



CHAPTER 3

Care for the Vulnerable

How the Father's Children Love the Fatherless

“I delivered the poor who cried for help,
and the fatherless who had none to help him.”

JOB 29:12

Kimberly and I already had four adopted children but decided that we had room for one more. Our Ukrainian kids also wanted a little brother. After playing with their Ethiopian cousins for a weekend, James said that he wanted a “sunscreen brother!” (He was trying to say “sun-tanned” brother.) So it was a joy to find and adopt Joshua, an adorable five-year-old boy from Ethiopia. His biological parents died when he was one, and he had no siblings. His impoverished uncle put him in an orphanage. Needless to say, we were eager to show him love in many ordinary ways, including family mealtime.

On his second night in our home, we all sat down to eat. Kimberly made a nice meal that included a spinach salad. Our Ukrainian kids never object to vegetables and we had a custom of eating everything on the table. But Joshua wouldn’t eat the salad. He wouldn’t even eat around the salad. He wouldn’t even sit at the table with us! In protest to spinach salad being served, Joshua shook his finger, wagged his head “no,” said several Ethiopian words, and left the room! I went to

get the little guy, and sat him back at the table. I motioned “eat” with my hands, but it didn’t work. He got up two more times to leave the room. I kept bringing him back and sitting him down. He refused to eat spinach.

While this whole episode was going on, I kept thinking about what my mom (and other moms) used to say when I was a kid. She would say, “Tony, you need to eat your green vegetables.” I would ask, “Why, Mom?” She would reply something like this: “Because there are starving kids in Africa!” As I surveyed this situation, I thought, *Apparently, that’s not true.*

This funny episode actually highlights two basic principles about adoption and orphan care. First, it’s *challenging*. Doing orphan care isn’t easy. My wife says she never struggled with cussing until she became a mother. Some days I think we will have been successful parents if we keep them out of prison; other days, I think we will have been successful if I stay out of prison.

Second, adoption and orphan care *is a joyful and unpredictable adventure*. Even though you will face challenges, adoption and orphan care will open up emotions you didn’t know you had, and you’ll have too many stories to share in one lifetime. Despite all the hardships, I wouldn’t change our situation one bit. I love being a dad to these five kids. I love seeing Joshua eat his salads now, seeing the kids sing in worship, and seeing them give and receive love.

To endure this joyful but challenging world of orphan care, we need to constantly draw hope and strength from God’s Word. *The foundational biblical truths that motivated us to adopt children, sustain us, as well.* Wherever you are in the journey—already adoptive parents, considering adoption, or desiring to do orphan care in other ways—it’s important to consider the biblical foundations and the practical challenges carefully.

BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR ORPHAN CARE

Where should we begin when discussing orphan care? We certainly need to have discussions about adult caregivers/adoptive parents, and orphans, but before we think about people, we need to think about *God*. Let's think about three foundational beliefs about God and the corresponding implications: (1) God cares for everyone made in His image; (2) God is "Father of the fatherless"; (3) God is an adoptive Father.

1. God Cares for Everyone Made in His Image

We get a lot of funny pronunciations of our church name, Imago Dei. One of my friends calls us "Joe Dimaggio Church." One guy said he thought it meant, "I'm a go to church to-dei." Some folks ask us if we are a Hispanic church. Why did we go with this name? My wife and I actually settled on it back in 2005. We said that if we could ever plant a church, we would call it Imago Dei because one of implications of this doctrine is that people have dignity and worth, and we would try to love all types of people. A firm belief in the doctrine of the image of God changes the way we view humanity.

God—who eternally exists in a triune relationship—created the universe out of nothing.¹⁴¹ The Scriptures speak of God creating "all things,"¹⁴² including the heavens,¹⁴³ and His special creation of human beings.¹⁴⁴ The author of Genesis describes God's glorious creation, and says these important words regarding the sixth day:

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.¹⁴⁵

God delights in His creation, and rejoices in all His works, but He has a unique love for those He made in His own image.¹⁴⁶ Being made in the image of God (or *the imago Dei*) means that people have the capacity to think, feel, reason, love, rejoice, reproduce, choose, and most of all know God personally and eternally through Jesus Christ.¹⁴⁷ God made us intimately, uniquely, and as male and female, distinctly.¹⁴⁸ He also made the purposefully. We are made to glorify the God who made us.

The Psalms are filled with praises to God who created the world in such splendor and glory.¹⁴⁹ Sadly, sin tainted God's glorious creation and is in need of redemption. All of creation, including humans, are under the effects of Genesis 3, and are currently "groaning for redemption."¹⁵⁰ But despite the devastating effects of the fall, we must not take a negative view of creation. We should enjoy creation. We should give thanks to the Creator and Redeemer. And we must assume our responsibility to care for God's creation, giving special attention to God's image bearers. This God-given responsibility involves meeting the physical and spiritual needs of people.

