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MORE THAN A VOLLEYBALL

Romans 12:14-16

One of the things I don’t truly understand about God is his nature as a Trinity. He is one being, but with 3 persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. How is that possible? I don’t know. Even though I accept that there will be mysteries we cannot unravel about God, I want to be able to figure that one out. However, God did create us in his image. One effect of that is that relationship is an integral part of God’s nature. Built into the character of God is relationship between the members of the Trinity. While we are not triune beings, God has created us in such a way that relationship is also a part of our nature. To be human is to have and to need relationships with others. To be truly whole as humans we need to be connected to other people.

You might remember an old movie from about 20 years ago called *Castaway*. In it, Tom Hanks starred as a man who was stranded all alone on an island in the Pacific after a plane crash. The movie depicted his struggle to survive. He found ways to get food, water and a shelter for himself so he could live. But he was alone. He struck up a relationship with a volleyball that survived with him and called it Wilson. But Wilson was a lousy conversationalist. He was a good listener, but that was it. In the end, the central character took the gigantic risk of building a raft and sailing away from his island though he had no idea where to go, because he couldn’t bear being alone.

We need other people. But that can be challenging, because people can be difficult. Consultant and writer, Morgan Snyder, in his book, *Becoming A King*, relates a conversation he had some years back with a decorated member of the US Special Forces. This man is a master of the battlefield. He said, “I can handle any firefight and a 300 man ambush, no problem. My role and objectives are clear. It is my life at home I can’t handle, my marriage, my kids, my mortgage. I’m failing. I feel like I live in Afghanistan, and I’m deployed to my home in Texas.” Dealing with relationships can be challenging. Today we are going to look at a couple of crucial ideas for how to have strong relationships. We will see them in Romans 12:14-16.

WE NEED EMPATHY

Paul tells us to bless those who persecute us, I’m going to hold off on discussing that because it fits with the final verses of this chapter, which I’m going to address next week.

Next he tells us to rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep. That’s a shorthand way of describing empathy. He’s telling us that we need to care about people to the level that what happens to them affects us the way it affects them. Caring so much for others it eclipses our obsession with ourselves.

Rejoicing with those who rejoice can be relatively easy when things are going well for you. When you’re happy with what is happening in your life it is not difficult to be happy for others when something good happens to them. That becomes considerably more challenging if you are going through hard times. I thought about our son and daughter in law. They have had a difficult few months. A result of social distancing was that the past couple of years kids did not get a lot of the usual colds and flu viruses that are the norm. But this year as life returned to normal all that came back in a rush. For a couple of months their house was like a hospital. It seemed like there were at least 2 people sick at any given time as they passed various bugs around. Included were some really delightful bouts with stomach viruses. They got through all of that and were all healthy for a few weeks, and then they all got covid. Toby got it the worst. He told me that one night he was 10 minutes from taking himself to the emergency department. To add to the fun, one of their dogs, Banjo, had something go wrong in the digestive tract and had problems all over the house. The piece de resistance was while he was sick Toby started having severe back spasms. It seemed like things would have to improve for them to be like Job. When life is like that it is hard to be thrilled because of wonderful things happening to other people. Imagine if a friend of theirs who had several kids and had been through a similar siege of illness shared how happy they were that finally everyone in the family was healthy. What would be the normal human response? How nice for you. But inside there is definitely a “What about us?” response.

The other side of that coin is also difficult. It calls on us to enter into the pain of people when they’ve experienced a crushing blow. When life is overwhelming, we are to come alongside and weep with them. I can tell you from personal experience that can be an extremely difficult thing to do. It can be like getting too close to a blazing fire where you stand the chance of getting burned.

We learned last week that Paul called on us to have brotherly affection for one another, meaning to have relationships with each other that are like those in a family. It means recognizing there is a bond that ties us together in a powerful and unbreakable way. When something good or bad happens to someone you love, a member of your family, you feel some of what they feel. If it is good, you are happy, if it is painful, you hurt with them.

A few years ago Laurie had to have surgery to remove some fibroids. I hated that she was going through that. But I remember especially when she was in the recovery room after the surgery. She had a reaction to the anesthetic they had given her. She was recovering from surgery, which is tough enough on its own. But the anesthetic made her feel sick, and then she threw up. More than once. I have no words to tell you how miserable I felt. It was awful seeing the woman I love desperately going through that. I could hardly bear it. It almost felt like it was happening to me. That’s what Paul is talking about here. That is how we are to relate to one another. We enter into their experience and feel it with them.

