

Study Guide and Commentary

ACIM® Text, Chapter 16, Section I

True Empathy

Legend:

blue text = Material from ACIM 3rd edition (FIP)

bold blue text = words emphasized in all caps in Urtext

red text = alternate or omitted material from the Urtext

light blue text = editorial comments

~~strikethrough blue text~~ = Not in Urtext, in FIP edition

Overview of the Section

The Chapter title is, “The Forgiveness of Illusions.” It seems to be based primarily on the prayer given at the end of the chapter, which begins with the words, “Forgive us our illusions, Father.” The concept of illusions, however, runs through the chapter. In this section, it takes the form of realizing that *suffering* is an illusion, and not something we want to share.

Paragraph 1

1. 1To empathize does **not** mean to **join in suffering**, for that is what you must **refuse** to understand. 2That is the **ego's** interpretation of empathy, and is **always** used to form a special relationship in which the *suffering* [Ur: in which **suffering**] is shared. 3The **capacity** to empathize is **very** useful to the Holy Spirit, provided you let Him use it in His way. 4**His way is very different**. 5He does **not** understand suffering, and would have you teach **it is not understandable**. 6When He relates through you, He does **not** relate through your ego to another ego. 7He does not join in pain, ~~understanding~~ **[knowing]** that **healing** pain is **not** accomplished by delusional attempts to **enter into it**, and lighten it by *sharing* the delusion.

• Study Question •

1. What does the Course say that empathy is not:
 - A. Joining in pain
 - B. Relating with our ego to another person's ego
 - C. Sharing another's suffering
 - D. All of the above

This paragraph corrects our normal understanding of empathy. Empathy is normally defined as “Identification with and understanding of another's situation, feelings, and motives” (American Heritage Dictionary). This would commonly include the idea of sympathy or pity, *identifying* with or joining in another's pain and suffering. “Oh, I so understand how you feel! It must be *awful!*” That is the common understanding of empathy. But Jesus goes right to the heart of the matter when he asserts that, “To empathize does *not* mean to *join in suffering*” (1:1). We've had it all wrong, we've had it backwards.

He continues by saying that suffering “is what you must *refuse* to understand” (1:1). It seems instinctual, and so loving, when we are confronted with someone who is suffering, to commiserate with them. But that, he says, “is the *ego's* interpretation of empathy” (1:2). The word *commiserate* literally means “to lament with,” from the Latin words “com” (with) and “miserari” (lament), which in turn derives from the Latin “miser” (wretched). So when we empathize in the sense of commiserating, we are choosing to be wretched with them, to lament with them. We are in fact forming a special relationship with the person who is suffering by *sharing their suffering* (1:2). And that, says Jesus, is definitely *not* true empathy. We are lending support to their suffering and, in so doing, whether we realize it or not, we are supporting *an illusion*. (I'll come back to the notion of suffering as illusion in a moment, when I discuss 1:7.) Notice here that we are talking about a form of *special relationship*, thus carrying on the theme from Chapter 15.

Empathy is not a bad thing, however! The capacity to empathize is a gift of God, and the Holy Spirit can use it profitably if we allow Him to use it in His own way, rather than following the ego's idea of empathy (1:3). Empathy-Holy-Spirit-style *is very different* from the ego's way (1:4). Jesus does not really spell out in detail, here or in the rest of the section, on exactly what Holy Spirit empathy looks like. He spends more time telling us what it *isn't*. As you will see as you read the section, you learn true empathy, not through reading about it in words, but by listening to your Inner Teacher. You don't have to figure it out. You let Spirit move you. There are certain general characteristics that identify true empathy, such as sharing *strength* instead of sharing weakness, being open and above board rather than private and hidden (“I really get you and why you are suffering, I understand you better than anyone else”), or refusing to validate suffering (1:5).

In our egos, we think that to empathize means to really understand someone's suffering. But Jesus is saying that suffering isn't understandable (1:5). It makes no sense;

in fact, it is *delusional* (1:7). I think that it helps here to distinguish between suffering and pain. Pain (within the illusion of physicality and separation) happens. I do not believe we are meant to deny that we feel pain. If I touch a boiling pot I am burned and I feel pain. If my back goes out, I feel pain. If my best friend dies, I feel pain. If someone I care about betrays me in some way, I feel pain.

