



## Reflecting the Father of the Fatherless

James 1:27

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“Praise God” (spoken in Ugandan). Ah, where are my people? I’m waiting to hear. That means “Praise God.” Let’s try again. You would say, “Amina.” “Praise God.” (Audience: “Amina”) Ah, very good. Thank you for making me feel at home. If I were speaking in Uganda, that would be the first thing I would say when I open my mouth before a body of believers.

I bring you greetings from Kasana Community Church. That’s where my family and I worship in Uganda. Greetings are very important, both to be brought and also to be received. If you have greetings to send, I will bring them back to Uganda next week. Do you have some to send? Okay, thank you. That’s excellent.

We love the privilege of worshiping there with that body of believers. It’s beautiful. We have a church made up of over 20 different tribes and languages. Different nations are represented when we gather to worship Jesus. I haven’t seen this anywhere else in the world except where God’s people gather. There’s something glorious about worshipping, and all of a sudden seeing some Rwandese dance out with their traditional Rwandese dance—using cow horns. [I won’t demonstrate it for you.] But it’s beautiful to see redeemed men and women from the nations, tribes and tongues gather around Jesus to worship the Lamb.

It’s a privilege to be here. Laura Beth and our family are very much at home here. We feel enveloped in the love of this church body every time we step through these doors. We love that we’re known and we love knowing so many of you, even as we’re continuing to get to know others. We thank you for the care and refreshment you bring into the lives of so many missionaries when they’re home on this side of the world.

I’m looking forward to sharing God’s Word with you. We’ll be in the book of James. As you’re turning there, I want you to imagine waking up tomorrow, and across all the major news agencies you are hearing reports of how Christianity is so bad and that it’s bad to be a Christian. You hear things you knew were clearly just misunderstandings of what it means to follow Jesus and other things that are straight-up lies. Then your phone rings and it’s Pastor David or Patrick. They say, “Hey, we want you to write a letter to the President of the United States. In that letter

we want you to address these things. Defend what it means to actually follow Jesus and what Christians really are like, how we really live our lives.”

That’s very similar to what was happening in the ancient world. In the first century, there were many misunderstandings about these “Followers of the Way,” these followers of Jesus, these early Christians. In fact, the Roman Empire believed Christians were harmful to the Empire. Lies were spread that Christians married their brothers and sisters—that they practiced incest. Of course, that’s because in Christ, He makes us family. We are called brothers and sisters. They believed these Christians were cannibals, eating flesh and drinking blood. Clearly that was a misunderstanding of what it meant to gather and partake of the Lord’s Table together as we celebrate the broken body of Jesus and the blood He poured out for us and for our salvation.

So to address this, a man by the name of Aristides wrote a letter to the Emperor Hadrian. This is before A.D. 138. He defended Christianity through describing what Christians are really like. Speaking of Christians, this is what he wrote:

They do not worship other gods. They are humble and gentle and do not lie. They love one another, and they do not disregard their widows. Orphans are protected from those who would hurt them. They willingly share what they have with those in need. They bring strangers into their homes, and welcome them as true brothers and sisters. When there’s a person in poverty or need among them, if the Christians do not have resources at hand to help, they will fast two or three days in order to provide the food needed.

That pierces me right to my heart. I wonder if someone were describing me, would they be able to say, “This is what Keith, follower of Jesus, is like.” If we were in Uganda, we would say \_\_\_\_ [a Ugandan word of exasperation]. Yet at the very heart of what is at stake in this description is the reality we all face: the relationship between what we profess to believe and how that profession is lived out, the shape our faith takes in our daily living.

James is very concerned about this. As he pens this New Testament letter, he’s captivated by this reality: that those who profess faith in Jesus should demonstrate that faith is genuine through their works and through the way they live their lives. To say it another way, James is convinced that the gospel must produce fruit in the lives of believers—and he wants everyone to know it. He wants everyone to examine their hearts to see how their own faith is at work. And that comes to us who are seated here today.