Yale University psychology professor, Paul Bloom, says empathy is “the act of coming to experience the world as someone else does.” You’ll often hear people use the expression that you need to walk a mile in another person’s shoes. That’s all about feeling what they feel, knowing what they know, seeing what they see. Every one of us knows what it feels like when people are callous to our situation or comes up with some solution to a problem we face, that if they were in our shoes they would never suggest because they know it is not helpful at all. We also know how much of a difference it makes when someone actually understands and comes alongside us.

There was a news story that was kind of unusual that came out about a year ago. It was about something going on in St. Petersburg, Florida. The newspaper there initially published this story. The central person in the story is a man named Al Nixon. Every day between 6 and 8 in the morning he can be found on a bench in Vinoy Park near the bay. He has been sitting on that bench for a couple of hours every day for years. It started 7 years ago when he was dealing with a number of troubles in his work and life. He needed to clear his head, and he found this bench near a sea wall that was a good place to do it. He started going there 3 or 4 mornings a week, then it became every day. One day he had an encounter that changed his perspective. A complete stranger came up to him and said something that he has never forgotten. This person said, “I know when I see you sitting there that everything is going to be all right.” At that moment Al realized that maybe there was more of a purpose for him than just dealing with his own woes, maybe he could somehow have a positive influence on other people. After a while people started confiding in him. They told him about their children, their lives, their finances, and their marriages. During the pandemic he heard about loved ones that people had lost. He said, “Mostly people just want to be heard. I’ve heard a thousand stories. I don’t consider myself all that smart or debonair, but I’m a good listener.” People pour out their hearts to a stranger sitting on a bench in a park because they long for someone to listen to them with a sympathetic ear. Everyone wants that.

A big part of empathy is listening. Remember that when Job’s life turned into a nightmare, 3 of his best friends came to see him. For a week they just sat with him and listened. Then they began sharing their opinions and their wisdom. And that quickly turned into a dumpster fire. That is an example we should learn from.

True empathy is not always easy. I read about a study that looked at 247 sets of parents of adolescent children. The goal was to gauge how well they understood and dealt with the feelings of their children. As part of the study they gauged how empathetic the parents were, then looked at and compared the effects on their children. It is not surprising that the children of empathetic parents where better adjusted and healthier. One surprising result was they looked at blood samples taken from the children and found that children of the most empathetic parents had lower levels of inflammatory markers than the other children. In other words, even their physical health was better. The really surprising result was discovered when they examined blood samples of empathetic parents. They showed they had a level of systemic inflammation. In other words, being good, empathetic parents was making them sick! When you enter into the trials, challenges, feelings of other people, it will cost you.

Douglas LaBier, the director for the Center for Adult Development in Washington D. C. says that that there is an epidemic in our society of Emapathy Deficit Disorder. He claims many people in our country are “catastrophically unempathetic.” This should be of great concern to us. Hannah Arendt, the Holocaust survivor and political philosopher, said the death of human empathy is one of the earliest and most telling signs of a culture about to fall into barbarism. She was not just theorizing when she said that. She had been a witness of it and a victim of the barbarism that ensued. Roger Ebert, the film critic said, “I believe empathy is the most essential quality of civilization.”

In 1 Peter 3:8 we are taught that we should be “like minded, sympathetic, love one another, be compassionate and humble.” That was characteristic of Jesus. Matthew 9:36 says of Jesus, “When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless.” Compassion and empathy are closely linked. Compassion means to suffer with, to feel with another. Jesus didn’t look at helpless people and think, “Can’t you people get it together? You’re your own worst enemy. Quit feeling sorry for yourselves and get better.” He felt for them. Hebrews 4:15 says of Jesus, “We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are, yet was without sin.”

Jesus stepped into our world and experienced all of the travail and pain and hardship of this world to a degree that is infinitely beyond anything we undergo. He went through it all and never wavered, but stood firm, always doing the Father’s will. He was perfect. He could very easily have been impatient and highly critical of what Hebrews calls our weaknesses. That means our flaws, our fickle nature, our inability to even measure up to our own standards for ourselves, our unfaithfulness to God. He could have condemned us for all of it. But he sympathized with us. He had compassion for us. He knew what it is like to be human, he had empathy. We are called in these verses to be like him, to have empathy for others. This is a crucial component of building strong relationships. We all know that because we all feel the longing for empathy from others.

What are indications of lack of empathy? One of the most common is criticism, condemnation or contempt. We are quick to see what is wrong with other people and maybe even have disdain for them. That’s a clear sign of lack of empathy. Another one is impatience. That implies a demand that the other person operate according to my timetable. A third one is indifference. When we just don’t care, we are cold to another person, that’s another obvious sign of indifference.