If you don't believe God made and crafted us in His image, then you're left to wonder why you should treat a human with great dignity. But if you embrace the doctrine of the *imago Dei*, you'll care about people from the womb to the tomb. Those who embrace this foundational doctrine will have a different outlook on life than some others. But God's people have always been set apart by such distinction. Pharaoh, Herod, and other evil rulers have had no problems destroying people made in God's image. Many continue to see and treat people as machines, animals, or mere sexual beings. But God's people see things differently. We realize that God's image bearers are worthy of love, dignity, provision, basic rights, and the opportunity to hear the good news about Jesus. In short, we must value what God values, and God values people.

HONORING GOD, HONORING PEOPLE

Throughout the Bible, we find that there are no gradations in the image of God. The author of Proverbs tells us:

The rich and the poor meet together; the LORD is the maker of them all.¹⁵¹

The poor man and the oppressor meet together; the LORD gives light to the eyes of both.¹⁵²

Whoever mocks the poor insults his Maker; he who is glad at calamity will not go unpunished.¹⁵³

There's no distinction in value here. God made both the rich and the poor, the slave and the oppressor. And notice this: If you dishonor anyone made in God's image, you dishonor God Himself. Similarly, James says:

But no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God.¹⁵⁴

Notice the danger of dishonoring those made in God's image by sinning with your words. You must treat humanity with great dignity and care in both word and deed.

Some people don't make this connection between our view of people and our view of God. Consider an illustration from Nicholas Wolterstorff. It would make sense for a foreigner, knowing nothing about U.S. history, to ask, "Why is the Mount Vernon estate in Virginia preserved as a national monument, and treated with great worth?" There are other more elaborate plantation homes. Why is this home so valuable? It's not because of its size or appearance (though it's beautiful). It's significant because it belonged to George

Washington, the first President of the United States. We value the home in Mount Vernon *because we treasure the owner*.¹⁵⁵ Can you imagine the outrage if people were damaging this house? People would speak up and act.

How much more should we care about people made in God's image? Value people because you treasure their Maker. Don't sit idly by while others mistreat God's treasured possession. When we don't act on behalf of God's image bearers, we belittle God Himself.

Martin Luther King Jr. couldn't allow the abuse of *the imago Dei* to go on without acting. This doctrine drove much of the civil rights movement.¹⁵⁶ King fought for fair and just treatment of everyone, and he called out those who discriminated against races. He said:

You see the founding fathers were really influenced by the Bible. The whole concept of the *imago Dei* . . . is the idea that all men have something within them that God injected. Not that they have substantial unity with God, but that every man has a capacity to have fellowship with God. And this gives him uniqueness. . . . There are no gradations in the image of God. *Every man from a treble white to a bass black is significant on God's keyboard, precisely because every man is made in the image of God.* One day we will learn that. We will know one day that God made us to live together as brothers and to respect the dignity and worth of every man. This is why we must fight segregation with all of our non-violent might.¹⁵⁷

King also reflected on the hypocrisy of a particular white Baptist church that spent thousands of dollars to evangelize Africans, yet fired its pastor for allowing a black man to sing in its choir.¹⁵⁸ His sermons call our attention to the fact that one may affirm the doctrine of *imago Dei* on paper, but actually deny this belief in practice.

Because of a firm belief in the value of everyone, King was moved to tears as he observed the intense poverty in Quitman, Mississippi,

specifically as he watched a school teacher feed her students lunch, consisting of only a slice of an apple and some crackers. He grieved over the poor in Harlem, and defended poor sanitation workers in Memphis.

When we ask what drove this great man, we must answer (at least in part): a firm belief in humanity's value and uniqueness. Does it drive you? Do you realize the incredible value of people? C. S. Lewis reminds us of the wonder of a human being:

There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilizations—these are *mortal*, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. It is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit.¹⁵⁹

Because God cares about everyone made in His image, we must too.

2. *God Is "Father of the Fatherless"*

Some often asked me about this “new orphan-care movement.” They wonder about why this movement is growing. The fact is orphan care isn't new. Instagram is new. But orphan care is an old idea.

In the Old and New Testament, we see that God has compassion on the fatherless, and commands His people to mirror His concern. One of God's titles is “Father of the fatherless.” It's appropriate in light of the number of texts that highlight God's compassion and care for the orphan. God receives this name like some people receive nicknames—it just reflects His character and nature.

IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

As mentioned, the trio of the vulnerable—the orphan, widow, and sojourner—receive special attention in the Old Testament. My friend Rick calls them “running buddies” because you often see them mentioned together. God showed concern for these running buddies, who were vulnerable to abuse and injustice. We could devote an entire

chapter to each of these groups of people, but I'm focusing on the orphan here (the others are mentioned throughout the book).

In an effort to highlight the number of texts in a concise way, please notice three charts with three designations: (1) common problems of orphans, (2) God's concern for orphans, and (3) God's commands to care for orphans.

First, consider *some common problems of orphans*. Orphans were some of the most helpless members of society. They were social misfits. They lacked material needs. They were victims of all sorts of abuse. We can piece together a picture of their awful condition by noting a few biblical references.