James begins his letter in chapter one by addressing a number of practical issues, like how to deal with the trials, sufferings, struggles, challenges and hardships we face. He’ll come

back to that a number of times in his letter. He goes on to talk about what it means to ask God for wisdom and what it means to live out the life God calls us to live. At the end of chapter one James gets to the heart of an issue that flows throughout his letter. Let's read there, beginning with verse 22:

*<sup>22</sup> But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. <sup>23</sup> For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. <sup>24</sup> For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. <sup>25</sup> But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing.*

So James begins to set up a series of contrasts that flow through this part of his letter. He speaks of the contrast between doers and hearers-only. He contrasts those who are undeceived with those who are deceived. He contrasts the “self-looker” —the one who looks at himself as if in a mirror but then walks away and forgets what he’s seen—with the “God-looker,” the one who looks at the perfect law of liberty and perseveres, who looks at God and then acts.

Continuing in verse 26, James says, “*If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person’s religion is worthless.*” So now he’s going to set up this reality of worthless religion, expressed in a tongue that is not submitted. It just speaks whatever it speaks. This harkens back to what Jesus talked about regarding the heart, saying it is out of the heart that all sorts of evil things flow. And the tongue reflects the heart. James will speak about the tongue again later in his letter.

Notice a key phrase in this verse: “*If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart...*” This refers back to what he said in verse 22: “*Be doers of the word and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.*” There is a reality of deceit and self-deceit that shakes me to my core. I’m very aware of my own frailties; what a man in the flesh can do and can live out against God. But the reality of self-deceit hits me and I ask, “Can I be deceived in such a way that I don’t even know I’m deceived?”

I can think I’m okay and be convinced in my heart that God and I are good—but actually on the inside we are not good. I can sit in these chairs and worship and say, “Yes, praise the Lord,” when my heart is far from Him. Can I be that deceived? I don’t want to be self-deceived. James is bringing a warning for all of us to do a heart check regarding the way we’re living out this faith we profess. None of us want worthless religion.

So we begin with the question: what does James mean by religion? Maybe we don't want religion at all. A famous saying in our day goes like this, "I don't want to be religious—I want relationship. Don't give me religion. Give me relationship." And there are some truths there, because none of us want an empty and hollow religion, where we do what we do without any purpose. At the core of what it means to be a Christian is to know Christ. It is a relationship.

Yet James is not coming at religion in a negative way. For him, religion is very positive. What is religion for James? Some people believe James is only focused on the externals—on the works. Yet that is not true. James' heart is for those of us who profess faith in Christ to live out that faith. We see this throughout his book. Let's take a quick look at James' emphasis on faith.

- In James 1:3 he writes, "*For you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness.*" What faith? Faith in what? Not faith in faith—faith in Christ. It's the testing of our faith in Christ that will build in us steadfastness.
- James 1:6, speaking of asking for wisdom, says this, "*Let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind.*" So again, faith is so central.
- James 1:18 says, "*Of [God's] own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.*" Here James is recognizing that the very faith we proclaim is that which is birthed in us, given to us, as the gift from the Father, from whom "*every good and perfect gift*" comes, verse 17. It's of God, through His word of truth, that we come to this glorious faith.
- Then flowing out of today's passage into James 2, he says, "*My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory.*"

So James is very intentional to let us know that it's faith alone in Christ alone that saves us and is that to which we cling. Yet, for those who profess this faith but are not living it out—reflected in the tongue, reflected in their walking away and forgetting, as opposed to being transformed and acting out that faith—their religion is worthless.

