

*A Theological Conversation Starter*

# ORPHANS, FAMILY SEPARATION & THE CHURCH



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Since the inception of the Church, followers of Christ have compassionately sought to minister to orphans. It is a clear, scriptural mandate. Yet many of our attempts in ministry have actually hurt the children that we seek to help. Sadly, issues of poverty, abuse and broken attachment have plagued both where the children are coming from and also the solutions we've provided.

**What if the scripture that compels us to help, can also inform our approach to do so without causing hurt?**

1MILLIONHOME provides this scripture resource to guide conversations around God's desire for these children and His plan for them. If we want to leave behind broken systems that leave children in their vulnerability, we can take up our Bibles and build something better for them. **The children we serve deserve strong defenders.**



*Let's begin a conversation about...*

**The godly IMPULSE to Care**

*James 1:27 & Matthew 25:31-46*

**The Importance of PERMANENCY**

*Romans 8:15-17 & John 14:18*

**A Biblical Approach to SYSTEMS**

*Psalms 127 & Psalm 82:3*



## The godly IMPULSE to Care

*James 1:27 & Matthew 25:31-46*

**If there was one scripture that is cited over and over when it comes to Christian care of orphans and vulnerable children, it's James 1:27.**

The verse compels our best of intentions that seek to help the vulnerable. It has been used to support foster care, orphanages, short term missions trips, adoption, family strengthening, you name it. It has been used so broadly that some practices supposedly based out of James 1:27 contradict other practices based out of the same verse. Why is that?

One problem with most uses of James 1:27 is that we tend to isolate “visit orphans” from the other elements spoken of in the verse or the passage at large. James is using this verse to exemplify the importance of being persevering doers of God’s word. Our practice of “the orphan care verse” must then be an ongoing engagement that perseveres. Short term actions are not an option.

Second, we’ve divorced “visit orphans” from “and widows”. Throughout scripture, orphans (or the fatherless) are repeatedly mentioned together with widows precisely because they are also together in real life (see Psalm 68:5; Isaiah 10:2; Malachi 3:5). They aren’t really two groups at all, they are essentially one group. They’ve lost the same person. The father/husband, as the head of the family, was to protect and provide for his wife and children. In a patriarchal society, protecting the vulnerable automatically meant protecting this group: the widow and the fatherless.

Sadly, we’ve also divorced “visit orphans” from “to keep oneself unpolluted by the world” (NIV) as many of our practices have actually fed into the pollution surrounding the welfare of vulnerable children. We should dive deeper into the godly impulse to care for orphans and widows, but do so in a way that insists on the **best possible care**.

The best possible care looks like addressing the actual root causes of their vulnerability. Addressing the roots is how we best minister to the children and to Christ Himself. At the judgment seat, Christ will separate the goats away from the sheep (Matthew 25) and the characteristics of His sheep are that they cared for the vulnerable according to their actual need. Jesus lists six vulnerabilities in this passage: hungry, thirsty, a stranger, naked, sick and imprisoned.

From the gospel accounts, we could trace Jesus’ direct experiences of each of these six risk factors. It therefore makes perfect sense that he identifies with those that are undergoing such difficulties.

Caring for the fatherless enables us to minister to these six groups all at once. When orphans and separated children are left without family, they become hungry, thirsty and in need of clothing. Street dwelling youth become sick from abuse, neglect and addictions. Children in orphanages become strangers within their own society as they are closed in and unable to find freedom.

These verses, and those that follow, can inform a robust orthopraxy that provides real care to the least of these. We can no longer have enormous orphan care ministries based on paper thin theology or exceedingly broad interpretations. **We must submit impulse to best practice.**







# The Importance of PERMANENCY

*Romans 8:15-17 & John 14:18*

## So what do we do with this godly impulse to care for orphans and widows?

The best ministries will offer lasting, permanent solutions. Jesus framed his own ministry as delivering full restoration to those to whom he ministered. That meant sight for the blind and liberty for the captives (Luke 4). So what is the actual need of orphans? Quite simply, they need parents. We should start with that end in sight.

Adoption is typically a solution that Christians pursue, and rightfully so. There are children in the world that absolutely need permanency through adoption. This reflects God's work in our own lives, as described by Paul, where we become the sons and daughters of God through the Spirit of adoption. As God's permanent, adopted children we then also become His heirs. The biblical picture of adoption is complete inclusion into the family unit.

