

TOXIC
EMPATHY

HOW

PROGRESSIVES

EXPLOIT

CHRISTIAN

COMPASSION

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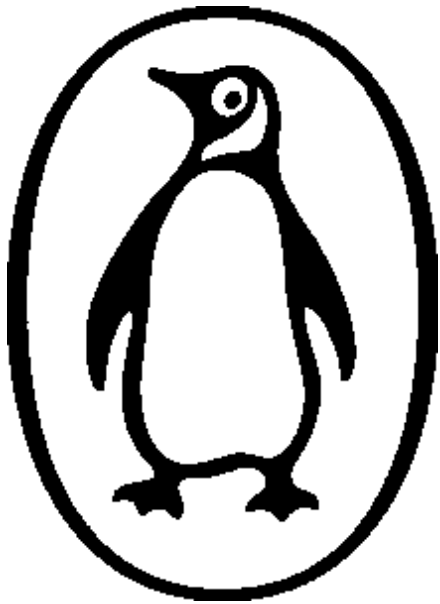
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SENTINEL



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For Mom and Dad, my original balcony people

Introduction

Love is the strongest force in the world.

—CORRIE TEN BOOM

IT WAS LIKE I COULD feel her anxiety. I saw the stress in her body language,

heard the unease in her voice, as she pleaded with her screaming baby to

calm down. She was struggling down the jet bridge, shushing her few-

month-old in his carrier while lugging multiple carry-ons and her folded-up

Doona stroller onto the plane. “It’s ridiculous American Airlines doesn’t let

families with small children board first,” I thought for the hundredth time.

I was on a work trip alone, so I had a free hand. I closed the gap between

us as we boarded the plane. “Can I help you carry something?” I asked. She

looked back. “No, I’m fine.” I would’ve said the same thing. I’m not really

sure why. It’s just reflexive to reject help—especially from strangers—even

when we obviously need it. But I saw the tears brimming in her eyes, so I

knew she hadn’t meant her rejection. A few moments later, I insisted. “Let

me carry the stroller. I’ll follow you to your seat.” She agreed. We got her and

her baby settled, and she said thank you. I noticed she wasn’t on the verge of

tears anymore.

I'd been there—exactly there—just a few weeks earlier. I was going to Atlanta for a speaking engagement, and I was with my oldest, who was three and in the middle of her runaway era. This was the first time I'd traveled alone with one of my kids, so I was more stressed than usual. On top of that, I was dealing with one of those merciless gate agents who was completely uninterested in accommodating us.

Typically when traveling with babies, my husband and I had collapsed the stroller and left it at the top of the jet bridge for an airline employee to take down and stow away. So we stood there, ready to board and drop off the heavy contraption that I'd broken a sweat folding while wrangling my elusive toddler. Without looking up at me, the gate agent said I'd need to take it down the jet bridge myself. "I can't do that," I said. I didn't have enough hands to get everything and everyone onto the plane. She didn't offer a solution. She just told us to move out of the way while others boarded.

I shuffled us to the side as much as I could, and I sat on the ground with my restless daughter, who was determined to sprint down the jet bridge solo.

I told myself not to cry because that wouldn't help. I got a few sympathetic looks as people stepped over and around us to get on their flight. Finally, a woman knelt down and asked, "Can I help you?" I wanted to say no. But I was about to lose it, fighting back tears. Considering how obviously desperate I was, I knew it would be ridiculous—and honestly inconsiderate to everyone in whose way we sat—to reject it. "Actually, yes," I said. Another woman behind her followed her cue and offered to carry my other bag. The one who first offered help said, "I'm a mom too. I've been there." I was thankful.

"I've been there." That changes everything, doesn't it? There was a time when I hadn't been there. Before I had kids, I'm embarrassed to say that when I heard babies screaming on planes or running around chaotically in airports I thought, "Why do parents travel with little kids?" Or "Just give them some Benadryl!" I laugh at myself now, realizing how little I understood then. I had no idea at the time that those parents feel a great deal more stress and frustration than I did at their child's behavior. I didn't

consider that the child may be tired, scared, overwhelmed, or stressed herself. I had no concept of these things, because I hadn't been there.

