

How Not to Show Sympathy

by J.R. Miller

The sermon emphasizes the importance of avoiding self-centered conversations about ailments and instead fostering uplifting interactions.

Scripture: Proverbs 17:22, Matthew 5:16, Romans 12:15, 2 Corinthians 1:4, Galatians 6:2, Philippians 4:8, Colossians 3:2, 1 Thessalonians 5:11, James 1:2-4, 1 Peter 5:7

Topics: "Encouragement", "Sympathy"

Description

J.R. Miller discusses the concept of sympathy and how asking someone about their feelings can sometimes lead to self-pity rather than healing. He illustrates this with examples of individuals who crave sympathy and recount their troubles, suggesting that true kindness may involve encouraging others to focus on hope and positivity instead. Miller emphasizes that the act of asking 'How are you feeling today?' can be burdensome and counterproductive, advocating for a more uplifting greeting like 'Good morning' instead. He argues that this approach not only saves time but also fosters a more positive interaction, aligning with the teachings of Jesus about focusing on the mission rather than personal woes.

Transcript

One of the suggestions to the guests at a noted sanitarium is, "Do not ask a neighbor the question: How are you feeling today?" There is a great deal of wisdom in this hint. Indeed it contains a whole philosophy. There are a great many people who always introduce their conversation in this way when they meet a friend or neighbor, especially if the person has been ill, or is in the habit of complaining. There are many people, too, who like nothing better than to have this question asked them, for it gives them new opportunities to tell over the tale of their miseries -- and almost nothing gives them so much pleasure as this. Indeed, they feel disappointed when they meet a friend or neighbor, if some such inquiry is not made. Some are even offended if no chance is given them to recount their ills.

A good woman chided her husband for lack of sympathy with her, because he never asked her how she felt, and never showed any interest in her recounting of the aches, pains, and discomforts which fretted her. The truth is, the husband is one of the most sympathetic of men. He has a tender heart for suffering in any form, even in a dumb animal. It grieves him sorely to have any of his family really sick or suffering. But the good man has learned through the years, that his beloved wife's ailments are not serious, that they are, indeed, usually only tricks of her imagination. He has learned moreover that she has a most unwholesome craving for what she calls "sympathy." That is, she likes to have people listen to the story of

her many afflictions -- and then express their pity. Anyone who will not do so, is hard-hearted in her estimation. Her husband loves his wife and in any actual sickness or suffering, has the deepest sympathy with her. But he is sensible enough to know that to humor her, would not be kindness to her -- but would only pamper and encourage in her a miserable weakness which would make her increasingly miserable.

A few months ago, a young woman who was in a good deal of trouble, financially and otherwise, wrote to a friend, telling him quite in detail the story of her trials. Her family had suffered losses and her parents were in much distress at home in the South. She herself was teaching in an institution in the North and was receiving only a very small salary. The winter was coming on, and she had no provision in the way of clothing adequate for its rigors.

The friend to whom she wrote replied as kindly as he knew how, sending also a sum of money sufficient to meet her immediate needs. He did not, however, refer at length to the troubles -- the recital of which had filled her letter. He sought rather to put hope and courage into the young woman's heart, to help her to carry her burden more victoriously. Soon an answer came. She thanked the friend for the money, and then added: "But I must say that your letter hurt me very much. I told you of all my troubles and of the sufferings of my poor parents, and you did not write a single word of sympathy. You did not even say 'I am sorry;' you only said, 'Cheer up, my friend, be brave and strong and keep sweet.'"

The young woman really felt that she had been wronged and treated unkindly by her friend, because he had not gone over her troubles, showing pity for her. There are many other people just like this girl. Their idea of a friend, is somebody to listen patiently and interestingly to the story of their woes and then to condole with them on the sadness of their lot. Anyone who fails to do this, is lacking in human feeling, unable to sympathize -- so they think.

The request made of the guests at the sanitarium is an admirable one. It is well suited for a place where there are hundreds of people who are sufferers in some way. The worst thing these can do is to talk about their ailments, to discuss their symptoms, to be led in any way to think of, and pity themselves.

Half the cure is in getting them out of themselves -- to forget themselves, especially if there is anything wrong with them -- and to think of other things and other people, and talk of matters altogether apart from their own condition.

But what is a good rule for patients in a sanitarium, is a good rule for people outside of sanitariums. It were well, indeed, if the question were universally prohibited. No one has a right to ask another how he feels. It is an impertinent question. It is nobody's affair how you feel, and you have a right, in a Christian way, to resent the liberty anyone takes when he greets you in this way.

One of the instructions which Jesus gave to the disciples when he sent them forth, was that they were to greet no one along the way. The reason generally given for this instruction, is that it took a long while to go through salutations in the Orient, and time was so precious to these men bearing the King's messages, that they could not pause to go through the long program of bowings and motions.

Our modern etiquette does not make it so burdensome to speak to people when we meet them. Yet there are those you cannot get away from quickly if you inadvertently ask, "How are you feeling today?" They will keep you a long while listening to the answer to your question. You will save precious time, by always avoiding such an inquiry. "Good morning," is a much better salutation. It is more gracious. It means more. It touches a more wholesome chord in your friend's consciousness. It is a truer way to be a blessing to

men.

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