In none of those instances, however, is it necessary for me to *suffer*. Suffering is an interpretation, not a fact. Suffering arises from the way in which I perceive the pain I am feeling.

I do believe that, ultimately, even pain itself is illusion because it only arises within the larger illusions of physicality and separation. Workbook lesson 190 says that in no uncertain terms: "Pain is illusion; joy, reality. Pain is but sleep; joy is awakening. Pain is deception; joy alone is truth" (W-pI.190.10:4-6). I think that suffering occurs when I validate my pain and make it real by identifying with it. Pain is always associated with the body or with the ego; you injure my body or you hurt my feelings. Because I identify with my body and my ego, I experience pain. To whatever degree I can know and accept that I am not my body and not my ego, I can leave pain behind.

I admit, I'm not there yet myself, but I do believe that is what the Course teaches is possible for all of us.

When the Holy Spirit uses our capacity for empathy, He does not:

- relate through your ego to another ego
- join in pain
- enter into another's pain
- share their delusion of pain.

Paragraph 2

2. ¹The clearest proof that empathy as the ego uses it is **destructive** lies in the fact that it is applied **only** to certain types of problems and in certain people. ²These it **selects out**, and **joins [forces] with**. ³And it **never** joins except to strengthen itself. ⁴Having identified with what it **thinks** it understands, the ego sees **itself** and would *increase* itself by sharing what is *like* itself. ⁵Make no mistake about this maneuver; the ego always **empathizes to weaken**, and to weaken is **always** to attack. ⁶You do **not** know what empathizing means. ⁷Yet of this you may be sure; if you will merely sit quietly by and let the Holy Spirit relate **through** you, you will **empathize with strength**, and will gain in strength and **not** in weakness.

• Study Question •

2. *How can we use our "capacity to empathize" (1:3) in a non-destructive way?*
- A. *Empathize only with the strength we perceive in people.*
- B. *Stop trying to control situations ourselves and allow the Holy Spirit to*

relate through us.

C. Choose differently to identify stronger people to empathize with.

Here we are told that we do not know what empathizing means (2:6). The ego's use of empathy (which is what most people mean by empathy) is actually an attack, designed to weaken another and to reinforce their weakness.

Ego Empathy Separates

The distinguishing mark of ego empathy is that it is separating; it selects certain people and situations to join with, often making common cause against someone or something else, which is implied by the phrase "joins forces with" (2:1-2). There are some people we sympathize with and some we do not, and some that only some of us sympathize with. One person sees a homeless person and "empathizes" and gives them money; another person turns away with a feeling of disapproval. I may feel sympathetic toward sick people but look down on people with financial problems. We do not empathize across the board. This selectivity, the Course says, *proves* that ego-based empathy is destructive. It reinforces the notion of victim/victimizer. We are in effect saying, "I join with you in the battle with your adversary."

Ego Empathy Strengthens Both Egos

If I call to mind some situation where I have "empathized" with another person in the ego's sense, by joining in their pain and commiserating with them, it helps me somewhat to understand the idea of empathy as a way of strengthening my own ego (2:3). When I look at how I feel in such a circumstance, there is a feeling of "specialness" about it. There is a special bond that forms between me and the other person; I think I understand them (2:4). And I am validating their pain, so in that sense, I am confirming its reality. When I validate the other person's sense of separation (their ego), I am validating my own ego as well (2:3-4). We pick the people we empathize with because our ego thinks that their ego is like our ego (2:4), so by validating *them* we are validating our own ego. By identifying with the other person's sense of victimization we are validating our *own* sense of victimhood.

Ego Empathy Is An Attack

The statement in 2:5 is startling, and we are told to make no mistake about it: "The ego always *empathizes to weaken*, and to weaken is *always* to attack." I am joining with the person in their perception of attack from something or someone: perhaps another, third person; perhaps a virus or germ or traitorous body part; perhaps an unfair society or unfair world; perhaps a malicious god. Suffering always seems to arise from the perception of oneself as a victim; don't you agree? Therefore, when I join in someone else's pain, I am validating their sense of weakness and vulnerability, am I not? That is why this kind of false empathy is really a form of attack!

