

The Cost and Worth of Sympathy

by J.R. Miller

True sympathy requires individual experience and a willingness to walk in the deep valleys of life.

Scripture: Psalm 34:18, Isaiah 53:3-4, Matthew 5:4, Romans 12:15, 2 Corinthians 1:3-4, Galatians 6:2, Colossians 3:12, Hebrews 4:15, James 1:2-4, 1 Peter 3:8

Topics: "Compassion", "Sympathy"

Description

J.R. Miller emphasizes that true sympathy goes beyond mere emotional responses; it requires personal experience of suffering and struggle to resonate deeply with others' pain. He illustrates that while many may echo feelings of joy or sorrow, genuine sympathy is rooted in individual experiences that enrich one's ability to empathize. Christ exemplifies this by living a human life, experiencing trials and temptations, which enables Him to truly understand and sympathize with our struggles. Miller argues that only through our own trials can we develop the compassion necessary to support others effectively. Ultimately, he calls for a deeper understanding of sympathy as a ministry that requires us to learn from our own life experiences.

Transcript

The true nature of sympathy is not always understood; it is more than tears, which often lie near the surface, and flow easily at the touch of any external experience. Some natures are wonderfully sensitive to the expressions of joy or sorrow in other lives.

You stand before a cliff, and in responsive echo every sound that is made beside you comes back to your ear. If a child cries, the cliff sobs back. The murmur of a soft song returns again, like a melody sung by some far-away singer. The notes of speech come back echoing through the air. The cliff is sensitive to every wave of sound, and responds to it.

Just so, there are human hearts that are similarly sensitive to every touch of human experience that plays upon them: they are so full of emotion, that they respond to every note of joy or sorrow that strikes their chords. They echo back the merry laughter, the voice of tenderness, the wail of sorrow--but they are nothing more than echoes; only from their surface do they reflect the tones of other lives. No depths are stirred. They know nothing of sympathy.

Sympathy is more than an echo; its background is individual experience. Strength is not enough for this ministry of sympathy, even the purest, noblest, most majestic strength; it must have passed through the

fires of suffering, or of struggle, to attain the fineness and delicacy required for this sacred work. Moral uprightness and purity are not enough; unchastened, even these divine qualities are too cold to render the service that sad and weary hearts need in their loneliness and weakness. Even the purest holiness must be swept through by the thrills of pain, before it can understand the experience of pain in others, and be made capable of feeling with them in their weakness and suffering.

One may have pity without knowing anything of the experience of the condition which appeals to him; but pity is not sympathy. Holy angels can pity the sons of men in their sore need--but in their lofty heights of unfallen purity they cannot sympathize with us mortals.

Even Christ was not fitted to sympathize with men--until he had entered into human flesh, and lived an actual human life. One would say that his divine omniscience certainly qualified him for sympathy. He knew already every phase of experience--in the sense that his eye saw into every nook and cranny of every human heart--and discerned and understood every play of emotion, every struggle, every pain; yet his omniscience did not prepare him for true sympathy--he must become a man. Nor was that enough; he might have taken humanity upon him, and then have passed at once with it into the glory of heaven. But he must live an actual human life; his nature must be enriched by experience; he must know life, not merely by his omniscience--but by having passed through it himself. This is the background of the precious doctrine of Christly sympathy. Christ was tempted in all points, and therefore he can be touched by the feeling of our infirmities. No matter what the phase of trial or struggle on which he looks down upon the earth, he can say, "I understand that. At Galilee, or at Bethany, or in the wilderness, or in Gethsemane, or on Calvary, I passed through that same phase of experience."

So even the tenderest human life--the one most responsive to external emotional influences -- cannot truly sympathize with our lives--until it has been enriched by experiences of its own. The young man brought up in a sequestered home, away from the mad excitements of the world, cannot understand, nor sympathize with, the struggles of the man who is wrestling with the sore temptations of a great city. The young woman who has never herself suffered, who has never had a wish ungratified nor a hope thwarted, nor has ever endured a pang or a grief, is not fitted to sit down beside a sister woman in sore agony over a shattered joy or a crushed hope, and really understand her feelings, or enter into actual sympathy with her.

