

**Core Seminar**

**Suffering for the Glory of God**

**Class 8: Sharing Their Burdens**

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***A biblical perspective on the relief of physical suffering***

**Introduction**

The last two weeks we’ve been talking about how suffering is a battle for faith. We’ve talked about practical things we can do when we find our self hurting and last week we talked about what we can do to encourage *others* who are fighting for faith. If you remember, one of the things we looked at was the ministry of hospitality; a way to serve others which includes helping out with the practical needs of life such as food, clothing, shelter, friendship. Why is that important? Well, for one, we realize that our spiritual life is not disconnected from the physical. Stress, exhaustion, not eating well, failing to exercise make it harder to think clearly and to trust God. Go for 3 days without sleep, living off of Red Bull and candy bars and your quiet time, well…it will be a little interesting.

But if part of the way *we* as Christians can help others fight for faith is through helping out with practical needs, it raises some questions, doesn’t it? For instance, if we do a quick assessment of our own friends and family, the needs are not a few. Outside our own family and friends, just turn on the local news or open the paper and the headlines present needs that can be overwhelming: disease, poverty, famine, natural disasters…where do we start? We could look at suffering all around us and throw up our hands and say, “This is just too much, there’s nothing I can do,” or we could try to tackle every need possible and burn out before we really get started.

What we need then is a biblical perspective on the relief of physical suffering. To do that, we’ll look at three principles: Love as the posture of a Christian, moral proximity, and the priority of need. Now, in light of our limited time together this morning, this is not meant to be an exhaustive treatment of the issue, rather we hope to introduce these ideas that are helpful for thinking through the issue. This class is fairly theoretical, and we won’t be able to move completely from the theoretical to the practical in once class. But we need to. So, next week we have an entire class of Q & A with a panel of folks up here to field your questions and then two additional classes where we will seek to Scripture to real-life scenarios to flesh out what it looks like. With that mind, let’s get right to it.

1. **Principle #1 - Love is the Posture of a Christian**

The parable of the Good Samaritan is well known to many of us. In **Luke 10** Jesus tells a story of a Jewish man traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho when he was attacked by a band of robbers. He was stripped of his clothes, beaten and left for dead on the side of the road. And as he lay there, three men passed by – the first two were religious leaders in Israel who turned their head and passed by on the other side of the road. But the third was a Samaritan, a group of people the Jews hated, who ended up the only one to stop and help.

The basic point of the parable is “Go and do likewise.[[1]](#footnote-1)” The reason Jesus told the parable in the first place was in response to a lawyer who had asked how to inherit eternal life. When Jesus told him to love God and neighbor, the lawyer asks, “And who is my neighbor?[[2]](#footnote-2)” Basically, he was trying to water down the definition of “neighbor” so he would be able to fulfill it in his own effort and justify himself before God[[3]](#footnote-3). But Jesus’ parable frustrates his efforts – he is (and we the readers are too) faced with the reality that the very thing that he’s required to do to inherit eternal life – he has utterly failed to do – in fact he *can’t* do on his own. Why? Because Jesus is teaching that we are called to love, not just those who are easy to love, but *anyone and everyone* as we have opportunity[[4]](#footnote-4).

Friends, it’s easy to hear this and assume that loving this way is not what Jesus meant. There’s gotta be some catch, some condition that will lighten the load and so we skip on to other texts without feeling what he’s saying here. But we need to let this to sink in a little bit. Jesus is saying this is how *we* should love. As followers of Jesus, this should be *our* disposition as we walk the streets in DC, hear of suffering overseas, or are faced with needs in our own church family.

Why? Because like the lawyer in the story, we *too* have realized we cannot justify ourselves before God. We were once that man on the road, dead in our trespasses and sin (**Eph. 2:1**), and left for dead when Jesus came down the road. Though we were *His* enemies, he saved us . . . at the cost of His life. Knowing God’s love for us should move us to love lavishly, creatively, radically – without asking is *that* my neighbor? He he/she worthy of my love? Instead, such love is our posture as those who have come to know the love of God in Christ.

But…we only have 24 hours in a day, and all the needs around us seem countless. So how in the world are we to think carefully and biblically about what this looks like?