Yet none of us want worthless religion or worthless faith in Christ. What do we want? We want the treasure of Christ to be revealed in how we live. So James is going to contrast worthless religion with true religion, which leads us to our main verse, James 1:27. Let's just say it as James is meaning it. "*Religion [faith in Christ] 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.*"

James is going to bring us into this positive—negative. Religion, that is, faith in Christ, is pure—the positive. It's undefiled—the negative side. Of course, if something is defiled, it's not

pure. What does it mean to be pure? This is actually gospel language the early church would have been exposed to—even Jesus’ words to His disciples in John 15:3 were, “*Already you are clean [pure] because of the word that I have spoken to you.*” Hebrews 10:22 says, “*Let us draw near [to God] with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean [pure] from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.*”

So there’s this image of those of us who have come to faith in Christ, that it’s through Christ’s sacrifice that we are made pure. James grabs that language and says, “Do you want to talk about pure faith in Christ? Do you think you have really been washed by Christ? Well, this is what it will look like. It’s going to be pure and undefiled.”

The thing we always think about is water. Nobody wants impure water, do you? If you come to Uganda, I can bring you to my cistern where we catch our water in gutters and it flows down into a big holding tank. If I lift the lid, you’re going to find big cockroaches moving around. I can’t get rid of them. I’ve tried. They always come back and run around. And you think, “Oh!” And if you look at the water, you might see snakes living down there. You might see a frog. You might see a dead frog floating belly-up. Who knows what you’ll find. Then that water is pumped up into a tank and moved into our house for washing hands, for bathing, for using the bathroom—but not for drinking. You don’t want to drink that impure water. It’s defiled.

So James is going to say faith in Christ is pure. It’s without any defiling. This is what it’s going to look like—and he very strategically gives us two things. Now, James could say many things that would be true. In his letter he writes about many things. Don’t show partiality. Don’t do this, do this. He walks through a whole list as we read through the letter. But here he boils it down to two. Pure and undefiled faith in Christ is these two things: visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and keep yourself unstained from the world.

Writing about these two things, John Piper states,

Notice the two kinds of effects that pure religion or faith in Christ has: 1) practical compassion toward orphans and widows, and 2) personal purity of life. This is important to see, because so many Christians fall off the horse on one side or the other. Some fall off by saying: What matters is personal purity—sexual purity, financial integrity, a clean thought life, and so on; but they are weak in practical deeds of compassion for the poor and helpless. But some fall off the horse on the other side, by saying: What matters is social justice and compassion and helping people, and what you do with your mind and body and your private personal life is not significant.

But James is going to penetrate right to the heart of both of these misunderstandings of gospel truth. He lays them both out. The positive, again: visit orphans and widows in their affliction. The negative: keep yourself unstained from the world.

What does it mean to remain unstained from the world? It's not like walking outside and getting shot by paintball guns so you've got these stains. He's looking much deeper than that. He's talking about the world shaping what we value, what we pursue, what we live, what we think makes us successful, what we derive meaning from and why. See, when the world shapes these things for us, then it will lead to an impure and defiled faith and practice. We are not to let the world be our shaper. It will stain us.

On the positive side, what are we to do? We are to visit orphans and widows. Now, some of you are sitting there thinking, "Oh, that's easy. Just get a plane ticket; I'll fly to Uganda with the McFarlands. Hey guys, we've come to visit some orphans. How's it going? Just fulfilling James 1:27. I'm good now, okay? I'm going back home." Is that it? No. It's not. The NIV translates the word "visit" as "care for" orphans and widows. The NIV is trying to get to the heart—the deeper level—of what the word is communicating. Yet it's even richer and deeper than that. One Bible dictionary nails it. It says it this way: "To visit: a divine action that produces a great change in the position of a subordinate, either for good or ill." It's a divine action. It's an action that is of God—an action of God that produces change in a situation. It could be changed one way or changed the other. But in biblical language, it is change for the good.

For example, in Luke 7, Jesus is walking along and there is a widow—interesting. Her son, who is fatherless and an orphan, has died. Jesus raises this fatherless child to life. After He does it, the people proclaim, "God has visited His people!" It's an echo back to Exodus 4, when the people of Israel were in slavery and God comes down and visits them—not to check on them, but because He's enacting a plan that only He can fulfill that is going to bring the greatest change they would ever know: freedom from slavery and death, pointing ahead to what only Jesus can bring us freedom from. See, that's God "visiting" His people.