Although we don't know what empathizing means, we *can* still "empathize with strength" if we are willing to "merely sit quietly by and let the Holy Spirit relate

through" us (2:7). I think we can empathize with strength in two ways: First, our spirit's strength will empower our empathy, and second, we will empathize with the strength of the other person, rather than with their weakness. Such true empathy results in an increase of strength in both parties.

Paragraph 3

3. ¹Your part is only to remember this; you do not want anything **you** value to come of a relationship. ²You choose neither to hurt it **nor to heal it** in your own way. ³You do **not** know what healing **is**. ⁴All you have learned of empathy **is from the past**. ⁵And there is **nothing** from the past that you would share, for there is nothing from the past that **you would keep**. ⁶Do **not** use empathy to **make the past real**, and so perpetuate it. ⁷Step gently aside, and let healing be done *for* you. ⁸Keep but one thought in mind and do not lose sight of it, however tempted you may be to judge any situation, and to **determine** your response **by** judging it. ⁹Focus your mind only on this:

¹⁰*I am not alone, and I would not intrude the past upon my Guest.*

¹¹*I have invited Him, and He is here.*

¹²*I need do nothing except **not to interfere**.*

• Study Question •

3. *Which one of the following is the best and most complete description of what the Course is asking us to do?*
- A. *Decide on the most healing response in any situation, and carry it out.*
 - B. *Do nothing at all, recognizing that all pain is illusion.*
 - C. *Set aside all our opinions of what should happen and allow the Holy Spirit to work through us without our interference*

Tough advice here! When Jesus tells us that we do not (really) want anything *we* (that is, our egos) value to come of a relationship, what is he really saying? Does he mean that we are to look at what we want to get out of a relationship and just forget all about it? Really?

Yes. Really.

This goes back to what was said earlier about not using any relationship for our own purposes, but allowing the Holy Spirit to use them for His purposes:

You can place any relationship under His care and be sure that it will not result in pain, if you offer Him your willingness to have it serve no need but His. All the guilt in it arises from your use of it. All the love from His. Do not, then, be afraid to let go your imagined needs, which would destroy the relationship (T-15.V.5:4-7).

I believe that when Jesus refers to “anything *you* value” in 3:1, he means the same thing he was speaking about in the passage just quoted as “your imagined needs” in the relationship. Forget what *you* think the relationship is for! Those things are actually destructive. and what we are asked to remember is that we really do not want them (3:1). The key point here is that, even in attempting to bring healing into a relationship, we must always remember to join first with the Holy Spirit, to connect with That within us that is more than our ego. If we attempt to heal “in [our] own way” (3:2) we will do damage, because as a separated self we cannot possibly know what healing really is (3:3).

The ego's understanding of empathy, being based on the past, is simply wrong. Ego empathy is not about loving feelings; it is about our ego joining with the other person's ego. It is saying, “I know just how you feel, because I've been hurt just as you have.” It makes the suffering (whatever the suffering may be) real. It makes their past real and it makes our own past real, and that, says Jesus, is exactly what we *don't* want to do (3:5–6).

We are asked to “step gently aside, and let healing be done *for you*” (3:7). The remainder of the section attempts to expand on this instruction, but in the end it is still necessarily vague. You are not going to end up studying this section with a clear understanding of what empathy is! There is no one-size-fits-all formula. Rather than being a set of instructions in what to *do*, it ends up being instructions in *how to be*, and part of that is accepting that you *don't know* what empathy is! Ultimately it comes down to scrupulously maintaining your close, intimate connection to the Holy Spirit, to the Guide Within, and giving up any pretense of being able to figure out what to do or say in any situation. At first, this may feel like doing trapeze acrobatics without a safety net. It seems dangerous to just “step gently aside,” “not intrude,” and “do nothing except *not to interfere*” (3:7–12). It also seems a little demeaning—but that's your ego speaking! Yet, very early in the Course, we were told:

His Voice will direct you very specifically. You will be told all you need to know (T-1.I.4:2-3).

And elsewhere, Jesus says,

You will be told exactly what God wills for you each time there is a choice to make (W-pII.361.5:3).

If there are plans to make, you will be told of them (W-pI.135.23:2).

