

DANGEROUS EMPATHY

By Alfred H. Ells

Are you empathetic to other people's concerns and pain? Should you be?

I recently was reflecting on this issue and my own behavior. As you can imagine, empathy is valued by Counselors and the people they help. It is necessary for me to empathize with my clients. I must understand the client's thoughts and connect with their feelings in order to best serve them. Empathy has also become a new buzz word in leadership circles. The assumption is if you can truly understand others you can better lead them. Leadership guru and Sociologist Brene Brown, references the following four attributes of empathy:

- To be able to see the world as others see it – putting your own “stuff” aside to see the situation from their eyes.
- To be non-judgmental – judgment of the other person discounts their experience.
- To understand another person's feelings – we have to be in touch with our own feelings in order to understand someone else's.
- To communicate your understanding of that person's feelings – instead of saying “it could be worse” or “at least you...” It's better to say “I've been there and it really hurts” or “It sounds like you're in a hard place. Tell me more about it.”

Our culture also values empathy even though its adoption is relatively new. The first mention of it in literature was in 1946. The major cultural moray at the time was responsibility. We stressed not caring so much about how people felt, but rather how they behaved. Calling people to responsibility trumped being empathetic. Parenting styles also reflected this focus.

For instance, my Dad would often say “I don't care how you feel, just get your work done.” Gradually, since its recognition, empathy has gained more and more favor as a relational currency while primarily stressing a person's behavior has declined. Empathy can be good.

My wife, Susan, loves it when I truly listen to her heart and understand what she is feeling and thinking. It makes her feel loved – especially if I don't try to ‘fix her’. She is empathetic towards those less fortunate and regularly reaches out to immigrants and

the poor in her giving and friendship. However, empathy can also be dangerous when not clothed in wisdom. Let me explain.

Empathy needs to partner with responsibility, or our interaction with others can lead to their demise, not success. A perfect example of this is “people pleasing”. People pleasers attempt to empathize and validate others in order to be approved and validated by others. They rarely “speak the truth in love” and often placate and indirectly or directly condone dysfunctional and even sinful behavior in another. They don’t want to be responsible for also sharing the truth. All because they want to be liked and loved and can’t risk the truth since it may return rejection.

Another example is found in the addiction community. They talk about “enablers” – people, often family members who are so in touch with their addicted person’s pain and torment that they cannot also call the loved one to responsibility for their damaging behavior. They oftentimes protect their addict instead of allowing legal and other natural consequences. I have been guilty of this in dealing with a member of my own family who was an addict. I unwittingly allowed my empathy for him to keep me from imposing painful consequences that could have led to his recovery sooner. My empathy for him was hurtful, not helpful.

I believe our society is also in danger of making this mistake. Barna (Barna Trends, page 50) and other researchers are clear in saying that Christian morality is “being ushered out of our social structures and off the cultural stage.” Which begs the question of “what now is used as the determiner of morality?” I believe empathy is now being used as a reference point for morality in America. If we can identify with someone’s pain and understand them, then we do not challenge their unbiblical behavior. This seems to be especially true regarding Biblical values regarding pre-marital sex and homosexuality. Many people understand the struggle and can empathize with the feelings of those caught between traditional values and personal desires. Not wanting to be judgmental, or themselves judged, they condone unbiblical behavior.

Empathy towards another can be a gift. Seeing and validating another’s inner world can be enriching and healing. It can connect us more intimately and its presence can melt walls and overcome offense. However, it can be dangerous when empathy is not balanced and paired with loving truth. And it is always dangerous when Biblical responsibility is ignored.