So when James says pure, undefiled religion before God our Father is to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, he's talking about the reality of us who profess faith in Christ entering the lives of orphans and widows in a way that brings change for their good, but not so that any of us can be praised. It is done in a way which reveals that God is at work. God is the One Who is doing these things. Hallelujah! Praise the Lord! That's the visiting, caring for, meeting the needs of orphans and widows.

What makes this group of people so special as to be singled out from the broader category of the poor and needy? Later in his letter, James is going to talk about the poor. Many Bible commentators say, “Well, here James is just using the orphan and widow as an example of the most vulnerable—the neediest of the needy. So we could just translate this by saying, ‘Care for the poor in their affliction and don’t let the world stain you. Keep yourself unstained.’” Yet James intentionally does not use the word “poor” here. He chooses orphan and widow for a purpose. What might that purpose be? Why might he do this?

Let’s look at a few clues that will help make this come alive for all of us. The first clue is found tucked in the verse here, where he says, “*Religion that is pure and undefiled, before God the Father...*” Now, this is an older ESV. I think the newer ones might say, “Before the God and Father,” or something like that. Actually, in the original language there is an emphasis—you can translate it “before the God and Father.” He doesn’t say, “The Father God.” It’s like he’s setting these up. It’s the God and the Father—pure religion is to care for orphans and widows. Visit them in a way where they see God at work on their behalf.

Why Father? Why is James inserting that? Why might that be strategic for understanding this? Well, in the Old Testament, the word “father” is used to describe God maybe 15 times. In fact, no good Jew would be caught praying to “Father.” It was “sovereign King,” or “Lord.” I mean, you don’t even pronounce His name, much less speak, “Father.” It’s never about an individual. Maybe He’s the Father of the nation. “I’m okay with that. But my Father? That’s too intimate, too close. I won’t do that.”

In fact, the only time Father is personalized in the Old Testament is in 2 Samuel 7:14, speaking of David’s son to come: “*I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son.*” Of course, that’s fulfilled in Jesus Christ. So we see in the Old Testament that God’s fatherhood is not very clearly revealed, although it’s there.

Then Jesus comes on the scene and it’s like a “Father explosion.” In the book of John the word “Father” is used around 115 times. Of course Jesus comes and reveals the Trinity to us. In the book of Isaiah, Jesus is spoken of as the One Who will bear these divine titles: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Prince of Peace, Everlasting Father. Who is the Wonderful Counselor? He is the Holy Spirit. Who is the Prince of Peace? It is Jesus Christ, our Lord. Who is the Everlasting Father? He is God, the King. And all three are called Mighty God—the Three in One, the Trinity. Jesus comes and reveals the Father.

Nowhere is this seen more clearly than in John 14:6 where He says to His disciples, “*I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.*” Well, Philip gets very excited. I don’t know what he had in mind. I don’t know if he was thinking about

Moses on the mountain beholding the glory of God passing by. But Philip says to Jesus (verse eight), *“Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us.”* It’s like all Jesus has done isn’t really enough yet. *“Show us the Father...and it’s all done.”* Jesus’ response is mind-confronting. He says, *“Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me?”* Jesus is not the Father. But He reveals the Father, and He is the way to the Father.

Working among the fatherless, very often I find there are those who want nothing to do with God the Father. In fact, the concept of God’s fatherhood is frightening. *“Give me Jesus. Jesus is safe. I can relate to Jesus. But God the Father?”* To these people, the concept of Father does not bring happy thoughts and good memories. For some of us here, it does. Some of us think of father as best friend, provider, on and on. But for some, abuse, brokenness, present but not involved. But that is not Who God the Father is. He is not like our earthly fathers, because every earthly father is an imperfect picture of God the Father.

So Jesus comes and reveals the kind of father God is like. He is the Father every one of us have longed for. We were made for Him, by Him, to know Him. If you want to know what He’s like, just start writing down everything you love about Jesus—because that’s exactly Who God the Father is and what He’s like. Jesus comes and reveals that Father, and He is the way to this Father. So I think for James, looking at living out this faith that’s undefiled before our God and Father is just this.

