

Empathy vs. Sympathy

(January 29, 2026)

“For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin.” (Hebrews 4:15)
Jesus is a sympathetic High Priest.

It is my hope that we will better understand the healthy use of empathy in relationships. However, there are a few similar concepts that can cause confusion and eventually undermine relationships if we don't understand them properly. The most common one is the word “sympathy.”

Sympathy means “same feelings.” When a 2-year-old child cries because they see their mother cry, they are demonstrating sympathy. Sympathy may or may not involve empathy, because a person in sympathy may or may not understand the feelings they are sympathizing with. The key component of empathy is understanding, which sympathy alone may lack.

The benefit of sympathy is that it can help us develop a deep understanding of another person's feelings or experiences. If we have personally felt what someone else is feeling, we may better understand their experience. Childbirth produces feelings that no man can fully empathize with, because it is impossible for them to have experienced the same pain.

However, the detriment of sympathy is that it can cause us to lose our objectivity. Sympathy can lead to enmeshment and loss of boundaries which often drives over-functioning. It can also cause us to lose our sense of ourselves, our convictions, and our values which might lead us to make decisions that we regret later. Sympathy without boundaries is dangerous.

Jesus could “sympathize with our weakness,” but it never led Him to endorse our sin.
Empathy prevailed...and it led to our salvation.