



Great Commission, Great Compassion: Following Jesus and Loving the World
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Helping the Needy We Will Never Meet

Biblical Reflection: 1 John 3:17 Meets CNN

When John wrote about the demonstrated love of God through Jesus Christ, he urged believers to imitate Jesus by laying down their lives for others (1 John 3:16). To place this action in the context of daily living, he asked, “If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? (1 John 3:17).”

“It’s this simple,” John says. “If you want to test your understanding of the love of God, then ask yourself – when you have and you see someone who has not, do you respond with generosity and compassion? This demonstrates love in deed, not just words.”

I hope that John’s readers struggled with this rubber-meets-the road exhortation to love others, but I wonder if they lived in a simpler world. When they returned from the marketplace with two loaves of bread and they walked past the neighborhood beggar, the verse challenged them: “Does the verse mean that I need to give up one of my loaves?” But their smaller world did not require them to encounter beggars one thousand miles away.

I struggle in larger ways to apply this verse. On the one hand, I seldom encounter beggars – because I live in a country where we hide our poor better than they did in Jesus’ day. The economically poor don’t live near me, so I can effectively avoid them and pretend that everyone lives as comfortably as I do.

Unlike John’s readers, I seldom encounter the needy at my doorstep or in my marketplace. I see them through the media. CNN brings the flood victims of Mozambique into my living room. *Time* magazine ushers famine victims in the Sudan or Bangladesh into my kitchen. I can sit munching on junk food while their emaciated bodies roam before me in a special report from a refugee camp. I obviously have material possessions. They obviously have material needs. Even as a person serving in full-time Christian ministry, I’m still wealthier than 90 percent of the world. What does 1 John 3:17 mean for me? Does CNN make me now responsible for the whole world?

These tough questions burden the compassionate but already overloaded caring type. Guilt offers no cure; it only paralyzes us or stirs us to impulsive action. Hardening our hearts couldn’t be the solution either; this leads to apathy (remember: “no feeling”). How do we respond? At the least, my wife and I stop to pray. Often, we look for ways to invite fellow Christians to respond: is it time to suggest a spontaneous offering at church for the people in the Congo? Sometimes we respond immediately by sending a financial gift – in an effort to be part of the solution, to be obedient to 1 John 3:17, and to keep our hearts soft toward those facing need that exceeds anything I’ve personally encountered.



Most of all, we stay involved in mercy ministries. Even though we may not be able to respond financially to the current crisis crossing our TV screen, we've devoted ourselves to generosity and sacrifice on behalf of the poor. A generous lifestyle allows us to live with the assurance that we're applying 1 John 3:17 – by using our material resources to serve our brothers and sisters in need. CNN expands our response to 1 John 3:17 because it makes the world our neighborhood.

Look for Opportunities and Needs at Hand

Whether we're thinking of the demonstration of the gospel through practical acts of compassion or we're looking to share verbally about a relationship with God through Jesus Christ in the process of disciple making, we will need to take some sort of action. Looking for opportunities, taking the initiative in conversation and going out of way to start a relationship all involve action, and the first action (after prayer, of course) is to go looking.

How? Ask God daily for "divine appointments" where he guides us to people right in front of us who have a need or could use a friend. It could be as simple as raking a neighbor's lawn or helping that person boarding the airplane get his bag into the overhead bin. It might mean reading a person's Facebook or Twitter post citing some challenge they are facing and following up with a response or phone call to offer a word of support or encouragement.

Unfortunately, we live in a world of a thousand distractions. Sometimes living out the Christian life simply means being observant to the needs right around us. My seminary professor Elisabeth Elliot taught that common courtesy (opening the door for someone else, giving someone else the right of way, deferring to another person waiting in line) is our first expression to the world that we live with the Jesus-imitating value *I will sacrifice that you might benefit*.

– Taken from chapter nine, "Look"



Paul Borthwick: Mobilizing Others to Mission

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Paul Borthwick, author of *Great Commission, Great Compassion: Following Jesus and Loving the World*

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Borthwick is the author of *Western Christians in Global Missions*, which was the 2014 Christianity Today Book Award of Merit Winner (Missions/Global Affairs) and the 2014 Outreach Magazine Resource of the Year ("Also Recommended," Global Outreach). He is also the author of *How to Be a World-Class Christian, Six Dangerous Questions to Transform Your View of the World, A Mind for Missions* and other books and Bible studies.

In his latest book, *Great Commission, Great Compassion*, Borthwick calls readers to find "biblical balance" between Jesus' instructions to go and makes disciples and to care for hurting people. He focuses on our ability to make practical lifestyle choices that allow us to live a "great commission, great compassion lifestyle."

Borthwick is an active speaker and teacher, having taught courses at Gordon College, Africa International University (Nairobi), Alliance Theological Seminary (Manila) and Lanka Bible College (Sri Lanka), plus a guest faculty position at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. Previously he served for more than twenty years on the staff of Grace Chapel in Lexington, Massachusetts, first as youth pastor and then as minister of missions.

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