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ARE YOU SENSITIVE TO OTHERS' FEELINGS?

Today's Text: Ezekiel Chap. 24

Extracts:

Also the word of the Lord came to me, saying, "Son of man, behold, I take away from you the desire of your eyes with one stroke; yet you shall neither mourn nor weep, nor shall your tears run down. Sigh in silence, make no mourning for the dead; bind your turban on your head, and put your sandals on your feet; do not cover your lips, and do not eat man's bread of sorrow." So I spoke to the people in the morning, and at evening my wife died; and the next morning I did as I was commanded. And the people said to me, "Will you not tell us what these things signify to us, that you behave so?" [Ezek. 24: 15-19]

The women's basketball team of Rutgers University (New Brunswick, New Jersey, USA) had just had one of its best seasons in history. It played in the final of the 2007 NCAA national championship where it lost 46-59 to a much more experienced Tennessee.¹ But Don Imus, an influential syndicated U.S. radio host described the Rutgers' team as "nappy-headed hos," a racial slur used to describe the tightly-curved natural hair texture of African-Americans. There were only two white girls out of ten members of that team. Therefore, his "joke" was directed at the eight black members. The national outcry against Imus for his insensitive racist and sexist remark was instantaneous. Within days, the CBS Radio and MSNBC dropped "Imus in the Morning" radio show on television, as advertisers pulled out.

To Don Imus, his remark was meant as a joke. But to those affected, it was a major insult, especially as they had done nothing wrong. How often have we offended others by the way we react to their needs, problems and pressures, or even successes? Have you ever tried to put yourself in their place to have a true picture of how you hurt their feelings? How would you feel if others treated you the same way? How can you lift up rather than hurt others with your words or actions? Those and more are the issues that we shall examine in today's lesson.

¹ Story based on the following sources: "Rutgers Falls in National Championship Game to Tennessee, 59-46," www.scarletknights.com/basketball-women/news/release.asp?prID=5185, "MSNBC drops simulcast of Don Imus show," www.msnbc.msn.com/id/18042523/ April 12, 2007; and "Imus: 'It was comedy... I'm not a racist'" TODAY, April 12, 2007; www.msnbc.msn.com/18035749

1. God makes Israel look at sin from His own perspective!

In African folklore, there is the story of a young suitor who wanted to marry the only daughter of the village elder. People had advised the elder not to give her to such a person because he had the reputation of being self-centred and uncaring about other people's feelings. However, the elder refused the advice and determined to give him a chance. On the day that the young man came with his people to pay the bride price, the elder observed that there was blood on the big toe of his right foot. On closer examination, he discovered that a giant black ant was fastened to it. To draw that much blood, the insect might have been there for a long time. So, he asked the young man why he had not removed the ant, in spite of the sharp pain that it could be causing him. The young suitor replied, "I did not even notice!" The elder replied, "If you cannot notice an ant, how will you notice my daughter?" That ended the engagement!

Was the elder right to judge the young man the way he did? The answer can be either way. For example, it is possible that the young man focused so much on the coming event that he did not notice anything else! Is it not possible that a man who can bear the pains of an ant's bite can bear the pains of marriage? On the other hand, is it not also possible that somebody who cannot feel pain cannot give pleasure? How would his wife know if she was hurting or pleasing him when she expressed displeasure over certain marital issues in the future? Perhaps, the most acceptable answer will depend on *whose perspective was most important at the time*.

In today's lesson, God looked for a way to convey to the people of Israel how He felt about their sins against Him. Through the prophet Ezekiel, He had warned and cautioned them to no avail. So, God did the radical! He brought His hurt vividly home to Ezekiel. He told the prophet that he was going to take away from him what he dearly loved but he should not cry or mourn. That day, his dear wife died and the following morning, he went about his business as if it was nothing [Ezek. 24: 16-18]!

