

Di121 Effective Communication

Lesson Di121-20 Attitude: Empathy

This lesson discusses the importance of a third attitude—having empathy in our communications. Empathy is “sensitivity to another’s feelings and trying to understand what they are experiencing.” Empathy is more than just a feeling of compassion or a manner of approach. It involves your effort to put yourself in someone else’s shoes. Imagine yourself in their place. Have you ever helped a stranger who obviously had a need? Perhaps they were hungry or thirsty or needed clothes? They didn’t tell you their need, but you sensed it and imagined how they felt.

In this story Jesus showed awareness of the needs and feelings of the crowds following him. They often misunderstood Jesus. Their motives were wrong and self-centered, but he still met their physical needs and showed them empathy. He could feel what they were feeling. In his human body, Christ suffered hunger and thirst, exhaustion and even frustration. He knows how we feel.

One day, Jesus crossed to the far shore of the Sea of Galilee. A great crowd of people followed him. They followed because of the miracle signs he had performed by healing the sick. Then Jesus went up on a mountainside and sat down with his disciples. He began to teach the people and heal those in need.

Late in the day, when Jesus looked at the great crowd, he said to Philip, “Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?” He asked this only to test him, for he already had in mind what he was going to do.

Philip answered him, “It would take more than half a year’s wages to buy enough bread for each one to have a bite!”

Another of his disciples, Andrew, spoke up, “Here is a boy with five small barley loaves and two small fish, but how far will they go among so many?”

Jesus was testing the disciples concerning their empathy for the crowds who followed him. John tells us that Jesus knew what he was going to do. The disciples, when confronted with this great need, saw only the difficulties and what they didn’t have. They were not sensitive to the needs of the people who had climbed up the mountainside behind them. They understood the people’s need for Christ’s teaching, but not their physical need for food. Jesus wanted them to see the needs of the whole person. He knew that sometimes it is necessary to show concern for the immediate needs of people, so they can hear the spiritual message.

Jesus said, “Have the people sit down.” There was plenty of grass in that place, and they sat down. About 5,000 men were there, besides women and children. Jesus had the disciples organize the people and seat them in groups. In this way, no one would be missed, especially the children and those who were weak in body. Jesus then took the loaves and gave thanks to the

Father. Barley loaves were cheap bread, the food of the poor. The disciples distributed the food. He did the same with the fish.

Those who were seated ate as much as they wanted. When the people were well fed, he said to his disciples, “Gather the pieces that are left over. Let nothing be wasted.” Bread was considered by Jews to be a gift from God. It was required that even scraps that fell from a table be picked up. So they gathered them and filled twelve baskets with the pieces of the loaves and fish left over by those who had eaten. Each of the 12 returned with his basket full. In this way Jesus provided for his disciples their food for the next few days. Jesus was always thinking about others and about their futures, here and in eternity.

After the people saw the sign Jesus had performed, they began to say, “Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world.” It was a sign that pointed people to the Son of Man and the food for eternal life that he gives. But they thought only of the prophet Moses had prophesied about. Through Moses, God had provided food and water for the people in the desert. They expected the Prophet he predicted to do more than this.

Jesus, knew that they intended to come and make him king by force. He rejected the world’s version of kingship as a temptation of the devil he had heard before. So he withdrew to a mountain by himself (John 6:1-15).

They wanted him to be their king because he had provided them food. He wanted to be their king because he knew that only in him could they find the source of eternal life. He felt empathy for their physical needs, but he cared even more about their spiritual needs. He could give them the eternal life they really needed.

When we communicate while feeling true empathy, we are being like Jesus. We are helping people meet their most important need of knowing him. In the process we may need to show our concern by meeting their immediate physical need—such things as food, clothing, firewood, or safety.

This story is **important** because it shows the effect on people when Jesus was sensitive to their immediate needs. They appreciated his real concern, his empathy, for them.

The **main truth** of this lesson is that showing people empathy often involves meeting their basic needs of life, before being able to share Jesus with them. He is the one who can meet their deepest spiritual needs along with giving them eternal life.

Let’s **review** this lesson—

1. What was the response of the disciples when Jesus pointed out that the crowd needed food?
[Pause]
A. If you said that the disciples did not feel empathy for their hunger, but saw only the difficulties, you are correct.
2. How did Jesus show his empathy for the crowd of 5,000 who followed him? [Pause]

A. If you said, “He provided food by multiplying five loaves and two fish to feed them all,” you answered correctly.

3. How can we show empathy for people who are in need? [Pause]

A. If you said that showing empathy may involve meeting people’s immediate needs, you are correct.

Your **assignment** for this lesson is to memorize the story and find a Christian neighbor or a group of people who have not heard it before. After telling the story of the miracle feeding, ask the group, “Which is more important, short-term needs or long-term needs? If we really show concern for the immediate needs of people, will they be more likely to listen to our message about eternal life?”

What is a need that someone near you has that you can meet, and thus show the empathy of Jesus for them? Find at least one such needy person that you can give food or clothing to today.