

# Stage 1

## IGNORANCE

You walk into a restaurant for a Saturday evening meal and notice that there's an open table. As the hostess escorts you to the table, you notice a young man at a neighboring table making a scene, incessantly making small hopping movements in his chair and occasionally rocking back and forth. You have no idea what might be prompting this person to do this, and you really don't want to know. You simply ask the hostess to find another table.

You are just leaving Sunday worship services when another member comes up to you and tells you about a wonderful seminar they just attended where everyone was encouraged to assess their church building's accessibility. They wonder if you'd help. What for, you answer. There's no disabled people here anyway.

You are annoyed. You pull into a parking lot, see a great spot

open up right near the door and pull up, only to see a sign saying “handicapped parking only.” Why do they even have all these spots, you say to yourself. It’s not like there’s that many people - and the people using those spots are probably just abusing the system, like always!

How are all of these examples of ignorance? Some might seem a tad insensitive, but ignorant?

## What is Ignorance?

Ignorance is ‘being blind’ to an issue or a concept. It is being uninformed, unaware, or disconnected. Ignorance is largely unintentional, and yet it is so simple to move past ignorance that it can appear intentional to stay there.

Ignorance is also a necessary first step in any journey. Before we can make any progress in anything, we must first get past the point where we have no understanding of it.

So, ignorance is necessary. There must always be a point where you are ignorant.

But hopefully, not for long.

Ignorance is a negative word for a good reason. No one who finds out that they’re ignorant about something wants to stay that way, or have others realize that they are, in fact, ignorant.

## What Keeps us Ignorant?

When we live life apart from people with disabilities, it can connect us to some troubling ways of thinking:

- We can think that people with disabilities are in their condition because of some sin of their's or their parents. Remember the disciples in John 9 ("Lord, who sinned, this man or his parents")? This is troubling thinking, and reflects the very same ignorance displayed by the Lord's disciples.
- We can think that people with disabilities can not be used by God. I thought this myself. My most fervent request of God was that He remove this speech impediment... this one little thing that kept me from being normal. I believed that being 'normal' was the only way in which God could really use me.
- We can think, inversely, that life without disability (or difficulty) is a reflection of God's blessing. We who seek to serve God wonder why He would allow us to experience difficulty after we have devoted ourselves to His service. Yet God clearly tells us that those who seek to serve the Lord will suffer (or be persecuted - see 2 Timothy 3:12).

These ways of thinking inform our actions. They prompt us to keep our distance. They compel us to keep apart from, and they

are dynamic in that these ignorant assumptions are actively dividing the family of God. They keep us from enjoying the full communion of His Kingdom.

## How Can I Move Beyond Ignorance?

### PRAY

Pray that God might open your eyes to the prevalence of people with disabilities.

- Pray that you might have the opportunity to connect with someone who lives with a disability.
- Pray that God might give you a heart of grace and mercy toward those who are different.

### REFLECT

- If 19% of the world's population is living with some kind of disability, why am I not connected to anyone who lives with a disability?
- In what ways have I ignored, been annoyed by, or do I lack empathy for people who live with disabilities?
- What conclusions do I jump to about people with disabilities? What role do I believe sin plays in the lives of people with disabilities?

- What do I assume about the value of people with disabilities?
- Does God have a purpose and plan for their lives?

## ACT

- Seek to be introduced to someone who has a disability. Don't pursue this as an opportunity to "have a disabled friend." Instead, please view this as an opportunity to simply establish a connection with a brother or sister in Christ. See others first as people, and second as people with differences.
- Read Mark 10 and Matthew 20. In both passages, we hear slightly different accounts of what appears to be the same story, in which Jesus restores sight to someone who is blind. In each story, the crowd rebukes the blind man to "be quiet." After you read this story, think about the ways you and your church have rebuked and ignored people who live with disabilities.
- Ask one other person (or, even better, ask your family) if they knew that 17% of your neighbors were living with some kind of disability. Ask them who they know who lives with a disability.

## Questions to Consider

What is your attitude toward people with disabilities? Can you remember the last time you treated someone with disabilities out of an attitude of ignorance? What leads you to believe that people with disabilities have no place in your life?

## Resources

Here are some other resources that can help you move beyond ignorance:

- *Dancing with Max*, a book by Emily Colson in which she shares life with her son Max, who has autism.
- *Sunshine Down*, by Gillian Marchenko. Gillian shares not only the challenges of life after giving birth to a daughter who has Down Syndrome, but also shares a very raw account of her own personal challenges from that moment forward.
- Check out *Irresistible Church*, a blog and resource website put together by Joni and Friends. This site will introduce you to what a welcoming church really looks like.