You're more likely to understand someone's position—their perspective, feelings, and needs—when you experience what they've experienced. Even if you haven't lived through the same struggle, you can still try to imagine their pain and offer help. The ability to place yourself in another person's shoes—with or without having had a similar experience—is typically called “empathy.”

By this definition, empathy is a powerful motivation to love those around you. It precludes unfair criticism and presumptuousness and motivates us to help people who need it. This kind of empathy can help us become better neighbors, friends, and parents, as we consider how to treat people the way we'd like to be treated. This isn't so different from Jesus's command to “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Just as we naturally seek to meet our own needs, we should seek to meet the needs of others.

Some of the most memorable heroes in history have been those who

were, in part, motivated by empathy. Corrie ten Boom, in her biography, *The Hiding Place*, recounts the intense compassion she and her family felt for the Jews fleeing from the Nazis. While they were moved by a Christian obligation to oppose injustice, it was their love for vulnerable Jews and their belief in their shared humanity that compelled them to hide Jewish people in their home. They saw and felt the pain of their Jewish neighbors and placed themselves in front of the target.

In a way, Jesus embodied empathy when he took on flesh, suffered the human experience, and bore the burden of our sins by enduring a gruesome death. Hebrews 4:15 describes Jesus as a great high priest who is able to empathize with our weaknesses, who was tempted in every way as we are, yet was without sin.

But empathy alone is a terrible guide. It may be part of what inspires us to do good, but it's just an emotion and, like all emotions, is highly susceptible to manipulation. That's exactly what's happening today.

Empathy has been hijacked for the purpose of conforming well-intentioned

people to particular political agendas. Specifically, it's been co-opted by the progressive wing of American society to convince people that the progressive position is exclusively the one of kindness and morality.

I call it toxic empathy.

Toxic Empathy

If you really care about women, you'll support their right to choose.

If you really respect people, you'll use preferred pronouns.

If you're really a kind person, you'll celebrate all love.

If you're really compassionate, you'll welcome the immigrant.

If you're really a Christian, you'll fight for social justice.

You're probably familiar with this line of thinking. The goal of statements

like these—examples of toxic empathy—is to get us to suppress our

opposition to a particular issue or point of view by playing upon our desire to

be a good person.

No one wants to be seen as unempathetic, because a person who

completely lacks empathy may be a narcissist. They're unable to see anyone

else's point of view and refuse to bear their suffering. They're selfish and coldhearted. They ignore the struggling mom lugging her bags and her toddler down the crowded jet bridge.

That's why toxic empathy is so persuasive. It extorts a real and good desire that most people have, which is to be, and to be perceived as, kind.

But empathy and kindness are not synonymous, and neither are empathy and compassion. Kindness describes how we treat someone, either in word or deed. Compassion means to suffer with someone who's struggling. Both kindness and compassion are necessary components of love. But empathy literally means to *be in the feelings* of another person. Empathy by itself is neither loving nor kind; it's just an emotion. Love, on the other hand, is a conscious choice to seek good for another person.

The erroneous conflation of love and empathy has convinced the masses that to be loving, we must feel the same way they do. Toxic empathy says we must not only share their feelings, but affirm their feelings and choices as valid, justified, and good. This confusion has not only made us a morally lost

people but it's also harmed the very people empathy-mongers claim they're trying to help: the truly marginalized and vulnerable.

Empathy for a desperate, pregnant woman may lead us to support her choice to have an abortion. But this empathy can blind us to the reality that abortion is a brutal procedure that kills a valuable person and leaves a woman with physical, emotional, and spiritual scars.

While empathy for someone who is deceived about their gender may lead us to affirm their stated identity, it is not possible to become the opposite sex, and this lie leads to policies that compound their deception and jeopardize the safety of women and children.