1. **Principle #2 - Moral Proximity**

In order to think carefully about the relief of physical suffering in this world, it’s helpful to understand the principle of moral proximity. The idea can be defined in that “the closer the moral proximity of the need, the greater the moral obligation to help. Moral proximity does not refer to geography, though that can be part of the equation. Moral proximity refers to how connected we are to someone by virtue of familiarity, kinship, space, or time. **[[5]](#footnote-5)**”

So, a stranger could come up to me in DC and tell me he lost his job and needed money. Giving him money to him *may* be a good thing to do. But if my brother-in-law who lives 1,200 miles away in Nebraska loses his job, I have *more* of an obligation to help. If you’re a parent, moral proximity may sound like common sense. Imagine that you checked your child into the nursery here for church. If the building caught on fire, I have no doubt you as a parent would want to get every child out safely – but who would you be sure to grab first? You’d grab your own child; not because you don’t care about the others, but because you have a unique responsibility, a moral proximity to *that* child.

Now, we need to be careful here. Moral proximity does *not* mean that we should only care only for our friends, family and people across the street. But (and this is a key aspect of the principle), “it means that what we *ought* to do in one situation is what we *may* do in another. Moral proximity makes obedience possible by reminding us that before Paul says ‘let us do good *to everyone’* he said, ‘So then, *as we have opportunity’* (**Gal. 6:10**).[[6]](#footnote-6)”

We can see the difference between what we ought to do and what we may do by comparing **1 John 3:17** and **2 Corinthians 8-9**. In **1 John 3:17**, the apostle is addressing the way Christians should care for other believers in their *local church.* He writes, “If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need (*there’s the opportunity*) but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him?” That’s strong language, isn’t it? He’s not saying, you *may* do this, he’s saying you *must* do this if you claim to be a Christian. To fail to do so is sin!

On the other hand, in **2 Corinthians 8-9**, Paul is writing to the church in Corinth in order to raise money for the church in Jerusalem some 800 miles away. Now, does he write the same way as John instructs to care for the needy in your local church? No! Instead Paul writes to the Corinthians, “I say this not as a command, but to prove by the earnestness of others that your love is genuine…Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.[[7]](#footnote-7)” 1 John is *you ought* to do this. 2 Corinthians is here’s an opportunity; *you may* do this.

Again, moral proximity is not an excuse to ignore our neighbor in need (remember Jesus’ parable of the Good Samaritan), rather it acknowledges that we have limitations. We have physical bodies that get tired and sick. We have other *good,* God-given responsibilities: loving our spouse, raising our kids, working our jobs, being a faithful church member, being sure to rest[[8]](#footnote-8). We only have limited resources and limited time in a day. As one writer put it, “If we need 50 hours in every day to be obedient, we’re saying more than the Bible says.[[9]](#footnote-9)”

So what does this look like? Trying to nail it down *exactly* may be impossible since every situation is unique and calls for prudence. But if we would sketch out what Scripture generally emphasizes for moral proximity, it might look like the following:

*may*

*ought*

**QUESTIONS?...**

1. **Principle #3 - Priority of Need**

A third principle is the priority of need. All suffering is terrible, but not all categories of suffering are equal; they don’t all bear the same weight. We need to have clarity on the relationship between suffering in this life (from poverty, racism, crime, disease, lack of clean water, etc.) and the realities of heaven and hell.

In **1 Corinthians 15:3,** Paul writes, “What I received I passed on to you as of *first importance.*” Well, what did he receive? What was of ‘*first importance’*?! He explains in **v4**, “that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that He was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter and then to the Twelve.[[10]](#footnote-10)” For Paul, the message of the cross is of first importance. Does that mean that we don’t care for physical suffering? Absolutely not! The story of the Good Samaritan in **Luke 10** makes it clear that a heart which cares for the poor is a heart transformed by the gospel – so we must!

But it’s also the story of the Good Samaritan - a story that calls us to *love* our neighbor - that compels us to do evangelism. The nature of love is to do what is good for another. If my friend is a non-Christian, then the *most loving* thing I can do is to share the gospel with them, without with they will spend eternity in hell. No matter how many loving things I can and *should* do to alleviate physical suffering, if I do nothing to alleviate their eternal suffering, how is that loving? One of the most essential ways we fulfill the Great Commandment is by fulfilling the Great Commission. Evangelism then, is primary, of first importance.

