

Chapter 2: The Call of a Father's Heart

God is stirring in the hearts of His people a desire to respond to the needs of the most vulnerable in the communities where they live. For too long, Christians have lived self-centered and self-consumed lives. Historically, we have turned our eyes the other way when the needs of the most vulnerable are all around us. Hopefully, we are no longer satisfied or willing to simply study God's Word for the sake of knowledge and gather in sanctuaries for the sake of fellowship. I see a transformation occurring that takes place only when the Holy Spirit moves in our hearts. He is the One who gives us a desire to reach outside of ourselves, to give of ourselves, to sacrifice our comfort and our possessions. Praise God for His moving in us, and praise Him for the response of those who claim to follow Him. I hope we see more of His moving and more of our in-kind response.

Without question, some of the most vulnerable in our communities are orphaned and at-risk children. Caring for these children is clearly something that God calls us to do, and it reflects the true nature and heart of God. Consider Scriptures such as Isaiah 1:17, which says, "Learn to do good. Seek justice. Help the oppressed. Defend the cause of orphans. Fight for the rights of widows." Or Psalm 68:5–6, which says, "Father to the fatherless, defender of widows—this is God, whose dwelling is holy. God places the lonely in families." And, maybe the most well-known verse, James 1:27, which says, "Pure and genuine religion in the sight of God means caring for orphans and widows in their distress and refusing to let the world corrupt you." Dozens more Scriptures reflect God's heart for the most vulnerable in our midst.

When I read different Scriptures that repeat the same basic theme in both the Old and the New Testament, I think that their subject matter is probably important to Him. If I really am His follower, a disciple of His teaching, then hopefully I will do more than just intellectually understand what He is saying. Surely I will live my life so that my actions reflect His heart and passion.

Look at some of the action words in the verses: seek, help, defend, fight, and care. These words call for an enthusiastic response. These words are the call of the Father's heart to respond with action.

So who are the orphans and at-risk children in our communities? According to the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services, the children needing foster and adoptive homes through Child Protective Services are:

- Children and youth between zero and 22 years old who are of all ethnic, cultural, and racial backgrounds and who have been abused, neglected, and/or abandoned.
- Sibling groups who need to be placed in the same foster or adoptive home, or who are not placed together but need to have regular contact with each other.
- Children and youth who have disabilities and special needs, including but not limited to psychological, medical, and physical diagnoses.

According to the Website, www.fortheorphan.org, five hundred thousand children in our nation are in the foster care system. More than twenty-eight thousand children in the state of Texas, where I live, are in foster care. That number only reflects the children who are in the custody of the state's foster care system. Many other children live in unstable homes, on the streets, or in non-state group homes. Think about your own community: Do you know how many children are in foster care in your county or city? How do you respond when you encounter a child who is in a vulnerable or at-risk family situation? Do you notice them? It is evident that Father God notices such children, and He is calling us to not only notice them, but also to do something about the problem.

Once children are in the foster care system, they remain for an average of two to three years. Two to three years! That is the average. Do you know what it looks like for a child to be in foster care? Can you imagine what it is like to have someone show up at your daycare or school one day,

telling you that he is taking you to a “safe place?” As this child, you may or may not have been the person who brought attention to your home situation. Either way, you probably did not fully understand what would happen next. This person takes you to a complete stranger’s home with only the few items you had with you that day. You probably don’t have your favorite toy, stuffed animal, clothes, or pet. You may or may not ever see those things again. What do you think would go through your mind that first night as you lay in bed in this strange, new home? Are you really safe? What is this new family like? Are your other family members safe? Will you ever see your family again? The questions must be endless. Many children move from foster home to foster home, experiencing that trauma over and over. It is not the child’s fault that he or she ended up in this situation. These are children who have been neglected, abused, or even abandoned. No wonder they typically do poorly in school, act out in various ways, and have mild to severe emotional scars. These are the ones for whom the Father is telling us to seek justice, defend, fight, and care for.

About 25,000 children nationwide age out of the foster care system every year. Aging out of the foster care system means that the government is no longer their legal guardian—their parent. The children were never reunified with their biological family, nor did a forever family ever adopt them. They are now “on their own.” The children come from broken families. Chances are many will continue the cycle of abuse, broken relationships, and dysfunctional homes. The Midwest Study published in 2007 by the Chapin Hall Center for Children interviewed 732 foster youth three times from the time they were 17-18 years old until they were 20-21 years old. The results revealed that “compared to their peers who were a part of biological families these foster youth are on average less likely to have a high school diploma, less likely to be pursuing higher education, less likely to be earning a living wage, more likely to have experienced economic hardships, more likely to have had a child outside of wedlock, and more likely to have become involved with the criminal justice system.”¹ The government, as the legal guardian, is striving to meet the needs of the foster children even as they transition into adulthood. Thank God our country attempts to provide a system to care for them. However, nothing can meet these needs like a family.

For some time, the evangelical church — a church that places a higher priority on evangelism — has acted as if meeting social needs was the responsibility of the government or liberal churches. The evangelical church’s responsibility was strictly teaching the Word and sharing the Gospel. I am glad to see change, a shift in attitude in this area. If we as believers are going to listen to the beat of our Father’s heart, we are called and responsible for both meeting the social needs of those who are vulnerable, and for sharing the good news about salvation in our Lord Jesus Christ. Both are mandates in Scripture. Hopefully, the church is waking up to the fact that no government can adequately meet these needs. As Christ followers, we cannot relegate this responsibility onto the state. To do so is to ignore God’s call and His heart.

We need to preach and live the *whole* gospel, not just a portion of it. This does not mean that everyone needs to be a foster parent or adopt a child. There are many ways to care for vulnerable and at-risk children. Believers can pray for these children. We can ask God to open our eyes and hearts to these children. We can come alongside to lend our support to those who are fostering or adopting children. We can donate our money to adoption funds or to families who need financial help to foster or adopt vulnerable children. We can get training and certification so that we can provide respite care for fostering families. The ways we can seek justice, defend the defenseless, fight for their rights, and care for the fatherless are endless. We just have to be willing.

The bottom line is that if we want to adopt the heart of the Father, we can no longer ignore His heart for the vulnerable in our midst. This is what God has been fostering in my heart. Regardless of what anyone else will say or do, I am compelled by His heart to respond to the needs of those at risk in my community. As you read about our journey, I hope that you will be open to adopting God’s heart of a father as well.

¹ Chapin Hall Center for Children. Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth: Outcomes at Age 21. 2007