

I remember when I was about five years old and there was this girl who lived down the street from us who was overweight. **She came down to our house to play.** I became upset with her and began making fun of her size. My father overheard me and when I came in for supper, he was waiting for me.

He said, **“How would you like it if someone made fun of you for the way you looked?”**

I thought about that, and said I wouldn't like it.

**“I want you to go tell her you're sorry.”**

So I walked down the street to her house and apologized.

My father was teaching me *empathy*. Sometimes we use words and don't know what they mean. **Empathy means the identification with and understanding of another's situation, feelings, and motives.** Trying to look at a situation through someone else's eyes, asking ourselves, “How would I feel if that were happening to me?”

**Jesus is traveling through Gentile country and a woman approaches, pleading for help for her daughter, who has been possessed by a demon. This**

was back in the days when inexplicable illnesses were assumed to be caused by demon possession.

At first, Jesus ignores her. **So she turns to his disciples and pleads with them.** They grow irritated and ask Jesus to show her the door. What a position to find himself in! Jesus has a clear sense of his calling in life—he has been sent to help the people of Israel. Now this Canaanite woman is claiming his time and attention. **It reminds me of lady down the street from us who has a couple kids who are always scruffy and have a habit of showing up at our house around dinnertime, because their mother is always off somewhere else helping someone else.** She forgets her first responsibility.

Here is Jesus, whose first responsibility is to the children of Israel, and this Canaanite woman wants him to heal Canaan's children. Jesus says, "I can't help you. I have to help my own people."

**She kneels down in front of him. "Lord, help me."**

He is weakening, trying to reason with her. "You want me to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

Ouch! **Maybe he's a little angry too, for being put in this uncomfortable position; having to choose between his sense of responsibility and his natural kindness.**

“I’m not asking for all the food,” she says. “Just a crumb that’s fallen to the floor. I’m a mother begging for her daughter’s life. All I’m asking for is a crumb. It is such a little thing for you, but such a big thing for me.”

She’s asking him to have empathy. And he does. He marvels at her faith. **It’s an odd thing—the disciples who should have had faith in him seldom did, and the people who shouldn’t have, often did.** He is moved by her trust and pronounces her daughter healed.

This is a hard story. Jesus comparing the Canaanites to mongrels. **He says that, and probably feels bad about it.** Remembers when he was little and was unkind to someone and his father overheard him and made him apologize. **Or maybe he hesitates to help her because he knows something else—that as good as empathy is, it can also be crippling.**

When we lived in Irvington there was this man who came to our house every day asking for food. **Of course, we thought it was our Christian duty to help him, so we’d feed him.** Then he started asking for money. Well, we could kind of see his point. Looking at things from his perspective. He’d had all these hard knocks in life. **So we’d give him money, drive him places, do this and that for him.** Before long, taking care of him had become a second job. Then I came home one day and caught him trying to break into our house.

I said, “No more help.”

He said, “You’re a Christian. It’s your responsibility to help me.”

**Right about then, I began to see the downside of empathy, that our empathy for him, our natural sympathy for his situation was causing us to over-function and him to under-function.** Our over-responsibility was making him less responsible. Our being strong for him was keeping him crippled. **Happens all the time.** Well-meaning parents who do too much for their children. Caregivers who do too much for their patients. Governments who do too much for their citizens.

Jesus has this real problem. It is the problem for anyone who genuinely cares about others. **He has this marvelous ability and desire to help people.** He knows he can make a profound and powerful difference in their lives. But he also knows if he does too much, they will do too little. I **never appreciated the alternative meaning of the phrase “kill them with kindness,”** until I began to think seriously about the downside of empathy. It is possible to do *everything* for someone else, until they can’t do *anything* for themselves.

We’ve been talking about maturity, and I initially said mature people have empathy for others. **But after more reflection, I think mature people know when it is wise to show empathy and when it is wise to withhold it,**

when it is best to step in and do something for someone, and when it is best to step back and say, “Friend, you can and should do this for yourself.”

It isn’t easy. If we don’t have enough empathy, we can become hard and uncaring. If we have too much empathy, we can cripple someone’s ability to function. It’s a fine line. **I suppose the test might be this: When you’re investing more time, care, and passion in someone’s functioning than they are, you might be doing too much.**

The Bible doesn’t say, but I bet this was one of the greatest challenges Jesus faced. How much should I do for other people? How much should I let them do for themselves? Should I heal this person? Should I let them take responsibility for their own healing?

People who love alcoholics or addicts have to ask themselves, “Should I step in and help this person so they don’t ruin their lives?” or “Should I let them suffer the consequences of their addiction so they will become aware of the need to change?”

I was at an awards ceremony last month for graduating seniors. They were honoring the top graduates. **Comes time for the kids to give a speech, but instead of the kids giving the speech, they write it, and the teachers read it.** That was odd. I asked one of the teachers why they did it that way and

she said, “Oh, the kids have a hard time giving speeches, so we do it for them.” **These are the top graduates on their way to college.** That might be a bit too much empathy.

In the end, Christians aren’t called to meet every need uncritically. We are called to love. **Sometimes the most loving thing is to identify with and understand another person’s situation, feelings, and motives.** That is empathy. But sometimes the most loving thing is to not rush in and rescue someone from difficulty, and in so doing help them grow wise, grow strong, and grow up.