Empathy can be hard. Through many years of ministry I’ve dealt with many people trying to get money by essentially panhandling. They always have a story of woe to tell. The stories usually have holes in them big enough to fly jumbo jets through. You know they’re trying to play you. One classic incident we were on vacation in Honolulu. Late one day I went for a run. At one point I took a break by the beach to enjoy the view. As I stood there a guy approached me asking for money. Even on vacation they find me. Before he could even finish his story I stopped him. I said, “I’m in the middle of a run and I don’t have any money, so I can’t help you.” He suggested I could go to an ATM near by and get cash, but I told him I didn’t have a bank card with me either. Then he suggested I could take him to my hotel room and get some money there. I said I absolutely would not do that. Then he got angry with me because I wouldn’t do what he wanted. I had a hard time having empathy for him. Yet Jesus looking on humans could have felt more annoyance with them than I felt for that guy, but he had compassion. God wants us to do the same for others. That will require the next quality Paul mentions.

WE NEED HUMILITY

Paul says in verse 16, “Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.” The core of the message there is that we should be humble in our relationships. In his classic description of love in 1 Corinthians 13 Paul wrote in verse 4, “Love is patient, love is kind, it does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud.” Love does not boast and it is not proud. Why is humility an essential element of love? Why is it important in relationships?

All of us have had to deal with people that are hard to have a good relationship with. There’s the blamer, who is quick to blame others whenever anything goes wrong. There’s the complainer, who always thinks things are not good and has to talk about it. A classic is the know it all, who always has to be right, always knows more than everyone else and is never wrong. There’s the ticking bomb, who might explode at any moment. There’s the control freak, who has to be in control of every one and everything. There’s the narcissist, who makes everything about himself or herself.

I’m sure you can identify some other difficult types. But each of these types of people are difficult to be in a relationship with. They also all have something else in common. There is a lack of humility. The complainer thinks everything should conform to his or her expectations and nothing ever does. The blamer is much like the know it all, they are both sure that nothing is ever their fault and they know better than other people. The time bomb cares only for what he or she feels and gives vent to those feelings without regard for others. The narcissist, obviously, is all about himself or herself. The point is, if we are going to love others we cannot be this kind of difficult person, and not being like that begins with humbling ourselves.

Some of the most important words for love relationships are, “I was wrong. You were right. I am sorry.” A person who is allergic to using those words is extremely difficult to love. They build frustration and resentment into the relationship. We avoid being that person by humbling ourselves.

C. S. Lewis said pride is the very heart of evil, it is the root of all other sin. It is obvious that humility is a pre-requisite for empathy. Without humility we are not going to have empathy for the weaknesses and hurts of others. We will only be impatient and critical with them. There are two crucial elements that make for humility.

The first is an awe of the glory of God. I have mentioned before that Laurie and I have a friend that played 14 years in the Major Leagues. His name is Storm Davis. He was a very successful pitcher. He played 3 years for the Oakland A’s in their heyday. Once when Laurie and I were visiting Storm and his family up in Oakland he invited me to come down on the field before a game. He introduced me to a number of his teammates. I got to spend some time chatting with them as they were taking batting practice and going through their pre-game workouts. One thing that struck me was that they were all big. Most of them were over 6 feet tall and all of them were very muscular. But the bigger impression they made on me was how tremendously athletic and good they were. They were quick on their feet, amazingly coordinated and even graceful in their movements, they were fast, they had powerful throwing arms and when they hit the ball it was almost scary how hard they hit it. I was hanging around with guys like Mark McGwire, the big home run hitter, and Jose Canseco, Dennis Eckersley, Dave Stewart, Ricky Henderson, even Billy Beane of *Money Ball* fame. Several of these guys are in the Baseball Hall of Fame. In Numbers 13 when Israel spent spies into the land of Canaan. They were intimidated by the fierce looking people they encountered there. In verse 33 in their report they said, “We were like grasshoppers in our own eyes.” That’s how I felt around those guys. I was not even a tiny bit tempted to regale them with tales of my exploits playing baseball for the East Bakersfield Blades in my high school days. My puny and mostly futile efforts were pitiful in comparison to these guys. I was very much aware that in their company, athletically I had never been in the same galaxy as these guys.

This is a bit like what happens when we see the glory of God, only multiplied infinitely. God is majestic, awesome, holy. We saw earlier in Romans 11:36 that all things are from God, through him, and for him. He is the source and the center of all things. It all exists for him. All that exists has a focal point. That focal point for us human beings is going to be one of two things. It is either going to be God, or it is going to be self. If we don’t see all of life, including our lives being about God, we will see it all as being about ourselves.

