

Practical Christianity: How to help someone in need

Message for Sunday, April 27, 2014
by Bruce Fraser

Scripture: Matthew 22:37-40; 25:31-46;

1) Love the people around you

Someone asked Jesus which is the most important of all the commandments.

Matthew 22:37–40, NRSV

Jesus said, “ ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

Love God; love others. That’s it. That’s what God expects of us, in four simple words.

This message is part of a series of messages on how we apply our faith to everyday life. In the Bible, you don’t find a separation between “religious” and “secular” areas of life. God is involved in every aspect of our lives. All that we do is part of our worship, part of us offering our lives to God.

2) How do I help someone?

Jesus tells a story which shows that God’s judgement depends on how we have helped others. It is the parable of the sheep and the goats. The judgment given to the righteous is thus:

Matthew 25:34-36, 40, New Living Translation:

Then the King will say to those on the right, “Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry, and you fed me. I was thirsty, and you gave me a drink. I was a stranger, and you invited me into your home. I was naked, and you gave me clothing. I was sick, and you cared for me. I was in prison, and you visited me.”

These people, confused, asked when they ever did this.

And the King will tell them, “I assure you, when you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you were doing it to me!”

There are a few things about the kind of help which we may note.

a) It was help in simple things

The things which Jesus picks out are things which anyone can do. It is not a question of giving away

thousands of dollars, or of being a Mother Teresa whose whole life is devoted to helping the poor. It is a simple case of giving help to the people we meet every day.

b) The help was given graciously, without looking for a reward

Those who helped did not think that they were helping Jesus and thus gaining favour with God. They helped because it was the natural thing to do. Once you’ve experienced the love of Jesus, and it’s overflowing in your life, it’s easy to pass it on to others. On the other hand, the attitude of those who failed to help was, “If we had known it was you we would gladly have helped; but we thought it was only some riff raff not worth helping.”

Here are some other ideas which you may find helpful.

c) Pay the bill; don’t give cash

This is a practice we follow with the Benevolent Fund. If we’re giving someone money to help buy groceries, we don’t just hand over the money. Who knows what it’s going to be spent on? Instead, we give a gift card for groceries.

d) Don’t loan money; give it away

Jane and I have a policy that we don’t loan money to people who are in a tight spot. The reason is simple: if their situation unexpectedly gets worse, and they’re not able to pay back the loan, that creates bad feelings all around. It can ruin an otherwise wonderful relationship.

We find that it’s far better to simply give the money, with no strings attached, and with no expectation that we’ll ever see the money again.

e) Include “helping others” in your personal budget

Each month set aside some money specifically to help people in need. Then, when the opportunity arises, you can give freely and cheerfully, instead of grudgingly.

f) Offer to provide counselling

Some people who are short of money are that way because they don’t know how to use it. They spend money as soon as they get it, never saving any. They need financial counselling. Or perhaps the issue is one of *need vs. greed*; this is a spiritual matter, and may need spiritual counselling.

In either case, you can offer to take the person to someone or an agency which provides counselling. Look in the phone book or ask your pastor for help.

g) Listen to people; hear their needs

The pastor of Lawndale Community Church in Chicago was wondering how they could reach out to people in the neighbourhood. He imagined big projects like low income housing, a recreation centre, or a health clinic. But as he listened to people, he heard them saying that

their greatest need was a safe place to do their laundry! So the church installed washers and dryers, and opened a laundromat. People flocked to that church, and they liked what they found.

h) Give yourself

These are just a few ideas. There are as many ways to help as there are people. Be creative; pray and ask for wisdom. The main thing is: give yourself. Be a friend. That's what love is.

3) Do what you can, where you are

You might think to yourself, "What can I do? How can one person make a difference?" The truth is, you *can* make a difference, no what your situation is.

Richard Beck is a pastor of a church. The church he serves has a ministry in a local prison, where they hold Bible studies. Richard tells about one session.

I've written before how the inmates struggled with living out Jesus' call to be "meek" and "poor in spirit." As they said to me that night, "Kindness in here is mistaken for weakness." And the weak get hurt in prison.

We left that class on an ambivalent note. I encouraged them to try to find moments when they could embrace their humanity, and the humanity of those around them. But many still seemed skeptical. The way of Jesus, we all concluded, is a difficult path to follow. Both inside and outside the prison walls.

Since that class I'd not revisited this subject. Until last Monday when I was in John 13 and discussing Jesus washing the disciples' feet.

After reading the story I returned to our prior conversation. I asked, "Can you serve people like Jesus did here in the prison?"

As before, there was general skepticism. The comment "kindness in prison is mistaken for weakness" was repeated. But I pushed a little harder this time and waited a little longer.

"How can you find moments to serve in this place?"

There was a long silence.

Then one man, Norberto (not his real name), raised his hand.

I was intrigued by what Norberto would say. He is a big, intimidating man. He could snap me like a twig. You can tell he commands a lot of respect from the other men.

I called on him and, given his intimidating presence, figured he'd stay with the "you can't do that kind of stuff in here" consensus.

He began, speaking softly.

"Well," he started with his heavy Hispanic accent, "I don't know if this is what you are looking for but I help my celly [i.e., cell mate]."

"How?" I ask.

"Well, my celly isn't too bright. Something is wrong with his head. He was in an accident so he's not too smart." Guys who know Norberto's cellmate nod in agreement and elaborate. Apparently he's mentally handicapped and needs a lot of help taking care of himself and navigating prison life.

Norberto continues. "Well, when my celly first got put in with me I noticed that he never took off his shoes. He always left them on. So one day I finally asked him, 'Why don't you ever take off your shoes?' He wouldn't tell me. Finally I got him to tell me. He was embarrassed. He didn't know how to take care of his feet. So his toenails were all overgrown, smelly and ugly looking. So I asked him to take off his shoes and socks. And his nails were awful. But he didn't know how to cut them.

So I sat him down and had him put his feet in water. Then I took his foot in my lap and cut his toenails for him. I don't know what people would have thought if they walked by, his foot in my lap. And I would never have thought I'd be doing something like that."

There was now a deep silence in the room. The image before us was so unexpected. Here was this huge, intimidating man taking the time, almost like a mother, to gently wash the feet and trim the nails of his mentally handicapped cell mate.

Breaking the silence Norberto looked up at me and asked, "Is that an example of what you were talking about?"

"Yes," I said. "Yes, that is an example of what I was talking about."

Next Steps:

- Whom is God calling you to love? Write down name(s). Start by praying for him/her/them.
- How can you love this person? If they're lonely, giving them money isn't the answer. And even if they are short on cash, money still isn't the whole answer. Give *yourself*.
- Do it. Stop making excuses.