Now, some argue that caring for the physical needs should be seen as equally important as evangelism. Others see evangelism as *doing* social justice - *share the gospel, use words if necessary*. But Scripture is clear that evangelism is *not* simply doing good things – it is proclaiming or speaking the message of the gospel. As a result, some will pit caring for physical needs against evangelism as if we have to choose between the two. You know, *either be someone who ‘does something’ or be someone who just ‘preaches’ at people.* But John Piper has said it well,

“Suffering in this world is terrible and limited, but suffering in the next world is terrible and eternal. And love sees it that way. Love does not shut its eyes to this world or that world. Love reckons with the reality of suffering here, and the worse reality of suffering there…Don’t choose between rescuing people from suffering in this world and rescuing people from suffering in the next. We care about *all* suffering now, *especially* eternal suffering.[[11]](#footnote-11)”

That’s a great way of looking at it. As followers of Christ, we should care about all suffering, *especially* eternal suffering.

And friends, let’s not assume that only social action produces social change and that the gospel doesn’t – nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, it can be argued that the gospel, rightly proclaimed has been used by God to bring about the greatest social change the world has ever known. Mack Stiles tells of an example of this he saw first hand:

When our missionary friend, Mike McComb, tried to introduce protein into the diets of the largely illiterate Guatemalan farmers, it was a masterful combination of expertise, training, and strategy. He started his work towards the end of the murderous civil war. We lived there with him off and on over the course of six years, working in the malnourishment clinic in the village. During that time Mike also faithfully shared the gospel.

But Mike noticed it was the gospel that allowed protein to get to the people. When the gospel was understood and accepted in villages, men stopped getting drunk and beating their wives. As they attended church, they started to attend to their crops and their children's education.

Tomas, the local mayor, told me that it was only when the gospel came to the Ixil lands that real change happened. Mike says that the preaching of the gospel did more to eliminate hunger than fish farms or crop rotation ever did. We must never forget that the Gospel brings more long-term social good than any aid program ever developed[[12]](#footnote-12).

Okay, so what does this have to do with suffering well? What does this have to do with fighting for faith?

1. *For those who are suffering* - it reminds us of the importance of having an eternal perspective. We talked about this in our class about the role of heaven and hell, but suffice it to say that knowing our *greatest* need has been taken care of in Christ helps us to endure the worst of suffering in this life. As Paul says in Romans 8, “I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.[[13]](#footnote-13)”
2. *For those who are helping –* it reminds us that as we care for others, love calls us to care for the physical suffering of others but to not forget that the eternal is more important than the temporal. So, as we think of what it means to love our neighbor, we remember the most loving thing we can do is tell them the gospel[[14]](#footnote-14). If the person suffering is not a Christian, we pray that God would give them saving faith through the gospel. If the person is a Christian, we pray that God would preserve their faith through the gospel.
3. **Conclusion**
4. **Q & A –** *If time…*

1. Lk. 10:37 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Lk. 10:29 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Lk. 10:29 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Darrell Bock summarizes it this way: “The issue is not who we may or may not serve, but serving where need exists. We are not to limit who our neighbors might be. Rather, we are to be a neighbor to those whose needs we can meet.” (BECNT [Luke], pg. 1035) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. <http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevindeyoung/category/social-justice/> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *What Is the Mission of the Church?* By: Kevin DeYoung & Greg Gilbert (unpublished manuscript), pg. 97 my italics [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. 2 Cor. 8:8, 9:7 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Even Jesus told His disciples, “Come away by yourselves to a desolate place and rest a while” (Mk. 6:31). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. <http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevindeyoung/category/social-justice/>. DeYoung goes on to add, “There are no easy answers even with the principle of moral proximity, but without it God’s call to compassion seems like a cruel joke.” [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. 1 Cor. 15:3-4 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. <http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/sermons/abortion-and-the-narrow-way-that-leads-to-life> [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. <http://www.matthiasmedia.com.au/briefing/library/6195#f3> [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Rom. 8:18 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. J.I. Packer writes, “The nature of love is to do good and to relieve need. If then, our neighbor is unconverted, we are to show love…by seeking to share with him the good news without which he will perish.” *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* pgs. 108-109 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)