

## The Power of Empathy in Prayer

I pray with hurting people almost every day of every week. My desire is to stir hope in their hearts and to lead them through empathy and prayer into an intimate and healing experience with Christ.

The Apostle Paul prayed that people would come to know Christ experientially not just cognitively.<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, many people that you and I pray with do not know how to make that experiential connection with the Lord. Empathy and prayer combined can be the bridge that helps hurting people *experience* God loves. Moreover, if they experience God loves, then they can have hope.

Empathy is “the action of understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to, and vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts, and experience of another . . .”<sup>2</sup> It’s presumptuous to “fix someone” before gaining some degree of understanding and showing him or her that we are genuinely concerned. Before we launch into prayer, we need to take time to listen to their story!

It is also important to remember the critical role of the Holy Spirit<sup>3</sup> as we minister and pray for others. We have God’s promise that if we listen we will hear His voice.<sup>4</sup> The Holy Spirit, the comforter/counselor<sup>5</sup> will impress His thoughts upon our minds, giving us needed words of wisdom and knowledge, discernment, and prophetic insight.<sup>6</sup>

The Holy Spirit enables us to pray specifically<sup>7</sup> in accordance with God’s will<sup>8</sup> in order to accomplish this connection between hurting people and Himself. Here are some general practical guidelines that I often employ when leading people to Jesus for a touch from Him.

- **Questions:** I start by asking questions in an effort to gain knowledge of the hurting person’s story. *What is your concern? Would you like to tell me about it?* People need the freedom to talk about their pain without fear of rebuke: they need to be able to say, “I’m hurting,” “I’m angry,” even “I’m angry with God.” As they share, I try to make an empathetic connection with them and where appropriate share part of my own life experience.

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<sup>1</sup> Ephesians 3:19 (AMP)

<sup>2</sup> Merriam-Webster Online

<sup>3</sup> John 16:8, 13

<sup>4</sup> John 3:29; 10:4, 16, 27

<sup>5</sup> John 16:7

<sup>6</sup> 1 Corinthians 12:7-11, James 1:5

<sup>7</sup> Romans 8:26-27

<sup>8</sup> 1 John 5:14

- **Scripture:** While I am listening to the person, I am also listening to the Holy Spirit. Regularly He brings a portion of scripture to my memory<sup>9</sup> that I can share with the person that will touch their heart and offer hope—for example, Lamentations 3:16-20 speaks about expressing to God the deep emotional pain associated with grief. I let them know that grieving is a part of the healing process. It is only if you are stuck in grief for inordinate periods of time that it can become unhealthy. Lamentations 3:21-24 points to the hope that lies beyond the pain and helps the person see that God understands and wants to comfort them.<sup>10</sup> In this way, we till the soil of a person's heart helping them to receive the seed of God's word, which will be watered by prayer. In effect, we take them gently by the chin, and lift their head so they can see into the eyes of the One who loves them and see the hope that is in Christ.<sup>11</sup>
- **Prayer:** Finally, I pray for the person, that he or she will be able to experience this hope from God. If sin and the resulting guilt and shame are involved, I will invite that person to pray a prayer of specific confession so they can receive the forgiveness God wants so much to give and that they so desperately need.<sup>12</sup>

The Holy Spirit can give us the ability to speak<sup>13</sup> to issues authoritatively and with compassion that are beyond our natural abilities. He can enable us to make a relational, empathetic connection and empower us to pray the will of the Father. If we are willing to be His instruments, He will extend His hand into lives of hurting people through us.

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<sup>9</sup> John 14:26

<sup>10</sup> Matthew 5:4

<sup>11</sup> Psalm 33:20, 130:5

<sup>12</sup> 1 John 1:9, Matthew 11:28

<sup>13</sup> Luke 12:2; 2 Corinthians 3:6