Under the Law of Moses, there was a well-established tradition for mourning the dead. Your head had to be uncovered and you had to tear your clothes [Lev. 10: 6]. People wept bitterly [2 Sam. 24: 1] and it could last for a long time. For example, when Aaron and Moses died, each was mourned for a period of thirty days [Num. 20: 29; Deut. 34: 8]. David "mourned and wept and fasted until evening for Saul and Jonathan his son" after they had been killed in a battle with the Philistines [2 Sam. 1: 12]. There was always a large group of comforters to help the bereaved over their grief. For example, when Lazarus died, "the Jews who were with [his sisters, Martha and Mary] in the house and *comforting* [them]; when they saw that Mary rose up quickly and went out, followed her, saying, 'She is going to the tomb to weep there'" [Jn 11: 31]. So, mourning the dead was a big event.

In the case of Ezekiel who had lost a dear wife, God told him not to mourn, not to tear his garment and not to uncover his head. Coming from a man of God, the people were confused, and they asked him, “Will you tell us what these things signify to us, that you behave so?” He answered them as follows [**Ezek. 24: 20-24**]:

*The word of the Lord came to me, saying, ... “Behold, I will profane My sanctuary, your arrogant boast, the desire of your eyes, the delight of your soul; and your sons and daughters whom you left behind shall fall by the sword. And **you shall do as I have done**; you shall not cover your lips nor eat man’s bread of sorrow... You shall neither mourn nor weep, but you shall pine away in your iniquities and mourn with one another. Thus, Ezekiel is a sign to you according to all that he has done you shall do; **and when this comes, you shall know that I am the Lord God.**”*

In other words, God applied the concept of empathy to make the people appreciate what their sins were doing to Him. Perhaps, that should prompt them to repent and stay faithful to Him. Let us examine how the same concept may apply to us.

2. Analysis: by sympathy or empathy?

Generally, we can choose to look at things from our own perspective or from the point of view of others. Therefore, when we react to people’s predicament, we may be *sympathizing* (if we are looking through our own lenses) or *empathizing* (from their own perspective). For example, if a New York mother were to hear of a suicide bomb attack in Iraq, it might not mean much to her if none of her loved ones was affected. Therefore, her concern might be nothing but mere sympathy. However, if her only son were serving in the US army in Iraq at the time of the attack, the far away danger would be so real and quite close. In the latter case, she could easily empathize with the dead victims and support any action to deal with the culprits.

A good illustration of the concept of empathy can be found in the relationship between David and Jonathan. Jonathan as the son of King Saul stood a good chance to succeed his father. However, because of Saul’s disobedient spirit, God tore the kingdom away from him and gave it to David who was a teenager like Jonathan [**1 Sam. 15: 26-28**]. For that, Saul determined to kill David. If Jonathan had seen the matter from his own perspective, he could easily have cooperated with his father to get David killed. Instead, he saw an innocent young man being wrongly marked for death. On one occasion, he told David, “My father Saul seeks to kill you. Therefore, please be on your guard until morning and stay in a secret place and hide” [**1 Sam. 19: 2**]. Later, when Saul came to know that his own son was aiding and abetting David, he scolded him, saying, “You son of a perverse, rebellious woman! Do I not know that you have chosen the son of Jesse [i.e., David] to your own shame and to the shame of your mother’s nakedness?”

For as long as the son of Jesse lives on the earth, you shall not be established, nor your kingdom” [1 Sam. 20: 30-31]. Saul wanted his son to look at the matter sympathetically.

But is it always better for us to empathize? Are there not circumstances when it is more profitable for us to sympathize rather than empathize with others? Let us consider the following scenarios:

a) *If your action will benefit both parties*

What you are planning to do may be of mutual benefit to you and the other party. In that case, both sides are looking at the matter from the same perspective. Sympathy and empathy are congruent in that case, and it is immaterial what point of view you apply. This is what is called the *win-win strategy*. The other party will not feel hurt. Instead, they will cooperate with you or accept your action without any protest.

A good example was when a dispute arose between the herdsmen of Abram’s livestock and those of Lot, his nephew . Abram said to Lot, “Please let there be no strife between you and me, and between my herdsmen and your herdsmen; *for we are brethren*. Is not the whole land before you? Please separate from me. *If you take the left, then I will go to the right; or, if you go to the right, then I will go to the left*” [Gen. 13: 6-9]. Abram did not only propose what was mutually beneficial to him and Lot, he allowed his younger nephew to even choose first!

b) *If your action will benefit somebody who cannot as yet appreciate it*

Perhaps out of ignorance or immaturity, the person who is affected by your action may feel offended by your insensitivity. For example, when you insist on your children doing their homework while a popular television programme is showing, they may feel that you are “wicked” whereas you are looking far into their future and the significance of a good educational foundation. In such a case, you cannot afford to treat them with empathy! Interestingly, children and wards do not appreciate their “harsh” upbringing until they grow up and begin to enjoy the fruits of success.

