

Why Ministry to the Fatherless?

By Rachel Miller

In the summer of 2013, I was sitting at church waiting for the arrival of my Sunday School students who, for some reason, were all late that morning. I had already done everything I needed to do to prepare my classroom, had prayed over the upcoming class, and had straightened things that didn't really need straightening—and still my students hadn't arrived. So, I started scrolling through social media on my phone and bumped into a single mom, whom we will call Marie. Marie's post in a local Facebook group went something like this, "Does anyone know of an organization in town that helps single moms get their children to doctor's appointments?"

I thought, "Wow! How easy is that? I can do that!" So I reached out to her.

Marie was a self-proclaimed pagan, and, at first, she doubted whether we would help her because so many churches had turned her away for that very reason. She was not open to hearing the gospel, but the next few months would provide a chance to live it out in front of her and her fatherless son. The three of us put in hundreds of miles all over the valley: Doctor's appointments, grocery shopping, job training, and more doctor's appointments. Some days, we put in as many as 80 miles. We also talked—a lot. Through those conversations, I learned about her needs, her struggles, and the things that were important to her. I listened a lot, but I was also able to speak. She did not come to Christ during the months that I worked with her, but we developed a relationship that lasted even after she moved out of state.

Did you know more than 143,000,000 orphans live in the world today? Did you know that in America more than 41% of all children are growing up in fatherless homes? Did you know that fatherless children are at a greater risk for drug and alcohol abuse? Did you know that they are more likely both to be the victims of and to carry out acts of crime and violence? Did you know they are more likely to live in poverty? Did you know that children in fatherless homes are more likely to have mental health, behavioral, and emotional challenges and are 2 times more likely to commit suicide? In light of these things, I must always ask myself, "What if these were my children? Wouldn't I want someone to reach out to them with the hope found in Jesus Christ!"

In Psalms, David said that God is the Father of the Fatherless and the judge of the widows—He takes up their cause. From the days of Job, to the giving of the law, to the years of the kings and the prophets, Scripture lays out God's desire for His people to care for the fatherless and widow because, in doing so, we picture His loving plan of redemption. He called upon Israel to remember that they had been bondman in Egypt. God had scooped them up out of a field as a babe, abandoned and loathsome. He bathed them, clothed them, and then set His beauty upon them (Ezk. 16). He wanted *them* to do the same for the fatherless around them, not merely as a duty but as their worship of the God who had redeemed—ADOPTED—them. Ministry to the fatherless today gives us no less the chance to picture Christ and His love to these children and those caring for them.

One winter afternoon in late 2013, I was driving across town with a single mom and her friend. We were on our way to work in the Forbid Them Not clothing exchange, which is housed in my local church. As I drove, the two young women talked in the backseat—about Christians. They talked about false piety. They talked about hypocrisy. They talked about a holier-than-thou attitude that had been displayed to them over the years.

This, as you can imagine, was a bit awkward for the person sitting behind the steering wheel. Finally, I waved at them in the rearview mirror and said, "Um, hello! I'm right here!"

Both women laughed. "We're not talking about you. We know you're a Christian. We're talking about people who say they're Christians, but don't do anything to help."

That kind of blew my mind. Even today, the world understands that a follower of Christ is one who helps the poor, the needy, the stranger, the sick, the fatherless, and the widow. They understand that a follower of Christ is one who gives of their own substance (Job 31) to help the helpless even as Christ gave His own life to redeem us when we were without strength and dead in our sins.

Christ set the example in His earthly ministry. In Matthew 18, Mark 9, and Luke 9, Jesus took a child and set him in the midst of those who were standing around. He said to them, "*Whosoever shall receive one of such children in my name, receiveth me: whosoever shall receive me, receiveth not me, but him that sent me.*" In all of these passages, the word translated "receive" means (in part) "to take into one's family to bring up and educate." Jesus wasn't just talking about being kind to a child. He was talking about ministering to them in the same manner Job ministered to the fatherless: as a father, with his own substance, and at his own table. Just as the picture of delivering Israel from Egypt was a picture of our redemption, Christ now used the picture of adoption to draw the same analogy. In fact, nearly every use of the word "adoption" in Scripture is referring to redemption.