Imagine a situation in which you might be called upon to sympathize with someone, or to empathize. Maybe the person has been terribly wronged by someone else. Maybe someone has died. Maybe the person is ill, or broke, or depressed, or has been jilted. Now, imagine going into that situation without planning, without deciding what to say in advance, recognizing clearly that you do not know how to practice true empathy, and so stepping aside, doing nothing, yet knowing with certainty that you are not going alone, but with a Skilled Guide, and for that reason, going determined not to interfere with the Voice for God within you. Imagine listening, and being told very specifically all you need

to know. That is what we are being asked to do.

Paragraph 4

4. ¹True empathy is of Him Who knows what it is. ²You will learn His interpretation of it if you let Him use **your** capacity [**the capacity of empathy**] for strength, and **not** for weakness. ³He will **not** desert you, but be sure that **you** desert not Him. ⁴Humility is strength in this sense only; that to recognize and **accept** the fact that you do **not** know is to recognize and accept the fact that He *does* know. ⁵You are not sure that He will do His part, because you have **never yet done yours completely**. ⁶You ~~cannot~~ [will *not*] know how to respond to what you do **not** understand. ⁷Be tempted not in this, and yield not to the ego's triumphant use of empathy for **its** glory.

• Study Question •

4. *We do not know what empathizing means, but the Holy Spirit does (4:1). We are uncertain that He will really act through us because we have never completely allowed Him to do so (4:5). Our greatest temptation in regard to empathy is thinking we understand it, and making our responses based on our understanding. What attitude in us does this paragraph seem to be emphasizing? (Choose the one best answer.)*
- A. *Allowing the Holy Spirit to use our capacities.*
 - B. *Recognizing and accepting the fact that we do not know what empathy is.*
 - C. *Doing our part completely.*

You do not know what true empathy is nor how to practice it; the Holy Spirit *does* know (4:1). You *can* learn His interpretation of it, but not by reading about it or thinking about it. You can learn only by allowing Him to practice empathy through you, having empathy for other people's strength rather than with their weakness (4:2). He will be there if *you* will be there, knowing that you do *not* know, accepting the fact that He *does* know, and allowing Him to speak and act through you (4:3). It is a very humble stance to take, and yet it is your strength (God's "strength is made perfect in weakness" said the Apostle Paul in II Corinthians 12:9) (4:4).

Why is it that we doubt that "He will *not* desert" us? Why are we afraid that, unless we prepare properly, we will be left dangling with nothing to say or do? It is because "you have *never yet done yours* [your part] *completely*" (4:5). We have never stepped gently aside. We have always had a backup plan, made by the ego and using the ego's judgment of the situation. And our judgment is going to be wrong, always: "You will *not* know how to respond to what you do *not* understand" (4:6).

Wisdom is not judgment; it is the relinquishment of judgment. Make then but one more judgment. It is this: There is Someone with you Whose judgment is

perfect. He does know all the facts; past, present and to come. He does know all the effects of His judgment on everyone and everything involved in any way. And He is wholly fair to everyone, for there is no distortion in His perception.

Therefore lay judgment down, not with regret but with a sigh of gratitude" (M-9.4:5-5:1).

Our ego loves these situations calling for empathy because they are great opportunities for self-aggrandizement, which is a big word for ego bloat. The ego uses empathy in a "triumphant" way (4:7) that we are advised to avoid. Just what that triumphant use is will be explained in what follows.

Paragraph 5

5. ¹The triumph of weakness is **not** what you would offer to a brother. ²And yet you recognize no triumph but this. ³This is **not** knowledge, and the form of empathy which would bring this about is so distorted that it would imprison what it would release. ⁴The unredeemed cannot redeem, yet they **have** a Redeemer. ⁵Attempt to teach Him not. ⁶**You** are the learner; He the Teacher. ⁷Do not confuse your role with His, for this will never bring peace to anyone. ⁸Offer your empathy to Him for it is **His** perception and ~~His strength~~ [*His strength*] that you would share. ⁹And let Him offer you **His** strength and **His** perception, to be shared **through** you.