Common Problems of Orphans	Biblical References
Being Kidnapped and Sold	<i>There are those who snatch the fatherless child from the breast, and they take a pledge against the poor. (Job 24:9)</i>
Helplessness	<i>. . . because I delivered the poor who cried for help, and the fatherless who had none to help him. (Job 29:12)</i>
Hunger and Abandonment	<i>If I have withheld anything that the poor desired, or have caused the eyes of the widow to fail, or have eaten my morsel alone, and the fatherless has not eaten of it (for from my youth the fatherless grew up with me as with a father, and from my mother's womb I guided the widow) . . . (Job 31:16–18)</i>
Losing Land Rights	<i>Do not move an ancient landmark or enter the fields of the fatherless. (Prov. 23:10)</i>

Losing Livestock	<i>They drive away the donkey of the fatherless; they take the widow's ox for a pledge. (Job 24:3)</i>
Victims of Violence	<i>You have sent widows away empty, and the arms of the fatherless were crushed. (Job 22:9)</i>
Treated as Property for which Others Gamble	<i>You would even cast lots over the fatherless, and bargain over your friend. (Job 6:27)</i>
Victims of Injustice and Abuse	<i>Your princes are rebels and companions of thieves. Everyone loves a bribe and runs after gifts. They do not bring justice to the fatherless, and the widow's cause does not come to them. (Isa. 1:23)</i> <i>Woe to those who decree iniquitous decrees, and the writers who keep writing oppression, to turn aside the needy from justice and to rob the poor of my people of their right, that widows may be their spoil, and that they may make the fatherless their prey! (Isa. 10:1–2)</i>
Being Murdered	<i>They kill the widow and the sojourner, and murder the fatherless. (Ps. 94:6)</i>
Not Represented in Court	<i>If I have raised my hand against the fatherless, because I saw my help in the gate, then let my shoulder blade fall from my shoulder, and let my arm be broken from its socket. (Job 31:21–22)¹⁶⁰</i>

Begging for Food and Losing Their Homes	<i>May his children be fatherless and his wife a widow! May his children wander about and beg, seeking food far from the ruins they inhabit!</i> (Ps. 109:9–10) ¹⁶¹
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These same problems continue today. The fatherless are still objects of abuse and exploitation. They often have no one speaking up on their behalf. They are often the poorest of the poor, begging for food, living on the streets, and having serious medical needs. Millions of orphans are around the world right now.

Yet we won't hear them today because they won't make the evening news. Other "more important problems" will get highlighted. You could possibly live your whole life without ever meeting or knowing an orphan. You could live and die and never even be inconvenienced by their presence. You can go about your merry way and never even be moved by their problems because we rarely hear about the orphan crisis. Yet, they're there. Like in the days of the Old Testament, they need advocates, providers, and families.

Second, consider *God's concern for the orphan*. Does anyone care for the vulnerable? Yes. God Himself takes up their concern. The Old Testament writers illustrate God's mercy and compassion with God's concern for orphans.

God's Concern for Orphans	Biblical References
God Hears Their Cry	<i>If you do mistreat them [orphans and widows], and they cry out to me, I will surely hear their cry.</i> (Exod. 22:23)

God Defends and Provides for Orphans	<i>He [God] executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing. (Deut. 10:18)</i>
God Is Entitled “Father of the Fatherless”	<i>Father of the fatherless and protector of widows is God in his holy habitation. God settles the solitary in a home. (Ps. 68:5–6a)</i>
God Knows the Orphan’s Condition and Will Execute Judgment on Oppressors	<i>But you do see, for you note mischief and vexation, that you may take it into your hands; to you the helpless commits himself; you have been the helper of the fatherless. . . . you will incline your ear to do justice to the fatherless and the oppressed, so that man who is of the earth may strike terror no more. (Ps. 10:14, 17b–18)</i>
God Sustains the Orphan	<i>The LORD watches over the sojourners; he upholds the widow and the fatherless, but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin. (Ps. 146:9)</i>
God Welcomes the Orphan	<i>For my father and my mother have forsaken me, but the LORD will take me in. (Ps. 27:10)</i>
God Shows Mercy to the Orphan	<i>“Assyria shall not save us; we will not ride on horses; and we will say no more, ‘Our God,’ to the work of our hands. In you the orphan finds mercy.” (Hos. 14:3)</i>

Third, consider *God’s commands to care for orphans*. In light of the plight of orphans, and because of God’s concern for orphans, He established laws to help and defend them. We see this plan in the Covenant Code in Exodus, and in the Deuteronomic Code in particular. God had a plan to care for orphans, and that plan was *His people*

acting justly and mercifully. God promised to bless those who bless orphans. He warned those who abused orphans. He urged His people to show mercy and justice to them.

