

one • Why Should We Care?

The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners.—Isa. 61:1

Most of us have taken relaxing vacations where all our worries went away. It might have been something as simple as a few days off from the daily grind, relaxing in our backyard. Or maybe it was in a more exotic setting, and we basked in the warmth of the sun on a pristine beach.

For a short time, vacation allows us to experience a carefree existence without worrying about earning income or finding our next meal. And if we are like most, deep inside we are keenly aware that our small sampling of paradise can't last. All too soon the reprieve must come to an end, and we return to real life and face unpaid bills, meetings, and obligations. We cherish the “paradise moments” all the more because they feel so divinely good.

Paradise Lost

No wonder many of us feel deflated and depressed after taking time off. Like the person waking from a near-death experience who has seen the shimmering presence of white-clad forms on the other side, we feel unceremoniously yanked back to the land of the mundane and imperfect.

This drastic shift from utopia must be a microcosmic sample of what Adam and Eve experienced after disobeying God. They were suddenly torn from paradise and separated from their perfect existence—

total communion with an all-powerful God who cared for their every need. Now they would have to face the real world and learn how to survive in it. It would be a future filled with struggle, a concept foreign to them.

God said,

Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return. (Gen. 3:17-19)

Who among us can't relate to this passage? We understand all too well what earning our keep through the "sweat of [our] brow" means. And this labor holds even more meaning when we've recently experienced brief glimpses of paradise. Adam and Eve moved us from the bliss of constant communion with a God who provided for our every want to a life spent working from sunup to sundown for survival.

Even King Solomon with his storehouses full of wealth recognized the futility of the human struggle for survival. He wrote, "What does the worker gain from his toil? I have seen the burden God has laid on men" (Eccles. 3:9-10).

Like the experienced parent who watches a child move out of the household to be on his own, God knew what our survival in the real world would entail. It would be difficult at best. And though Adam and Eve brought about their own harsh circumstances, God still had compassion on them and their descendants. He put mandates in place to ensure for their provision. One of these regulations was about caring for the land and its resources. Leviticus 25 contains guidelines God gave Moses on Mount Sinai for instituting a sabbath rest for the land. Every seventh year was to be a time to let the fields and vineyards lie fallow so that the resources might not be overworked. But then after seven of these sabbath rests, on the fiftieth year, there was to be a year of Jubilee—a year of liberty.

God wasn't merely concerned with the usage of the land. He knew how difficult it was for people to work by the sweat of the brow. He understood humans. Some would prosper while others would struggle. The natural inclination of those who excelled would be to take advantage of those in meager circumstances.

He imposed regulations to restore this inequality. Landowners were to allow what was naturally produced in the sabbath years and Jubilee year to be gleaned by property owners and slaves alike (vv. 6, 11-12). The Jubilee year signaled people to be fair in business transactions. During Jubilee, slaves were to be released and property returned to original owners.

In Deut. 15:1-2 we are also told that at the end of every seven-year period there should be a relaxation of debts. It was a time of restitution. Unfortunately, humans rarely ever put these decrees into practice. Imagine what would happen if we actually did?

Care for the Less Fortunate

The implications are clear. If each of us adhered to the rules for restitution that God presented to us in Deut. 15:1-2, we would make the playing field more level and there would be fewer people in need. The theme of caring for the less fortunate echoes throughout the Old and New Testaments. Deuteronomy 15:11 says, "There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be openhanded toward your brothers and toward the poor and needy in your land."

Notice it wasn't an option. It was a command. God knows our inclination is to hoard our resources and care for ourselves first while paying little heed to the plight of others. Jesus constantly drew attention to the circumstances of people in need, modeling the importance of reaching out to them. Matthew 26:11 is just one of many verses that speak to the topic: "The poor you will always have with you, but you will not always have me."

Poverty will always be an issue, but Christ wasn't suggesting that we ignore poor people because poverty wouldn't go away. His every ac-

tion showed a tender heart toward hurting people. Pastor Rick Warren observes,

Jesus came to preach the Gospel to the poor. I don't know about you, but for a long time I had blinders on about this. I went to a Baptist college and two seminaries and it wasn't until a couple of years ago that I asked, "How did I miss 2,000 verses about the poor? I just didn't see it."¹

The truth is that no matter how prosperous we become, there will always be poor people. Some people struggle with debt and poverty more than others. Maybe they made bad choices, were exploited by others, inherited their poverty from previous generations, suffer from mental illness, or were just born in the wrong place at the wrong time.

God is a God of compassion and second chances. He cares for the hurting and underprivileged, and so should we. Benevolence should be a part of every Christian's life. And the more we practice it, the more it becomes second nature to us. Although we may not think that one solitary action will make a difference, it can make more of a difference than we realize.

Motivational speaker Joel Barker tells a story adapted from the writings of Loren Eiseley. One morning a man set off on a walk along the beach. As he looked down the expanse of sand, he saw a figure bending, standing, and stretching in a rhythmic motion that looked like some type of youthful dance. It was probably just some youngster expressing his exuberance at the new day. But as he drew nearer, he could see the figure was a young man bending over, sifting through the debris and driftwood, and flinging something out into the ocean.

No longer able to contain his curiosity, he asked the young man what he was doing. The youngster replied, "Throwing starfish into the ocean."

Not fully satisfied, he asked why.

"The sun is up and the tide is going out. And if I don't throw them in, they'll die."

The older man looked at the vastness of the beach and the starfish that littered it. They stretched out of sight. What a futile task it was.

“But young man, don’t you realize there are miles and miles of beach and starfish all along it. You can’t possibly make a difference!”

With that the young man reached down and flung out another starfish, watching it splash in the ocean. “It made a difference for that one,” he said.²

Sometimes the needs of the world can overwhelm us like the countless starfish on the beach. I have felt this way at Safe Harbor Rescue Mission where I work. Nearly daily we have to turn needy people away because we simply do not have the resources to meet their needs. When the need is so great, we may feel we can’t possibly make a difference. To respond to such a great need, we must adopt the attitude of the young star thrower. Even the smallest acts of compassion can make a difference in someone’s life—giving something away instead of selling it so that the poor can glean, forgiving someone’s debt, lending a helping hand in a moment of crisis, buying an extra gift at Christmastime, and so on. The opportunities are endless.

The apostle Paul referred to Christ followers as the body of Christ. How does this body reach out with care and compassion so that the love of the Father is reflected to a hurting world? By not merely operating as a talking head that spouts Scripture and declares good intentions. We are God’s hands and feet. Like the young man on the beach, we can choose to help or not to help, and we make these choices daily. We are to be an extension of God’s compassion, a source of refuge, and most importantly a pair of loving arms embracing those who need love and hope.

- *The trouble with being poor is that it takes up all your time.*

—Willem de Kooning³

Points to Ponder

1. Can you remember a time when someone literally or figuratively rescued you? What was the incident? How did it make you feel?
2. When it comes to helping the less fortunate, would you say your church is more like a talking head or God's hands and feet? Give several examples of why you feel this is so.
3. What is your typical reaction when you see someone in need? Circle the answer that best describes you.
 - a.* I usually rush to that person's aid.
 - b.* I recognize the need but usually hope someone else will help.
 - c.* I may help but only after a careful analysis of the situation.
 - d.* Mercy doesn't come naturally for me, so I usually don't get involved.
 - e.* Other (explain).