

## Living Out The Grace of God Together

### Lesson 3: Showing Understanding (Empathy)

#### I. Introduction

- a. Christians readily agree to the principles of the Bible. Without difficulty we accept the “oughts” of Scriptural obedience but we often run aground when it comes to the actual doing. *James 1:22-24 Don't fool yourself into thinking that you are a listener when you are anything but, letting the Word go in one ear and out the other. Act on what you hear! Those who hear and don't act are like those who glance in the mirror, walk away, and two minutes later have no idea who they are, what they look like. The Msg*
- b. Converting spiritual principles into **practical**, manageable behaviors has always been the challenge for Christians who are committed to living their faith.
- c. The Apostle Paul describes what it looks like when those principles are **applied**—or not—to life. In particular, Galatians 5 is full of the contrasts between behaviors that destroy individuals and relationships and those that give life. *Gal 5:13-14 Rather, use your freedom to serve one another in love; that's how freedom grows. For everything we know about God's Word is summed up in a single sentence: Love others as you love yourself. That's an act of true freedom. The Msg*
- d. Paul affirms that living a life in the image of Christ will build relationships rather than **destroy** them. *Gal 5:22 But what happens when we live God's way? He brings gifts into our lives, much the same way that fruit appears in an orchard — things like affection for others, exuberance about life, serenity. We develop a willingness to stick with things, a sense of compassion in the heart, and a conviction that a basic holiness permeates things and people. The Msg*
- e. Peter reaffirms this message, pointing to the communication aspects of how we express our **love**. *1 Peter 3:8 Summing up: Be agreeable, be sympathetic, be loving, be compassionate, be humble. The Msg*
- f. Christian principles should be lived, first and foremost, **at home**. In many homes, love is present, but in spite of wanting emotional closeness and trust, the behaviors habitually practiced produce hurt, feed conflict and result in distrust.
- g. In many Christian marriages this produces a crushing sense of failure because **the gap** is so great between what is professed and what is experienced in their personal lives.
- h. The communication skills we will study provide us a bridge that **enables** us to close the gap between the principles of Scripture and the practice of principles in our relationships with family, neighbors, co-workers and strangers.

#### II. Why Learn the Skill of Giving Empathy

- a. The concept of empathy was developed in Germany during the 1870's as part of the philosophical study of beauty. The word literally means to “**feel into**”. This refers to that quality of a painting or music which evokes an emotion.
- b. In terms of communication, empathy is the experience of being drawn **into** the experience of another in a special and deep manner. It is as if two hearts understand as one, seeing through the eyes of the beholder their life's experience.
- c. Recent brain research indicates that empathy comes from **mirror** neurons in the brain which pick up feelings in others and create them in our brain. To the extent we accurately understand someone we are knitted to them.
- d. Those who do not have or use these mirror neurons can develop them by practicing the Showing Understanding Skill. The more we are treated with empathy the more our capacity for giving empathy **grows**.
- e. The Bible tells us that we ought to be sure that we accurately **understand** our partner's thoughts feelings, concerns, desires. *Prov 10:13-14 You'll find wisdom on the lips of a person of insight, The wise accumulate knowledge — a true treasure; The Msg*
- f. Being understood at our deepest level and still being **loved** is the deepest desire of the human heart. This is in fact what Christ does for us and therefore ought to be what we do for one another. *Rom 5:8 But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. NKJV*
- g. Using the skill of empathy will **mitigate** misunderstandings and shorten the healing time of upsets paving the way for workable solutions to difficult problems by nurturing co-operation.. *Prov 15:1,4 A gentle response defuses anger; Kind words heal and help; The Msg*
- h. Using the skill of empathy will develop greater emotional **intimacy** and a sense of safety which foster deeper communication between the couple. *Phil 2:1-2 If you've gotten anything at all out of following Christ, if his love has made any difference in your life, if being in a community of the Spirit means anything to you, if you have a heart, if you care then do me a favor: Agree with each other, love each other, be deep-spirited friends.*
- i. In listening with the depth of caring in the way I wish to be heard we **earn** the right to be heard in turn, by my partner. *Luke 6:30-32 Live generously. "Here is a simple rule of thumb for behavior: Ask yourself what you want people to do for you; then grab the initiative and do it for them! The Msg*

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**What the Skill Looks Like**

- a. There are two parts to Showing Understanding (Empathy). You **MUST** have both parts for this to work.
  1. Part One is for you...what you must do in your own head. You must listen while you put yourself in the other person's place so you understand them. In a sense you become them and this is not easy for most.
  2. Part Two is for your partner. As you are listening, you **name** what you find when you are experiencing what your partner is experiencing. You say it in a way that your partner feels understood and accepted.
- b. **Listen** in a way that shows strong interest which requires that you:
  1. Put your own thoughts on **hold**.
  2. Pay close attention to what your partner is saying through words and **body language**.
  3. Show with your body that you **want** to hear what your partner says.
  4. Listen with an open mind and an open heart without forming a **judgment** on what is being said.
  5. Listen without forming your **response** to what is being said.
- c. **Become** your partner which requires that you:
  1. Put yourself in your **partner's place**.
  2. Be **curious** what it must feel like to be your partner as s/he expresses these thoughts and emotions. Ask yourself: What's going on here; What's important? How do you feel?
  3. **Identify** the thoughts, desires, concerns, feelings.
  4. Pay attention to **conflicting** thoughts, feelings, concerns, and desires.
  5. This is the internal part of empathy. For empathy to work, that internal part has to be there. Otherwise you are just **repeating words**.
- d. **Name** thoughts, feelings, concerns and desires. This requires that you:
  1. Describe what you have come to understand about what your partner thinks and feels. Begin your statement with: "As (NAME), I feel..." Or, As (NAME) "you feel". Remember, you are **being your partner in your response**.
  2. Use the "**I form**" of empathy, simply speaking as if the thoughts and feelings being expressed are your own. Avoid saying "I hear you saying that" because that implies you are outside, not inside your partner's experience.
  3. Focus on the feelings and what **has not** quite been said. There is no need to get the story exact; just capture the feelings and concerns.
  4. Show **respect** and compassion by your voice, body, and words. Communicate acceptance.
  5. This is not **agreement**. It is acknowledging that whatever your partner says is important to him. You accept this deep sharing as a gift to you.
  6. Use words your partner will readily **accept**. When genuine understanding is happening it is common for the person talking to tell you even deeper feelings, concerns, and desires.
  7. It is also common for feelings in that moment to grow stronger, yet softer, and the expression to be even more vulnerable. Then the feeling of being understood emerges in each of you as negative feelings are named yet **accepted**.
- e. The fifth aspect of this skill is to accept and make corrections **graciously**. This requires:
  1. First, that you understand that each person is the world's greatest authority on himself. Therefore, when offering observations of your partner's emotions or experience, they may **disagree** with your observation. That's OK.
  2. This accepting and gracious attitude will keep the observer from telling someone else **what they feel**.
  3. **When** the other person "feels understood" there is a natural quiet and a readiness to hear from the other person.

**III. Practice Application**

- a. Think of a childhood experience (either pleasant or unpleasant) but it needs to be something that has both meaning and emotion. As you tell your story don't say too much before giving your listener a chance to empathize.
- b. The other person will listen attentively with empathy, trying to understand from the inside what it must have been like to have that experience. Then switch roles where person #2 tells a childhood memory and person # 1 listens with empathy.