

Love Based Generosity: Mercy Ministry Outside The Church

Luke 10:25-27

The Parable of the Good Samaritan is perhaps Jesus' most well known parable. The phrase "Good Samaritan" is widely understood, even in our secular culture, as someone who does a good deed to help their fellow man. While many people may not know that the phrase originates from Jesus' teaching in the New Testament, they will instantly recognize what the newspaper reporter or politician means when they sing the praises of a Good Samaritan. Because the phrase conjures up images of selfless dedication and mercy to those in need, men name hospitals, shelters, and countless Christian ministries after the Good Samaritan. Clearly there is something about the parable that strikes a chord with both believers and unbelievers alike.

The world is fascinated by Good Samaritans because there is something compelling about self sacrifice, especially in a world that is overrun with selfishness. Failing to understand this, there are many in the modern day church who have bent over backwards to accommodate the spirit of the age in their desire to gain the world's attention. Thinking that by doing so they might gain a wider audience for the gospel (which incidentally, they are often preaching something other than the gospel), they have brought this spirit into the churches, baptized it, and attempted to use it to achieve some worldly measure of success.

Does the world like contemporary music? Then they will bring it into the church and call it worship. Is the world preoccupied with self? Then they will preach man-centered, self-help sermons designed to make people feel good about themselves. Is the world skeptical of miracles? Then they will play down the supernatural aspect of the Bible and instead stress its morality. All this has resulted in the world being largely unimpressed. After all, for those things that it loves, the world is able to do a far better job of indulging itself, than the church could ever do. To be sure, Christians have a message that the world needs to hear and a power to love that they need to experience. But if we want the world to stand up and take notice of the message, then putting on a Christian rock concert is probably one of the last things we should be doing.

How did the early Christians get the attention of the world? In 360 AD, Emperor Julian the Apostate wrote a letter to Arsacius, his chief priest in Galatia. Permit me to take just a few moments to read from Julian's letter.

The religion of the Greeks does not yet prosper as I would wish... Why then do we... not observe how the kindness of Christians to strangers, their care for the burial of their dead, and the sobriety of their lifestyle have done the most to advance their cause?

Each of these things, I think, ought really to be practiced by us. It is not sufficient for you alone to practice them, but so must all the priests in Galatia [in modern Turkey] without exception. Either make these men good by shaming them, persuade them to become so or fire them . . .

For it is disgraceful when no Jew is a beggar and the impious Galileans support our poor in addition to their own; everyone is able to see that our coreligionists are in want of aid from us.

Clearly these Christians had gained the attention of the world. The Emperor himself is writing his chief priest to command him and the other priests to be more like the Christians. "Make these priests good" is what Julian told Arsacius. What Julian failed to understand, of course, is that men cannot be made good any more than they can be made to fly like birds. True goodness comes only from a changed heart, and a changed heart only comes from the imputation of Christ's righteousness through faith alone. Men's actions are only good when done in Christ. It is His sanctifying power that makes them acceptable. Considered in and of themselves, they are as filthy rags.

Nevertheless, every day unregenerate men perform selfless acts to benefit their fellow man. In fact, it's quite surprising what a man can do with a hard heart. The Apostle Paul recognized this when he spoke of those who might venture to give all their goods to the poor and even offer up their bodies to the flames only to have it gain them nothing. Their selflessness was good in the sense that it provided some earthly benefit for man but from the perspective of eternity it gained them nothing for it was done without love.

When Christians engage in mercy ministry they have a greater goal in mind than just the well-being of their fellow man. In Matthew 5:16 Jesus says, "*let your light shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father in heaven (Matthew 5:16).*" Notice what end is in view here. Jesus' desire is that the Father would be glorified. Or in other words, the Christian's goal in helping others is worship. This worship is given its fullest expression in the outpouring of love to God and the overflowing of that love to men who are created in His image.

Humanists and theological liberals in our day applaud the parable as an example of man's compassion for his fellow man. After all, they say, we are all God's children and a part of the brotherhood of man. They are comfortable with the parable as long as the Samaritan's supreme motivation was his concern for a fellow traveler on spaceship earth. But the moment the Christian dare suggest that the Samaritan's actions were motivated out of a love for God, overflowing with joy to his fellow man, then they object. How dare we suggest that love for a Holy God should play any role in our motivation for helping others! In their view the injured man's need and his common humanity automatically entitled him to the Samaritan's time and money. Nothing else was required.

