

## Introduction

“Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.”

—James 1: 27

“When one man dies, it is a tragedy. When thousands die, it is statistics.”

—Joseph Stalin

Orphan.

It’s the saddest word in the English Language.

It’s just as sad in Greek, *orfanó* (ορφανό), Hebrew – *ya tom* (יָתוּם), Arabic *yatim* (يَتِيم), or any other language on the planet.

The word describes a child under the age of 18 for whom one or both parents have died. It is a sad and lonely word.

I have seen orphans in the favelas of Brazil, in the townships of South Africa, in the villages of Mozambique, the streets of Iraq and cities of Viet Nam. I have visited orphans in deplorable institutional care facilities in China, Russia and Egypt. Their pain preoccupies my days. Their cries keep me awake at night.

We are living today in the midst of a great opportunity to bear witness to our faith and work to improve the lives of orphans. There are an estimated 150 million orphans alive right now – mostly in the developing nations of the global south – and approximately 16,500 children die daily from the effects of extreme poverty. Many of these children who die are orphans, and 16,500 per day totals 6 million per year.

I have struggled with finding the right words to describe this situation. Is the world experiencing an orphan crisis? Yes. An orphan epidemic? Yes. But maybe we should call it an orphan scourge, or orphan affliction? But it is something beyond these words. It's like a plague, a haunt. It's a weight on our shoulders, a shadow hanging over the head of the world's people. It's cosmic chaos, a grave distortion of the way life should be. It is a perennial problem that is exacerbated by other forces such as malaria, AIDS, extreme poverty, war, nationalism and tribalism and more.

In my struggle to find the right word or words to articulate this situation I have learned this: the presence of 150 million orphans around the world today coupled with the death of 16,500 children per day from preventable diseases provide us with an opportunity to care for orphans. It is *The Orphan Opportunity*. We have the ability to end this situation. We have the resources and the technology to care for all of the world's people, including the 150 million orphans and the six million children who die annually from the effects of extreme poverty.

Most of these deaths are preventable. These children die from diseases, malnutrition and / or lack of potable water, all conditions that humanity has had the means to end decades ago. They die unspectacular deaths in rural, suburban and urban communities far from the world's media and our attention. They die virtually unnoticed.

Our neglect of these children is not only sad. In reality, it is a crime against humanity.

The death of 6 million children *per year* is, of course, the same total as the number of Jews murdered by the Nazis during the Holocaust. It is clear that those murdered by the Nazis comprised 6 million sins of commission (**sins of commission**: blatant acts of sin we commit by doing something we should not be doing, such as murder, rape, stealing,

lying) as the Jewish people were specifically targeted both individually and collectively for death through a systematic campaign of genocide. Our disregard for the 6 million children who are dying each year now is, on the other hand, a sin of omission (**sins of omission**: sins we commit by not doing something we should do, such as feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting those in prison, tithing and regular prayer). Some Christians are, no doubt, unaware of the extent of today's orphan crisis, and thus can claim ignorance and innocence. On the other hand, many other Christians, including denominational leaders (both lay and clergy across the religious spectrum) are fully aware of the dire circumstances that exist around the planet and choose to ignore this ongoing tragedy. We who know and turn our backs on these children are guilty of the sin of omission.

**Here's the truth: there is no reason for this crisis. There are enough resources on this planet to feed, clothe, house, educate and provide health care to every person alive today and many more. We have the resources. What we lack are the moral vision and collective will to make this a reality.**

How can this be in a world where so much progress has been made in technology, agriculture, communication and more? Thirty separate times the Bible directs its readers to care for orphans (these instructions are often linked with charges to also care for widows and foreigners). There are 2.4 billion Christians alive today. This means that there are approximately 15 Christians for every orphan. If one out of every 15 Christians could care for one orphan, or, if groups of 15 Christians could come together to care for one orphan, there would be no orphan crisis. Enough Christians and enough resources exist on this planet to care for the needs of all these children with plenty to spare.

Moreover, caring for these children can be done for a few dollars per day. The majority of orphaned children live in poor, undeveloped nations, where food, clothing and shelter are inexpensive and relatively easy to provide. We can use our resources (time, talents, gifts and service) to care for these children, or we can continue to look the other way and allow this crisis to continue.

