

Leaning In to the Messy / Love Your Neighbor

6.3: Widows and Orphans

February 21, 2016

Last weekend we focused on loving those who have less. Well, let me share with you a couple of “Messy Towel” stories. Randy is my preaching partner. A pastor-friend of his in Illinois is following along with our series, and he called Randy last week Tuesday and told two stories of messy people leaning in to the messy.

Towel story #1: She struggles with a gambling addiction. She has been in counseling but still battles the temptation. She has gambled away 10’s of 1000’s of dollars. Oh, and her husband is the chairman of the board at their church. You can imagine the stress her gambling has created for their family. Well, she had a birthday a couple of weeks ago, and her daughter gave her an attractive blouse as a present. But the blouse was too small. Ordinarily the lady would have taken it back to the store, taken the money and bought lottery tickets or played the slots; but this time she didn’t. She had noticed the lady who worked the cash register at the convenience store where she bought her lottery tickets always wore the same two shirts. So she took the blouse down to the store where she spotted the employee out taking a smoke. She went to her and explained her daughter had bought her a blouse for her birthday but it was too small, but she thought it might fit her. Well, the cashier burst into tears; then she said, “I have to go to a funeral tomorrow and I have nothing to wear.” Sometimes when you lean in, you’ll find that God is already there, ready to use you. And to see one messy person helping another, isn’t that cool!

Towel story #2: Following church, an unnamed husband and wife talked about how best to help those with less. They identified a group of people they wanted to help—those who were lured to predatory loans ... short term loans at high interest rates until you get your next paycheck. They withdrew \$150 from their checking account and stood outside the loan store, praying that the right person would come along. They prayed that the person would need exactly what they had drawn from their checking. Well a couple walked up to the door of the fast-cash store and these Jesus-followers stopped them and asked, “How much do you intend to borrow?” “\$150.” “Well, Here, it’s yours. We have been praying that we could provide the margin to help someone from going into debt.” How cool

is that! You think God is at work? When you lean into the messy, you might discover that God is already there.

Now, one of the most famous verses in the Old Testament is Micah 6.8. It's one of those power verses that drill down right to the heart of who we are and what we stand for. It says, "What does the Lord require of you? To act justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God." To act justly (the Hebrew word is "mishpat" – justice), to love mercy (the Hebrew word is "chesed" – a selfless, covenant love), and to walk humbly with your God. A passion for justice, a love driven mercy, and the wisdom to recognize that there is a God, and you are not him. And here's the deal, this justice and this mercy go together. Mercy is talking about the heart; and justice is more than just punishing wrong, it is the determination do what is right, to put mercy into action. One is about the heart, the other is about the doing.

And when you dig around a bit, you'll discover this mishpat, this justice, is huge in the Bible. You see, we have a God who wants his people – us -- to have a heart of mercy, and a passion to do justice ... especially for four groups of people. You see, God has a special place in his heart for four groups of people who really need mercy, and justice. One guy calls these four groups of people the quartet of the vulnerable: widows, orphans, immigrants, and the poor. Over and over the Bible tells us there is a special place in God's heart for widows, orphans, immigrants, and the poor. And if we are going to be Jesus 'followers,' if we are going to try to obey the two great commandments – to love God with all our heart, and to love our neighbor as ourselves – then there is going to have to be a special place in our hearts for widows, orphans, immigrants, and the poor.

So last week we focused on the poor: leaning in to the poor. This week we're going to focus widows and the orphans. And next week will be about the immigrants – which we are going to broaden to the issue of race and racism. Guys, if we are going to love our neighbors God's way, we must find ways to lean into the poor, and the widows, and the orphans, and the immigrants.

Now guys, there are boatloads of verses about God's heart for the orphans and the widows, and we're going to be scrolling a bunch of them

on the centerscreen behind me. But I want to pull out a few of them to show how important this stuff is to God, and to us.

- Here's Moses, in the book of Deuteronomy. Moses says, "The Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, (he is) the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality and accepts no bribes. (Here it is:) He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow (orphans and widows), and (he) loves the foreigner residing among you, giving them food and clothing." (Deuteronomy 10.17-18) Guys, that's a window into the heart of God – he defends the orphans and the widows.
- This is from a psalm of David, the greatest Old Testament king. He says, "Father to the fatherless (those are the orphans, and), defender of widows — this is (who) God (is; this is what God does), whose dwelling is holy." (Psalm 68.5) That's powerful stuff! Widows and orphans matter to God.
- Here is one of the laws of Moses, this is how God expects his followers to behave. He says, "You must not exploit a widow or an orphan. If you exploit them in any way and they cry out to me, then I will certainly hear their cry." (Exodus 22.22-23) And then you'll find yourself answering to him ... which is not a good thing.
- And here is Isaiah, one of the greatest of the prophets. He says, Guys, "Learn to do good. Seek justice (seek mishpat). (How? Well) Help the oppressed. Defend the cause of orphans. Fight for the rights of widows." (Isaiah 1.17) Because that's who we are, that's what we do, as Jesus followers.