Of course, Christianity recognizes no such right and it's instructive to note how the Good Samaritan helped the injured man. He did not begin by lobbying for a national healthcare system. He did not decide to start a political movement called Canaanite Lives Matter. He did not try to force the government to institute a so-called "living wage" so that the thieves would no longer feel the need to rob innocent travelers. Instead the Samaritan invested his own personal money and his own personal time to care for the injured man. He did not try to legally compel

the inn-keeper to provide any care whatsoever. The Good Samaritan would reimburse the inn-keeper for any expenses when he came again.

It's also interesting to note that Jesus never tells us what the Good Samaritan's motivations were. We might well assume that he was motivated by a regenerated heart filled with love to God and man but we don't know for certain. Because of what theologians have referred to as God's common grace, even men with unregenerate hearts are able to do a lot of worldly good for others.

The fact of the matter is that all men everywhere should find the motivation for everything they do grounded in a love for Christ and a desire to see His glory manifested in the world. The early Christians were not taking care of the pagans out of some patriotic sense of civic duty. They were taking care of them because their love for God abundantly overflowed into the lives of others.

So the question we must first ask ourselves this morning is what kind of Good Samaritans do we wish to be? Or to put it another way, what is your motivation for the mercy you show to others? Are you motivated simply because of your common humanity, your common experience, your common bonds of family and friendship? If so, then you may end up doing a great amount of temporal good in this life, but in the next, it will amount to nothing but dust and ashes. If on the other hand, your motivation is a desire for God's glory and a desire to see His Kingdom established in the hearts of men, then you should have every confidence that God will give you the desires of your heart. My assumption this morning is that Christian love is what motivates you and so I'd like to spend the rest of my time talking about mercy ministry outside of the local church as an expression of our love for Jesus Christ.

A book that has been a very practical help to us as deacons is, "When Helping Hurts: How to Alleviate Poverty Without Hurting the Poor And Yourself" by Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert. Much of what follows is attributed to their book and while I might not agree with everything they have written, I do think that they offer some very valuable insights into the lives of the poor people we are trying to help.

Corbett and Fikkert write that the practical goal of mercy ministry is "to see people restored to being what God created them to be: people who understand that they are created in the image of God with the gifts, abilities, and capacity to make decisions and to effect change in the world around them; and people who steward their lives, communities, resources, and relationships in order to bring glory to God.

When Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden they became separated from God and alienated in all of their relationships. Poverty entered into their lives, and not just the material kind of poverty that we often think of today. There was also introduced a poverty of spirit. The practical goal of mercy ministry is to help reverse this poverty and to facilitate the restoration of these relationships for God's glory.

The relationships that need to be restored are with God, self, others, and the rest of creation. The first and most important relationship of course is with God. This is our calling and the reason why we were created. The Fall introduced a poverty of spiritual intimacy that manifests itself in human beings by causing them to deny God's existence and authority.

The second relationship that needs to be restored is with self. People were uniquely created in the image of God and have the high calling of reflecting God's being. The Fall introduced a poverty of being that results in the creation of god complexes, low self-esteem, or some strange mixture of the two.

The third relationship that needs restoration is with others. God created us to live in a loving relationship with one another, as God has given us various callings. The Fall introduced a poverty of community that results in self centeredness, exploitation, and the abuse of others.

The final relationship that needs restoration is our relationship with the rest of Creation. The cultural mandate of Genesis 1:28-30 teaches us that God created men to be stewards, people who understand, subdue, and manage the world that God has created in order to produce bounty. The Fall introduced a poverty of stewardship within this relationship. This type of poverty results in a loss of a sense of purpose that can result in either laziness or in men becoming workaholics.

The practical goal of mercy ministry is to help restore these relationships by alleviating the poverty that has occurred within each. But there is a danger here. It's possible that our efforts to help can actually do damage to those that we are trying to love. Let me give you an example.

One of the authors of "When Helping Hurts" tells a story of his work in a Ugandan slum. Grace was a witch doctor who began attending small business classes offered by the author during his time visiting at St. Lukes, a small refugee church of around one hundred people. During this time Grace decided to give her life to Christ and publicly burned all of her herbs and potions in front of the congregation. Over the next several weeks the positive change and joy in Grace was obvious. She had become a new creation in Christ. But then one day the author and one of the other aid workers noticed that Grace had been absent from a church service so they went to check on her. When they finally made it to Grace's hut they found her lying on the dirt floor, writhing in agony. Grace had developed tonsillitis and the local hospital would not treat her because she was infected with HIV. To get some relief Grace had paid a neighbor to cut out her tonsils with a kitchen knife. The result was a severe infection. Clearly, Grace needed help. The solution was penicillin, which could be purchased outside the slum for \$8 dollars. Concerned for Grace's well-being, the author quickly took the money from his wallet and gave it to the aid worker who went to purchase the medicine Grace needed. With the medicine Grace recovered.