It is pretty easy to say that we are disciples of Jesus. It is not always easy to follow his ethical teachings and demands for sacrifice. Seriously, who is ready to pick up their cross and follow Jesus? But how we use our resources is a central ethical question for any follower of Jesus Christ, who spoke about the topic of wealth and possessions more than any other. Here is but one example: “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” (Matthew 6: 19 – 21)

In light of these words from the Sermon on the Mount, consider these questions:

- Can, or will, Christians, in the United States, and other developed regions of the world, give up a craft beer or designer coffee and use those funds to save a child’s life?
- Can we live without the \$20,000 (or, in some cases, many times more) it will cost to renovate our kitchens, or \$5,000 we spend on a special vacation?
- Will we use our resources to purchase and buy expensive and unnecessary luxuries for ourselves and immediate family, or share with those in need?
- Are we willing to sacrifice anything for this world’s orphaned children?

These are some of the most difficult, but important, moral questions of our day.

It seems simple to me: if we Christians can hear the cries of these children, we can turn our collective energy, resources and love towards them and end this crisis. We can fulfill our Biblical mandate and help children in need. We can go to where God is already present—where children are suffering and dying—and, working with local community leaders, help provide them the resources to survive and thrive. In so doing, we ourselves will be blessed because we know that when we give, we receive more than those we give to. When we help shine a light for others, our own path is better illuminated.

On a larger scale, however, the goal is to mitigate and, eventually, eliminate the suffering of orphans around the world. It is our ultimate goal to light a fire that can and will spread across denominational and faith lines, uniting Christians, Jews and Muslims in caring for these precious children as our respective sacred texts command us all to do.

Most of the Biblical commands to serve orphans are found in the Hebrew Scriptures, the Old Testament. This means that our Jewish brothers and sisters should be caring for orphans since it is commanded they do so within their sacred writings of the Torah, Writings and Prophets.

Likewise, the Qur'an tells its followers 22 times to care for orphans. The Prophet Mohammad himself was an orphan, and service to orphans has always been important to Muslims. Service to orphans can be a means of peacebuilding between the three Abrahamic Traditions, all of whose sacred texts call on their followers to care for these children.

When you add the total number of Jews, Christians and Muslim followers up around the world you end up with a total of four billion persons, over half of the world's

population. There are 26 Jews, Christians and Muslims around the planet for every orphan alive today.

And, the reality is, children who are orphaned are just like children who are being raised by their parents. They want to play and have fun: they want to go to school and have someone help them with their homework. They want to be tucked in at night. These children want someone to say to them: “I love you.” They need health care and an opportunity for gainful employment (even if they don’t understand these concepts). They want to be part of a family, with a mother, father, sisters and brothers, aunts and uncles and cousins and grandparents. They want to be loved, and they, in turn, want to return this love.

When orphans overcome their circumstances, they can be incredibly successful. They often have an inner drive and work ethic far beyond children whose parents raised them. Think of Alexander Hamilton, James Monroe, Andrew Jackson, Herbert Hoover, Eleanor Roosevelt, Louis Armstrong, Marilyn Monroe, Babe Ruth and James Michener. All of them were orphaned. I know of many orphans today who, from debilitating circumstances and near impossible conditions, have made something positive of their lives. They have fought for an education, excelled scholastically, and become successful in a wide variety of fields including medicine, the arts, law, politics, education and religion.

But, we have a big problem. Part of the reason we don’t respond to the needs of orphans today is because the “Christian Church” is often weak, divided, misguided and self-serving. Perversions of Christianity have distorted and corrupted the original and true

message of Jesus Christ, who lived a life of service, grace, peace, mercy and love. He challenged his followers to do the same.

In many ways, we have failed to meet his challenge. Instead of “picking up our crosses and following Jesus,” many Christians and churches follow worldly values and principles and pursue earthly goals and ambitions. The “Christian Church,” a human institution and organization, has, for too long and too often, put the acquisition of wealth, power, status, and personal gratification above the vision, demands and rewards of the Gospel.