Did you know that there are at least 143 million orphans in the world today? Did you know that in Africa alone, it would take 80,000 orphanages housing 600 kids each to accommodate just the Aids orphans? Did you know that there are about 400,000 children in the US foster care system, and about 100,000 who are waiting to be adopted? Did you know that about 30,000 children in our foster care system age out every year, without families?

There is an amazing verse in the book of James, the James who was the brother of Jesus. He says, "Pure and genuine religion – pure and genuine religion -- in the sight of God the Father means caring for orphans and widows in their distress and refusing to let the world corrupt you." (James 1.27) Did you hear that? He says, pure religion isn't just about attending

church. It isn't just about what we do in this room, or in one of our life groups. It's about chesed and mishpat: out of mercy, leaning in to the orphans and the widows, and refusing to let the world corrupt you, by tempting you to lean away.

There are things in the Bible that mess us up sometimes. There are these chapter numbers and verse numbers. Guys, those weren't there at first. James didn't put a "chapter 2" after he wrote chapter 1 verse 27. He just keeps writing, and what he writes in chapter 2 unpacks what he says at the end of chapter 1. He starts talking about the temptation we face to give more attention to people who have money and power and the temptation to look right past people who don't. He says, "If a man enters your church wearing an expensive suit, and a street person wearing rags comes in right after him, and you say to the man in the suit, "Sit here, sir; this is the best seat in the house!" and either ignore the street person or say, "Better sit here in the back row," haven't you segregated God's children and proved that you (do not have God's heart?) are judges who can't be trusted?" (James 2.2-4)

You see, that's the temptation. We tend to fawn over people who have money, or power, or position ... we fall all over beautiful people. God says, "Don't you go there. Pure religion is looking after the widows and the orphans and the poor – people who are not powerful, people who are not 'beautiful,' people who can't pay you back." True religion doesn't follow the values of our culture, it follows the values of God.

Do you have any idea how big a deal this is? Did you know that according to the Census Bureau, 800,000 people are widowed every year in the United States, most of them women? And did you know that the death of a spouse is ranked as the #1 stressor on the stress index scale? In fact, did you know that 60% of those who lose a spouse will experience a serious illness within the next 12 months following their loss? And did you know that millions of widows live in devastating poverty, and crushing loneliness, and debilitating fear? (Widowshope.org) It's no wonder God's heart weeps for the widows.

In the Old Testament there is a book called "Job." And this Job swears an oath that blows my mind. He says, "I have been a godly man." He says, "Have I (ever) refused to help the poor, (have I ever) or crushed the hopes

of widows? Have I (ever) been stingy with my food and refused to share it with orphans?” He says, No, from childhood I have cared for orphans like a father, and all my life I have cared for widows. Whenever I saw the homeless without clothes and the needy with nothing to wear, did they not praise me for providing wool clothing to keep them warm?” And here it is. Here’s the oath that I’d be afraid to take, and I suspect most of you would be afraid to take. He says, “If I (ever) raised my hand against an orphan ... then let my shoulder be wrenched out of place! Let my arm be torn from its socket! (Are you serious? And then he says,) That would be better than facing God’s judgment. For if the majesty of God opposes me, what hope is there?” (Job 31.16-23) Did you hear what he swore? He raises his arm and says, “If I have ever held back from the poor, or the widow, or the fatherless – then let my arm be torn out of its socket!” Now ... that’s a prayer I’d be afraid to pray! You? Because if God actually did – start tearing arms out of sockets -- I suspect we’d have a hard time shaking hands in this place.

Now it’s true that the plight of widows and orphans in the Bible was quite different than the plight of a lot of widows and orphans in our world. They didn’t have the safety net we have. They didn’t have orphanages, and a foster care system, and adoption agencies for kids. They didn’t have nutrition programs for kids, and Head Start, and a free public education. Their widows didn’t have food stamps, and Section 8 housing, and a Welfare System, and Supplemental Social Security, and Medicare, and Medicaid, and Meals on Wheels, and Senior Citizen Centers. But even with all that stuff today, our widows and our orphans face a risk of financial poverty that goes way beyond the risks faced by those who are not orphans or widows. And if you add to that the loneliness, the fear, how hard it is to maintain a home without a partner, how hard it is to grow up without a dad, or a mom.

