassy meadow had become something of a canyon. As I kept jumping from rock to rock, I remember thinking, “If only I can keep my boots dry. I hate wet boots!”

The stream was still slow, wide, and shallow, and when there wasn’t a rock to jump to, it was a relief to find out that I could walk on flat sandstone with the water only a few inches deep. The water still would not get inside my boots. But after an hour or so of this kind of careful walking, the canyon became narrower, and there was no place to walk without getting my boots wet—inside and out. We were not interested in turning around and finding another route to the rendezvous point. We had spent too much time and energy getting this far, so we bravely continued with water just above our knees. I remember thinking, “If only I can keep my pack dry. It would really be a disaster if all my clothes and my blanket got wet.” Fortunately the water was quite clear, and I was able to see where to walk in order to stay in the shallower parts of the river. After an hour or two of this kind of progress, I noticed that the canyon was becoming even narrower, and the inevitable happened—there was no shallow spot. We still were determined to press forward rather than backtrack, even though the bottom half of my pack was now drenched. Then, after another hour or so of carefully making my way in chest-high water, I took a step and felt nothing beneath my feet. My thoughts had evolved from “if only I can keep my boots dry” to “if only I can keep my pack dry” to “if only I can stay alive!” I paddled desperately for about 50 feet or so. And, finally, there was a welcome sight—a break in the canyon wall and a sandy bank. We climbed out of the water and examined our packs. Everything was soaked! We made a fire, and as I sat there drying myself, my clothes, and everything in my pack, I felt only gratitude. I remember reflecting on what a waste of time it had been to worry about getting my boots wet.

Now, having had that experience and other similar experiences, I can respond to a client with

empathy. I can say, metaphorically, “I can see that you don’t like to get your boots wet” or “You’re worried about getting your pack wet” or “You must be afraid you are about to drown.” I know what it feels like to be afraid you are going to drown. But even though I have empathy for my client’s feelings, I won’t share my client’s anxiety because I also have a vision of that client sitting on the bank by a fire (metaphorically speaking) and feeling only gratitude.

I have learned over the years that empathy is important for everyone, not just professional counselors. Empathy is an essential ingredient for all positive interpersonal relationships. If we couldn’t at least imagine what it feels like to be in someone else’s shoes or skin, we wouldn’t be able to connect; we would live our lives in isolation. Empathy is the skill or characteristic that makes it possible for us to love our neighbor as we love ourselves (see Matthew 19:19). It is empathy we demonstrate when we “bear one another’s burdens,” “mourn with those that mourn . . . , and comfort those that stand in need of comfort”—as taught by Alma (Mosiah 18:8–9).

3. *Empathy is enhanced and demonstrated by reaching out to others, by focusing on their unique feelings and needs.* For example, let’s assume that your roommate shares with you the bad news that he or she received a failing grade in a chemistry exam. You may be tempted to convey empathy by sharing your own experience of failure. You could say, “I know exactly how you feel. I got a bad grade in physics once.” Although you mean well, your roommate may not interpret your sharing as empathy—at least not initially—because you are focusing on your experience rather than on the experience and feelings of your roommate.

Some of you may have difficulty feeling empathy for such a roommate because you have always been straight-A students. You don’t know what it feels like to receive a failing grade. I suspect, however, that you know what it feels like to experience personal failure. You

could say to your roommate, “Yeah, I feel for you. I remember when I got a B in English lit.” Needless to say, that comment will also not be interpreted as empathy. Empathy is more than just reaching out to others; it is reaching out by focusing on others’ unique feelings and needs. So you might convey empathy to this roommate by remembering the feelings you felt when you got that B or D, and, instead of focusing on your experience, saying something like “You must really feel discouraged.” With that simple acknowledgment you have opened the door to a meaningful conversation. At some point in that conversation you will probably share your personal experience of disappointment or failure, but the focus will be on your roommate’s need rather than on your need to share.

I cannot address the subject of reaching out to others without quoting my favorite social worker, King Benjamin, whose directives are consistent with the parable of the good Samaritan:

*Ye will administer of your substance unto him that standeth in need; and ye will not suffer that the beggar putteth up his petition to you in vain. . . .*

*Perhaps thou shalt say: The man has brought upon himself his misery; therefore I will stay my hand, and will not give unto him of my food, nor impart unto him of my substance that he may not suffer, for his punishments are just—*

*But I say unto you . . . , whosoever doeth this the same hath great cause to repent . . . and hath no interest in the kingdom of God.*

*For behold, are we not all beggars?* [Mosiah 4:16–19]

By imagining ourselves in the shoes or skin of the beggar, we can reach out appropriately—not just to appease our guilt but to do our part, whatever that part may be. Through empathy we will know exactly what that beggar needs. It might be cash or it might simply be a smile or a kind word. It might be a bowl of soup in the nearest restaurant. It might be information

about needed resources. And, in a few cases, it will involve ignoring the begging in order to not reinforce inappropriate behavior.

4. *Empathy is enhanced by praying for the understanding of others’ feelings.* Christ’s ministry gave new meaning to the word *empathy*. The empathy we typically try to practice is consistent with the commandment Christ gave at the beginning of His ministry: “Love thy neighbour as thyself” (Matthew 19:19). But at the end of His ministry, after He had provided an example, His new commandment was “Love one another; as I have loved you” (John 13:34). Christlike love is much more than understanding the feelings of another person. To love as Christ loves requires a perspective that surpasses our mortal ability; that is, we must share the vision and perspective of Christ. Thus empathy is enhanced by praying for the understanding of others’ feelings that comes only through Christ.

A number of years ago I struggled through a difficult marriage and a painful divorce. My husband had broken his temple covenants and betrayed me. But he would continue as the father of my children, and I didn’t want a miserable, adversarial relationship indefinitely. So I made it a matter of prayer. I said something like this: “Heavenly Father, I know you love all your children, so I know you love my husband. Help me to feel about him the same way you feel about him.” The result was something of a miracle. The Lord couldn’t answer my desperate plea to help my husband change—no amount of faith will take away another person’s agency. But the Lord could take away my bitterness and help me feel empathy for my husband—not empathy in the sense that I could relate to his feelings completely, but empathy for him as a son of God. I knew that Christ had all the feelings of a tender parent for my husband, regardless of his behavior. The resulting empathy has made my life much easier.

“Love thy neighbour as thyself” is a commandment, not a suggestion. And Jesus’

instruction to “love one another; as I have loved you” is also a commandment. As disciples of Christ we accept this higher mandate. My take-home message today is that we enhance our ability to obey both of these commandments by enhancing our ability to feel and convey empathy. I challenge each of us to increase our empathy by (1) borrowing different lenses for

viewing other people, (2) valuing our own life experiences and using them to help us understand the feelings of others, (3) courageously reaching out to others—focusing on their unique feelings and needs, and (4) praying for the understanding of others’ feelings that comes only through Christ. This is my prayer in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.