God's Commands to Care for Orphans	Biblical References
Don't Take Advantage of Orphans	<i>You shall not mistreat any widow or fatherless child.</i> (Exod. 22:22)
Give Justice to Orphans	<p><i>"You shall not pervert the justice due to the sojourner or to the fatherless, or take a widow's garment in pledge, but you shall remember that you were a slave in Egypt and the LORD your God redeemed you from there; therefore I command you to do this."</i> (Deut. 24:17–18)</p> <p><i>"Give justice to the weak and the fatherless; maintain the right of the afflicted and the destitute. Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked."</i> (Ps. 82:3–4)</p> <p><i>Learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause.</i> (Isa. 1:17)</p> <p><i>"Do not oppress the widow, the fatherless, the sojourner, or the poor, and let none of you devise evil against another in your heart."</i> (Zech. 7:10)</p>

<p>Feed the Orphan from the Third Year's Tithe</p>	<p><i>“At the end of every three years you shall bring out all the tithe of your produce in the same year and lay it up within your towns. And the Levite, because he has no portion or inheritance with you, and the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow, who are within your towns, shall come and eat and be filled, that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hands that you do.”</i> (Deut. 14:28–29)</p>
<p>Provide for the Orphan from the Sheaves Left in the Fields</p>	<p><i>“When you reap your harvest in your field and forget a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it. It shall be for the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow, that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hands.”</i> (Deut. 24:19)</p>
<p>Provide for the Orphan with the Fruit Left on the Trees and Vines</p>	<p><i>“When you beat your olive trees, you shall not go over them again. It shall be for the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow. When you gather the grapes of your vineyard, you shall not strip it afterward. It shall be for the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow.”</i> (Deut. 24:20–21)</p>

Include Orphans in the Celebrations of the Worshipping Community

“Then you shall keep the Feast of Weeks to the LORD your God with the tribute of a freewill offering from your hand, which you shall give as the LORD your God blesses you. And you shall rejoice before the LORD your God, you and your son and your daughter, your male servant and your female servant, the Levite who is within your towns, the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow who are among you, at the place that the LORD your God will choose, to make his name dwell there. You shall remember that you were a slave in Egypt; and you shall be careful to observe these statutes. You shall keep the Feast of Booths seven days, when you have gathered in the produce from your threshing floor and your winepress. You shall rejoice in your feast, you and your son and your daughter, your male servant and your female servant, the Levite, the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow who are within your towns.” (Deut. 16:10–14)

<p>Know that Condemnation Awaits Those who Oppress Orphans</p>	<p><i>“Cursed be anyone who perverts the justice due to the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow.” (Deut. 27:19)</i></p> <p><i>“Then I will draw near to you for judgment. I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hired worker in his wages, the widow and the fatherless, against those who thrust aside the sojourner, and do not fear me, says the LORD of hosts.” (Mal. 3:5)</i></p>
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In short, the Old Testament writers reveal why God is called as “Father of the fatherless.” He is aware of their awful situation. He is compassionate toward them. He expects and commands His people to care for them.

IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Sometimes it’s asserted that the New Testament doesn’t give much attention to orphan care, and consequently the church shouldn’t be all that concerned about it. But I would beg to differ. While the number of texts doesn’t compare with the number of Old Testament texts, we must remember that God’s character hasn’t changed. These Old Testament laws are grounded *in God’s character*, which never changes.

Further, the New Testament writers often look back at the Old Testament to base moral and social exhortations for the church. Though the principles for collecting manna don’t apply to us, for example, Paul uses them to exhort the church in Corinth to radical generosity and sharing among Christians.¹⁶² Keller notes, “Just as Israel was to be a ‘community of justice,’ so the church is to reflect these same concerns for the poor.”¹⁶³

We see Jesus demonstrating God's ongoing concern for the vulnerable. As noted, Luke describes numerous instances of Jesus caring for the poor. He describes one occasion when a desperate widow from Nain brought her dead son to Jesus. Luke writes that Jesus "had compassion on her" and He then proceeded to raise this young man from the dead. Jesus then gave this boy back to his mother. All the people respond, "God has *visited* his people!"¹⁶⁴ These folks knew that God was "protector of the widow," and that in Jesus, God showed up.

The other Gospel writers also provide examples of Jesus caring for the ostracized, the immoral, children, lepers, and the physically challenged. Matthew and Mark note Jesus' criticism of the religious leaders' insensitivity to the vulnerable, saying they "devour widows' houses and for a pretense make long prayers."¹⁶⁵ And we must remember that the *incarnation* itself was an example of how Jesus "moved in with the poor."¹⁶⁶

Luke also writes about a very important example of mercy ministry in Acts 6. It's the passage many point to as "the origin of the deacon." The apostles didn't want to give up prayer and ministry of the Word but they had a problem. And what was that problem? It was the need to care for widows. Right here in the beginning stages of the church, the concern for widows appears. Later, when Paul writes to Timothy about the nature of the church, he gives about half a chapter to the proper care for widows.¹⁶⁷

Though we don't have as many passages on orphan care in the New Testament, we must see the continuity between the Testaments, and consider these New Testament examples. Much of this ministry is assumed. And when you read church history, you find the early church being known for such ministry. The philosopher Aristides told Emperor Hadrian in AD 125 of the early church's praiseworthy mercy ministry, including widow and orphan care: "They love one another, and from widows they do not turn away their esteem; and they deliver the orphan from him who treats him harshly."¹⁶⁸