Service with orphans will provide an antidote to the Christian Church in decline and division. It has appeal to all sides of the political and religious spectrums. Service with orphans can unite Christians across the nation and world and, in fact, heal many of the divisions between individuals, churches and denominations. This remedy is right in front of us: caring for orphans lifts communities and can bring together disparate groups within the Christian Church. It is Biblically mandated and greatly needed in the world today. Despite the fact that we are living in difficult and toxic times, or maybe *because* we are living in difficult and toxic times, service with orphans can pull Christians and churches of different stripes and different opinions together around this one issue. This is THE ANSWER to what ails us.

For example, those on the Christian Right should be involved in caring for these children because 30 separate times the Bible tells us to care for orphans. Persons on the Christian Right tend to be more literal and more fundamental in their reading and interpretation of the scriptures. They should be caring for orphans because the Bible explicitly makes these demands.

For those on the Christian Left service to orphans is also expected, in part, because they believe in social justice and the social gospel. While they interpret much of the Bible symbolically, they take seriously the commands to care for the least, the last and the lost. There is no one more in need today, for example, than a 4-year old Sub-Sahara African orphan whose very life depends on outside services.

Those in the middle are often looking for common ground, a place where all can meet in love and service. Sometimes being in the middle is the most difficult position. But serving the needs of orphans is common ground, a meeting place for all, and a sacred space where all may join hands in service.

For everyone, no matter where we fall on the religious or political spectrum, service to orphans should be undertaken for this simple reason: *it is the right thing to do!*

I have personally witnessed persons of different backgrounds and beliefs coming together in service to orphans. Through the years, I have led many groups into this mission field. These groups have included Democrats, Republicans and Independents; they have included rich and poor, young and old, black and white, blue and white collar. I have worked on orphan projects with Roman Catholics and Protestants, with Jews and Muslims, atheists and agnostics. After being with orphans for a day, week or month, political and religious differences seem insignificant. There is a diminishing desire to fight and argue over politics or religious beliefs, ethics or personal philosophies after serving the world's most vulnerable population. The tendency to divide and debate is replaced with an overwhelming desire for service and the making of plans to improve the living conditions of these children in need. Our differences fade as we serve side by side with those in need.

In the Early Church, service to orphans and those in need helped fuel the explosive growth of the new religion called Christianity in the Roman Empire. Chaz Robbins writes:

The early church experienced rapid growth due in part to their emphasis on orphan care. In a sharp contrast with the surrounding culture, early Christians valued the life of the most vulnerable in their society. They turned their beliefs into practice by adopting or taking care of unwanted children. Both of those practices resulted in the continual swelling of the early church's numbers in the second and third century. (Robbins 2016)

This same practice is applicable today in the midst of the great decline experienced across the board in Christendom. Many have written about the post-Christian culture that now exists in the developed nations of the world, specifically Europe and North America. A post-Christian culture, i.e. a culture where Christianity once flourished, then declined, presents us with a pre-Christian environment, a new opportunity for us to witness our faith and attract new followers to Jesus Christ. We are in a time that is parallel to the early church where we are living in a (mostly) pre-Christian culture. We therefore have the ability to re-set and re-build the Christian Church, the Body of Christ.

I have personally experienced and seen this growth through work with orphans. During my tenure as the pastor of the New Milford United Methodist Church in New Milford, Connecticut, we became involved with orphans in Mozambique and raised \$85,000 to construct a House For Children (orphanage) for 25 children. Our weekly attendance during my time at that church grew from 85 to over 300 per week fueled, in part, by our emphasis on local and international missions. Members of that church could argue and debate a host of theological and political issues, but I assure you of this: they

were united in love of those children and committed to making sure that *our* children in Mozambique had shelter, food, water, health care, access to education and a future.

The absence of a strong missional and prophetic voice from the Christian Church has created a spiritual void around the planet that is being filled by cultural and political forces leading us further away from Jesus' vision for the world and towards a dystopian future. The institutional church, at least in the United States, is reflecting the culture we are living in more than the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The Christian Church is often obsessed with excessive consumerism and bitter partisan infighting at the expense of doing what we could, and should, be doing to help those in need.

