



1. The heart of care

[8.00] Welcome and arrivals

Introduction

[8.05] How the course will work:

Welcome and thank you for being part of this course. Please feel free to have your video switched on or off as you prefer during our time together. We'll have some times of input in a big group like this, and other times in some small groups. In the small group discussion feel free to share as much or as little as you feel comfortable. Don't feel in any way pressured to share more than you want to. While we are in the large group it would be helpful to put yourself on mute to avoid any distractions.

This course is all about loving others with the love of God. Over the next four weeks we are going to look very practically at how we can do that well. Here's the outline of the course. And we are going to start with the foundation, the heart of care.

Scenario

You get into conversation with a friend of yours, Jane, after church one Sunday. Jane is anxious and worried about her job security, with another round of redundancy happening at work. She is concerned about her mortgage payments if she lost her job. As she talks, however, she also begins to open up to you about her father, who she tells you has just been diagnosed with cancer.

[8.10] **Discuss** [10 min]: Introduce yourselves. What does this person need?

[8.20] The reason I wanted to start with Jane is because we tend to approach a pastoral situation like Jane's by thinking "What do I need to *do* for this person?" It's not a bad question, and it springs from a desire to help a fellow brother or sister in need.

But before we get to what we might do, a better question to ask ourselves is this: "What is *God* doing in this person?" Because it would seem good, if we know what God's intention and purpose is for this person, then we can pursue the same aim.

So what *is* God up to in the life of someone who is suffering?

"Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope." (Romans 5:3–4)

Paul says we can 'glory' or 'boast' in our sufferings – not that sufferings and struggles are somehow a wonderful enjoyable thing, ('yay, suffering!') Rather, we can have great confidence in the midst of our suffering, because we know that God is at work within it.

God is at work, producing something in our suffering and struggles. Suffering produces first of all perseverance – we will never see that we stand firm in our faith unless we go through times where that is not easy. Suffering also produces character, which has the sense of something that has been tested and refined by the process. The crucible of suffering is the place where our character and trust in God is tested and refined and made stronger. And so is our hope in God, which is the final thing that Paul highlights here.

"Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything." (James 1:2–4)

James gives the same sentiment as Paul, "Consider it pure joy..." – not because the trials are pleasant or easy, but because there is a purpose in them. Once

again they produce the fruit of perseverance. And that fruit of perseverance in a Christian's life has the end goal of completeness and maturity.

God's goal in the suffering person's life is to make them mature in Christ; to ensure that they do not lack anything of the riches that Christ has for them.

And if that is God's goal and aim for a person who is struggling, then it ought to be our aim to. There may be many other things we can, and ought, to do for them. But our main aim is to take people to Christ and to grow in maturity and walk with him.

Actually, that is God's aim for everyone, whether they are struggling or not! God isn't really doing something different with a person who is suffering. He hasn't changed his plan.

This is important for us to get our heads around. Because I often think of struggles and suffering as obstacles. Certainly they are painful and difficult, but they don't stop God working. We don't need to try and solve people's problems before God can be at work in their lives. Instead we need to see how God is already at work in and through them.

This is a course all about 'pastoral care' but we haven't said that a lot as we have advertised it. That's because pastoral care can often seem scary, difficult and something to be left to experts.

But think for a moment about what we've seen already. What *is* pastoral care? It is simply 'discipleship in difficult times'. But most times are difficult times, aren't they? So pastoral care is really helping people follow Jesus whatever the situation is.

I like this definition of pastoral care because it helps us to see that it is something we are all involved with. There is certainly a need for experts and professionals. And we'll consider later in the course how and when we should call in other help.

Don't forget what you are **not**: you are not this person's doctor. You are not their nurse. You are not their financial advisor. You are not their social worker. Above all, you are not their saviour. You cannot fix anyone! Only Jesus can do that. He is the ultimate caregiver.

But you **are** this person's friend. You are their brother or sister in Christ. You are God's instrument to his work in their life. What a privilege that is!

At its the heart, caring for others is not an expert's job but a calling for everyone. It is not about a person to fix, or a situation to solve, but a heart to

which we minister God's grace. And the good news is that God has given us all we need to do this!

“His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature, having escaped the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.” (2 Peter 1:3–4)

We have everything we need for a godly life! There is all kinds of specialist advice we can gain from others, and there is certainly a place for that. But when it comes to living a godly life, growing in godliness, we have everything we need. And everything comes through ‘our knowledge of him who called us’. It comes through knowing God by his Son, who lived and died for us and rose again. We have everything we need for godliness through the gospel.

We may not be able to help people with financial assistance, or career advice, or housing. But we can help everyone with the gospel truth.

[8.30] **Discuss** [10 min]: How do we see this worked out in the lives of Timothy and Epaphroditus (Philippians 2:19–28)?