A second clue as to why he chooses orphans and widows comes from the Old Testament unveiling of God’s fatherhood in a very unique context. It’s easy to miss it as you read through the Old Testament, and it is the revealing of God’s fatherhood to the fatherless, the widow and the sojourner. These three—this triad, if you will—follow through the story line of the Old Testament. When we look at God’s giving of the law to His people, we know the commands of God are not given arbitrarily. Everything God commands His people to do is an outflow of the very character and nature of God.

So, for example, in the Ten Commandments God says, *“You must not bear false witness.”* Don’t lie—why? Because God is truth. His character is what is being reflected through the commandment. Just after the giving of the Ten Commandments, we come to Exodus 22:22-24, where we hear this: *“You shall not mistreat any widow or fatherless child. If you do mistreat them, and they cry out to me, I will surely hear their cry, and my wrath will burn, and I will kill you with the sword, and your wives shall become widows and your children fatherless.”* And everyone in Israel gasped—because this is serious.

What is this revealing about God? In the ancient world it was normal for the ancient kings—from Hammurabi on to others—to boast that they bring justice to the fatherless and the widow. It was the ideal king who could make that boast. However God is the ideal King and in His character He Himself is the defender of the fatherless and the widow. It's part of Who He is. So if His people break that and fail to reflect the character of God—that's sin. Every time they sin in this way, God is saying, "I will come and bring judgment. Why? Because you are messing up My character revealed to the fatherless and I will defend that character. They will know Me as their Defender."

That's serious. But praise God that in every point of the law where we fall short, in every point where our sin is revealed, we have a Savior Who has come and taken the curse of that law on Himself and taken that punishment for us so we don't have to fear that punishment. But the character of God doesn't change. He is Defender of the fatherless. Chapter 19 of the book of Leviticus talks about God providing for the poor, the fatherless and the widow through His people. Deuteronomy 10 speaks of God protecting them through His people.

I can just picture David, who comes later, reading the law of God. We know that David meditated on the law day and night. Psalm 19 says it was like honey on his lips. He didn't just love the commandments because they were commandments. David's not sitting there thinking, "Ah, I just love that commandment: don't boil a goat in its mother's milk. Mmm, that's good." Right? He was captivated by the law because he was captivated by the God Who revealed Himself through the law. He loved to meditate on the law because he loved to meditate on God. He was a man after God's own heart, despite all of his imperfections.

I can picture David meditating on this law regarding the fatherless and the widow: "O God, You defend the fatherless? You provide for the fatherless? You protect the fatherless? You're the Dad. You're like their Father." I can just see him, through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, in Psalm 68:5. David is the first one who makes this incredible statement: "*Father of the fatherless and protector of widows is God in his holy habitation.*" Yes, he says it. God is the father of the fatherless. The book of Job, and the prophets, will continue to attest to the severity of God as He calls His people to reflect on Who He is by caring for the fatherless and the widow.

I think all of this is background for James. James is aware of this reality, and out of all things he could draw from to reflect genuine faith in Christ, he says, "Hey, it's to visit orphans and widows." This is the heart and character of God the Father. But it doesn't stop there. I used to do a teaching on the Old Testament fatherhood of God to the fatherless, and we'd walk through every passage. I could do it in a couple hours. But you get to the end and it's like, "Okay, guys.

What has God called us to do?” “Care for the fatherless.” But there was something missing. What’s missing?

There’s one more step we have to take, and it’s the very foundation of what all of this is about and what all of this is pointing to for us—and that is the reality of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Because it’s in the gospel where we are brought into a relationship with our Father God. I can go and care for orphans. I can give them food and school fees. We can work with pastors to try to help families take in orphans and adopt them. We can try to work with families in the church to strengthen them, to prevent orphans and give safe places for orphans. We can do all of that, but if we do not point them to their hope in Christ, Who brings them into relationship with God the Father, then we are failing them.

