

**“And this Gospel”
shall be preached...
Matthew 24:14**

Sermon Summaries from Ministers of the Worldwide Church of God

HOW I LEARNED WHAT PURE RELIGION MEANS

by Bernie Schnippert

I've been preparing for this sermon for the last five years while I was ill and at times bedridden by hypoglycemia, and I mean to tell you, it's coming from way deep down.

Many was the time when I sat or lay in that bed, or when I took a long night ride by myself to get away from the screaming walls that penned me in to that bedroom, that I thought that it could eventually all be worthwhile because I could pass the lessons along to you.

Two Worlds

What I learned is that there are two worlds. There's the world of health, of physical abundance and plenty, the world of general well being. Then there's another world, the world of the needy, of the sick. It's a different world. And unless you've lived in it, it's difficult to feel or understand it.

There are blind people who live in a different world than you do. There are sick people who live in a different world. Deaf people. Crippled people. And a lot of different races, of different sizes and shapes.

What we need—you and I and all of us—is to have more empathy for those people. There's a deep need for us to extend ourselves, to take the great mental jump across that huge chasm into that other world.

You've heard many good sermons about serving

the needy—about love. But I maintain that you're not going to serve anybody unless you *recognize his need for help*. And you're not going to extend yourself to help anyone unless you *feel* for him or her.

Ecclesiastes 4:1: "I returned, and considered all the oppressions that are done under the sun: and behold the tears of such as were oppressed, *and they had no comforter*. . . ." If you sit down and talk to someone who's lame, deaf, blind, ill, or someone who's just lost his mate, and show a little concern, you're in the minority.

The afflicted cry (Psa. 31:9-10): "Have mercy upon me, O Lord, for I am in trouble: mine eye is consumed with grief, yea, my soul and my belly. For my life is spent with grief, and my years with sighing: my strength faileth because of mine iniquity, and my bones are consumed." They are lonely. They feel that life has passed them by. I know. I've been in that world.

"I was a reproach among all mine enemies, but especially among my neighbours, and a fear to mine acquaintance . . ." (verse 11).

Maybe they don't look too good, maybe the mattress smells a little, maybe it's not too pleasant to sit in the room with them. They know that, and it's a tremendously humiliating experience to lie there in a bed, to have a tube coming out of your nose. And you can serve those people physically

and only add to their depression because *mentally* you have no empathy.

Do you know something that really bugged me? People would come and they'd say, Well, we don't know why Schnippert's sick. There must be a good reason. And they act like it's certain to be your fault.

Exodus 22:22: "Ye shall not afflict any widow, or fatherless child." (We can afflict by our actions, and we can afflict by our lack of action.) "If thou afflict them in any wise and they cry at all unto me, I will surely hear their cry; and my wrath shall wax hot . . ." (verse 23-24). Believe me, there are many who cry, who beg God for the chance to wake up in the morning with a pair of legs that will carry them, or be without pain, or find a meal on the table. A lot of people don't know what it's like to wake up and to be able to see.

Many people feel sorry for themselves, and so sometimes we feel we must not give them any sympathy. That's a cop-out! Do you know why we don't sympathize more with people? Not because it's going to hurt them (which it might if it's prolonged—that happens in unusual cases), but because we don't have it in us.

Empathy the Key

We've just mentioned the term "sympathy." Well, *empathy* is something more. It is a facet of love. And what is love? Love is an outgoing concern.

Job made this observation about his friends. (And so many times when people have needs, we're to them like Job's friends.) "To him that is afflicted, pity should be shewed from his friend . . ." (Job 6:14)—a plain old unadulterated principle *pretty tough to back away from*. But many of us don't have it in us, and that's why we don't do it.

It's said in different words in I Corinthians 12:23, 25-26: "And those members of the body which we think to be less honourable, upon these we bestow more abundant honour; and our uncomely parts have more abundant comeliness . . . but that the members should have the same care for one another. And whether one member suffer, *all the members suffer with it* . . ."

That is empathy. When one person suffers, you suffer with him, not at him, not maybe even in front of him, *but with him, deep down in your own heart*.

If he's lost a wife, for a few moments capture in your mind and in your heart what it must be like to lose a wife. If he's lost a child, just for a few minutes, deep down in your mind and in your heart understand what it must be like to lose a child. If he's laid in bed for two years, look at him and deep down in your heart and in your mind understand his situation.

Empathy goes both ways—with the rejoicing, as well as the suffering (" . . . or [when] one member be honoured, all the members rejoice with it"—verse 26). Unless you've been in the deepest valley, you can't really appreciate the highest mountain.

I was driving, hoping to keep my mind off my illness, praying out loud, begging God to help me see what was wrong with me, to give me the strength to cope. For a few seconds I closed my eyes. And when I did, I saw something that I had never seen before, that helped me have a little empathy for other people who were in a worse fix (and there are plenty).

Try it once. Just shut your eyes and see if you see what I saw. If you see blackness, if you see your own darkness, you haven't seen enough. Because what I saw was what it was like to be blind. I realized that there were people whose eyes would never open. And for a fleeting instant, I empathized with them and I prayed and I said, Oh, my God, please help these poor people who can't see. They need help!

Roadblocks to Empathy

There are a number of roadblocks in our human nature that stop empathy. One of them is insensitivity. Some of us are just totally oblivious to anything or anybody else in the world. That's a characteristic of youth. If you want to see that, try a high school, or even a college. You live in a dream when you're young. You're going to grow up and be rich, famous, have the same perfect health, forever.

If ignorance is bliss, some of us must be the happiest people in the world. We just totally ignore what's happening around us.