While empathy for a gay person may bid us to celebrate their lifestyle, redefining the family endangers children and can inhibit gay-identifying people from repenting and following Christ.

While empathy for the immigrant may tempt us to open our borders, that kind of immigration policy is dangerous both for America and for the people trying to come here.

Toxic empathy claims the only way to love racial minorities is to advance social justice, but “justice” that shows partiality to the poor or those perceived as oppressed only leads to societal chaos.

Empathy can help us see their perspective and foster compassion, but that’s all it can do. It can’t guide us into making the right decisions or donning the wise, moral, or biblical position. Toxic empathy bullies us into believing that the unwise, immoral, and unbiblical position is actually the righteous one.

I’ve found myself compelled by toxic empathy arguments on each of these issues at different points of my life. Like you, I want to be kind, and any accusation that I may lack empathy hurts. I’ve always had a heart for the underdog. I hate bullies. Because of that, I’ve had the propensity to be persuaded by emotional arguments from people claiming to be champions of the downcast. But as I’ve learned more about these subjects, I’ve realized how vital it is to push past superficial, feelings-based arguments and to pursue what is good, right, and true.

Christians are called to love, not just empathy. While empathy may help us love, it is not love itself. Empathy feels pain, but love always “rejoices with the truth” (1 Cor. 13:6). We must seek and speak the truth in love (Eph. 4:15). Because God is love and is the Source of truth, we can only embody this truth-and-love dichotomy to which we’re commanded by defining both love and truth as He defines them (1 John 4:8). We look to His Word—not our feelings—as our guide in all things, including the hot-button cultural and political issues of our day.

As we’ll see again and again, progressive positions are often—if not always—untruthful and unbiblical and are, therefore, also unloving. They sound good and often begin with good intentions, but they obscure the entire truth, convincing people to vote for policies—and embrace lifestyles—that are ultimately destructive.

To love means to want what is best for a person, as God defines “best.”

God’s definition of what is good and loving will almost always contradict the world’s definition, which will inevitably put us at odds with mainstream

culture. While this is uncomfortable, the sacrifice is worth it. The truth can change lives.

I have the privilege of writing and speaking for a living. On my podcast,

Relatable, where I analyze culture and politics through a biblical lens, I often

hear from readers and listeners who tell me God used something said on the

show to change their mind. One of these listeners is Daisy Strongin, a young

woman who, as a teen, began “identifying” as a man. At age eighteen, she

started on testosterone. She underwent a double mastectomy at age twenty.

She soon realized that her dramatic transformation didn’t give her the

satisfaction and confidence for which she longed. By 2021, she’d

detransitioned and become a Christian. In 2023, she messaged me on

Instagram and told me *Relatable* played a major role in her acceptance of her God-given gender.

She first listened in 2019. “I originally started listening because I thought

you were nutty, to be honest,” her message read. “But then for some reason I

kept listening and found that I was struggling to rebut you in my head.” She

didn’t just wrestle with my arguments about gender; she also felt convicted

by the theology-focused episodes as she struggled to reconcile her feelings with Christianity. Eventually, her mind and heart changed, and the Lord called her to repentance. She stopped denying her femininity and embraced her true gender, as well as her real identity as God's child.

Over the years, I've received thousands of similar messages—some about abortion, some about gender and sexuality, some about reproductive technology, and others about faith. Listeners and readers thought one thing and then were convinced of the opposing position either by things I said or by a point made by a guest on my show.

God gets the credit for changed hearts and minds, because He alone gives growth to the seeds planted by the truth spoken in love (1 Cor. 3:7). His Word never returns void; it will always accomplish what He wills (Isa. 55:11).

That means when we tell the truth as He defines it, no matter how nervous we are or how uncomfortable it is, it will bear fruit in accordance with His perfect will. We may not see the immediate results of our obedience, but we can rest assured that God uses every lovingly truthful word spoken to bring