The most significant text in the New Testament on orphan care is found in James. Against the backdrop of all the Old Testament texts previously mentioned, James writes these words:

Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.¹⁶⁹

James says that faithful Christians care for the vulnerable. And they do it “before God, *the Father*.” James seems to intentionally mention the Fatherhood of God in this exhortation. We care for the fatherless in view of, in obedience to, and for the glory of, the “Father of the fatherless.” In the context of James, this text serves as a way to be “doers of the word, and not hearers only.”¹⁷⁰

Visiting orphans means to care for them. Know them. Feed them. Teach them. Advocate for them. Welcome them. Give transitional aid to them. Adopt them or, when possible, reunify them. There are various ways to do James 1:27, but realize it requires personal involvement and sacrifice.

This word *visit* gets used in other very important passages to describe God’s merciful care and deliverance of His people in redemptive history.¹⁷¹ God “visited” His people when they were childless, breadless, and crushed under Egyptian oppression. When God “visited” His people, He came to their rescue personally. James calls us to reflect the nature of our redeeming God by aiding orphans “in their affliction.” And the *affliction* exists. Some of the coldest and darkest places I’ve ever been are orphanages. Not every orphanage cares for children well. In many cases, it’s a living hell on earth. Orphans often live in fear, despair, hopelessness, and with the scars of an awful past.

James says caring for orphans in their affliction is one of the marks of “true religion.” Yet, how many books on spiritual growth include James’s concern? You can find numerous books on Bible study, prayer, stewardship, evangelism, and parenting (and rightly so). But why the neglect of orphan care? Why isn’t this on the list of “spiritual

disciplines”? Why isn’t it known as one of the marks of an effective church? One wonders why James 1:27 isn’t taken more seriously, especially given the barrage of the other biblical texts. New Testament scholar Douglas Moo comments on the importance of James 1:27, and the spirit of it:

One test of pure religion, therefore, is the degree to which we extend aid to the “helpless” in our world—whether they be widows, orphans, immigrants trying to adjust to a new life, impoverished third-world dwellers, the handicapped, or the homeless.¹⁷²

We’re left with the question: Am I extending aid to the orphan and other groups of vulnerable people? If not, then why not? God is “Father of the fatherless,” and true religion involves imitating His concern.

3. *God Is an Adoptive Father*

Sometimes people look at me funny when I’m with my Ukrainian son, and my Ethiopian son, since they both call me “Papa.” Observers often have questions. As I talk with them, and eventually share that we have five adopted children, the most common question is “Why?”

What moved my heart the most was the doctrine of adoption. Of course, this isn’t what most people expect to hear. They expect to hear about infertility. But my wife and I were led to adopt because of *theology* not *biology*.

The doctrine of adoption is the Cinderella doctrine of Pauline theology. Books about salvation often emphasize justification, redemption, reconciliation, and propitiation, but speak cursorily—if at all—about adoption. That’s really sad because the doctrine of adoption is, in the words of J. I. Packer, “the highest privilege that the gospel offers.”¹⁷³

When we fail to ponder the privileges of adoption, we miss so much. It provides incredible hope and assurance to God’s people.¹⁷⁴

It's also a unifying metaphor for much of the Christian life. One can speak of other doctrines when talking about adoption, like the Trinity, salvation, the Spirit, Christian growth, eschatology, the church, and prayer. The doctrine of adoption also inspires prayer and worship to God. And it reminds us of how we should relate to one another in the church: as adopted brothers and sisters.

Paul uses the word *adoption* in Ephesians, Galatians, and Romans, though the concept is taught elsewhere (including in the Old Testament—Israel was “God’s son”). Paul shows us that God the Father administered our adoption, God the Son accomplished our adoption, and God the Spirit applied our adoption, giving us a new nature, a new position, and the indwelling presence of God that enables us to cry, “Abba! Father!”¹⁷⁵

God is an adoptive Father—by choice. Adoption was never Plan B for God. It wasn't an alternative solution. It was Plan A. Before the universe existed, God planned on adopting us into His family.¹⁷⁶ Why did God adopt us? Because He is gracious and merciful. God didn't adopt us because of our attractive merits, but because of His amazing mercy.

Therefore, when Paul tells us to “be imitators of God, as beloved children,”¹⁷⁷ part of that means reflecting the adopting love of God to a world in need. Certainly, not everyone is called to adopt, and not every orphan is available for adoption; but every believer is called to imitate God.

We've passed on “the adoption bug” to our kids. Recently I was taking my son Joshua to baseball practice. He said, “Papa, when I get old, I want to adopt from every country. I want to adopt from Ukraine, Ethiopia, China, and Kentucky.” He doesn't understand everything about adoption, but Joshua already has a sensitivity to others in need. His little heart has already grasped the idea that those adopted should extend adopting love to others.