One of my first memories of arriving in Uganda in 2002 was of a young girl named Betty Nantumbwah—11 years old. Her mother had just died. We sat in this family group called Samuel Family. New Hope has seven families where children are brought in—the neediest of the needy, those who don’t have healthy home or relative situations to care for them. They’re put into a family with Ugandan parents. And Betty was in this family. We sat there around the open hut in the middle of the compound.

I remember Betty was crying. Laura Beth just went and put her arm around her, praying for her, and found out she had just lost her mother to AIDS. Now, Betty’s father was alive, but nobody knew where he was. He had come in and out of her life. She had memories of him, but they were painful memories. As we moved back there in 2004, Betty became a heart-adopted daughter into our home. As we walked the journey of life with Betty—as we do with kids we live around there—the day came when Betty got the news that her father had died. It’s like reality hit—both her parents were gone. She sat at our kitchen table with those same tears—but this time I sat next to her with my arm around her. She was grieving and hurting. I said, “Betty, why don’t you just write down on a piece of paper all the ways your dad has hurt you, both directly and indirectly?” So she started writing them down. Things he had said to her when she was young that hurt. His failing to be there as part of her life. Her feeling abandoned by him. Her longing to hear the words she never heard him utter even once: “I love you.” She was writing it down, tears coming.

I said, “Betty, there’s a God Who loves you so much that He sent His Son Jesus for you, to bring you into relationship with Him.” Betty knows the gospel. She had professed faith in Christ, so I was reminding her of this. Then I said, “Let’s just look at all the things God has spoken to you as Father.” We started writing down everything we could think of. Of course, it was the absolute opposite of the things her earthly father had spoken or ways he had failed her. It was

like, “I have chosen you before the foundation of the world. I am your Father Who will never leave you. You are precious in My sight. I love you.” As we were reading through these things, I said, “Betty, God is the Father Who will never leave you or forsake you.” As she cried, and I cried, and we prayed, something sweet took place as her heart was brought into relationship with God the Father.

I grew up saying the Lord’s Prayer every Sunday in the little church my grandfather built in West Virginia. “*Our Father Who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done...*” It was just something I said, just something that came out. It wasn’t until moving to Uganda and seeing this reality that all of a sudden it was, “Our Father Who art in heaven.” The privilege to call God, “Father.” The privilege to lead hearts to proclaim Him as Father. From that day Betty actually began to call me Papa, which is what my children call me. She began to call Laura Beth Mama. We’re not the only parents in her life, but we are family together.

In all of this, this entire unveiling in the Old Testament of God’s fatherhood to the fatherless, the New Testament unveiling of the fatherhood of God, are working toward one great goal: the magnification of the grace of God through the gospel of Jesus Christ. That’s what it’s all building toward—this gospel that takes orphans like Betty and brings them to the Father.

This is the same gospel that takes sinners and slaves to sin and death and Satan—like you and me—and He saves us. He pours out His grace that we don’t deserve. He cleanses those who come to Him in faith through the gospel of repentance. Then He gives us this amazing gift: His righteousness that comes to us, that draws us into relationship with God. He reconciles us, because He takes our punishment. But He doesn’t stop there. He adopts us into His family and makes us sons and daughters. Romans 8 and Galatians 4 talk about this glorious doctrine of adoption. I’m not going to talk much about it now, because in a few weeks, on Father’s Day, Justin Taylor is going to be looking into this beautiful doctrine of adoption. I’ll let you enjoy it then.

But let’s just listen to Ephesians 1 and the party that’s going on, and this reality of the grace of God that brings us into family and calls us sons and daughters of God, Whom we can now call “Abba, Father.” Ephesians 1:3-6 says this:

*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved.*

We could go on and on. Do you hear it, though? Predestined, right? Planned and decided beforehand to be adopted as sons and daughters, to the praise of His glorious grace. So James says to us, “Pure and undefiled religion before God the Father is this: visit orphans and widows in their distress, in their affliction. Keep yourself unstained from the world.” This calling for us to live out the truth of the gospel through caring for orphans and widows, through caring for the needy—really, bringing the gospel to those who so desperately need the truth of what Jesus has done—that is the very heart of what we are all called to do. Caring for orphans is not just a good thing to do. It’s more than a good thing—it’s a gospel thing.