Listen to these numbers:

- 40% of our kids are born to single moms (who, by the way, face some of the same problems as other ... ‘widows’).
- 33% of our kids grow up absent a biological father. Way more than that if you include dads who are present but disengaged.
- And kids in father absent homes are almost 4x as likely to be poor; they face a dramatically higher risk of drug abuse and alcohol abuse;

they are twice as likely to commit suicide; and they will face a host of other relational and emotional problems.

So, what do you think 'pure religion' means in our world? I read about one guy who had a passion for 'pure religion.' He was already a member of his church's parking team, but he was nudged by God to go further. So he began to visit widow's homes. And he saw trash containers that had not been emptied in months, and bedsheets that hadn't been changed in just as long. He saw women who needed wheelchair ramps because they couldn't walk down the three steps outside their mobile home, leaving them insulated and isolated for weeks on end. He saw others with holes in their roofs that leaked whenever it rained. So he began to mobilize teams from his church to go make a difference. Pure religion?

I read about one church whose pastor was convicted by their need to show their community 'pure religion.' So he contacted the local Department of Human Resources and asked how many foster kids needed placement in their town. The number was 150. So he set up a meeting for families in his church who might be willing to provide a foster home. 160 families showed up to the meeting. God was there, ahead of them.

About 13 years ago I experienced one of the most magical moments of my life. Johnny and Alice Jones (Johnny is one of our elders) they were compelled to practice 'pure religion,' so when Johnny went to China to adopt child #2, I got to go with him. Anna had been abandoned by her mom. She was an orphan, and she had been in an orphanage for 2 years. I was in the room when the nurse brought Anna in and handed her to Johnny. I have never seen anything like it; in fact I can't quite put it into words. Anna – 2 years old – just studied Johnny, he was holding her, tears streaming down his cheeks. For the longest time Anna just stared at him ... and then she just ... melted into his arms. In that moment this orphan adopted Johnny as her daddy. And during the rest of our time in China, when anyone else would reach for her, she would pull back to her daddy. She had a dad. The power of 'pure religion.' That's God loving on orphans – through us.

Randy sent me an article about Cori Salchert. At one time she was a perinatal bereavement nurse, helping parents whose babies died. In 2012, when she could no longer work in the hospital, she began adopting

“hospice babies.” You see, sometimes the pain of watching their baby die was too much for the biological parents to bear, so they would step away. So Cori would bring the babies home – she already had 8 kids of her own. And she and her family would love on that child as it died. No baby, she says, should die alone or unloved.

Here’s part of her story – this was national news. She says, “In August of 2012 we received a call asking if we would be willing to take in a two-week-old baby girl who was nameless and had no one to care for her. The baby's prognosis was grim ... and doctors said there was no hope for her. I was told that she was in a vegetative state — unable to see or hear, and could only respond to painful stimuli.”

She says, “Taking all of that information in stride, we left to bring Emmalynn home, having been given the privilege of choosing a meaningful name for her and allowed the priceless gift of being her family. She could have died in the hospital, wrapped in a blanket and set to the side because she was being sustained with a feeding pump. But we brought this beautiful baby home to live, and live she did. Emmalynn lived more in 50 days than a number of folks do in a lifetime. She had not had a family, and now she was the youngest sibling of nine. We held her constantly and took her everywhere with us.”

“There came an evening when I knew Emmalynn was beginning to fade. The whole family was home and got to hold her and kiss her. My husband tucked her close with her little head under his chin and sang to her. Eventually, most of the family began to drift off and head to bed, but my daughter, Charity, and I stayed awake with her.”

“I was snuggling Emmalynn into my furry, warm bathrobe, holding her on my chest and singing 'Jesus Loves Me' to her, when it occurred to me that I had not heard her breathe for a few minutes. I leaned her back to look at her, and saw that this beautiful creature was gone. She'd left this world hearing my heartbeat. She didn't suffer, she wasn't in pain, and she most certainly wasn't alone. It was painful initially. Gradually we were able to see the opportunity to hold her through this life and as she entered the next solely as a gift.”

She goes on to talk about Charlie, another baby they are helping die. She says, “For years I had wanted to care for babies who had a life-limiting prognosis like Charlie or a terminal diagnosis like Emmalynn. What a gift it is to be a part of these babies' lives, to have the ability to ease their suffering, to cherish and love them even though they aren't able to give anything tangible back or even smile in return for our efforts.” She says, “We invest deeply, and we ache terribly when these kids die, but our hearts are like stained-glass windows. Those windows are made of broken glass which has been forged back together, and those windows are even stronger and more beautiful for having been broken.”

Guys, it is an amazing story.