WISE ORPHAN CARE

In light of these foundations, how might we care for those made in God's image? How might we practice true religion? How might we imitate God by putting the adopting love of God on display?

Accept Responsibility

When I talk about orphan care, people usually assume that at the end of the message I'm going to say, "Now, go adopt children!" But that's not my exhortation. I don't tell every Christian to adopt children. I do tell them to elevate their view of adoption, and to seriously consider it. Here's my simple application: Every Christian must *do something* to care for the orphan. The question everyone must ask is, "What can I do to practice James 1:27?" All of us are at various stages of life, and every person needs to pray and evaluate their life before answering this question.

For all of us, orphan care ought to be expressed through very ordinary means. Sure, some of you will be led by the Holy Spirit to pursue international adoptions. Some will rescue multiple siblings in crisis. But others will be called to pursue less costly means in the area of orphan care. While we all are not called to become adoptive parents, we are all called to care for orphans. Orphan care is not for exceptional Christians, it's for the ordinary ones.

One way to love orphans is by caring for *foster children*. Contact your local leaders and see how you can help. Obviously, becoming a foster parent is something every believer should seriously consider. Churches may also think about supporting foster children by providing supplies for them. Some foster children move their stuff from house to house in a garbage bag. Can you imagine a more undignified act? Your church may consider supporting foster children who go to college. Many of them have no parents to move them into a college dorm. They need a computer, a bedspread, a home-cooked meal, and a place to wash clothes and watch football. We shouldn't settle for

supply-giving only, but we should see this as a practical way to help and love. You should also consider loving and serving the caseworkers who labor in foster care. Throw them a party as a church and tell them thank you.¹⁷⁸

Recently, a fifteen-year-old orphan made the news when he attended a worship service in Florida, and asked for someone in the congregation to adopt him. Davion Navar Henry Only, dressed in a dark suit and a borrowed tie, told worshippers at St. Mark Missionary Baptist Church these heart-wrenching words: "I'll take anyone. Old or young, dad or mom, black, white, purple. I don't care. And I would be really appreciative. The best I could be."¹⁷⁹ The fifteen-year-old has been in foster care his whole life. He found out in June that his mother, who gave birth to him while in prison, died.¹⁸⁰ In three years, he'll be on his own. His simple plea was for a family.

I was happy to hear that Davion went to the local church searching for a family. I only wish the local church would start searching for "Davions."

You may also seek to live out James 1:27 by loving the *functionally fatherless*. This generation has been called the *fatherless generation*. We desperately need men in particular to step up and welcome that kid down the street, whose dad is in jail (or uninvolved for other reasons), and whose mom is struggling.

One of my favorite shows growing up was *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air*. Some of you can probably quote the theme song! *It wasn't until recently that I realized I was watching a show about being fatherless*. In an extremely moving episode called "Papa's Got a Brand New Excuse," Will's biological father, Lou, shows up after fourteen years and spends time with him. Will is excited, and comes in with a duffel bag with a gift that's a statue of a father holding his son, saying, "Daddio!" He thinks he's going to go on a trip with his dad. However, his dad lets him down again, making some excuse for postponing the trip. Crushed in despair, but trying to play it off, Will has a conversation

with his Uncle Phil. The moving dialogue ends with Will asking Phil, “How come he don’t want me, man?”

This pain is present everywhere. And it’s not a TV show. Parental abandonment crushes children. Perhaps you won’t be an adoptive father, but maybe you can be an Uncle Phil or neighbor that welcomes in the functionally fatherless kid who’s asking the question, “How come he [or she] doesn’t want me?”

Advocate Boldly

If the Lord gives you any influence, use it to speak up for the voiceless. We’ve seen in the Old Testament that orphans often had no voice, and God urged His people to treat them justly. The same responsibility falls on us today. In the next chapter, we’ll consider the work of advocacy in more detail.

Act Wisely and Holistically

When it comes to *international* orphan care, we must be wise. The orphan crisis is complex, and there isn’t just one thing we need to do. If we don’t act carefully, we may even end up perpetuating problems (like human trafficking). We also need to think more holistically about orphan care. Adoption is only one of the ways to care for international children. Allow me to list some big categories worth pursuing further. (See Appendix for specific organizations working in these areas.)

Care for the Poor: One of the best ways to care for the orphan is to invest time and resources into impoverished countries, in order to *prevent orphans*. Often, some children are placed into orphanages because of poverty.

Caring for the poor can be a complicated matter, so invest resources, financial and otherwise, wisely. Sometimes we must do emergency relief, but we must also tend to the matters of *restoration* and *development*. Organizations can raise money for emergencies much easier than for development, but if we don’t change structures

and create sustainability, then the problems may continue to go on. Sometimes we can't prevent children from becoming orphans, but sometimes we can through wise mercy ministry.

