



Lesson 5 Being Understood

This week, we're going to focus on those who are caring for people with mental health challenges. We'll be looking at how Jesus responds to two struggling parents. There will be a brief introduction to the area of addiction and also look at the question of 'negative' emotions in the life of a Christian.

Read Luke 7:11-15 and Luke 8:40-42 & 49-56

Think about the following questions:

Before they meet Jesus, what do you imagine is going through the minds of the widow in Luke 7 and Jairus in Luke 8?

Have you supported a loved one through serious illness? What was it like?

What is Jesus' response to these two parents?

On top of her raw grief, the widow of Nain must have also been thinking about her fragile future - without husband or son, she faced a future that was financially insecure and socially isolated.

And those experiences are often shared by those who love people with mental health problems: If the person is unable to work, or if the carer needs to take time off, then there can be a real financial impact.

And if the person doesn't want to leave the house or spend time with friends, then there will be a major social impact on the carer too.

Jairus leaves his daughter's side to beg Jesus for help. He's made the agonising decision to leave his daughter in her dying moments to seek help.

Tough choices are often part of the care experience - especially as carers are often torn between the demands of love and loyalty and their own well-being.

How many people do we know that are going through similar challenges?

The partner of someone with depression • A parent of someone who is self-harming • The child of someone with dementia.

With both of these parents, we see Jesus act with great understanding. We read that Jesus' heart goes out to the widow - He was moved and He got involved.

Introduction to addiction

How common do you think addiction is? In a group of 100 people in the Australia on average there may be 19 people chemically addicted to nicotine, six people addicted to alcohol and one to other drugs, including prescription medication. On top of that, people can become psychologically addicted to pornography, gambling or food: anything that has an instant reward attached can become addictive.

Those numbers tell us that throughout our community, and indeed, within our church family, there will be many struggling with addiction - either themselves or of a family member or friend.

What causes addiction? Addiction can happen to anyone - there is no simple single cause. Sometimes there can be evidence of a genetic link in families but trauma and loss, particularly in childhood and adolescence, can increase risk. Peer group pressure and easy availability of a substance or activity can start an addiction.

Mental health problems and addiction often happen together – sometimes the mental illness comes first, sometimes the addiction does; it may be impossible to tell.

Some substances and activities are more addictive than others and often people describe going from one addiction to another.

What are the consequences of addiction? Some addictions are more destructive than others. Common consequences of drug and alcohol-based addictions include: physical and mental health problems, relationship and family breakdown, neglect of self and/or others, poverty and debt, homelessness, unemployment, offending (including violence) and imprisonment, poor self-worth and hopelessness.

On top of all this, addiction can have a devastating impact on an addict's family and community life. Can it be treated? Yes! Treatment is available for drug, alcohol and nicotine addictions in particular.

Recovery from addiction is generally a long-term prospect rather than a short-term fix, needing specialised help that can include medical treatment and talking therapies as well as learning new behaviours and forming new relationships. This may involve detoxification and rehabilitation – at home or in a residential setting – and prescribed medication.

Although treatment is available, recovery happens at different rates for different people, and we must recognise that for many, the first attempt to manage their substance use is only the start of a long journey.

Community drug and alcohol services will be available locally and people can self refer or go through a health professional such as their GP. Peer support groups can also be very useful, including Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous and many other similar groups.

Other addictions such as gambling and pornography are not as well catered for by the NHS, but many local or national self-help groups are available.

The number of church-based ministries and courses is increasing in an attempt to plug some of the gaps and also provide high quality care for people.

What about faith? Being a Christian does not offer immunity to addiction. There will be a significant number of addicted people in churches, although often hidden due to shame or denial and perhaps the feeling that they might be looked down upon or judged. Supporting those struggling with addictions is also an important part of outreach and mission.

One of the most important factors in recovery is for someone to be surrounded by people who will care and help them appropriately. The church community should be ideal for this – but it needs to be equipped to be competent and compassionate in helping people with addictions. In this context, good leadership, prayer and practical support are essential.

Addiction can be overcome and the person restored to fullness of life and hope for the future. There are many people who have recovered from many forms of addiction who can testify that this is true.

The Bible says 'Do not worry', 'Do not be afraid', 'Do not let your heart be troubled', 'Be slow to anger'. Some might say that Christians should not experience negative emotions.

What do you think? Notes: "I know I'm not really supposed to feel like this..." How many times have we heard that, or said it ourselves. Are there some emotions which Christians are not 'supposed' to feel?

Emotions have a big influence upon us and our lives. Although some Christians mistakenly believe that they should never feel emotions such as fear, anger, guilt, worry and sadness, they are an essential part of normal life and of the way our brains were designed to work. Whilst the need to sometimes suppress emotions 'in the moment' is a healthy part of adult emotional maturity, if denying, repressing or suppressing our emotions is the only way we know to manage them, we place ourselves at risk of harm later on.

When we read the gospels we find Jesus to be a man who experiences a full range of emotions – even the 'negative' ones:

- He shed tears (John 11:35)
- He grieved (Luke 23:28)
- He was angry (Mark 3:5)
- Anguish and sadness came over him (Matt 26:37)
- He showed astonishment and wonder (Luke 7:9)
- He felt deep emotional distress (Mark 3:5).

Of course, emotions are not an end in themselves: they trigger and prompt actions. The Bible does not condemn our emotions but it does

hold us accountable for what we do next: 'In your anger, do not sin'

Ephesians 4:26

Challenge: What can we learn from Jesus' approach to both Jairus and the widow?

How can we better notice those in our community who are carrying the heavy burden of care?

How as a church can we support those who are caring for friends or relatives with mental health problems?

Meditation

Think of a time when you felt that you were carrying a big burden of responsibility. Perhaps you were looking after a friend or family member. - What was going on? - How did you feel? - Did anyone reach out to you with understanding?

Now think of someone that you know who is caring for someone with mental health problems. It might not be a full-time role, but someone who carries that burden of worry. - How could you help them feel understood? Is there anything you could do to comfort and support them?

Closing prayer Almighty God, We pray for those who give care to family members and friends living with mental illness. May they feel your loving hand and your sustaining and nurturing power. May they feel less frustrated and experience less guilt for very human feelings they may have about wanting to escape their tasks. May they find us eager to support them in the midst of their difficult tasks. May we always encourage them as they grasp hold of an identity of worth and value even when community seems to desert them and their loved one. Save

us from our ignorance, Lord, that we may not ignore our friends because they live with pain that we do not understand, but rather help us to see that they are people of great courage and love who are trying desperately to care for a family member or friend. Thank you for the many contributions persons who care for folks in mental distress bring to the lives of their loved ones. Help us to learn from their examples of patience, strength, compassion, and faith. Amen