

Mistakes We Make with Grieving People



by EDWARD T. WELCH

What is your present wisdom on how to care well for those who grieve? I ask this question because most of us truly desire to bless, comfort, and encourage those who are suffering. But, too often, we hurt them with our foolish and blundering words. When grieving people most need words that encourage, we can be at our most inept. All this dulls our display of the “God of all comfort” (2 Cor 1:3). So I will offer some thoughts on this topic, but they are surely not all there is to know, and certainly include much you already do know. Think of this as a group project—a Wikipedia-like article—directed to the church that stimulates your thinking and contributions. As you read, imagine yourself as a participant rather than a mere reader-student so you can bless those near you when grief and suffering strike.

Ask *anyone* about their experience with comforters in times of trouble and they will have a story. I asked my wife, who responded quicker than I expected. Her first thought was a comment from years ago. She was surprised she remembered it. While speaking with a family member

Edward Welch (MDiv, PhD) serves on the faculty and counsels at CCEF. He is the author of numerous books, the most recent of which is titled A Small Book about Why We Hide.

about how hard it had been for her not to be able to have another child, the other person responded, “At least you have two children.” Most of us have stories like hers—and so the goal for us is this: to grow in compassion, humility, and skill, especially as we speak with those who live with a deep or persistent hardship.

You can easily find hundreds of lists of what *to* say and what *not* to say to grieving people. I will identify some of the common features of these lists, but we need more than that. Scripture takes us beyond lists. It reveals our hearts, which produce unintentional, though foolish, comments. It also reforms our hearts so that we can invent dozens of ways to bless the grieving and offer care that is shaped by *compassion* and *humility*.

Care Shaped by Compassion

When one of my daughters was three years old, our extended family gathered for a large reunion. At some point my daughter had a mishap that ended in tears, and she was on the lookout for someone to comfort her. As she walked through a room of adults, Uncle John rescued her. He picked her up and said, “Sweetie, I am so sorry. Is there anything I can do to help?” Compassion, of course, makes a difference. It only took one mishap for Uncle John to become her go-to person for all things tragic. He loved her, she loved him back, and I loved him for loving her.

Compassion means that the other person’s hardships affect you, no matter how transient those hardships might be. Such a response takes you into the very heart of God. He chooses compassion as the lead in his self-identification. “The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God” (Ex 34:6). And seeing the hard future ahead for his wayward people he says: “My heart is changed within me; all my compassion is aroused” (Hos 11:8). Jesus felt compassion for the crowds that followed him because they were “like sheep without a shepherd” (Mark 6:34). And when he told the story of the prodigal son, he makes it clear that the Father’s compassion is the center of it all. As he saw his son approaching, the Father “felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him” (Luke 15:20).

You will find the compassion of Jesus in his role as your high priest.¹ Here the divine and human meet in the One who experienced the worst of human misery and truly understands yours. His priesthood changes everything. “We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin” (Heb 4:15).

Here, then, are some of the ways to follow your Savior and allow compassion to shape your care for the grieving.

Receive compassion. To offer compassion, we start by receiving it. Helping skills are built upon truly knowing the compassion of your high priest toward you. As a way to assess yourself, try this simple test: Do you cry out to the Lord when your troubles accumulate? We naturally seek out another compassionate person when life is especially hard. If we don’t have such a person, our troubles might be expressed to an unsuspecting neighbor or even the supermarket cashier. But do you draw near to Christ?

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The writer of Hebrews invites you to do so. “Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (Heb 4:16). When you speak of your suffering to Jesus, you will notice two natural consequences. You will respond with compassion to others, and you will invite a grieving friend into the compassion of your high priest. So enter into the compassion of Christ, and pray that you would know it more. Talk about it with friends.

Still, growth in compassion will be different for different people. Some people feel things more viscerally, some less. No matter how intense or flat your emotions might run, compassion is a gift from God. It leads you to respond to a person’s grief as a burden to be shared.

Say something. Your helpful words to other people begin here. When your compassion is aroused, say something. When someone you know

1. For more on this topic, see Edward T. Welch, “The Priority of the Priesthood for Human Identity,” *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 32:2 (2018): 8–23.

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