

Identity Formation: What Every Child Needs (Part 3)

6. Understanding

Heb 4:15

For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin.

One of the primary characteristics of Jesus as our high Priest is understanding and empathy. We are called to reflect the same to others as we lead under him as our head.

1 Pet 3:7 ESV

Likewise, husbands, live with your wives in an understanding way, showing honour to the woman as the weaker vessel, since they are heirs with you of the grace of life, so that your prayers may not be hindered.

Some translations say, “with knowledge”, “according to knowledge”, “be considerate”. It comes from the Greek root *Ginosko* which speaks of experiential knowledge. This is what connects theory to practice and it is based on direct relationship. This shows me the importance of understanding your family members’ love maps and proclivities (What triggers them? When do they need space? What makes them sad? What energizes them? etc). Do you know their communication do’s and don’ts? Ladies do you know how your husband relaxes? If you know he unwinds by watching football, it defeats the purpose if you start discussing stressful admin issues with him while he is watching his soccer. You won’t get the attention you need. I was counselling a couple where one of her button pushers was when her husband would go along with people teasing her despite the fact that he knew she had come from a background of being bullied when she was young. You become more understanding when you understand. Gentlemen, you’re your wife goes shopping is she just going to get things or is she going for the experience? If you think she is just going to get things then you might be frustrated when you go with her and you are still at the mall 3 hours later. Empathy can increase with experiential knowledge of the other. We like to be understood. Someone once said that the desire to be understood is to communication what oxygen is to the lungs. This is why it is important for you to seek first to understand before you are understood. In our families we are being called to listen first. The person with the most influence in a conversation is the one who speaks second, not the one who speaks first.

A basic need every human being has is the need to know others and be known. Some people are social introverts; they seem like the life of the party but no one actually knows them. In getting to know and understand your family members, remember that that change. Children grow and mature. Spouses change. One person I was counselling said that new button pushers keep emerging for his wife. All this takes time. We need to study the other person. Many people want to have the hired holy man from the North pray for them to create intimacy in their family. I wish it were that easy. Part of the discipleship process involves renewing the mind on these issues. We cannot separate deliverance from discipleship.

Community is created when I allow myself to be known and make an effort to know others. God is breaking us out of superficial relationships into deeper levels of intimacy. One of my sons doesn’t like it when we don’t remember his favourite chocolate or clothing preference.

One of the biggest fears we have is the fear of being judged unfairly. This is simply the fear of being misunderstood. We pour out a lot of energy into trying to be understood. When I have arguments with my wife that’s one of her main themes, “I feel misunderstood; I just want to be understood.” Often when she explains herself, I say that I understand, but the point is that I hadn’t communicated understanding. Discipleship involves taking these passages of scripture and applying them in our lives. This can be hard work. You apply God’s Word and play for His grace to help you as you walk in it.

“Nobody cares how much you know, until they know how much you care.” - Theodore Roosevelt

In a family characterised by understanding, judgement is suspended. You have the right to make mistakes and learn from them. Your mistakes don’t result in banishment. Breaking something in the house isn’t a

catastrophe, it is a mistake. The gravity of discipline should never be related to the value of the thing destroyed. In a functional family you experience empathy for and from others. The word “empathy” comes from two Latin words meaning “feeling into”. Empathy is the capacity to understand or feel what another person is experiencing from within their frame of reference. It is the capacity to place oneself in another’s position. This type of understanding produces patience. We are called to be patient with our children.

1 Cor 13:11

When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me.

Your maturity is seen in your ability to handle immaturity

I am dealing with this now experientially; puppies chew things. So when our puppies chew things I can’t be angry with them or blame them; it’s our responsibility to make sure we put our things away so they don’t get chewed. When we don’t demonstrate understanding and empathy our loved ones stop communicating their needs. They know that if they express their needs we will minimize these needs and be dismissive so they resort to protesting. Protesting is a self-protective mechanism that avoids vulnerability. Sadly many people feel more understood by colleagues and friends than family members.

There are 3 major types of empathy:

a. Emotional Empathy – “I feel you”. This is the capacity to respond to another’s mental state with an appropriate emotion.

b. Cognitive Empathy – “I get you”. I might not agree with you, but I get you”. The ability to see where another person is coming from.

c. Empathic Concern – “I am here for you”. This involves being there for people when they need practical assistance.

1 Cor 12:26

If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honoured, every part rejoices with it.

Romans 12:15

Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn.

1 Pet 3:8

Finally, all of you, be like-minded, be sympathetic, love one another, be compassionate and humble.

Sympathetic is Sun + Pascho = Suffering or feeling together with.

Some time ago my wife was not feeling well so I told her that I would take care of the kids and also sort out our dinner. I was quite proud of myself as the helpful husband. Later on that evening she communicated that she did not know whether I really understood how bad she was feeling. She went on to describe the nature of her ailment and the pain it was causing. Of course I got defensive and stated how I obviously understood how she was feeling otherwise I wouldn’t be doing all the chores. Fortunately because I understood the different types of empathy I realised that she needed emotional empathy whilst I was only showing her empathic concern.

Developing these skills requires relational maturity. Struggling with that relational maturity can affect every intimate relationship and people from dysfunctional backgrounds often end up very detached. Understanding is important to prevent the enemy from creating massive gaps between us.

Rom 15:1

We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves.

Phil 2:4

Not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.

1 Cor 10:24

No one should seek their own good, but the good of others.

1 Cor 10:33

Even as I try to please everyone in every way. For I am not seeking my own good but the good of many, so that they may be saved.

Gal 5:14

For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: "Love your neighbour as yourself."

Imagine what family life would be like if we applied these scriptures on a daily basis. Your kids wouldn't fight. You and your spouse wouldn't fight. There will be no emotional wounding. I am convinced that one of the main keys to functional marriages and families is deliverance from selfishness and self-absorption.

Scripts for communicating empathy:

Aaaah, that must be really sore! How did you manage to do your test whilst feeling like that?

I can see you are frustrated with me and probably felt embarrassed. I am really sorry.

I know you feel smothered when I do that, please forgive me.

I can't believe how well you're holding up, considering how much stress you're under.

I appreciate your patience.

Thank you for remaining so positive.

I want to thank you for taking the time from your busy schedule to speak with me today.

Yes, exactly I can see why you said that. That must have been really annoying for you.

What you are saying makes so much sense to me

I would have had a hard time with that too

If I were in your position I would feel the same way too.

You must be feeling really exhausted after doing Let me fetch the kids from school.

Our mistake has cost you a lot of time and money. Let me make it right.

Scripts for lack of empathy:

Get a grip

Snap out of it

I don't understand why you are so angry, it's not a big deal

But I am also just as busy, if not busier than you.