We Christians are approaching a fork in the road. We can choose, individually and collectively, to participate in this orphan opportunity and take care of these children. In doing so, we can demonstrate our faith and the love of Jesus through hands on mission and outreach activities. We can be the generation to end the orphan epidemic. We can give the church a mission and evangelical message in which we can grow again.

Or, we can continue to fight and divide, with a shrinking membership and diminished impact on the world. If we continue to decline in numbers and influence our churches will become more like museums and cemeteries, irrelevant footnotes in history.

The institutional church, at least in the United States, most of Europe and the developed world, is in great decline. If the church is the Body of Christ, one could say we have been taken to the Intensive Care Unit of a local hospital. Without a unifying purpose or *raison d'être* in these divisive times and consumer-based mentality, the Christian Church will continue to flounder and, eventually die.

The global orphan opportunity presents the institutional church and spiritually motivated persons an incredible chance to demonstrate the fruits of our faith through good works. We grow, individually and collectively, in grace, peace, mercy and love, when we work with these children in the mission field. We become closer to God when we see Jesus in those we meet. Further, service with orphans gives us an occasion for evangelism. Caring for orphans affords us the chance to attract new converts who will witness our faith in action and be moved to learn more about this religion called Christianity. It is the right direction in which to row.

### **Pure Religion**

Caring for orphans provides us with an opportunity to practice pure religion. My title, *Pure Religion*, is based on the words of the Biblical Book James, who uses them towards the end of this passage:

But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act—they will be blessed in their doing. If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. ***Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.*** James 1: 22 – 27

This is the only location in the Bible where we can find a definition of religion. It is true that there are other succinct Biblical passages where we can find descriptions of what religion should be, such as the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20: 1 - 17), the Shema (Deuteronomy 6: 4 – 9), What Does the Lord Require (Micah 6: 6 – 8) and the Beatitudes (Matthew 5: 1 – 12). But James 1: 27 is the only place in the Bible where an explicit definition of religion is provided. So, how does James define true religion?

True religion is more than having perfect church attendance. It is more than tithing, teaching Sunday School or serving on a church committee, singing in the choir or volunteering as an usher, liturgist or Eucharist minister. True religion means more than donating to food banks, reading the Bible and praying regularly. These are all important components of true religion, but only part of the total definition.

James tells us that for faith to be real, it must be demonstrated in the world through deeds. One must not only be a “hearer of the word,” one must also become a “doer of the word.” Our lives must conform to what we espouse or, put more colloquially, we must walk the walk and talk the talk. “To care for orphans and widows in their distress” means, as John Wesley wrote, to care for those who need it the most, and in their most helpless and hopeless state. Orphans and widows are among the least, the last and the lost. God is already in the midst of those who suffer. Caring for these individuals places us in God’s presence. Remaining “unstained by the world” cannot be accomplished until we have given our hearts to God and love and service to those neighbors in need.

This book is about caring for orphans. It says here that this is not only the right thing to do, it is God’s will. I maintain that caring for these children will provide the Christian Church with a prime directive that will ignite a spark across church and denominational

lines that will inspire both those within and outside the church doors and lead to a new revival and awakening.

This is not a book about caring for widows: I will leave that important work to others, realizing that widows and orphans are created when a husband / father dies, leaving the wife a widow and the children orphans. There are other members of our societies who are equally vulnerable, including the sick, disabled, those in prisons and nursing homes. There are persons who live on the streets of every nation on this planet, and others who suffer from deep and extreme poverty. I offer this proposal for your consideration: let us start caring for orphans and, once we have seriously addressed and improved this situation, branch out to other vulnerable groups until we have seriously mitigated human suffering. This is not a time to rest on our oars, but a call for all hands-on deck for this important work of spreading scriptural holiness and wholeness across the planet. Like ripples expanding across a pond, like the growth of the early church, we can do this!

The Bible is the unrelenting story of God's love for all people – from the book of Genesis through the Revelation of John, and God's call for us to love our neighbors, particularly those in need. James stands in the tradition of the Torah, Prophets and other New Testament writers in his theological focus on love for God and neighbor. Live as a friend of God and those in need, not as a friend of the world: this is *True Religion*.