James says, “Pure and genuine religion – pure and genuine religion -- in the sight of God the Father means caring for orphans and widows in their distress and refusing to let the world corrupt you (by tempting you to look past them).” (James 1.27) But the need is so big, and I am so small. Here’s the deal, we can’t do it all, but we can do something. Do you remember what Andy Stanley said last week? He said, “Just do for one what you wish you could do for everyone.” (repeat) And there are so many ways you can “do for one.” I’m just going to start giving you some ideas. Maybe God will nudge you towards one of these. Or maybe one of these will spark some other idea in you.

There are all kinds of ways to sponsor a child. Julie and I have been sponsoring kids through World Vision for decades. I know that others here sponsor a child through Compassion International, a great organization that ministers to the physical, and spiritual, and emotional, and educational needs of kids all over the world. And we have two missions in Haiti that offer a way to sponsor a child: The Haitian Christian Mission, and the Haiti Needy Children Foundation, established by our own Raymonde Jacques. I’ve worked with the G.O. Ministries in the Dominican Republic – they are the ones who helped get our team out of Haiti after the quake in 2010. They have child sponsorships. And Joe Gilbert, one of our elders, is on the leadership team of Sparrow Missions, working down in Honduras. You can sponsor a kid through Sparrow Missions. By the way, there will be contact information for all these groups at the worship stations.

I've personally supported St. Jude Children's hospital for decades. Just a little a month, but a bunch of little gifts can add up to a lot of help for a great organization that focuses on broken kids. Eric Miller is one of our family here at Capital City. He builds orthotics for places like St. Jude. And he supplies orthotics to hospitals and mission teams around our world. These pics are from last week, guys. He's out there loving on people in the name of Jesus. That's pure religion, guys.

If you want to focus on widows and orphans closer to home, you can volunteer at one of our schools, or even volunteer for our children's ministry. You'll be loving on a whole bunch of kids from single parent homes. In fact we have a parent-kid bowling day scheduled for Saturday, March 12. And here's the deal. It doesn't have to be your kid. We need some extra dads and granddads to partner with some of our kids who don't have one.

We have organizations in town like the Simon House: they provide a place to stay for homeless women who are pregnant or who have children. And the King Center: they provide all kinds of programming and opportunities for kids who are poor, or who are from broken families. You can volunteer to help them. And we have a huge need for foster families in our community. It ought to be Jesus followers providing the homes. You can change the trajectory of a life for an eternity.

Guys, what you can do is limited only by your imagination.

- You can offer to help Larry Weese. He's our Seniors Minister. And he looks after a lot of our widows. He could use some help with hospital calls, or with a host of other ways to help our people.
- You can bring a meal to a widow, or a single parent family. Or maybe give them a gift card to a restaurant. It can make a difference.
- You can offer to babysit for a single mom – let her escape for a few hours, or even a weekend, so they can refill their tank.
- You can help with the housecleaning, or the chores. Widows and single moms: it can be overwhelming -- fixing the toilets, fixing the car, fixing the toys. If you can fix it, you can help someone.
- You can help with a medical visit, or a prescription. A lot of single moms struggle to get the meds their kids need; a lot of widows struggle to get the meds they need.

- You can invite widows and orphans to nearly anything. A game, a movie, a fishing trip, a game of golf.
- If you're a guy, you can provide some guy time to a boy whose dad is not there. If you are a lady, you can provide girl time to a kid whose mom is not there...

By the way, Randy and I sent Cori Salchert a note thanking her for the video she sent to us. Here is her response. She says, "Well, I'm no movie star. When People magazine contacted me about doing a story for them I was confused. #1: I don't read their magazine because I only watch the Gaithers, Lawrence Welk and football. And we're quite ordinary folks so I wasn't sure why they were wanting to mess with us. They did come last weekend and we were able to give the reason for the HOPE that lies within us."

She says, "It's beyond comprehension for those who are not Christians, that who are loved deeply by God, why we'd set ourselves up for the heartbreak we do. We'll heal here or as David Crowder would sing, "Earth has no sorrow that Heaven can't heal." I trust Him to hold me and He knows how much of a struggle it will be when Charlie dies. Our baby can have morphine to help ease his suffering, there is Jesus for the rest of us. His promise to supply all our needs through His riches in glory by Christ Jesus gives me the confidence to continue moving forward and not live my days dreading Charlie's death. Ever onward and forward, the reward is GREAT for those who remain faithful!" Guys – messy people loving on messy widows and messy orphans. Is there anything better you can do?

Now, you can leave today and on your way out, stop and tell me, "Good sermon, Preacher. You made me cry." Well, don't waste your tears. God is prompting those tears. God is tugging at you to step into someone's life. Do for one what you wish you could do for all. It won't change one life—it will change 2! Think about it.