• Study Question •

5. *Taking these first five paragraphs together, how would you describe true empathy and the way to experience it?*

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The ego's triumphant use of empathy is to glorify the weakness. It validates a person's consciousness of separation. It sides with the other person's ego so that they identify with their sense of weakness. This is *not* what we want to offer to others, and yet it is the only kind of empathy we know, unaided by the Holy Spirit (5:1–2). It does not release the other person from their suffering, it imprisons them within it (5:3).

You and I are not the redeemers, we are the ones being redeemed (in the sense of being released from slavery to our egos) and so we cannot redeem anyone else; the Holy Spirit is the only Redeemer (5:4). This is speaking in biblical terms, but the core meaning is that to experience true freedom from separated selfhood it is essential to connect with a Self that transcends ego entirely. Charles Fillmore (Unity's co-founder) pointed out that when we try, consciously, to reprogram our subconscious minds through affirmation and visualization, we are doing things backward. The subconscious, he said, is meant to be the slate that receives its images from the superconscious mind, the shared self. Or, in the Course's terms here, we (our conscious mind) must gently step aside and open to the

strength and perception of the Holy Spirit (the superconscious), which is then shared *through* us (5:4–9).

Paragraph 6

6. ¹The meaning of love is lost in any relationship that looks to weakness, and hopes to find love there. ²The **power** of love, which **is** its meaning, lies in the strength of God that hovers over it [**the relationship**] and blesses it silently by enveloping it in healing wings. ³**Let this be**, and do not try to substitute **your** “miracle” for this. ⁴~~I have~~ [We once] said that if a brother asks a foolish thing of you to do it. ⁵But be certain that this does **not** mean to do a foolish thing that would hurt either him or you, for what would hurt one **will** hurt the other. ⁶Foolish requests **are** foolish merely ~~because they conflict~~ [for the simple reason *that they conflict*], since they always contain some element of specialness. ⁷Only the Holy Spirit recognizes foolish needs **as well as** real ones. ⁸And He will teach you how to meet **both** without losing either.

• Study Question •

6. *Reference is made to an earlier statement (T-12.III.4:1) that “if a brother asks a foolish thing of you to do it.”*
- (a) How is that earlier statement amended or qualified here?*
- (b) Is there any indication that the Holy Spirit will sometimes guide us to meet a person’s perceived needs, even though those needs are not real? Support your answer from the paragraph.*

The first sentence here (6:1) means that when we think we are being loving by identifying with another person’s weakness in some way—practicing what usually passes for empathy—we have lost the meaning of love entirely. Rather than joining in lamenting the weakness, love focuses the attention on “the strength of God that hovers over” the relationship, “enveloping it in healing wings” (6:2). The image of “healing wings” is a biblical one, from Malachi 4:2: ¹ When confronted with a situation calling for empathy, then, our job is to foster the awareness of God’s healing strength, to simply “let this

¹ “Its [the sun’s] wings are a poetic image for the rays of this sun, bringing healing to all who come under its influence. Some suggest that ancient Near Eastern depictions of a winged sun disk are reflected in the image. Malachi’s readers probably would have thought this image predicted the sudden appearance of God himself, who is elsewhere compared to the sun (Ps. 84:11; Isa. 60:19–20; cf. Ps. 27:1; Isa. 60:1; Rev. 21:23). But Christian interpreters throughout the history of the church have understood this prophecy to be fulfilled in Christ, who is “the light of the world” (John 8:12; cf. John 1:4–6).” English Standard Version Study Bible, note on Malachi 4:2. The symbol is reflected, also, in the Unity Wings logo of the Unity Church.

be” (6:3) without attempting to add our cheapened brand of sympathy in a vain attempt at offering a miracle. (Note the quotation marks around the word “miracle.”)

Why do you suppose that, in this context discussing true empathy, Jesus suddenly refers to the earlier discussion about someone asking you to do a foolish (or “outrageous”) thing (6:4)²? The most likely explanation is that he considers a request for false empathy to be just such an outrageous, foolish request. And, so very often, when someone comes to us “for support,” what they expect to receive is false empathy, in which we validate their ego and, perhaps, side with them against some other person who has “wronged” them. And *that* is a foolish request.

Based on the earlier statement we might think that, foolish or not, we should just do it. But, to me, what is intended here is that because of the inevitable elements of conflict and specialness, offering false empathy is harmful both to the other person and to yourself; therefore, you should *not* comply (6:4–5).

