

Loving Others as Saints, Sufferers, and Sinners (Part 2)



by MICHAEL R. EMLET

The first article in this two-part series¹ highlighted the reality that as believers we experience life as saints, sufferers, and sinners. God reveals himself to us through Scripture, speaking to our experiences in this three-fold way. As saints, we need confirmation of our identity in Christ; as sufferers, we need comfort in the midst of our affliction; and as sinners, we need challenge to our sin in light of God's redemptive mercies to us in Jesus Christ. If God shepherds his people in these ways, then the same broad biblical categories should also guide the shape of our love as we minister to those around us in both formal and informal settings.

In the previous article, I focused on loving others as saints; in this article, I will highlight loving others as *sufferers* and as *sinners*. For each category, I will offer a biblical example, discuss the associated ministry priorities and implications, illustrate with a life example, and conclude with the barriers we face in loving others in these two ways.

Loving Others as Sufferers

In my second semester of counseling courses at Westminster Theological Seminary, I took a class called Methods of Biblical Change with Paul Tripp.

¹ Part 1 of this series appears in Volume 32:1 of the *Journal of Biblical Counseling* (2018).

Paul ended the first class by showing a video of a ministry conversation he had with a man named John. John was an angry man—a blame-shifting, complaining, angry man. We watched about thirty minutes of Paul’s conversation with him. Actually, it felt less like a conversation and more like a rant by the counselee. Tripp’s homework assignment for the class was to write answers to these questions: How would you approach John? Where would you go for the second half of the time together?

Here was my thought process: This guy was clearly blind to his sin. I figured that no matter what I said, he wouldn’t come back for more of my exceptional wisdom so it was now or never. I’d likely only have one shot with the guy, so I decided to let him have it—on paper at least! He needed me to open his blind eyes to the folly of his sin. I could smell the idols of his heart a mile away and lobbed mortar after mortar of biblical truth to blow up his self-oriented ways of living. I thought I was well on my way to becoming an “instrument in the hands of the Redeemer,” but in reality, I was more like a blunt object of destruction in my own hands!

I’ll never forget what Paul said at the start of the second class: “It’s important that you begin by connecting with this man’s pain as a first step to helping him. Otherwise he may never return.” Ouch! Guilty as charged.

My take-away was this: while it was certainly true that John manifested clear sin in his life, there were other aspects of his experience that I had failed to notice—most notably the extent of suffering in his life. Understanding a person’s suffering is critical for having fruitful and God-honoring conversations. Remember, most people seek help from others because they are suffering and need hope. So, let’s begin with how Scripture models love and understanding to people as sufferers.

Biblical example of loving others as sufferers. How do we see God loving his suffering people in the pages of Scripture? Psalm 22:24 summarizes an overall pattern you see throughout the Bible: “For he has not despised or scorned the suffering of the afflicted one; he has not hidden his face from him but has listened to his cry for help.” God listens to the afflicted. He doesn’t turn away in disgust or embarrassment or frustration as we sometimes do.

I live just outside of Philadelphia. The roads are generally overcrowded and there are frequent accidents. And what happens after an accident? People

slow down and look. This is the so-called “gawker delay.” We humans are curious about suffering from a distance. But put us up close and personal with suffering and we find it hard to move toward it, to look fully at its horror. Like the priest and the Levite in the parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37), we stay on the other side of the road and avoid the complicated mess of another’s suffering. God, on the other hand, does not hide his face. He moves toward sufferers with compassion and enters into their experience.

Entire books of the Bible are written to suffering communities—Lamentations, Ezekiel, Hebrews, 1 Peter, Revelation, and more. No one passage of Scripture gives us a complete template for ministry to suffering people. No one portion of Scripture says everything we need to know about affliction in order to bring hope and consolation to a suffering brother or sister. But let’s look at one passage in particular that at least begins to flesh out some important notes to strike as we come alongside sufferers—Revelation 2:8–11. In the early chapters of Revelation, Jesus addresses each of the seven churches in Asia. Our passage is the message to the church in Smyrna.

“And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: ‘The words of the first and the last, who died and came to life. I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich) and the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death.’”

What do we notice here that helps us minister to those who are suffering?

1. The message is from Jesus himself! And he is not simply the exalted one who is Alpha and Omega, the first and the last. He is also the one who suffered and died—and came to life again. This is the Jesus about whom the writer of Hebrews says, “he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God” (Heb 2:17; see also Heb 2:10). His own personal suffering

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The Journal of Biblical Counseling

(ISSN: 1063-2166) is published by:

Christian Counseling & Educational Foundation

1803 East Willow Grove Avenue

Glenside, PA 19038

www.ccef.org

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