Often our modern thought process defines religion as going to church, singing, listening to preaching, and saying amen at just the right moment. But when it came time for God to define religion, He gave it two very simple parts: "...*To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world.*" (James 1:27) Often our practice jumps

straight to the second part because it is easier to see our righteousness when we can check off all the boxes on our list. But what happens when we skip the first part?

I knew a fatherless boy (we'll call him Keagan). Keagan's father had abused him for years and then outright rejected him to his face. For years, Keagan had struggled with behavioral issues and disorders. Now, at fifteen, he wanted to help his mom with repairs around the house, but no one had ever taught him how. This led him to frustration because he felt he was failing. His mom brought the issue to me and asked if I knew anyone who would be willing to mentor her son and teach him some handyman skills. My requests for help went unanswered. Meanwhile, the situation continued to escalate in the home and Keagan continued to struggle.

I followed up on my calls, in particular to a church closer to where the boy lived that had said they would look into it. But, I found that nothing had been done. Two weeks later, Keagan injured himself while trying to repair a small household appliance, became angry, and ran away. His mother reached her wits' end and made a desperate but poor choice. Within a short time, she was in custody hearings with CPS.

Sometimes, the needs and requests that seem so very small are really so very important.

In the fall of 2014, I was standing in line in a food bank with another single mom who had called me about a week earlier. She was almost frantic when I answered the phone.

"Can someone please help me?" she'd said. "I'm a single mom, and I'm registered for a Thanksgiving food box at the food bank, but I don't have a car. All the other churches are giving me the runaround."

After a minute trying to calm her down and find out the situation, I told her I would love to take her to the food bank. So there we stood. The whole process took little more than 15 minutes.

As we were loading the boxes into my car, she said, "Thank you so much for doing this."

"Oh, you're welcome," I said. "That's what we're here for. We want to help—."

"No. You don't understand," she interrupted. "I called churches all over town and yours is the only one that was willing to help a single mom."

My jaw dropped.

When we neglect ministry to the fatherless, we often do not think there is any consequence because we sense no immediate change in *our* lives. We do not realize that we are feeling the effects as a culture. When denied the help we could offer them, the un-mended hearts, the hopeless, and the overwhelmed turn to whatever rescue seems closest to hand. Some turn to family, but many have no family. Some turn to the government to find the deliverance they once would have sought from God. Others turn to their own means: some struggling to do right, while others pursue crime, prostitution, and the numbness of drugs and alcohol. The heartache we once turned a blind eye to, we see later as a broken and bleeding society.

But the opposite is also true. When we choose to follow God's commands in this area, lives will be transformed and in the process our world will see a reflection of God's grace.

On a cold February night, I sat in a coffee shop with yet another single mom and a mutual friend. This mom and I had walked through a lot together over the previous months. That night, she was overwhelmed, feeling that she would never be good enough, never meet the standards and requirements that were daily upon her. She was ready to give up.

Over the next two hours, my friend and I shared with her how God is the God of the impossible. We shared stories both from our own lives and from the Bible of how God overcame impossible odds.

As the conversation came to a close, this mom looked at us thoughtfully and said, "You guys really know the Bible. You know how to apply it to your lives. I don't know how to do that. Will you teach me?"

I am happy to report that she has faithfully attended a Bible study ever since. She has grown. Life has not been easy, but she has continued to learn to seek God.

Ministry to the fatherless is important because it is the heart of God, it is the practical way in which He wants us to worship and honor Him, and it allows for living examples of His redemptive plan. And yet, in light of all this, only 1% of all American churches have any kind of specific ministry among single parents and their children—41% of all our children. God's heart cries out for them. Our hearts should reflect His heart. Sometimes we look at the world's 143,000,000 orphans and we think, "How could I ever make a dent in that." But over the years, I have learned that it doesn't take a huge program to change the world. It takes a willingness to change a life, to find a simple solution to their vital needs. I believe that we can make a difference in the lives of these children: That we can reach that 41% and change the course of their lives from one of potential crime, hurt, and heartache to a life filled with the hope and joy found in Jesus. It may be daunting at times. It may even be messy. But it is the worship, which God desires from each of us. What He has called us to, He will do. Will you join me?