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God's Heart For The Fatherless



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God's Heart For The Fatherless

God's Care for the Fatherless

James 1:27, "Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world."

Throughout the Bible, God is clear that He loves and cares for the orphaned, oppressed, and needy. As members of the body of Christ, we are called to be God's "hands and feet" in this world by doing His work. In this cruel world, He calls us to oppose evil and be a force for good. In *Isaiah 1:17*, God calls us to "Learn to do well; seek judgment [justice], relieve the oppressed, judge [defend] the fatherless, plead for the widow." There are many opportunities in the Church and the community to carry out the calling of *Isaiah 1:17*. Some may feel led by God to open their homes to foster children (often temporary placements) and others may feel led to adopt a child. Our desire in this series of articles is to highlight some of the needs of foster and adopted children. This first article is intended to understand God's heart for the fatherless. It is also intended to encourage the body of Christ to consider how God would call them to serve the fatherless.

Children were designed to thrive under the care of Godly parents who provide an environment of love, safety, security, and truth. Consider the description *Psalms 68:5-6* gives us of God, "A father of the fatherless, and a judge of the widows, is God in his holy habitation. God setteth the solitary in families: he bringeth out those which are bound with chains: but the rebellious dwell in a dry land." It is clear that God's heart is toward those in need and in particular the fatherless. Who better to step in and serve the fatherless than those who are to be "conformed to the image of his Son." While many may never be called to become foster or adoptive parents, it is important to acknowledge God's heart toward children in need. It is also important to consider what the body of Christ's role is in serving foster children and children awaiting adoption. To help put this need into perspective, 424,000 children were in the United States foster care system in 2009 and 115,000 of those children were waiting for adoptive families. Worldwide there are estimated to be 16 million orphaned (not having a mother or a father) children.

The need for Godly men and women to stand in the gap for the fatherless is evident. It is very important that every believer prayerfully consider what the Lord desires of them. Becoming a foster or adoptive parent is not what God has called all of us to be and those who have been called to such a task should prayerfully entreat the Lord for direction. *Luke 14:28* says, "For which of you, intending to build a tower, sitteth not down first, and counteth the cost, whether he have [sufficient] to finish [it]?" The principle in this verse can be applied to considering foster care or adoption. Those who are called into this ministry will experience challenges and in many cases these challenges will be beyond what were expected. To deny such a fact is not helpful or beneficial for parents or children alike. This reality is also why it is essential to consider the truth expressed in *Psalms 127:1*, "Except the LORD build the house, they labour in vain that build it: except the LORD keep the city, the watchman waketh [but] in vain." God blesses those who do the work God calls them to. This does not mean it will be easy or that it will result in the outcome envisioned by parents. Instead, it means that God is faithful and good regardless of outcomes. He desires obedience from His people rather than an "I will do this for you God if it goes well or turns out like I want" attitude.

So what is the "Body's" role in serving foster and adoptive children? We can clearly see that God loves the fatherless and desires to provide for their needs. It should likewise be the heart of all Christians to love and care for the fatherless (*Exodus 22:22-23*; "Ye shall not afflict any widow, or fatherless child. If thou afflict them in any wise, and they cry at all unto me, I will surely hear their cry;"). Likewise every believer ought to be taking an active role in serving those in need. The Word of God clearly expressed God's desire for His people to serve and provide for the needs of others. *1 Corinthians 12* tells us that God has given different gifts within the body and that every gift in the body is important. Your God-given gifts will shape how you

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should serve foster children and adoptive children. This does not elevate or diminish the role God desires to have you step into. Instead it shows the importance of knowing your gifts and using them in a way that is pleasing to God. May God move your heart to become more in-line with His heart toward the fatherless. This may mean that you will pray, open your home, express kindness, extend a smile, become involved in a ministry that serves children, or step into another role the Lord would have for you in serving the fatherless.

As the Church becomes more actively involved in foster care and adoption, may God's heart be pleased as He sees His children serve the fatherless. Being a parent is a wonderful blessing and gift from the Lord. Yet, being a parent is not the ultimate goal. Ultimately, the goal of all parenting, with biological, foster, or adopted children, is to help them to know Jesus Christ. Through Christ we are able to experience the ultimate adoption into the family of God (*Romans 8:14-15*, "For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God. For ye have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear; but ye have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father.").