Every time I read Isaiah 3:16 I see this dream world in action: "Moreover the Lord saith, Because the daughters of Zion are haughty, and walk with stretched forth necks and wanton eyes, walking and mincing as they go, making a tinkling with their

feet [totally wrapped up in their own world, not even realizing the existence of another world—plain old insensitivity]: therefore the Lord will smite with a scab the head of the daughters of Zion. . . .”

Another characteristic that blocks empathy is self-centeredness. When your mind is totally self-centered—it’s on you and nobody else—you can’t be helping anyone. You may at least be sensitive to the fact that other people are in circumstances worse than yours, but you’re so wrapped up with your day-to-day excitement, budget, pet project, family, career, that you’re just plain selfish.

Luke 12:16 begins a parable about a rich man whose barns wouldn’t hold all his wealth. So he decided to tear them down and build bigger ones.

That rich man may have seen the suffering around him, but he was too wrapped up with his own goods and self and in pleasing himself to ever step out of his little crystalline world into the other world of the needy. He talked to himself, “Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years; take your ease, eat, drink, and be merry. But God said unto him, You fool, this night shall your soul be required of you, and then whose things shall these be that you have provided?” (paraphrased).

Romans 15:1, “We then that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak, and not to please ourselves [not to be self-centered].”

Another characteristic that blocks the flow of empathy is found in Luke 10 in the parable of the Good Samaritan. This is prejudice. There are people—white people—who would find it very difficult to help a black child. I can’t really speak for minorities—I’m not one—but my impression of what it must be like would be to wake up every day and have life just a little tougher than if you’re part of the majority.

Are You a “Job’s Friend?”

There’s another block to empathy—a very big one.

An attitude of self-righteousness and judging blocks real empathy more than just about anything else I know. Here’s how the attitude expresses itself (I’ve actually heard these things!): “It’s good for him.” Now it might be good for him, but do you have to tell him? Do you have to feel that way in your heart? There are people who are sick or poor

and don’t deserve it any more than you, because you’ve abused yourself more than they, and it just hasn’t caught up with you yet.

Here’s another one: “I wouldn’t act like that.” A person is suffering and he sympathizes with himself, and you self-righteously judge him.

“I don’t think he wants to get better.” Or, “The guy’s sickness is all in his head.”

While you’re sitting there judging, do you know who you are? You’re a Job’s friend. Your self-righteousness is greater than Job’s.

Job 4:1: “Then Eliphaz the Temanite answered and said, If we assay to commune with thee, wilt thou be grieved? but who can withhold himself from speaking?”

You’re not going to like this, began his friend, but unless you listen to me, you’re never going to get better. And as they argued on and on, the three friends came more and more to insist: You must have done something wrong, Job. You’ve sinned. What is it you’ve done?

When you’re looking at somebody who’s blind, crippled, or got hurt in the war, and you’re sitting there saying, Boy, I wonder what this guy did, you’re judging him, and you’re self-righteous. It’s going to catch up with you, but in the meantime, it’s going to hurt that needy person even more. And he may be closer to God than you’ll ever be.

Another big block to empathy is that we don’t empathize with people because we fear to, because we’re embarrassed to.

Matthew 25:34, “Then shall the King say unto them on his right hand, Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: for I was an hungered, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink. . . .” I needed empathy, and you felt with me. You felt the hunger that I felt. I was a stranger, and you felt my loneliness. You sympathized with me. For a minute in your mind’s eye, you shut your eyes and you knew what it was like to be blind, and you led me. I was naked and you weren’t embarrassed. I was sick and you visited me, and I was in prison, and you weren’t afraid people would see you coming out, and think you were a prisoner getting out.

Another thing that blocks empathy is plain old naivete. A lot of people are just naive, because unless you’ve been through something, sometimes

it's very, very difficult to cross over the bridge between those two worlds.

Hebrews 4:14-15: "... we have a great high priest, that is passed into the heavens, Jesus the Son of God... not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities..." What is empathy but being touched with the feeling of someone else's infirmity? Our High Priest "was in all points tempted like we are, yet without sin." He wasn't naive about suffering. He had gone through it.

"Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace [where we can receive the mind that] can have compassion on the [needy], and on them that are out of the way, for that he himself is also compassed with infirmity" (Heb. 4:16; 5:2). But you—if you've never had an infirmity, and especially if you don't see your spiritual infirmities, frankly, you won't be able to empathize as much. It will be a little tougher for you.

There's another reason that people don't have empathy with others. It's an inability to cope. Some people look at another person and they see that they're afflicted. It so disturbs them that they get frustrated about it and therefore they refuse to acknowledge it.

Job—more than his friends—was the one who saw with empathy and reached himself out. Job 31:19-24: "If I have seen any perish for want of clothing, or any poor without covering; if his loins have not blessed me, and if he were not warmed with the fleece of my sheep; if I have lifted up my hand against the fatherless, when I saw my help in the gate: then let mine arm fall from my shoulder blade, and mine arm be broken from the bone."

James 1:27: "Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction [in their need], and to keep himself unspotted from the world." I tell you why it's pure religion. Because it's pure "give"!

James 2, verses 15-18 (I'm going to paraphrase this in my own words): "If a brother or sister be naked and destitute of daily food and one of you say unto them, depart in peace, be ye warmed and be ye filled. Notwithstanding, you give them not those things which are needful to the body, what does it profit? Even so, empathy, if it has not works is dead being alone. Yet the man may say, you have empathy and I have works, show me your empathy without your works, and I will show you my empathy *by my works.*"