Real humility is not modesty. It is not a low self image. It is not being zeroed in on ourselves all the time because what we are focused on is God. His radiant glory eclipses our obsession with self. When that happens true humility results. It’s not that we think poorly of ourselves, it’s that we just don’t think about ourselves much.

The second component of humility is an awareness of our true nature. Often people say something like, “I live by the Sermon on the Mount.” I think that’s a great idea. Let’s listen to Jesus’ opening volley in that sermon in Matthew 5:3. “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God.” We gain the kingdom of God by being poor in spirit.

What does that mean? That means our starting point in life is that we are poor in spirit. The pre-requisite for coming into the kingdom of God is admitting when it comes to matters of the spirit, we are impoverished and in desperate need. When we see God as he is, we will realize that we are like people in dirty T-shirts and jeans who have been working on an old car, showing up for a formal, black tie event. We come to God saying, “I deserve nothing but condemnation before you. I know this. My only hope is that you will have mercy on me, forgive me and love me because you are a God of mercy and grace.” A crucial verse in the Bible is Ephesians 2:8, which says, “It is by grace you have been saved.”

When do you need grace? You take a difficult test in a hard class in school. You get every question right. You score 100%, the highest score in the class. Do you need grace? No, you don’t need grace when you’ve succeeded. You need grace when you have fallen short. For the past 6 years we have had at least one grandchild who sits in a high chair to eat meals and transports food to their mouth with their fingers. Invariably after the meal there is food everywhere. On their clothes, in their high chair seat, all around on the floor. You expect that, because they are still learning and developing the skill of eating. They are not the only ones in the family that seem to have that problem. No matter how hard I try to be neat, you can usually tell where I was sitting at the dinner table because there will be crumbs all around on the floor. That’s normal for a toddler. It is a fail for a grown man. After nearly every meal Laurie will spend some time cleaning up the floor after me. She never berates or belittles me for it. She gives me grace. I’ve failed, but she loves and accepts me anyway. You need grace when you have failed, when you have not measured up.

James 4:6 says, “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.” The starting point of our relationship with God is grace, meaning we start with admitting that we have nothing to be proud of. We don’t insist on being right, because we’re not. We won’t get grace until we admit that we need it. The point here is that anyone who is saved by grace will be the most humble person in the world. They won’t need to prove anything about themselves, won’t need to show they are right, they are as good as or better than anyone else. They’ve already admitted that’s not true. They are secure in themselves not because they’ve got everything under control, but only because they’ve been given grace that they absolutely don’t deserve. That is the foundation of real humility.

That humility gives us true peace and security and allows us to turn our attention to loving others, to having empathy for other people who are also in need of grace. A truly humble person is almost impossible to offend. Whatever negative or critical thing someone might say about them, they have already admitted far worse. They are not threatened by admitting wrong or failure or by the words of others, because they are secure in God’s grace and love, and because they care only about God’s glory and kingdom, not about their puny image.

APPLICATION

Hopefully we have come to rest in God’s grace and have humbled ourselves. So now we want to think about having empathy. How can we increase in empathy? Empathy is one of those things that sort of seem like they’re in the feeling category. So how does it make sense to command us to be empathetic? As it turns out, there are ways we can increase our capacity for empathy, which will strengthen our relationships with others.

I recently read a quote from an expert who said that the answer for us is artificial intelligence. AI is going to help us become better people, more compassionate, especially through the use of Virtual Reality. Here’s my problem. We now have some artificial intelligence in our house. We have been invaded by Alexa. Recently Laurie needed to time something she was baking so she told Alexa to set a timer for 10 minutes. A little later Laurie and I were talking in the kitchen when she mentioned that she wanted to make sure to take the item out of the oven and not overcook it. I said, “Don’t worry, Alexa will let us know when the time is up.” To that Alexa responded, “No snow is expected tonight in your area.” Really? What a shock. No snow is expected in July in San Diego? Somehow Alexa heard “let us know” as a question about whether it was going to snow. That sounds more like artificial dumb than artificial intelligence to me. If we’re depending on artificial intelligence to have more empathy, I think we’re going to be in trouble.

ASK GOD FOR IT

This is a crucial place to start. God commands us to have empathy for others. It is his will. If we ask him for something that is his will, we can be confident that he will answer that prayer. This comes down to actually caring about it. If it’s a priority that matters to us, we will pray about it.

LIVE IN THE REALITY OF GRACE

The same thing we saw about grace producing humility also applies to empathy. When we see how needy we are before God and know how far short of his glory we fall, we will be freed up to feel for others who also fall short. When I see someone spill something or drop food on a table or the floor while eating, I don’t say, “Wow, got an eating disorder, Nimrod?” I don’t think, “Really glad I’m not like that dork.” I feel for them. I empathize with them, because I do that on an all too regular basis. It will also free us of the obsession with ourselves so that we can enter into the joy of others when God does something great in their lives.