Getting messy

[8.40] Caring for people, and being involved in their lives is a messy business isn't it? It's

not an easy thing, nor is it a quick thing. It's long term, tricky, tiring stuff. And so it's often easier not to do it! To come to church, but not get to know people. To participate in a Bible study but not to participate in the mess of other people's lives

Look with me at a few verses from Philippians chapter 4:

I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. Yes, and I ask you, my true companion, help these women since they have contended at my side in the cause of the gospel, along with Clement and

the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life. (Philippians 4:2–3)

Here's a good example of caring for people – Euodia and Syntyche, who clearly have some major falling out. Paul counsels them to be of the same mind (and that this is possible!), and that this can happen only “in the Lord.”

But he also encourages the “true companion” (possibly a name) to help them. I'm sure he would have thought “Come on Paul, you're the expert, you sort them out!” But Paul knew that this was a person who God had already brought into these two women's lives. A person God was using and able to use and involve in the work he is doing in their lives.

[8.45] **Discuss** [5 min]: Who has God already brought alongside you for you to help them?

[8.50] We can often resist this though. In the movie 'About a boy' the main character is a single guy who enjoys not being wrapped up in other people's lives. Reflecting on those words from John Donne, “No man is an island” he says this

"In my opinion, all men are islands. And what's more, now's the time to be one. This is an island age. One hundred years ago, for instance, you had to depend upon other people... Whereas now, you see, you can make yourself a little island paradise. With the right supplies and more importantly, the right attitude, you can be sun-drenched, tropical, a magnet for young Swedish tourists... The sad fact is, like any island dweller, from time to time, I had to visit the mainland."

Or, to quote a song, by Simon and Garfunkel:

I've built walls,
A fortress deep and mighty,
That none may penetrate.
I have no need of friendship; friendship causes pain.
It's laughter and it's loving I disdain.
I am a rock,
I am an island.

Those might be extremes (or just honest expressions) but we are going to need to help people understand that getting messy and involved with each other's lives is important. Let's look a few reasons.

Because, first *Jesus did it*.

Certainly Jesus taught large crowds and ministered to large groups of people at particular occasions. But have you noticed how much time Jesus spends with individuals, addressing their issue and getting involved in the mess and muck of their lives? Whether it's the woman at the well in John 4, or the rich young ruler in Matthew 19 – Jesus gets messy with people.

Second reason: *for the good of others*.

My brothers and sisters, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring that person back, remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of their way will save them from death and cover over a multitude of sins. (James 5:19–20)

These are the closing words of James in his letter, and in many ways it sums up the aim of his letter. That as Christian believers, we are to be looking out for others, watching for them when they wander and doing what we can, under God, to bring them back.

Final reason: not only for the good of others, but also *for your good*.

I pray that your partnership with us in the faith may be effective in deepening your understanding of every good thing we share for the sake of Christ. Your love has given me

great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the Lord's people. (Philemon 6–7)

Paul writes to encourage Philemon in living out the Christian faith. He is going to ask for some specific action on Philemon's part when it comes to his slave, Onesimus. But first, he begins by noting the Christian love that Philemon has already exercised in his life. And do you notice the way that Paul describes that love: "you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the Lord's people."

Now the word that Paul uses here actually means to cease or to stop. And making the hearts of the Lord's people stop doesn't really sound like a good thing! But the sense that Paul is using here is to rest, or to soothe. To refresh the heart of others by making it calm or at peace. It is to stop in the sense of a relaxing holiday or a rest at the end of a day.

This is a wonderful picture of our task as Christian believers. Notice that Paul doesn't say this is Philemon's specific task – it is something that every Christian should be doing – refreshing the hearts of the Lord's people.

When someone comes to you with the circumstances of life, what they reveal is the state of their heart – what troubles them, what they think about themselves, about life, about God. We have the privilege of putting their hearts at rest,

These verses also give us a great motivation for caring for one another and investing in one another: it helps us grow as disciples.

"I pray that your partnership with us in the faith may be effective in deepening your understanding of every good thing we share for the sake of Christ." (v6)

In fact, 'with us' isn't in the original text. What Paul is urging is Philemon's partnership, not just with Paul and the other apostles, but with all Christians.

And

partnership is just another word for investing with and in other people.

At school, I used to have to play rugby. I wasn't very good at it and did all I could

to get out of it! My mother used to remark how my white rugby kit remained white at the end of the game. That's because I didn't get stuck in and get dirty!

We are called to get stuck in and get dirty in the mess of relationships.

What effect does this have? It deepens our understanding of every good thing we

share for the sake of Christ. It is a key way to deepen our understanding of the riches of the gospel and to grow as disciples of Jesus Christ.

Loving one another should be a mark of being a Christian believer. I was struck by these words from Tertullian, a church leader from AD 197:

But it is mainly the deeds of a love so noble that lead many to put a brand upon us. See, they say, how they love one another,

Companies are very concerned about their brands, and protecting their brands. I wonder if people will see our brand as love, to say of us, "See how the love one another."