What can we do as a church body? What can you do right here, in a world that is filled with 153+ million orphans? I once had a woman say to me, “What can be done? What can I do? It’s too much.” And you know what? It is too much. But it’s not too much for God Who is at work through His people in this world to meet and impact this great need. You can pray. Pray for the fatherless. Pray for widows. Pray for the fatherless in this church. I know you can walk around here, and there are those who desperately need fathers. There are those—for whatever reason—whose fathers are not present in their lives or in their homes. Who knows why, but they’re here. There are mothers who desperately need father figures in their children’s lives. Call them mentors, call them whatever—they’re fathers.

In Uganda, my son Johnny—again, our heart-adopted son—was abandoned when he was about one. He was brought through the social worker to our Hope Family, which is specifically for abandoned and needy children. John spent two years there in Hope Family. We were praying and looking for families to adopt him. Those are the only children that we do adopt at New Hope—the young ones who don’t have anyone. Finally one of our single staff members, Grace Nasaka, was burdened in her heart and she adopted Johnny into her family. That was definitely better than putting him into a family group as a last resort. Family is always better than an institution. God made family.

Yet it didn’t take Grace long before she realized, “I cannot raise this boy. He needs a father.” Of course, Elisha and Johnny are age mates, and from a young age Johnny was always at our house playing. Elisha and Johnny were best friends. It wasn’t long before I was very much functioning as a father to him. Laura Beth and I served as a covering for Grace, walking alongside Johnny with his deep, wounded orphan-heart, helping Grace walk on that journey.

You can do that. You can find a boy who just needs somebody to be part of his life consistently. Take time. Love a child. Love a girl, a boy. Foster care—there are great needs in this area, and there are those from this church who have been very active in foster care which is

awesome. We celebrate that. It hasn't stopped. There are always needs for good homes for children. You can talk to any of the leaders here and they'll point you in the right direction.

What about adoption? You know, what better way to reveal God's fatherhood to the fatherless than through adopting a child into your family? There are adoptive families here, and it's just such a beautiful picture of the gospel for us. In Illinois right now there are 2,800 children in foster care who are waiting to be adopted. Imagine, there are 13,000 churches in Illinois. So if just one family in one church out of three and a half would adopt a child, that need would be gone—at least for the present time.

When we come to the international orphan crisis, Uganda alone has three million orphans. It's our privilege to be there and get to be part of what God is doing through His church body. How can you be involved in that? Well, you can sponsor a child. Go to [hopeuganda.org](http://hopeuganda.org), click sponsorship and for \$30 a month you can sponsor a child and help those who are actively seeking to bring God's fatherhood to the fatherless. They do this both through caring for orphans in their communities with their families and relatives, as well as caring for those who are within the ministry itself.

But do you know what the greatest thing you can do is? Share the gospel. Share the gospel, because ultimately bringing people into relationship with God the Father through Jesus, through the working of the Spirit, is the highest calling on all of us to live out this truth that we profess.

Let's pray.

O God, we just thank You for the privilege to call You Father. Thank You that You are the Father of the fatherless, and that You are the God Who adopts slaves and orphans, bringing them into family. Lord, thank You for the gift of family. Thank You for the gift of this church body and how well they love and care for one another, for their heart to reach out into these communities. Lord, might this be a church body who will reflect You through how they live out the gospel they proclaim. Lord, we pray that Your Word would stir Your people. We pray that each of us, as we walk with You as our Father, would trust You as our Provider, Defender and Protector. God, we pray that many fatherless in our midst here would be fatherless no more—that they would know You as their Father. We pray this for the glory of Your name. Amen.

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## New Covenant Bible Church

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*All Scriptures quoted directly from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.*

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