

#31 “The Ministry of Comfort”

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Suffering is a reality of life, and it is not going to go away any time soon. Only heaven is free of suffering. In the meantime, we will suffer, loved ones will suffer, friends will hurt, and those in our sphere of influence will experience pain, some more severely than others. There will be times when it will be our turn to be comforted, and there will be times when it will be our role to do the comforting. Those who have experienced comfort know how valuable a ministry this is. Those who have not experienced it in their time of need know how badly it is needed. The ability to appropriately and genuinely comfort is a powerful ministry.

The best comforters are those who genuinely care and are able to express their care. It is not necessarily comforting when someone tells us in our time of need, “Well, things could always be worse. After all, there’s got to be somebody who has it worse off than you.” Maybe there is, and maybe there is not. Suffering, though it is universal, is often very unique to the person. It brings little to no comfort at all to know that things could be worse when things are as utterly bad as they are. Another well-meaning technique that typically fails is to try to help the person solve their problems. There may be a time for this, but we need to be discerning to know when a person has done all that they can do. If indeed they have, then our “friendly” advice comes across as judging their suffering as self-inflicted when we may not mean that at all. If a person asks for help, we can help. If they simply are hurting, we need to comfort them. Comfort and problem-solving are not necessarily the same. The worst technique is to question someone’s spirituality or integrity because of their suffering. It is extremely hurtful when a person concludes that we might be in pain or experiencing difficult circumstances because we lack faith or are in sin. If we are in the wrong either way, we shouldn’t be offended, but it is not wise to assume that suffering is to be equated with weak faith or sin. Job’s “friends” did this by pressing him repeatedly to own up to a wrong that he didn’t commit. They thought suffering meant a lack of faith and obedience, which it did not. This didn’t bring Job any comfort whatsoever for obvious reasons. He says in Job 21:34, “How then will you vainly comfort me, for your answers remain full of falsehood?” Attempts at comfort are vain if we don’t care, if we don’t try to empathize, if we judge, and if we play the blame game. Yet there is one more common error. This is another form of vain comfort, and it is to offer hope that God has not promised. Zechariah 10:2 says, “For the teraphim speak iniquity, and the diviners see lying visions and tell false dreams; they comfort in vain. Therefore the people wander like sheep; they are afflicted, because there is no shepherd.” Those who should have been teachers and shepherds of the people did not speak the truth of the Word of God but rather their own empty promises of false hope. This is downright cruel to do to a person in suffering. An example would be saying “Things will get better” or “It will be alright.” Things may not get better or be alright. In fact, in some instances, things will get worse. This is why we need to speak the truth of God’s Word that He is with the person in suffering and not make promises that God has not made.

Christ provides the ultimate example of what it means to comfort. Psalm 23:4 says, “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.” The key phrase is that Jesus is with us. He is not absent in our suffering, for He is suffering alongside of us. He is not taking the literal insult or succumbing to the actual disease, but His presence is our comfort. It is good enough just to know that He loves us and cares for us. It is sufficient to know that He is in complete control even when we hurt. It is enough to know that we have Him. Thus, following Christ’s example, the best way to bring others comfort (albeit imperfectly when compared to Christ) is for them to know that we support them, that we feel for them, that we care for them, and that we won’t abandon them in their time of need. *The state of being comforted is a state of knowing that Someone (and hopefully someone) is there to watch over us and take care of us out of real and genuine love for us.* Comfort thus implies confidence in a person and trust in their loyalty and goodness to us. Those who are fair weather friends are not going to bring us much comfort. The greatest comforters are those who, unlike Job’s friends, help get us through the struggle. Why didn’t Job’s friends mourn with Job? Why didn’t they pray for him? Why didn’t they bring him food or ointment for his sores? Why didn’t they affirm their commitment to him to do what they could to support him and his wife? They offered Job nothing except criticism and judgment, the archenemies of comfort. If we want to be skilled in the ministry of comfort, we must learn to have sympathy, compassion, understanding, and a commitment to bring our friends and loved ones through no matter what it takes. If people sense that our comfort is conditional, it will be just that.

Where is the person who sympathizes? Where is the person who will try to understand and listen? Where is the person who will offer a shoulder to cry on? Where is the person who weeps with those who weep (Romans 12:15)? Psalm 69:20 says, “Reproach has broken my heart and I am so sick, and I looked for sympathy, but there was none, and for comforters, but I found none.” David expresses that he has no one to comfort him. Of course, God is there for him, but what a shame it is and what pain it brings when those on earth who should be comforters fail us. It is an awful reality, but it happens, sadly even in the church. So what do we do when we find ourselves comfortless and alone? We must find our comfort in Christ (2 Corinthians 1:3-5) and in His Word (Psalm 119:50), both of which are sufficient, praise the Lord.

Acts 9:31 says, “So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria enjoyed peace, being built up; and going on in the fear of the Lord *and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit*, it continued to increase” (italics mine). God is a God of comfort, and it is time that we, His people, learn to be effective ministers of His comfort. May God give us grace in this extremely important ministry.