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The Most Important Traits We Can Possess

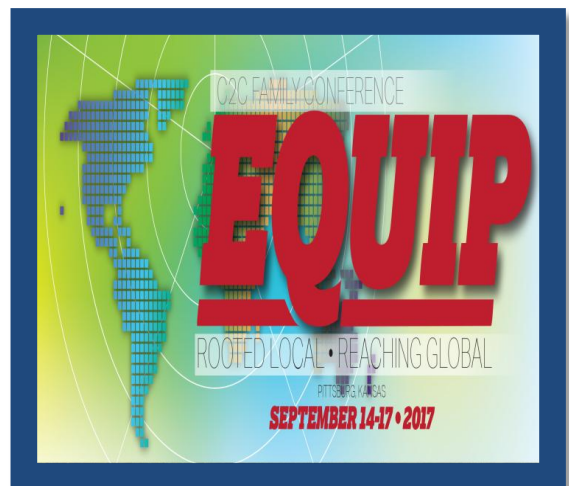
In the past several Equipping Thoughts I have been exploring ideas of the nature of shepherding in any type of leadership. All of the instruction concerning leadership from the Bible must be clothed in three very important aspects of the nature of God, empathy, compassion, and lovingkindness.

One of the most important things any leader can do is to genuinely demonstrate these things towards people.

What's the difference between the three? They are different aspects of the same root.

Empathy is about identification, knowing and feeling what someone feels. It helps you identify and connect. Compassion and lovingkindness are both about the feelings but are also actions motivated by them to help the person who is suffering. They are powerful

aspects of God that impact others. The Bible says that "His lovingkindness is better than life" (Ps 63:3), and it is what "draws people to Him" (Jer 31:3). Without these traits being evident in our lives we will come across more like the Pharisees rather than like Jesus.



The Psalmist describes probably the worst state anyone can find themselves in. Yet this is what many people all around us feel every day. **Psa 142:3-4** *When my spirit faints within me...(4) I look to my right and see. There is no one looking out for me; there is no escape for me; no one cares for my soul.*

In our current culture we have an epidemic of loneliness and isolation. The breakdown of family, the cheapening of life, and a culture that emphasizes the narcissistic pursuit of self has led to a famine of caring and empathy. We have a widespread compassion and empathy deficit in our culture. Mother Teresa said it well, "The worst disease in today's world is not leprosy or cancer: it is the feeling of being uncared for, unwanted, of being deserted and alone"

"No one cares how much you know, until they know how much you care." Teddy Roosevelt

Those Jesus calls to lead should possess an incarnational empathy, compassion, and lovingkindness. They make us able to enter the world of another and possess a heartfelt caring for them. The apostle Peter counseled Christians to have "compassion for one another; love as brothers, be tenderhearted, be courteous" (1 Pet 3:8). Paul also encouraged empathy when he exhorted fellow Christians to "rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn" (Rom 12:15).

There are broken hearts in every pew and in every house in our neighborhood. Even in the midst of all our online social connectedness, sociologists and psychologists have been telling us that social media like Facebook often increases people's sense of loneliness and isolation.

Empathy is the ability to understand and feel for the plight and feelings of another. It should lead to compassion and lovingkindness. Jesus perfectly possesses these traits. *Hebrews 4:15-16 For we have not a high priest who is not able to be touched by the feelings of our feeble flesh; but we have one who has been tested in all points as we ourselves are tested, but without sin. (16) Then let us come near to the seat of grace without fear.* He personally feels the pain of His people and it moves Him to action, "You keep track of all my sorrows. You have collected all my tears in your bottle. You have recorded each one in your book" (Ps 56:8).

Communicating empathy, compassion, and care for people builds an important bridge over which the things of God easily flow. These are not simply hardwired personality traits that we naturally have or we don't. As we walk with God they can grow in our lives.

How can we increase empathy and compassion?

- **Reflect on God's nature and seek Him for change.** Every time we connect with God in real prayer and worship our heart connects with His heart which is the seedbed of change (2 Cor 3:8-18).
Eph 5:1-2 Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us
1 Peter 5:7 casting all your anxiety on Him, because He cares for you.
1 John 4:11 Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.
1 John 3:16 "This is how we know we are walking in His love, if He laid down His life for us, then we lay our lives down for our brothers.
- **Meditate on Jesus' examples of empathy and compassion that builds faith and motivation.** Consider afresh the ways in which He interacted with the woman at the well, the prostitutes, and the tax collectors like Zacchaeus.
Mt 9:36 When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them (Mt 14:14).
Jn 11:33-35 When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. ... Jesus wept.
- **Follow God's design of listening thoroughly to people without interrupting.**
James 1:19 This you know, my beloved brethren. But everyone must be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger.
- **Be fully present when you are with people tuning into them with body language that reflects it.** Focus, put away you cell phone, and look them in the eye etc. If you are distracted you will miss what they are saying and appear as if you are not fully there.
- **Smile.** It is the universal language of friendliness, openness, and caring. Over the decades study after study show that smiling tends to lower blood pressure, leads to better moods, relieves stress, lessens pain, strengthens your immune system and is contagious. Smiling releases good chemicals in the brain and help others feel you are approachable. *Proverbs 15:30 A cheerful look brings joy to the heart;* Even the Psalmist ask God to smile on him as He spoke His truth. *Psalms 119:135 Smile on me, and teach me your laws.*
- **Encourage people as you listen.** It can be as simple as nodding, responding with their name, a well timed touch, and look for genuine things about them to encourage them with.
- **Follow God's design to put yourself in other's shoes.** Try to appreciate what they are feeling and facing from their perspective. *Heb 13:3 Remember those in*

prison as if you were their fellow prisoners, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering.

Rom 12:15 Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn.

- **Genuinely recognize positive things about the image of God in people and call attention to them (giving a blessing).** Be specific as you bless them with it. *1 Peter 3:9 not returning evil for evil or insult for insult, but giving a blessing instead.*
- **Challenge yourself to go deeper in conversations with people if they are open.** "Fine" is an acronym for "Feelings I Am Not Expressing." In seeking to go deeper you are exploring what is in their heart. Questions like "tell me more, that's interesting, how did you develop that idea" can be caring questions to go deeper. *Proverbs 20:5 A plan in the heart of a man is like deep water, But **a man of understanding draws it out.***
- **Understand the importance of the gift of presence.** Even if you don't have any major word to say there is an effect in just being there and listening. In times of distress people rarely remember what we say. What they do remember is the comfort that came with you being there. It often provides comfort for the deep feelings of loneliness that set in during a crisis. Martha and Mary had many people who were with them after Lazarrus died (John 11:19). Then Jesus came and wept with them (vv.33-35). The people responded, "See how He loved him!" (v.36). Our presence and posture mean a lot to people.

"We must learn to regard people less in the light of what they do or omit to do, and more in light of what they suffer." Dietrich Bonhoeffer

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