

Misplaced Empathy

Lately, I have noticed that due to misplaced empathy I often find myself feeling very sorry for the imagined misfortunes of others. In the Scriptures we are admonished to love others as ourselves and behave towards others as we would want them to behave towards us. Sometimes I don't carry this far enough and show little empathy towards those who desperately could use a helping hand from me. At other times, however, I feel empathy where none is justified. Here are some examples:

1. I distribute clothing and other articles of necessity to the homeless on a regular basis. The empathy I feel towards these people is sometimes justified and sometimes not justified. Some of them are in their situation as a result of bad ethical decisions they have made, which landed them in jail and eventually back out onto the street. Hopefully, they are furthering their spiritual advancement through a learning process that the Bible refers to as "sowing and reaping." While I empathize with their situation and want to help them get back on their feet, I at the same time don't feel as sorry for them as I would for a homeless person who is on the street largely because of mental disease over which he has no control. Still others are on the street by choice. They enjoy the independent lifestyle and don't mind camping out. They are not willing to take on the work and responsibilities associated with earning a living and paying for their own food, housing, medical care and the like. These individuals do not deserve my empathy as much as the person who is struggling to get back on his feet, but is just not able to do it on his own, for one reason or another.
2. I suffer from a mild case of OCD (Obsessive Compulsive Disorder). I like things to be neat and tidy. I am bothered by small imperfections in the way I look, my house, my yard, the way I organize my affairs, and so on. I tend to project my compulsions onto others and feel very sorry for people with messy homes and yards. This kind of empathy is misplaced, because they don't feel sorry for themselves at all. They are perfectly content in their circumstances and are not all bothered by a little clutter in their lives, nor should they be. On the other hand, suppose one of my friends was handicapped, either physically or financially, and was unable to clean or maintain his house and yard to a minimum acceptable level. My empathy would not be misplaced if I were to feel sorry for this person and offer my help.
3. The world is full of people who undeservedly suffer from violence, hardship, poverty, disease, and misery. While all of these people deserve our empathy we cannot help all of them. My empathy might be misplaced if I feel excessive guilt because I am not doing more to help alleviate world suffering. Is it wrong to buy an extra nice car or house for myself, while so many people have no car or house at all? At what point does self-interest and self-love turn into selfishness and greed? How does one achieve an acceptable balance between generosity and self-interest? I am reminded of Jesus' parable of the separation of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25, where people metaphorically were refused entrance into the Kingdom because they did not help the poor and disadvantaged

of society. At the same time, in another situation, Jesus did say that the poor will always be with us and it is proper to tend to our own needs as well.

4. I know this is controversial, but I do believe that the Law of Sowing and Reaping (some call it Karma) is the reason for much of the suffering we see in the world around us. Some are suffering because of their misdeeds in this life, or perhaps in a past life. This should not be regarded as retribution from an angry God, but instead as a form of balance and correction intended for a reformation and/or refinement of the soul. Some of us chose, before our birth, to experience difficult circumstances in this life in order to learn compassion and empathy. When confronted with a man who was blind from birth, Jesus was asked if this man was being punished for his father's sin or for his own sin prior to birth. As it turns out, neither was the case. Actually, the man was born blind in order that Jesus might perform a miracle of healing and that God would be glorified. It is important to realize that God loves all of us equally and is at some level in control of everything that happens, and it's all good, because God is good.

I believe the resolution to all this has to do with how we would define the "abundant life" that Jesus came to give us. I believe that spiritual abundance includes being grateful, not guilty, for the gifts God has given us. Jesus did say that God loves to give good gifts to His children. Spiritual abundance includes having the ability and resources to help people in need. You can't give what you don't have. Spiritual abundance includes our gratitude for God's spiritual and material gifts to us. Spiritual abundance includes the love and gratitude we receive from others when we offer them our love, compassion and help.

So, how do we draw the line between what we keep for ourselves and what we give to others? Strangely, that line does not exist, because the more we give, the more we receive. Not all of God's gifts are tangible and material in nature. The best gifts are the intangibles like faith, hope, love, joy, comfort, empathy, peace, patience, kindness, and goodness. Regardless of where we attempt to draw that imaginary line, guilt should never be a part of the equation. We should not be motivated by guilt to help others. Instead, we should be motivated by love of ourselves and others. We need to realize that the best thing we can do to help ourselves is to help others.

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