



**August 11, 2025**

## **EMPATHY MATTERS**

Only eighteen months apart, my brother and I were constant companions in early childhood. I remember that on our first family trip to Florida, both of us had helium balloons and held them by the strings as we climbed the lower branches of a tree in our grandparents' front yard. I was the older but more awkward one, and I quickly lost my balloon when I tried to adjust my position in the tree. My four-year-old brother said, "That's OK, Reenie. I'll let go of my balloon, too." In the next moment, neither one of us had a balloon.

This incident hardly loomed large in our family history. Nobody fell from the tree, and nobody was reprimanded for climbing the tree. Even so, I was impressed as a child, and I still remember my brother's response for a reason: It was a sign, I believe, of his developing empathy. My brother would rather have shared my disappointment than have any advantage over me. This attitude would have been encouraged by our parents, who let us know that we were equal in their eyes and we must treat each other kindly. "Your brother is your closest living relative," my father said.

When we identify with the feelings of other human beings, whether or not they are close relatives, we feel empathy. The root of the word comes from the Greek word for *feeling*. According to *The Stanford History of Philosophy*, the word *empathy* was an attempt at translating from the German *Einfühlung* ("feeling into") and was coined in English by the psychologist Edward Titchener in 1909. Before that, the word *sympathy* was used, but now we might suggest that we feel sympathy *for* someone,

while we feel empathy *with* someone.

Capacity for empathy is an important part of our social and psychological development, and psychological disorders such as Narcissistic Personality Disorder and Antisocial Personality Disorder are characterized in part by a lack of empathy. A deficit of empathy could be either cognitive or affective—so someone with Narcissistic Personality Disorder, for example, could intellectually recognize another person's feelings without emotionally identifying with the other person.

Empathy is also related to our spiritual development. Christians have typically had a positive view of empathy and have prayed to develop more empathy for other human beings. Few of us have taken offense when we are called empathetic. The word *empathy* is not used in most English translations of the Bible, but it is relevant in many important passages. Jesus said, "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another" (*New Revised Standard Version*, John 13:34). The apostle Paul said, "Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep" (Rom. 12:15). Paul also wrote to the Corinthians, comparing the church community to parts of the body: "If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it" (1 Cor. 12:26).

I was surprised to learn that in the past few years, some Christians have grown skeptical about the value of empathy. According to an article by Julia Wong in *The Guardian*, some of the negative responses were evident in reaction to Rev. Mariann Budde's January 21 message to President Trump: "In the name of our God, I ask you to have mercy upon the people in our country who are scared now." Christian podcaster Ben Garrett responded, "Do not commit the sin of empathy. . . This snake is God's enemy and yours too." Allie Beth Stuckey, another Christian podcaster, tweeted, "This is to be expected from a female Episcopalian priest: toxic empathy that is in complete opposition to God's Word and in support of the most satanic destructive ideas ever conjured up."

These ideas might not represent Christianity as we understand it, but they have gained popularity in recent years. Paul Bloom wrote *Against Empathy* and suggested that excessive empathy might lead someone to exaggerate the worthiness of another person. Last year, Allie Beth Stuckey published *Toxic Empathy: How Progressives Exploit Christian Compassion*. This year, Joe Rigny wrote *The Sin of Empathy: Compassion and Its Counterfeits*. Apparently, Stuckey and Rigny warn that progressive Christians might try to manipulate others by appealing to their empathy. Some of these authors wonder whether empathetic Christians are often paralyzed when they need to make difficult decisions. On the other hand, couldn't someone argue that the evangelical Christians who condemn empathy as too "woke" could be simply seizing upon a justification for opposing equal rights and social



programs for people who need help?

So the issue of empathy is another topic that has become politicized. But don't we believe in a loving God who empathizes with us and "so loved the world that he gave his only Son" (NRSV, John 3:16)? And wasn't Jesus divine but also human and capable of feeling empathy for humans? What did Jesus mean when he told Peter "Feed my lambs" (NRSV, John 21:15)? Hasn't our God shown us the way to empathy?

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