Needs of Adopted Children

Families need to 1) prepare, 2) provide, and 3) persist when it comes to meeting the needs of adoptive children. Preparation is helpful and important when you decide to do anything. Bringing a child into your home is a life-altering decision that needs to begin in prayer. (*Psalms 127:1*, "Except the LORD build the house, they labour in vain that build it: . . .") Adoption, when it is the Lord's work, is a wonderful opportunity to minister to the fatherless. When the Lord provides direction and opportunity to adopt a child into your family know that there are many adjustments ahead. Two factors that will dramatically affect adjustments that occur are: 1) your family situation and 2) the adopted child. Consider the following about your family: Do you already have children? How old are your children? Are you married or single? What do you expect your role as an adoptive parent to be? And what roles will others play in the child's life? The adopted child's age, cultural background, ethnicity, history, and experiences will also greatly influence adjustments that will need to be made within your family unit.

Prepare:

To prepare for these adjustments, many family discussions are needed so that everyone knows the plan as well as the expectations for each family member when adoption occurs. Time and energy spent prior to adoption in prayer, discussion, and learning is time well spent. Children already in your home should be aware of how God has directed you, the parent(s), towards adoption and what adoption means for your family. Make an effort to learn and teach what the bible says about adoption as this understanding will help your children understand your purpose in adding another person to the family. You also need to learn about the culture, ethnicity, and background of your prospective adoptive child. If you already have children, become aware of their feelings regarding the planned adoption as well as their perception of how their role in the family may change or be diminished. What you learn in these areas will help you provide a loving, supportive, and comfortable environment for the child you adopt. As an adoptive parent, you will also need to educate yourself about the situation your adopted child is coming from.

Provide:

One way to look at stepping into the role of adoptive parents is through the lens of stewardship. *Psalms 127:3* tells us, "Lo, children are an heritage of the Lord: and the fruit of the womb is his reward." Children are a precious gift from God which He has entrusted to parents. Being a steward of this gift is an important part of parenting. It is vital that you understand, validate, and embrace the person God has created your child to be which includes, but is not limited to, their ethnicity, culture, talents, weaknesses, and experiences. Your adopted child has been "fearfully and wonderfully made" by God. Embrace the

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unique identity and personality of the adopted child while you train him to serve the Lord.

Your relationship with your child is extremely important as it is the foundation of your training, instructing and leading. One of the most important ways to provide for your adoptive child is through building a healthy relationship. Love, trust, and safety are three essential ingredients of establishing a strong connection with your child. It may help to think of your relationship with your child as an attachment. Developing a healthy attachment with your adoptive child is done through experiences where you show love and care for him. Specific ways to do this are hugs, kisses, holding, singing, rocking, and other healthy ways to physically and emotionally nurture a child. For more information on attachment you can read "Understanding Attachment: A Fundamental Parenting Principle" which is posted on ACCFS's website under parenting.

Loss and not having a sense of belonging are two things that can make attachment difficult for adoptive children. Think of a time when someone let you down. When this occurs, you are less trusting of that person the next time you interact with him. Attachment is built on trust, and an adopted child will need time and positive experiences with you to build that trust. Work to build trust by providing consistency founded on biblical principles, honesty (*Matthew 5:37*), discipline (*Hebrews 12:7*), and unconditional love (*Romans 5:8*). Provide your adoptive child with a clear sense and understanding that he is a member of the family. There should be no division between biological and adopted children in your home. In *Galatians 3:26-4:7*, Paul paints a beautiful picture of God's adoptive love by indicating that those who have faith in Jesus Christ are adopted into God's family, and there is no distinction between members of the body. This passage speaks to a spiritual adoption but the principle can be a powerful one in helping your adopted child become a family member and not just an addition. This will be an ongoing journey which will take a great deal of perseverance on your part and on the part of any previous children.

Persist:

Persevering in such a way that will help the child become known and seen by you and himself as one of your children is an important need to meet. An adopted child's perspective of his situation will change as he moves through the developmental stages of childhood. As children develop, they begin to ask questions about whom they are and where they belong. Parents need to be prepared to answer these questions. As a general rule, children who have been adopted should be informed about their adoption by age 3. Being adopted is part of their story they should always know and should not come as a surprise to them. Keep in mind that all children need to know that they are gifts from God (*Ps. 127:3*), that He loves them (*1 Jn. 4:16*), has a plan for them (*Je. 29:11*), and that they need Him (*Rom. 6:23*).

Understand that as an adopted child grows and matures, he will change his views on "adoption." As his view of adoption changes, his questions about adoption and the meaning he gives adoption will change. Your child needs you to persevere with him through the storms he will experience. The more time and energy spent during the early phases of adoption, building a strong relationship, will help you and your family endure through challenges that will occur.