After getting back on the plane to leave Uganda the author began to analyze the results of the mission. Not only had God used him and the others to bring a witch doctor to Christ but he had

also used them to help save her life! WOW! Obviously this would qualify as a resounding success, right? Well, not so fast.

The author was a very tall six foot, ten inch white man, or Mzungu who stuck out like a sore thumb in the Ugandan slum. He had everything that the Ugandan's typically associated with a Mzungu - wealth, power, and privilege. He had swept into the slum like a hurricane and hundreds of refugees had shown up to attend his small business training classes but now he was gone. But what about the Ugandan pastor that he had left behind? Day in and day out this man had to minister amongst the refugees in a very bleak and uncertain environment. Had he subverted the pastor and his relationship with his flock by swooping in with such extravagance? And what about the congregation he ministered to? Now that the circus had left town how would they view their ordinary but lovingly dedicated pastor who preached to them day in and day out about the faithfulness of God's provision. And what about Grace? As a witch doctor Grace had made lots of enemies. She was also HIV positive and would need the support of her local congregation long after the aid workers had left the slum. By paying for Grace's treatment directly from his own pocket, had he robbed the congregation and Grace of an opportunity to grow closer in service to one another? Simply giving the money for Grace's treatment was quick, it was easy, and it was probably the wrong thing to do. In reality, there was enough time for the author and the aid worker to return to the congregation and to ask them for help with buying penicillin for Grace. The congregation was extremely poor, but all of them together would have been able to buy Grace's medicine and in so doing shown Christ's love to her. The pastor could have led his flock in taking up the collection, bought the medicine, and then taken it with the congregation to administer to Grace. By simply simply stepping in as he did, the author had undermined all of these relationships.

As deacons there are guidelines that we try to follow to keep us from harming those that we are trying to help. In applying these guidelines it's important to understand just what kind of help is needed for each situation. The three kinds of help are relief, rehabilitation, and development.

The authors define relief as "the urgent and temporary provision of emergency aid to reduce immediate suffering from a natural or man-made crisis." Relief is what the Good Samaritan gave immediately to the injured man on the side of the road when he bandaged his wounds. His primary goal was to get the injured man past the emergency stage. Relief is also what the author had given to Grace when he purchased the penicillin that she so desperately needed. Again, the author's mistake wasn't that he provided relief to Grace when he should have been providing rehabilitation or development. The author's mistake was in the way he provided the relief.

The second stage of providing help is defined as rehabilitation. Rehabilitation starts as soon as the bleeding stops. Its goal is to restore people to the positive aspects of their pre-crisis conditions. When the Good Samaritan took the injured man to the inn-keeper and contracted with him to take care of the man until he returned from his trip, the Good Samaritan was just

beginning the rehabilitation process. He was seeking to restore the man to the condition that he was in before he was robbed.

The third and most comprehensive stage of help is development. This is the stage that seeks to move both the helper and the person being helped into a healthier relationship in each of the four areas - God, self, others, and Creation. The authors write that “as the materially poor develop, they are better able to fulfill their calling of glorifying God by working and supporting themselves and their families with the fruits of that work. Development is not done to people but with people.”

Relief is giving someone a fish. Rehabilitation is teaching someone to fish. Development is building an ongoing economy where people can sell and purchase those fish.

The biggest mistake that most Christians make - by far - is in applying relief to situations in which rehabilitation or development is the most appropriate intervention.

Or to put it another way, in the overwhelming majority of cases, the kind of help that you probably will need to give to someone is NOT relief, but rather rehabilitation or development. Unfortunately, the overwhelming kind of help that most people want, is NOT rehabilitation or development, but relief.

The vast majority of requests that we receive as deacons from those outside of the church is for relief. For example, people come to us all the time because they need help paying their utility bills, buying food, or getting their cars fixed. In almost every situation the need is not truly urgent. In other words, there isn't someone who is about to die if they don't receive assistance. And most of the time the person is not concerned with anything beyond their immediate need.

Sometimes these needs are the result of circumstances outside of their control. For example, someone has been laid off and they need help paying their electric bill while they look for work. Or the need stems from someone who must live paycheck to paycheck and then they get hit with an unexpected financial burden beyond what they normally have to pay.

Oftentimes however, the needs are the result of personal sin issues. For example, the person has a problem with authority so they have trouble keeping jobs. Or they have a substance abuse problem and most of their money goes to support the habit. Or they prove themselves untrustworthy and therefore creditors are unwilling to work with them when they get behind on their bills.