A good example is Christ’s reaction to Peter when He was washing His disciples’ feet. Apparently wondering why the Lord, their superior, was washing their feet, Peter asked, “Lord, are You washing my feet?” Jesus replied him, “*What I am doing you do not understand now, but you will know after this.*” When Peter resisted Him further, He firmly replied, “If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me.” That is not a gentle rebuke at all! Peter’s resistance was broken and he responded, “Lord, not my feet only, but also my hands and my head!” [Jn 13: 3-9]. Later, He explained

to them that what He had done was to teach them humility and selfless service [vv. 12-17].

However, if the person who does not as yet understand or appreciate your action is passing through pain, such as bereavement, you cannot afford to rely only on sympathy. You may need to show empathy in order to comfort them. A good example was when Jesus came to the home of Martha and Mary after the death of Lazarus. When He had been told days earlier that Lazarus was sick, He said, “This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the Son of God may be glorified through it.” But Lazarus’ sisters did not know that. By the time that Jesus came to their house, Lazarus had been dead for four days. Martha told Jesus that her brother would not have died if He had been there. Do you think that Martha and his sister were interested in or even listening to His doctrine on resurrection at that hour of grief? Jesus knew it. That was why, even when He knew that He was going to raise Lazarus back to life, we are told, “Jesus wept.” It was then the other sympathizers said, “See how He loved him!” [Jn 11: 1-36]. It took empathy for Him to calm them down. When later Lazarus came forth, the message of resurrection sank in!

c) *If you alone will benefit from your action*

In some cases, you may be the only beneficiary and others are likely to be hurt by your action. In such situations, you will do well to carry them along by looking at the issue from their perspective. That makes you sensitive to their feelings and helps you to market your ideas. This is crucial for the family members of a person who *alone* has been called by God to a ministry. You cannot expect your family to “understand” when you have not taken pains to obtain their appreciation of the pains that they will have to bear with you as you pass through your wilderness experience.

One example was when God asked Abraham to sacrifice his son, Isaac. The matter was between God and Abraham but Isaac was going to bear the pain. He was the one who carried the wood for the sacrifice. Isaac said, “My father, ... look, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?” If Abraham had replied, “You are the sacrifice,” can you imagine what impact it could have had on his young son? That would have been most insensitive. So, instead, he replied reassuringly, “My son, God will provide for Himself the lamb for a burnt offering.” The Bible records, “So the two of them *went together*” [Gen. 22: 7-8], that is, Isaac went willingly with his father.

In general, we can conclude that we can achieve better results when we empathise more than sympathise. We put ourselves in a position to appreciate why other people behave towards us the way they do. Somebody close to me opened my

eyes to this truth when she advised an offending wife to apologize to her husband. When she insisted on being convinced about what she had done wrong, the counselor told her, “What is important is not that you have done wrong but that *another person feels offended by your action.*”

3. Conclusion: Can you see sin God’s way?

God made us in His image and likeness. Therefore, we are supposed to see things *as He does*. Unfortunately, in the exercise of our free will, through Adam and Eve, we chose evil. That was the beginning of the difference in perspective between God and man. Thereafter, God made the first move to understand us. He sent His only begotten Son to take human form, to suffer and die for our sins. As a result, we now have a High Priest, Jesus the Christ, who can empathise with our weaknesses *because* He “was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin.” So, “let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need” [**Heb. 4: 15-16**].

But what is your reaction? God says, “You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy” [**Lev. 19: 2; Matt. 5: 48**]. You are holy before Him when you repent [**1 Jn 1: 7-9**] and confess Jesus as your Lord and Saviour [**Rom. 10: 9-13**]. For that to happen, you have to see sin from God’s perspective. It hurts His feelings. It grieves His heart!

Do you hurt the feelings of those you love? If you claim to love God, why then do you continue in sin? Empathize!