

SIT-INS AMONG THE SHUTOUTS

Ezekiel 3:15

"Then I came to them of the captivity of Telabib, that dwelt by the river of Chebar, and I sat where they sat, and remained there astonished among them seven days" (Ezekiel 3:15).

It is my purpose to emphasize the encouraging possibility that you and I can vastly improve our ability to understand other people and to enter sympathetically into their lives. Ezekiel provides us with a splendid example of one who did it.

Ezekiel was just starting in that noblest of all callings, that of a preacher. For this task he had made great intellectual preparation. But God held him back until he had done one other thing, namely, put himself in the place of those to whom he was to minister, in order that he might learn the art of sympathy.

Ezekiel was called to his important work in days that were extremely dark and which also forbade men to entertain much hope for the future. Nebuchadnezzar had come up with his armies, ravaging their country, and leaving it waste and desolate. He had sacked the city of Jerusalem and destroyed the Temple, which for generations had been the pride and joy of every pious Jew. Large numbers had been marched off as hostages of the king and taken to Babylon. It seemed that a final and irrevocable blow had been struck at the people of God.

It was to these captives in exile, these refugees of war, who had lost their home, their freedom, and their hope, that Ezekiel was commissioned to go as God's messenger in a time of great crisis. This commission was one from which Ezekiel shrank in fear and trembling, as well he might when he stopped to consider its awful responsibilities. There they were, the heirs of God's great promises, in captivity eating the bitter bread of dependence. Living there as people for whom the light had gone out and the whole world had come to a dreary end, "they sat down and wept when they remembered Zion." Their voices sang to silence as they endeavored to sing the Lord's song in a foreign land. They were swallowed up in despair and hopelessness, refusing to believe that anything wonderful and inspiring was ever going to happen to them again. To them the future was a meaningless succession of tomorrow. Their thoughts were fixed upon the past, the good old days, the like of which they never expected to see again. They remembered the days when they had worshiped in the Temple on Mount Zion. As long as the Temple stood they had felt reasonably secure, but now it lay in ruins and it seemed that their last vestige of hope was gone.

But God was not unmindful of His people. He called and commissioned Ezekiel to carry to them His message of rebuke, warning, encouragement, comfort, and cheer. Ezekiel wanted to help them and give them hope, but God told him: "They will not listen to you, for they will not listen unto Me." Nevertheless, God wanted Ezekiel to go, for however reprobate and sinful people are, or however much they may have flouted the laws of God, they are never to be given up as hopeless cases. In fact, when there are men and women in the depths of despair and hopelessness God always wants one of His messengers to go and tell them of the wondrous possibilities the future may still have for them if only they will accept Christ as their Saviour and seek to do the Lord's will instead of their own will.

What a mission it was that Ezekiel was called and commissioned to undertake! It was a mission to rekindle hope in dependent hearts, and to rekindle their love to God

against Whom their hearts were hardened. As such it called for a sympathetic understanding of their woeful lot, a genuine concern for their well-being, and at the same time a courage to urge them to stand upon their feet and face the facts of life however hard and bitter they might be.

Ezekiel had heard the voice of God. Wondrous visions had been granted to him. He had been singled out as the one whom God would have to pass on to His people the divine message. Was he not, therefore, fitted to begin his God-given task? No, not yet. Something else was necessary. The divine hand had been laid upon him. He was in touch with God, but before he could speak effectively to his fellow exiles it was absolutely necessary for him to be in touch with them also. He was not prepared to enter upon the great work of his life until he had learned the important lesson of sympathy. It was as Richard Baxter expressed it, after he had gone through a great sorrow, "I will not listen to any man who has not felt what I have felt." So, it was mandatory that Ezekiel go down among the children of the captivity, understand their circumstances, sit where they sat, put himself in their places, and see with their eyes. Before he could get them to listen to him, and before he could lift them up to the height of his own vision, he must himself feel the depths of their despair.

So, Ezekiel went down to live with the captives. He became a captive too. He let the blows of humiliation that fell on their backs fall on his. He put himself in their places, sat where they sat, looked at the world through their eyes until he felt what they felt. The fearful spectacle of their distress and grief overwhelmed him with amazement. When he sat where they sat, it brought him a widened viewpoint, and a widened sympathy. He did not know what to say, so he did not say anything.