If you are faced with a true relief situation then you give help. Period. No questions asked. But when providing rehabilitation or development it is important to keep some basic principles in mind.

The very first principle that we must keep in mind is to never give money to help with someone's need. If you are going to help them pay their power bill, you get their account number and you pay it yourself. Do they need food? Then you take them grocery shopping. Do they need an automotive repair? You pay the garage directly. Do they need gas? Then you meet them at the gas station or you take your gas can over to their home.

Please remember that these are only guidelines and that every situation calls for the application of wisdom. But our goal in applying these principles is to truly help the person and not harm them. If you give someone money directly then you have no way of knowing that it will be used for what the person said it would be used for. Remember that the Lord told us to be as wise as serpents and as gentle as doves (Matthew 10:16).

The second principle to keep in mind is to beware of what one author has called the "Tyranny of the Urgent". The tyranny of the urgent can be recognized whenever someone comes to you for help and they must have it RIGHT NOW. For example, people will often come to us and say, "I have to have \$200 to pay my electric bill or the power company is going to cut off my electricity tomorrow!" If this is really true then the person has had to have known about it for some time. AEP doesn't just show up at a person's house and turn their power off without giving notice well in advance. Why are they just now coming to you for help? Always resist the "Tyranny of the Urgent." Maybe the person's power will be turned off tomorrow. Maybe not. In either case however, it's not a situation that requires relief. It may very well be that some discomfort in losing power will go a long way toward encouraging them not to get into such a situation again in the future. Jonathan Edwards once wrote that God oftentimes makes men sensible of their misery, both temporal and spiritual, before He saves them. Don't undermine the work of God for the sake of an expedient solution.

This brings us to a third important principle. Never, ever, do for someone else what they can do for themselves. If you fail to observe this principle then I promise you that you will be doing harm to the person no matter what other good you may do. When you do something for a person that they can do for themselves then you are communicating, albeit unintentionally, that you are superior and they are inferior. In the process of doing so you hurt them as well as yourself. You hurt them because you are likely exacerbating feelings of inferiority and shame that they already have in seeking help. You also hurt yourself because doing things in this way will often contribute to sinful feelings of pride.

So remember why we're providing mercy ministry in the first place. Our love for the Lord Jesus overflows into the lives of people. We want to see them restored to being what God created them to be: people who understand that they are created in His image with the gifts, abilities, and capacity to make decisions and to change the world; and people who steward their lives, communities, resources, and relationships in order to bring glory to God.

In reality, what most people in North America truly need from you is not relief. Most don't even need rehabilitation. What most of them need is development and this is the hardest kind of help

to give. Relief is easy because it often involves simply cutting a check. You stop the bleeding and move on. Its quick and efficient. But truly helping people to embrace the gospel and live out its implications in every facet of life isn't easy. It's slow and it's messy and there are often setbacks and disappointments. It involves building relationships and actually seeking to invest in other people's lives in ways that go far beyond simply giving money or getting them through a disaster. It means actually befriending them, spending time with them, and listening to them.

What is the best way to ensure that our efforts to help the poor are a success? Answer - Involve them in the process. Here's why: Norway gives more of its government resources, as a percentage, to foreign aid than any other country. In the not-too-distant past, the Norwegian government decided to build a fish packing plant in Kenya on the shores of Lake Turkaria. The new facility would create jobs, provide a market for local fishers, export fish, and boost the local economy. It was a compassionate idea, motivated by the best of intentions. However, there was a few problems with the plan. First, there we no reliable roads connecting the plant with larger cities where the fish could be shipped and sold. Second, the locals were nomadic herdsmen who considered fishing to be women's work. The result? Within a year of opening, the fish packing plant was offline, and the local herdsmen were using it to shelter their goats from the sun - millions of dollars of aid ended up only as shade.

Involving poor people in meaningful ways with the selection and implementation of the help that we want to give helps increase the likelihood of success. It's the difference between cooking a meal and serving it to a poor person and cooking a meal with a poor person and sitting down to eat it together. Poor people know something about being poor. They probably understand their local situation in a lot of ways much better than we do. Its therefore important that we should involve them as much as possible in the plan for any help that we might give.

In conclusion, there are many promising methods for helping to alleviate poverty. There are job preparedness ministries, financial education ministries, wealth accumulation ministries, and educational ministries. But none of these will be of much benefit unless they motivated by true Christian love that desires to invest itself in the lives of others. It's been said that the early Christians overturned the world because they out-thought the pagans and because they out-loved the pagans. May God grant that it should be that way again.