Everyone knows how fruit ripens. There are a thousand influences that play upon it all the summer through--influences of climate, of sun and rain, of cold and heat, of darkness and light. Some fruits wait, too, for the frosts of autumn to come to complete the process of ripening. In some such way, human life ripens. There are countless influences--trial, joy, struggle, hardship, toil, ease, prosperity, adversity, success, failure--and at last the character is mellow and gentle.

Elderly people understand this. Disappointments, bereavements, anxieties, tender joys, the deep ploughing of the heart by afflictions, and all the diversified experiences of threescore or fourscore years--how they enrich the heart that is held all the while close to Christ under the warmth of his love! This is one of the blessed qualities of a ripe and beautiful Christian old age, that we sometimes overlook or underestimate. How much the aged know about life, if they have lived it well! What a power of helpfulness such an enriching puts into their hearts! No ministry in this world is finer, than that of those who have learned life's secrets in the school of experience, and then go about, inspiring, strengthening, and guiding younger souls who come after them.

A heart thus disciplined is prepared for sympathy, in the deepest, truest sense. It needs no labored words of explanation to enable it to understand the stress and strain of trial, the bitterness of sorrow, or the burden of infirmity. It has felt the same, and now is deeply moved by the experience on which it looks. Sympathy is a wonderful thing--it has a strange and mighty power of inspiration in it. How strong it makes us to go on with our work--to know that others care for us, and are interested in us! There is something in the simple touch of a friendly hand, or the look of a kindly eye, or the emotion that plays on an earnest face--which sends a quickening thrill through our souls.

When one is in deep sorrow, how is he strengthened to bear it by feeling the pressure of a warm clasp, which tells him, better than any words could do, of sincere sympathy! It cannot bring back his dead; it cannot restore the shattered idol. It cannot calm the storm that is raging about him. It cannot remove a straw of the burden, nor eliminate one line of the chapter of grief--but there is another human heart close by that feels for him; there is a loving presence creeping up in the darkness close beside him; there is companionship; he is not alone, and this blessed consciousness makes him strong.

A little token of love sent into your sickroom from some gentle hand, when human presences are shut out, telling of a heart outside that thinks about you--what a messenger of gladness it is! No angel's visit could be more welcome, or more comforting.

There is a story of a prisoner who had received nothing but severity in his prison-life, and knew nothing of human tenderness. One day a kindly man visited him, and spoke brotherly words, manifesting a sincere and hearty interest in him. It was a new and strange experience; and, after the man had gone away, he said, "I can stay here now, for I know there is one man, at least, in the great world outside, who cares for me, and has an interest in me." And that consciousness cheered and brightened for many days, the gloom of his lonely incarceration. Life is full of similar illustrations.

If we would, then, be fitted for this blessed ministry, we must be content to learn in the school of experience. Even Christ learned by the things he suffered. Angels are not fitted for sympathy, for they know nothing about human life.

In a picture by Domenichino, there is an angel standing by the empty cross, touching with his finger one of the sharp points in the thorn-crown which the Savior had worn. On his face there is the strangest bewilderment. He is trying to make out the mystery of sorrow. He knows nothing of suffering, for he has never suffered. There is nothing in the angel nature or in the angel life, to interpret struggle or pain.

The same is just as true of untried human life. If we would be sons of consolation, our natures must be enriched by experience. We are not naturally gentle to all men. There is a harshness in us that needs to be mellowed. Human uprightness undisciplined, is apt to be stern and severe, even uncharitable, toward weakness. We are apt to be heedless of the feelings of others, to forget how many hearts are sore, and carry heavy burdens. We have no sympathy with infirmity, because we do not know from experience, what it means. We are not gentle toward sorrow, because our own hearts never have been ploughed. We give constant pain to sensitive hearts by word and act, because we have not learned that gentle delicacy and thoughtful tenderness which can be learned only through the careless wounding of our own feelings by others.

These are lessons we can learn in no school but that of personal experience. The best universities cannot teach us the divine art of sympathy. We must walk in the deep valleys ourselves; and then we can be guides to other souls. We must feel the strain, and carry the burden, and endure the struggle, ourselves;

and then we can be touched, and can give help to others in life's sore stress and poignant need.

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