Ezekiel was a sit-in among the shutouts. There they were, exiles, a shut-out people and a man knowing he must sit-in with them to learn the language of their tears. He learned their particular difficulties, and he gained their point of view. He put himself in their places, heard with their ears, saw with their eyes, and sat where they sat. And don't write it off as a bit of ancient history, for it is a parable of a need which is growing deeper every year with a world growing smaller, and its people getting closer and closer in physical proximity. And it is the task of every person who has caught the spirit of Christ. The difference that Christ makes is deep down in the area of the feelings and sympathies. Christ enables His followers to put themselves in the other person's place.

Christ widens our sympathies by quickening our powers of imagination. The gift of imagination enables us to switch places with other people, and see others as we see ourselves. Children have that in abundance. The underlying psychology of children's play lies almost wholly in imagination, the power to project themselves into the role of other people--cowboys, Indians, and astronauts. Give a little girl a doll and immediately she sits where mother sits, feels herself into the role of somebody else. It is a wonderful gift. We are born with it. Some manage to keep this gift and find it useful in business. The advertisers sell us a lot of stuff we do not need with their uncanny ability to put themselves in our places and to know what is going on in our minds. In business imagination is a useful and indispensable gift.

Only those who have been there understand and can help. Have you ever tried to help someone through a great trouble of which you knew nothing? Sometimes with our clumsy words we succeed only in deepening the trouble. But let someone come along who has been through that trouble or experience, he doesn't have to say anything, his hand clasp is enough.

In our dealings with mankind, sympathy is the great lesson we all need to learn. If we would help, we can only hope to do so along the line of sympathy. The hardest heart can be unlocked, but the key to it is sympathy.

We must try to learn the art of appreciation. Christ comes right down into our surging life, trying to get us to look beyond our little fences and widen our understanding of people who live outside them. Most people in modern life move in circles made up of people like themselves, and know very little of what happens outside their fence.

We must try to put ourselves in the place of others to realize in some measure their circumstances, their limitations, and their difficulties. Then, we shall be able to treat them in a manner infinitely more tender, more sympathetic, and more kind. Life is poor and empty unless we are prepared to share its joys and sorrows with others. One can help others only as he sits with them, gets beneath their burdens and helps to lift them.

As far as possible we must try to realize what others are passing through--to sit where they sit. Personal, first-hand experiences give us the ability to comfort and to help. As we go about our daily duties, let us realize that there are hidden burdens and sorrows in the lives of those whom we meet. The man or woman who does not have a son in the military forces can never quite understand the strain upon the father and mother who have. Months ago one dear mother's heart was broken by the loss of her son. All of her friends sympathized with her at the time. One of those friends recently lost her own boy. She made her way to the mother who was first bereaved, and, when the tears would let her, said: "I thought I understood when I sympathized with you. But, I did not. I do now." She was sitting where the other sat.

I wonder if Ezekiel knew, as he sat there among the slaves, what a picture he was providing of the most sublime event of history--the divine sit-in--God coming to sit where we sit, and to feel what we feel.

Try to imagine what the presence of a godly man like Ezekiel meant to the sick and sorrowing and hopeless ones. His presence, his prayers, his sympathy, his counsel, and his hopefulness must have meant so much to them. Have you learned from experience that you can help people most by going to them and, if need be, by sitting with them? You can render a wonderful service by going into a room where a shut-in stays, and sitting down a little while and saying some heartening things and maybe rendering some needed service. Did it ever occur to you that some sick person is looking for you, and is terribly disappointed because you do not come? Go, I beseech you, and sit there where such a one sits, and, if possible, say or do something that will give that dear one new heart and hope. Christ said: "Inasmuch as ye did it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye did it unto me."

"I sat where they sat." How looks the world from the windows of the sickroom? How does it look to him whose every breath is one of pain? How does it look to him who knows he will never be well again? How does it look to the one who is imprisoned by disease and knows he will never get out again from the narrow precincts of the sick room until he is taken out to the yet narrower house in the cemetery? We who are well and strong need frequently to put ourselves in the place of the sick and suffering. If you really want to help somebody, then sit where he sits.

May God help us, His children, to do whatever lies in our power, to speak the friendly and encouraging word, and to perform the kindly deed. He alone knows how great is the need and He alone knows how far the fragrance of such may spread.

"Down in the human heart, crushed by the tempter,
Feelings lie buried that grace can restore;
Touched by a loving heart, wakened by kindness,
Chords that were broken will vibrate once more."