

**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 continued talking about how suffering is a battle for faith. We’ve talked about very practical things we need to do when we find *ourselves* hurting and last week we talked about what we can do to help *others* who are fighting for faith through the ministry of encouragement, sharing the Word, prayer and, if you remember, we finished by looking at the ministry of hospitality. We are to be a hospitable people not only to friends but also to strangers. The language for hospitality in the bible is strong; it can read “*absolutely committed* to the entertainment of strangers.”

Serving others costs us—a little quiet, a nap, resources, or maybe time with family. The point being we have our eyes open and find joy in ministering even when it’s hard. One of the ways we can be hospitable is by helping out those who are suffering with the practical needs of life such as food, clothing, shelter, and friendship. Now why would that be important? Well, for one, we realize that our spiritual life is not disconnected from the physical. Stress, worry, exhaustion, not eating well and sickness all make it harder to think clearly and to trust God in faith. I know this is true of myself in just handling the logistics of everyday life—when I find myself caught in worry or increased stress with pending deadlines at work, or with even just a few days of decreased sleep, I’m prone to respond poorly and even my time with the Lord can suffer…

But if part of the way *we,* as those who are “in Christ”, 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 just 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, government persecution…where do we begin helping? 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 spread ourselves so thin that we don’t really provide any real help and burn out before we really get started.

So what we need then is a biblical perspective on the relief of physical suffering. To do that, we’ll look at three principles:

1. Love as the posture of a Christian
2. The idea of moral proximity
3. 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 principles that are helpful for thinking through the issue. As we look at Scripture, I hope to help put our concern for the poor and needy, and our desire to help in their suffering—which is a biblical and good response, on more solid footing. This class is fairly theoretical, and we won’t be able to move completely from the theoretical to the practical in one class. In future lessons however we will seek to apply Scripture to real-life scenarios to flesh out what it can look like; and we’ll also have with a panel discussion in a few weeks. And so, with all that in 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 being the only one to stop and help.

The basic point of the parable is **Luke 10:37,** **“And Jesus said to him, “You 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 affirmed his answer 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 therefore justify himself before God[[3]](#footnote-3). But Jesus’ parable frustrates this lawyer’s 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 our neighbors, not just those who are easy to love, but *anyone and everyone* as we have opportunity[[4]](#footnote-4).

Friends, we sometimes hear this and make it easy to assume that loving this way is not what Jesus really 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 (how we “ought to”) love. As followers of Jesus, this should be *our* disposition as we are faced with needs in our own family, with our friends, and in our church; as we walk the streets in our neighborhoods; or hear of suffering overseas.

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 until 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, legalistically, *“Who is my neighbor?”* or *“Is 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.

This posture of “loving well” works itself out in a variety of ways. If we go all the way back to Leviticus we see this worked out**. Lev 19:9-18** is a good “love your neighbor” text for this:

**9 “When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap your field right up to its edge, neither shall you gather the gleanings after your harvest. 10 And you shall not strip your vineyard bare, neither shall you gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard. You shall leave them for the poor and for the sojourner: I am the LORD your God.**

**11 “You shall not steal; you shall not deal falsely; you shall not lie to one another. 12 You shall not swear by my name falsely, and so profane the name of your God: I am the LORD.**

**13 “You shall not oppress your neighbor or rob him. The wages of a hired worker shall not remain with you all night until the morning. 14 You shall not curse the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind, but you shall fear your God: I am the LORD.**

**15 “You shall do no injustice in court. You shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great, but in righteousness shall you judge your neighbor. 16 You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not stand up against the life of your neighbor: I am the LORD.**

**17 “You shall not hate your brother in your heart, but you shall reason frankly with your neighbor, lest you incur sin because of him. 18 You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD.**

So, we see that we show love to our neighbors:

- With our possessions (v9-10)

- With our words (v11-12)

- With our actions (v13-14)

- In our judgements (v15-16)

- In our attitude (v17-18)

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)**” The pattern for this goes back to the Old Testament and generally looked like: family, tribe, fellow Israelites, and other nations.

So, a stranger could come up to me in DC and tell me he lost his job and needed money. Giving money to him *may* be a good thing to do. But if my brother-in-law who lives 1,200 miles away in Minnesota loses his job, I have *more* of an obligation to help him. If you’re a parent, moral proximity may sound like common sense. As an extreme example, 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, people across the street, and family. 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 (repeat). 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 chapters 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, **“But if anyone has the world’s goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God’s love abide 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 chapters 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 **(verses 8:8 and 9:7)**, **“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 3:17** is *you ought* to do this. **2 Corinthians** says here’s an opportunity; *you may* do this.

Again, moral proximity is not an excuse to ignore our neighbor in need nor someone half-way around the world suffering after tragedy (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 (Kevin DeYoung) put it, *“If we need 50 hours in every day to be obedient, we’re saying more than the Bible says.[[9]](#footnote-9)”* *(Consider referencing additional quote in footnote.)* [Personal Note: *I even think about this as an elder. I get the joy of understanding more broadly what people need and are going through but I, personally, cannot meet every need. I’m thankful for the picture of us sharing the meeting of needs…but I still think I should do more, want to do more…]*

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:

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God’s Sovereignty

(Matt 19:26, Ps 121:2)

*May*

*Ought*

**Family—1 Tim 5:8**

“But if anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for members of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.”

**Local Church—1 John 3:11, 16-17**

“For this is the message that you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another… By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. But if anyone has the world’s goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God’s love abide in him?”

(Also **Phil 2:4**—“Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.”

**Other Christians—2 Cor: 8-9 (8:8, 9:5,7--Church is encouraged to excel in the grace of giving)**

“I say this not as a command, but to prove by the earnestness of others that your love also is genuine… So, I thought it necessary to urge the brothers to go on ahead of you and arrange in advance for the gift you have promised, so that it may be ready as a willing gift, not as an exaction… Each one must give as he as decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.”

**All People in Need—Luke 10:25-27 (Good Samaritan story already discussed)**

**The Work of God Alone--The Unbounded Region Outside (∞)**

Perspective: Remember that (+)Rich + (-)Poor ≠ Zero (All the wealth in the world cannot fix all the needs of the world)

**Matt 19:26b**

“But Jesus looked at them and said, “With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.”

**Ps 121:2**

“My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth.”

**Acts 17: 25b-26**

“…since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place,”

Again, the principle of moral proximity can be very helpful, but we need to be careful that we don’t use it to close our ears or to justify our own selfishness. It can be useful to help us understand our obligations and why helping relieve suffering may be of primary importance in some cases and secondary in others. Certainly, all these opportunities call for wisdom don’t they?

**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, **“For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received…*.*”**  Well, what did he receive? What was of ‘*first importance’*?! He explains in **v3b-4**, **“that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that He was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, 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 desire to care…!

But the story of the Good Samaritan is also a story that calls us to *love* our neighbor; one 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 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 [ee-hill] 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 again 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 that 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)”** It also shows us that we should accept the help that people offer us. It’s ok and we may have to let people into our lives to know what we need. And it also reminds us that even as we need help, we can still be of help by continuing to love others.
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)