## SECTION 2

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PITY

*Pity means when you feel sorry for someone like in a wheelchair.  
You feel compassionate for that person.*

*A lot of times when you are in a restaurant, and you get ignored,  
you get shoved in a corner, because they think I'm more different  
than they are.*

*I feel angry but I always felt different.*

*Bob,  
Co-laborer  
Elim Christian Services*

## Stage 2

### ~~PITY~~

Over the last twenty years, I have guided thousands of visitors on tours of Elim's ministry and the resources we provide to people with disabilities, and to those who serve them. In all those tours, there is always someone who is stuck. They are in a viewpoint rut and they can't get out. They look around at Elim, and all they see is reason to despair, to feel sorry and hopeless, to wish that God would either heal them (our folks with disabilities) or take them home to be eternally healed.

I can understand how they get stuck in that mindset. I get in that same rut myself sometimes. The viewpoint they're stuck on is what I call "pity," the second stage on the journey of disability attitudes. Pity is a necessary and important step in the disability attitudes journey. In fact, pity—as negative as I make it sound—is a good thing. God commands us to show pity to those in need.

*“He will take pity on the weak and the needy and save the needy from death”*

*-Psalm 72:13*

Not only does the Bible teach us to show pity, but there is a sound reason to do so. Where there is weakness or frailty, we must take extra care. And let's not be so misguided as to think that disability does not include weakness. It most certainly does.

If the Bible calls us to show pity to those who experience weakness or suffering, and we accept that people who have disabilities have weakness, then pity is a necessary and important step in the journey of disability attitudes.

## Don't get Stuck in Negative Pity

But there is a problem with pity. It is very easy to get stuck there.

Pity feeds on itself. Whether you feel sorry for others or for yourself, it is often because you see no other way around it, except to feel pity.

While pity is necessary, it is too often negative. It is a way of keeping our distance from people with disabilities. In fact, it often seems like negative pity is the only thing that keeps us from progressing in the journey of disability attitudes.

So what is negative pity?

Negative pity convinces us of one thing over and over again. “It’s just too bad.” And you keep thinking it and saying it whenever you see someone in a wheelchair, or struggling with behaviors, or unable to see what is happening around them. It’s just too bad.

It’s just too bad.

It’s just too bad.

It's Not Just Too Bad

And it is too bad. It's not good that we have disabilities. It is not good to have no ability to walk or run. It is not a good thing to be sightless when there are so many wonderful things to see, to be unable to communicate in a world that is rife with images and symbols and words that enrich our lives, by God's grace.

But it is more than just too bad. Unfortunately, negative pity never stops saying “It’s just too bad.”

But positive pity adds four words and a question mark:

*What can I do?*

Isn't that amazing? It can be (and in many ways is) that simple. The difference between negative and positive pity is four words

and a question mark. What can I do to help? What can I do to assist you in getting to your seat? What can I do to make sure you can communicate? What can I do?

It's so simple, and it gets us so far! The movement from negative pity to positive pity is the whole difference for many people. The inability to move beyond stage 2 is entirely wrapped up in the issue of negative pity.

## How can You Add Four Words and a Question Mark?

We know that pity is necessary. For that matter it is also important. It is not simple to live life with a disability. Those challenges will sometimes invite an attitude of pity. While pity is necessary, it all has both a positive quality and a negative quality. So what can you do to foster positive pity, and even move beyond it?

### PRAY

- Pray that God would show you how your pity keeps you 'apart from' people who live with disabilities.
- Pray for a spirit of openness to talk to a person who lives with disabilities, and to simply ask them about their day.

## REFLECT

- Why is “That’s too bad” so often the extent of my response to the challenges others face?
- How does negative pity keep me from getting to know people who live with disabilities?
- Are people with disabilities less valuable to God?

## ACT

- Read Luke 14:1-23. In both His discussion with the pharisees and His parable of the great banquet, what is Jesus telling us about people who live with disabilities? What is he saying about the place in the kingdom of God, if indeed they have one?
- Discuss the fact that people who live with disabilities are twice as likely to be unemployed and are 2.5 times as likely to live in poverty. Ask how this kind of injustice can be fixed.

## Questions to Consider

In what ways have you expressed negative pity about someone you perceive to have a more difficult life? What is your attitude about that person’s potential or capability? Share your thoughts in the comments section below.