Now, I think we need to be careful here. Most assuredly, this does not mean that we should respond with a self-righteous tone of spiritual superiority: “Oh! I can’t do that! What you really need, dear brother or sister, is to open yourself to God’s healing strength!” No. When the Holy Spirit responds, He can teach us how to meet *both* the real need (for God’s strength) and the foolish one (for sympathy) “without losing either” (6:6–8).

The Holy Spirit meets even our foolish needs, sometimes. I think when we are so caught up in our situation, with emotional or physical pain swirling around us, we may not be open to letting go of our imagined needs and opening to our real need: connection with God. We get so imbedded in weakness that strength seems inconceivable or even ludicrous. I can remember a time in my life, for instance, when my relationship with God was so riddled with doubt that just to open a Bible made me nauseous. When someone is in a situation like that, they can’t receive the higher gift; they need a “lower” one. I think that, at times, we must approach people in pain with caution, listening to the Holy Spirit, ready for some way to first meet their imagined need without compromising or “losing” the higher need. It may be nothing more than accepting them just as they are without any condemnation, overt or implied. Perhaps a loving hug, taking their hand, or just a smile. I can’t begin to give specifics. You have to listen in the moment to know how to respond. But for sure—no judgment. No condemnation. No rejection.

Paragraph 7

7. ¹You will attempt to do this *only in secrecy*. ²And you will think that by meeting the needs of one you do *not* jeopardize another, because you keep them *separate* and secret from each other. ³That is *not* the way, for it leads not to life and truth. ⁴No needs will long be left unmet if you leave them *all* to Him Whose *function* is to meet them. ⁵That is His function, and *not yours*. ⁶He will *not* meet them secretly, for He would share everything you give through Him. ⁷[Ur: And] That is *why* He gives it. ⁸What you give

2 Refers to T-12.III.2–4, specifically to 4:1.

through Him is for the whole Sonship, *not for part of it*. ⁹Leave Him His function, for He *will* fulfill it if you but ask Him to enter your relationships, and bless them *for* you.

• **Study Question** •

7. *What is the way we should respond, when there are apparently conflicting needs?*
 - A. *Try to figure out a compromise approach.*
 - B. *Ask the Holy Spirit to enter and bless our relationships, leave the meeting of needs to Him and don't try to meet them ourselves.*
 - C. *Recognize the impossibility of meeting conflicting needs, and choose which person's needs we will try to meet.*



The first few lines of this paragraph lead me to believe that when Jesus spoke, in 6:8, of meeting the needs of “both,” he had in mind not only the foolish versus the real needs, he also was referring to the needs of both *parties*, that is, the person asking for empathy and the other person who, in some way, is perceived as having brought them grief. The involvement of two people was already suggested in paragraph 6 by the mention of “specialness” and “conflict.”

So he goes on here to say that when meeting one person's imagined needs would conflict with the needs of other people, we usually try to meet the one person's needs *secretly*; we believe that by keeping it secret we are protecting the other person. Or, perhaps, we think we are protecting *ourselves* by not exposing the special treatment we are giving to the first person—perhaps taking their side in the conflict. This, says the paragraph, “is not the way.” Any true meeting of needs is something that is shared, openly, with the whole Sonship.

Answer Key

1. D
2. B
3. C
4. B
5. True empathy is not identifying with pain and suffering, which only strengthens their delusions, but identifying with the true strength in another person. We, on our own, do not know how to do this. The only way we can experience true empathy is to step out of the way, give up our control of the situation and our expectations about outcome, and allow the Holy Spirit to work through us without our interference. We offer our capacity to empathize to Him, receive His strength and perception, and allow that to be shared through us.
6. (a) We should do a foolish thing asked of us by a brother *unless* that thing will hurt either one of us, because what hurts one will hurt the other.
(b) Yes; the Holy Spirit recognizes foolish needs as well as real ones, and will teach us how to meet both real and foolish needs without bringing them into conflict. We will sometimes (if it is not harmful) be led to respond to the person's imagined need, and yet we will be able to meet their *real* needs (for the power of love and the strength of God) at the same time.
7. B