One of the ways we need to do this is by mobilizing business leaders to create sustainable businesses in impoverished places. It's common to take a successful businessman or farmer on a mission trip and have him tote bricks for a week. Don't get me wrong; serving is important. But wouldn't it make more sense to tell this same guy to do what he always does: create a sustainable plan for wealth? Wouldn't his entrepreneurial skills serve children and future generations better?¹⁸¹

Invest in Orphanages: In many cases, orphans aren't available for adoption. So, the question is, how can we care for kids that will grow up in an orphanage? Perhaps your church can select some orphanages to support. Look to serve orphanages by doing construction work, by giving financial aid, and by supporting the full-time workers. You should also think about how to make sure the children are being taught well, and are learning the basic doctrines of the faith. In supporting orphanages, you may also be able to develop relationships with the children, and have an ongoing relationship with them. Let's do what we can to see that these kids are hearing the gospel, being loved, and are receiving the best possible care.

Promote and Support In-Country Adoption and Orphan Care: While we should commend Americans for adopting a massive number of international children (more than every other country combined),¹⁸² we need to remember that we aren't the only answer to the orphan crisis. If we want to see orphanages emptied, and children in families (where they belong), then we need to think about educating and empowering local leaders to create a culture of adoption and orphan care.

As a political power play in 2012, Vladimir Putin banned American families from adopting Russian orphans. It's infuriating to see orphans used as political pawns, especially when you realize that Americans adopted about 1,000 Russian children in 2011,¹⁸³ and that

Americans have adopted more than 60,000 Russian children since the fall of the Soviet Union.¹⁸⁴ But we must also understand that even if the ban didn't exist, there are still nearly 120,000 children in Russia eligible for adoption.¹⁸⁵ What must we do for all these children if we can't possibly adopt them all? We must do our best to train local leaders to care for the orphans in their country. Putin's ban simply illuminates this need.

Since an adoption and orphan-care culture doesn't exist in many countries, we need do what we can to change this. Some of those ways include trying to impact high schools and universities, training pastors and future pastors in seminaries, hosting conferences, writing books, and influencing business leaders and politicians. In some countries, historical myths about orphans abound. Some believe orphans are "cursed," and to bring an orphan in their home is welcoming a curse. So we must educate. Others don't think they have sufficient accommodations to adopt. So we must help provide financial aid.

One agency we support, Lifesong for Orphans, reported recently that they've helped 140 Ukrainian children get adopted by loving, Christian Ukrainian families. They've effectively emptied an entire orphanage. And the cost for a Ukrainian family to adopt a child is \$500, not \$25,000 (about the cost of an American adopting a Ukrainian).¹⁸⁶ Perhaps you or your church might financially support such initiatives, after doing some careful homework.

Adopt and/or Support Adoption: Adoptions in the United States have decreased significantly in recent years. Will you prayerfully consider adopting children, either domestically or internationally? If the financial challenge is the major obstacle, then consider fostering to adopt. Just remember in adoption to select a good agency, and ask questions.

If you're not able to adopt children, then will you consider supporting others? You might give to various adoption-funding agencies, like our local church does, or you might consider blessing a couple in the adoption process. You may also consider supporting an adoptive

couple by helping them tutor their kids, or babysit to give the parents a date night.

Provide Transitional Assistance: Unadopted children often have nowhere to turn when they age out of orphanages. In some international countries, the kids are practically helpless and hopeless. When we were in Ukraine adopting our four children, I remember our driver (who uttered about four words in four weeks) told us when we were finally boarding the train with our kids, “Thank you. These kids have nowhere to go in our country.” He wasn’t a social worker; he didn’t have statistics; but he was savvy. This man knew the underbelly of the country, and he knew that many of the orphans ended up in a life of crime, prostitution, or became victims of human trafficking. His anecdotal statement is verified statistically.

So how do we help? Two ways are obvious. First, *churches must strengthen their relationships with orphanages*. If churches will invest in orphanages, and get to know children, then they can make an impact on these children when they age out. We need to know the kids on a relational level, and seek to support them.

Further, *we must help our Christian businessmen and women get a vision for orphan care*.¹⁸⁷ If entrepreneurial leaders will submit to God’s Word, and use their resources, then they can make a huge difference in the lives of children. I would encourage business leaders right now to consider “adopting” an orphanage. They could get to know orphanage leaders now, and provide some immediate help. Then, as the relationship continues, they may begin exploring ways to help these particular kids in the future. What I’m saying is that we need to turn our high capacity leaders loose on this problem of transitional assistance, introducing them to the right people, giving them biblical foundations, and covering them in prayer. We must help and encourage God’s people to steward their various gifts and skills for the good of those in need.

Acknowledge Your Insufficiency

Orphan care is warfare. When you begin to minister to orphans you'll face conflict at every level. Don't be surprised when you face challenges within your family and among broken governmental systems. Your marriage may also go through a difficult test as well. All of this and more points to the necessity of prayer. But the good news for Christians is that God is for us. The "Father of the fatherless" is our Abba. The "I AM" who "visited" His people in their affliction in Exodus is with you. Cast your insufficiencies on His total sufficiency. We can cry out to Abba, as Jesus did in the Garden of Gethsemane—weeping and falling to the ground. Because Jesus drank the cup of suffering on our behalf, we aren't orphans any longer. We are children of the Father, and have the ability to seek the Spirit's help, as we minister in Jesus' name.

