

GRACE FOR THE JOURNEY—TOUCHING LIFE
Luke 19:1-10

Grace For The Journey Message Series
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There is a well-known story about a person walking one day on an ocean beach. Stretching as far as the eye could see there were hundreds of thousands of starfish that were strewn all about when the tide went out. An important fact is that outside of the ocean water they would all surely die in just a few short hours.

Walking on the beach this person therefore began picking up these starfish one by one and throwing them back into the ocean. As she was doing this, however, another person came up to her and said, *“I hope you know that your feeble efforts won’t make much of a difference.”*

“Yes, I know that,” she said. *“But I did just make a difference for this one; and for this one; and for this one.”* Even though there was no way this person could ever throw all these starfish back into the ocean, she did what she could for a few.

My Friends, in many ways this is also the reality when it comes to the whole issue of poverty and to the many hurting people in our society; to our efforts to help those in need. It is extremely easy to look at how massive this problem has become; to look at how the gap between rich and poor is growing; and to simply surmise that there is absolutely nothing we can do.

It is easy to think about the words of Jesus that the poor will always be with us (an easy quote for those of us who have so much); then to resign ourselves to the idea that my puny efforts won’t do much at all to alleviate this age-old problem. The result is that we may rationalize that we then need not do much at all; we only need to do the bare minimum to help the poor.

Rather the attitude I believe we need today is one like that person along the ocean beach. Even though we can’t help everyone; even though we can’t change the whole system each one of us can help and make a difference in the life of one person; one family; a group of people living in our community or area..

We can bless the lives of another person if we make an effort to care for them; to support them; to mentor them. In fact, this kind of personal concern and longer term investment may actually help people find the lasting support that may eventually help them out of poverty; help them out of their slump or tough time they are going through.

Yet I believe that sometimes our problem in the church is that we think we should somehow help the masses of people; that we need lobby harder politically to change the whole system; that we should simply give more money to our pet cause. Perhaps there is a time and place for that.

Yet the most effective help is as it always has always been--one person at a time. Of course this is the example Jesus showed us time and again in his word. One example is the Parable of the Good Samaritan—Jesus shows how the Samaritan took the injured man and cared for him.

He bound up this man's wounds; took him to an inn; paid the innkeeper to feed and house him as well as care for his healing. In other words, the Samaritan actually touched and interacted with this needy person. He invested his hands-on care, as well as his own money in order to insure that this person was given the strength to get on his feet again.

This is how Jesus himself so often responded to people. He went to the home of Zaccheus in our Gospel lesson today. He took time to listen to, to provide living water to the woman at the well. He touched the eyes of the man born blind and offered him healing and new life. He spoke to the paralytic, offered him forgiveness for his sins—and he was able to walk again.

Jesus showed in his word the power of going to the places and communities where people actually live; eating with them in their homes; listening to them and their concerns; actually touching them with his hands. Jesus never simply offered easy answers or advice; rather he offered individuals the life changing and renewing power of God's love.

I have mentioned before the Cincinnati Vineyard Church I visited several times when my youngest son, Isaac, did his four year college degree at the Cincinnati College/Conservatory of Music. This Vineyard congregation, under the leadership of former Senior Pastor Steve Sjogren, started many years ago the mission of what is called "servant evangelism." Their focus is showing loving deeds to others in the name of Jesus.

They are the church that does very practical and personal things for people such as cleaning and scrubbing their bathrooms; washing their car for free; feeding laundromat machines for another; whatever. Then when these people wonder why they reply, "*We want to show you God's love in a practical way.*" They are simply doing God's kindness with no donations accepted.

When I shared about the Vineyard Church in my previous church a person questioned me about whether these acts of kindness are simply manipulative ways of trying to get more church members; if it is simply a sneaky way to proselytize people about Jesus? Yet that is the most amazing thing about this servant evangelism.

In our world today, as well as in our often cynical view of people, we are sometimes conditioned to think that nothing is ever given for free. We think that there is always a hidden motive; a subtle scheme behind everything. We may easily think that everyone, especially those in the Church, are out to try to scam us into joining; into giving; whatever.

Yet that is not what servant evangelism is all about and that is why it is so radical. People are shocked with amazement that someone will do something nice for them—no strings attached. Some want to jump to conclusions yet are overwhelmed that the kindness and care are so generous. Some simply say, "*It doesn't make sense why they would care for me.*"

Yet isn't that the true message of Jesus and his love? Somehow people in this world, as well as many of us in Christ's church, have never experienced; have somehow lost the understanding of God's unconditional love and kindness. Therefore to do acts of kindness; to say that one is simply showing God's love in a practical way is out of many people's realm of possibility.

However if you and I are actually touched by this God-centered grace and kindness, it is then that we can share that with others. In fact isn't that our calling "*to love our neighbor as we love ourselves?*" God calls each of us to show God's love to others in simple and practical ways.

Many at the Vineyard Church have been doing kindness and servant evangelism long enough that this kindness has infiltrated most everything they do in their daily lives. They think nothing of paying for the meal of a neighboring table in a restaurant; paying for someone's gas at the service station; raking someone's lawn; etc.

A few weeks ago my wife, Kim, was going through the drive through at a fast-food restaurant. When she got to the window the worker told her: "*Your order was paid for by the people in front of you. They want you to know that God loves you.*" Kindness evangelism and caring in all that we do is a powerful witness to each person--some who may have never experienced true unconditional kindness.

My friends the important thing to remember in all this is that the ones who change and are renewed the most are not the ones cared for, but rather the ones who do the caring. The ones whose lives are transformed the most are the ones who do acts of kindness in Jesus' name. As Jesus showed; go and share his love and your life will never be the same again.

This is what has happened at this Vineyard Church. They care for literally hundreds of thousands of people around the city of Cincinnati with most of these people never able to come to their church way out in the suburbs. They care in order to simply demonstrate God's kindness.

A few years ago this church was also giving over \$25,000 a month to inner city crisis shelters; to programs for people getting out of jail; for scholarships for inner city youth; and the list goes on and on. As God's love and kindness is proclaimed in this church; as people are empowered and trained to show servant care to others their whole church community has been transformed; they are focused on sharing Christ's love and caring for all.

My friends, this is also a vision I have for our Messiah congregation. My vision is that we develop many more simple and practical ways we can all reach out (as individuals and as a church) and show kindness to others in Jesus' name.

I firmly believe that this witness is drastically needed in our often unkind world today, as well as among churches who are often filled with lots of words—filled judgment and self-righteousness about the things they are against—rather than actual acts of love, grace and hope.

My vision is that through this caring outreach and kindness Messiah will become even more a congregation filled with kindness and mission for others. God has truly blessed each one of us, and Messiah, to be a blessing.

Always remember that even though we may not be able to change all the poverty and hurt in society, each one of us can make a difference for an individual and/or a family; we can share God's love with others in a practical and loving way. May God bless us in that mission!