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Needs of Foster Children

This portion will explain some of the elements and components of foster care. It will not dig deeply into specific areas or needs of foster children. Instead, it will provide an overview of how the church body can exercise true religion (*James 1:27*) in supporting and loving those involved in the foster care process.

The word “foster” is certainly a beautiful word filled with many biblical applications. It means: to promote the growth or development of (a child), to bring up (a child), to cherish (a plan, hope, etc.) in one’s mind. We are indeed thankful that many families have felt the call to minister to the needs of children in a very unique way by opening up their homes to fostering opportunities.

In America, there are 463,000 children in foster care; 24% were placed in a relative’s home. 46% of those children were in foster care for less than a year. 52% of the children left the foster care system to be reunited with their families. (2008 information per childwelfare.gov)

The church family can be helpful to those involved in this service of care in a number of ways, three of which will be expressed in this article: 1) Display a proper blend of sensitivity and empathy, 2) Display the love of Christ, and 3) Display the power of prayer.

Display a proper blend of sensitivity and empathy.

We might recall a time in our life when our family needed to move, change schools, or find another home to live in. Whether the event was positive in nature or rooted in sadness, the act of changing homes can be very impactful. As created beings, we tend to gravitate towards routine, normalcy, consistent habits, and expectations. The Bible is filled with examples of the struggles that the Children of Israel encountered during their times of being exiled and carried away to other lands. Jeremiah records the picture of a mother weeping for her children because they were not home, but in exile (*Jer. 31:15*).

Children enter the foster care system because something is wrong in their home and the level of adequate care for them is missing. No matter how we see a “foster child” act, we always need to extend the mental grace of empathy and remember that this child has had some very tough experiences in their young life. Just because they have moved into a Christian home doesn’t automatically bring healing from these experiences. We know that just because someone goes to church on Sunday, it doesn’t automatically bring sanctified behavior on Monday. Healing will take time and purposeful action from “foster parents” that is rooted in love. There are many additional elements of attachment (trust, security, safety, etc.) that are woven into the behaviors of foster children. Those elements, while common in all children and families, are especially magnified in the heart and mind of those in foster care.

God’s brilliant design of the connection between infant and mom/dad is hard to describe. Most parents are very thankful for that connection, because biological parents have their struggles also. Even in the worst possible dysfunctional and abusive situation possible, most kids WANT to be home with their family. It is wise to remember that and display the appropriate sensitivity to children in these situations. A common, well-intentioned mistake of someone trying to be encouraging usually includes phrases and words said to the child about “how thankful they should be for being in a better place/home right now”. Yes, that is true, but that comment is not sensitive to the child’s desire and longing to be in their own home. We can encourage foster children by letting them know how thankful we are for the chance to get to know them.

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Display the love of Christ.

Jesus was very generous in helping us understand the “why” and “who” of love:

By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples if ye have LOVE one to another (Jn 13:35). When ye have done it unto one of the LEAST of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me (Matt. 25:40).

A beautiful part of our church family heritage is the expression of love and care that is displayed among the brethren. *James 2* is a powerful example of showing the fruit of caring for all, regardless of one's position or current situation. Parents can make an effort to remind their children who share the same Sunday School class with a foster child to go the extra step in reaching out to the new church friend. Saying “good to see you today” and “so glad you are here” go a long way in breaking down walls of uneasiness for someone who is new. When the new child can be invited to sit at their lunch table, or for afternoon service, or maybe over to ride bikes on a Sunday afternoon; these can be some of the purest displays of Christ's love to one in need. The church family in general can be blessed and strengthened when we go out of our way to greet the foster children. How kind it is to also provide a word of encouragement to the foster parents, who may (or may not) have had a pretty trying week. What a testimony of Christ's love when those children return to their original homes and talk about how they loved church because everyone was so nice to them.

Display the power of prayer.

The church family can have the joy (*Phil. 1:4*) and fervency (*James 5:16*) in prayer for the child and the family. Foster care responsibilities encompass the additional needs of scheduling with: case workers, court hearings, meetings with biological family, etc. At any moment- any of those scenarios can be very anxious for all involved and the need for them to be blanketed in prayer is immense. What a blessing when members of the congregation take the time to ask foster parents of specific things to pray for.

For those with this type of need, the church family can be a great strength and resource through its display of sensitivity, empathy, love and prayer. May God continue to bless all those involved with this ministry. May God bless His work.