CHOOSE EMPATHY

Yale psychology professor Paul Bloom has written a book titled *Against Empathy.* He doesn’t actually think empathy is bad. He is against the current popular understanding of empathy that sees it as primarily an emotional identification that condones everything a person is and does. He demonstrates how this can actually have some very negative effects.

I saw an example of this issue yesterday. Laurie and I took care of our 3 granddaughters Friday night to give their parents a much needed break. Saturday morning after breakfast we all went for a walk to a playground. When we got back I had this illustrative incident. Bria, our youngest granddaughter, is 17 months old. She has an interesting personality. Much of the time she is the happiest, smiliest child you have ever seen. It gets interesting because she has developed a desire to be held by her mom. All the time. The only acceptable substitute is Nana. If she doesn’t get that she goes from the happiest child you’ve ever seen to a full on nuclear meltdown in the blink of an eye. There is no in between. She doesn’t work up to it. She doesn’t cloud up and start whimpering, then crying. It’s like an off on switch. She’s happy and smiling one moment, then the switch flips and it’s ear splitting screaming instantaneously. We got back from the walk yesterday and Laurie took the older girls from the garage into the house. But Bria had determined that she wanted Nana to hold her and carry her into the house. She immediately went down face first on the garage floor and began screaming loud enough to be heard in Arizona. I empathized with her. Being 17 months in a house full of older siblings and parents is hard. You have no power or control, and life is already tough enough because you can’t talk, so communication is almost impossible. You don’t understand why things happen the way they do. You have so many difficult things to learn. Life is hard. I empathized with her. And she wasn’t getting what she wanted, which is always hard for anyone, especially a toddler who believes she is the center of the universe, as all toddlers do. So I had empathy for her. I felt for her. But suppose my empathy moved me to give her what she wanted, which was to pick her up and hand her to Nana. What would that have done? It would have affirmed that she does need to be held by Nana all the time, she should get whatever she wants when she wants it, and the way to get it is to scream like a banshee. Those are all the absolutely wrong message. I calmly said to her, “Bria, you can stand up and you can walk. So you can get up and walk into the house with the rest of us, or you can lay out here on that hard floor screaming, all by yourself.” Then I headed for the door. She stopped screaming, got up and walked to the door.

Bloom makes the point that very often what is most needed is what he calls cognitive empathy. That is choosing to care about a person regardless of emotions, and seeking that person’s good. He cites an example from Leslie Jamison, a novelist and writer. She wrote a collection of essays called *The Empathy Exams*. In it she described going to a talk by a man named Jason Baldwin. He was wrongly convicted of a crime and unjustly spent years in prison. He is known for how he has forgiven publicly the people who wronged him and has refused to hold it against them, though he had every right to be bitter. After his talk, Ms. Jamison stood up and told him how much she admired him for forgiving the people who had assumed his guilt and wrongly imprisoned him for so many years. She asked him where that remarkable ability to forgive came from. She had been thinking a lot about the psychology of empathy and was expecting him to respond by discussing how he worked through the psychological issues and his feelings about the people who had so terribly harmed him. But he responded quite simply. He said, “It’s from my faith in Christ.”

We can make the decision to have empathy for others because of Christ and his command that we do so. That has nothing to do with feelings. It is a choice of the will that we can make. Cambridge University psychology professor Simon Baron Cohen says, “Empathy is a skill like any other. You can practice it and get better at it.” We can choose it and get better at it.

EXPERIENCE PAIN

No one wants to hear this, but one of the greatest sources of empathy for others is our own pain. Damien Spikereit is a fellow believer who went through a tragic experience. Two days before his high school graduation his father died suddenly and unexpectedly. He loved his dad, and was shattered and devastated. He was a brand new believer in Jesus. He couldn’t understand this huge loss, and he longed for God to speak to him and help him. He heard nothing. The memorial service for his dad came, and he expected something to happen there that would help him. But nothing he heard in the service seemed to help. People afterward expressed their condolences and words of comfort, but none of it helped. Then a girl he knew from his youth group, Kim O’Quinn, came with tears in her eyes and hugged him. She didn’t say a thing, but in that moment he said God spoke to him. He felt comforted, helped, strengthened. It was because only a few months earlier he had attended a funeral for Kim’s father. She knew his pain because she had experienced it. We are all going to experience pain. No one wants it. No one likes it. No one chooses it. But it has tremendous power to enable us to bring solace to others., to empathize with them. Use your pain to help others who hurt.