NOTES

141. See Genesis 1:1–2; John 1:1; Colossians 1:16.
142. See John 1:3; Acts 4:24; 14:15; 17:24; Colossians 1:16; Revelation 4:11.
143. See Revelation 10:6; Nehemiah 9:6; Colossians 1:16.
144. See Psalm 8:5–8.
145. Genesis 1:26–27.
146. See Genesis 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31; 2:18–25.
147. John 17:3. For more on the theological and practical foundations for orphan care, see Tony Merida and Rick Morton, *Orphanology* (Birmingham: New Hope, 2011).
148. See Genesis 2:7, 21–23; 1:27.
149. See Psalm 8; Psalm 104.
150. See Romans 8:18–30.
151. Proverbs 22:2.
152. Proverbs 29:13.
153. Proverbs 17:5.
154. James 3:8–9.
155. Keller, *Generous Justice*, 85, my emphasis.
156. See Richard Wayne Wills Sr., *Martin Luther King Jr. and the Image of God* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).
157. Sermon, 1965, Ebenezer Baptist Church. Quote found in Keller, *Generous Justice*, 86–87, my emphasis. He called out the church for not living out this belief, and

for not worshipping together. At the National Cathedral, during his last sermon before he was assassinated, he said, “We must face the sad fact that at 11 o’clock on Sunday morning when we stand to sing ‘In Christ there is no East or West,’ we stand in the most segregated hour of America.”

158. Richard Lischer, *The Preacher King* (New York: Oxford University Press 1995), Kindle edition.

159. C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 46.

160. In verse 21, Job seems to say that he hasn’t harmed an orphan (“raised my hand”) even though he knew the officials would have backed him (“help at the gate”) if he wanted to do so. The raised-hand gesture may indicate the way one voted.

161. This is a prayer of lament in the context of an Israelite suffering from vicious attacks, who is crying out for vengeance. I simply note it to point out how the psalmist assumes that being an orphan is awful. For more on this psalm and simply cries for vengeance in Psalms in general, see Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1–72* and *Psalms 73–150*. Tyndale Old Testament Commentary (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1973), 25–50; 388–91.

162. See 2 Corinthians 8:13–15.

163. Keller, *Generous Justice*, 23.

164. Luke 7:16, my emphasis.

165. Mark 12:38–40; Luke 20:45–47.

166. Keller, *Generous Justice*, 44.

167. 1 Timothy 5:1–16.

168. Aristides, “The Apology of Aristides the Philosopher.”

169. James 1:27.

170. See James 1:22–25.

171. See Genesis 21:1; 50:24; Exodus 3:16; 4:31; Luke 1:68; Acts 7:23.

172. Douglas Moo, *The Letter of James* in *The Pillar New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 97.

173. J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1973), 207.

174. In fact, Paul speaks of it in the context of suffering in Romans 8, providing hope and assurance.

175. Galatians 4:6.

176. Ephesians 1:5.

177. Ephesians 5:1.

178. I owe many of these practical ideas to my friend Rick Morton. I highly recommend his book *Know More Orphans* (Birmingham: New Hope Publishers, 2014).

179. Edmund, DeMarche, “Florida Church Flooded with Calls After 15-Year-Old Orphan Asks for Family to Adopt Him.” Available online at <http://www.fox-news.com/us/2013/10/17/orphaned-florida-teen-makes-adoption-appeal-at-church>, accessed Oct. 17, 2013.

180. Louise Boyle, "Orphan Davion Goes to Church." Available online at <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2463498/Orphan-Davion-Only-goes-church-asks-adopt-him.html>, accessed Oct. 18, 2013.

181. My friend Chris Marlow makes this point often. I highly recommend his nonprofit organization Help One Now at www.helponenow.org.

182. Naomi Schaefer Riley, "And the Kids Suffer," *New York Post*. Available online at http://www.nypost.com/p/news/opinion/opedcolumnists/and_the_kids_suffer_97b-4wWHF4R2zoOHhCKpSgO, accessed Dec. 4, 2013.

183. David M. Herszenhorn and Erik Eckholm, "Putin Signs Bill That Bars U.S. Adoptions, Upending Families," *New York Times*. Available online at http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/28/world/europe/putin-to-sign-ban-on-us-adoptions-of-russian-children.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0, accessed Dec. 4, 2013.

184. Kirit Radia, "Putin's Adoption Ban Is Agony for American 'Mom,'" ABC News. Available online at <http://abcnews.go.com/International/putins-adoption-ban-makes-american-mom-cry/story?id=18082631#.UONgyI6mG5c>, accessed Dec. 4, 2013.

185. Herszenhorn and Eckholm, "Putin Signs Bill."

186. These points were brought home at a recent presentation by Kory Kaeb with Lifesong for Orphans. Visit their website for more information at www.lifesongfororphans.org.

187. Rick Morton makes these points in *Orphanology*, 144–47.