The precursor to adoption is separation from the family and the life of an orphan. For those that are outside family, they are enslaved to fear (Romans 8:15) and that was our experience before God adopted us. We were orphans, but God was not content to leave us in that situation. He made a way for us to have glorious permanency with Him.

**How do we apply God's example of permanency to our orphan care ministries?** When it comes to orphans and at risk children in the majority world, western Christians have typically defaulted to two solutions. The first is establishing orphanages which do not provide permanency. If the proposed solution only solidifies (or even creates) their status as an orphan, then that is not a biblical solution. The second is international adoption. While this has been the right solution for some children, most countries do not adequately prioritize domestic solutions and it traumatizes a child to be removed from their

nation and culture. These should be last resorts for orphans and vulnerable children.

An imperative understanding when considering orphans, is that most children living on the streets or in orphanages actually have biological family that they could return to. Hence, the word "orphan," in its general connotation, is often a misnomer. Due to some adversity, they've become separated from their families. Permanency, biblical restoration and best practice child welfare thus look like helping the child to return home and no longer living as an orphan. Upon return, we could help the family as a unit rather than allowing the child to remain isolated.

Similar to Paul's writing, Jesus also described the work of the Spirit as a permanent tie into God's family. On the night of His arrest, He told His disciples, "I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you" (John 14:18). It is easier to think of orphans as "those kids out there," but we must remember that this is our story. We were the orphans with attachment disorders, addiction problems and fear. God's solution for us was a loving, permanent family.

It is not God's intent that we would be left as orphans, and our intent with orphans should reflect that. **This means adoption for some, and family reunification for most.**





## A Biblical Approach to SYSTEMS

*Psalm 127 & Psalm 82:3*

**When we say yes to permanency for children, when we insist that they return to their families or, when necessary, become adopted, we actually receive a blessing for ourselves.**

Biblically speaking, children are the reward and inheritance that the Lord has given to the parents (Psalm 127). Conversely, when children are separated from family and living on the streets or in orphanages, that blessed inheritance is forfeited.

Psalm 127 is an encouragement to seek God's design and for Him to build the house. There is no lack of work that we could do in our attempts to "solve the orphan crisis," but any attempts that counter God's initial design will be toilsome and in vain. God's intrinsic design for humanity from the beginning was family (Genesis 1:26-28) and **we must prioritize systems with family in mind.**

Systems that are "like family" and "family style" are insufficient, kids need real family. Family that is bonded by blood or adoption with loving adults as parents or substitute parents and the family living in a culturally appropriate home. If we seek to achieve God's design, we won't be content with another child growing up in a children's home when we could help that child grow up in a parent's home instead.

Our child welfare systems must be poverty-informed. Being poor is not a sin and it is closer to God's design for a child to

be raised in a poor family than in a rich orphanage. When we enter countries with lower gross national income and pour money into systems like international adoption (\$60,000 per child), orphanages (\$500,000 for 30 children per year) or child sponsorships (\$25,000 per childhood), we can expect corruption to be close at hand. We don't want poverty and as Christians we fight against it. Let's have our fight against poverty be centered on family and healthy economic development.

Admittedly, the family system also has problems, as anyone raised in a family can attest. Poverty, abuse, addiction and neglect are all real family issues. This exposition of God's design for family isn't to gloss over these very real problems and the ways that they negatively affect children. Rather, we are presented with family as the context in which to minister to these areas of brokenness. We ought not allow children to become permanently separated from family in the name of protecting them. Separating kids is not only ineffective as it sidesteps addressing root problems, but it's also unbiblical.

Psalm 82:3 instructs God's people to "defend the cause of the weak and fatherless; maintain the rights of the poor and oppressed" (NIV). We must defend the fatherless, the child at risk, the widow, the street dwelling youth, the vulnerable family. Their cause is now our cause. We extend the support to them that we would hope for ourselves if the roles were reversed. We want family for us, so we want family for them too. We defend their right to inclusion in the family and community. We defend as a way to minister to Jesus directly and as a way to love our neighbor.

**Let's defend children, let's defend families.**







## *QUESTIONS for further conversation...*

*What Bible verses have you turned when working with orphans and vulnerable children?*

*If the Bible was your only source for designing a ministry to orphans, what type of ministry would you establish?*

*In what ways have the church's child welfare ministries led to families becoming separated?*

*What does "defending the cause of the weak and fatherless" look like for you?*





*Thanks for joining us in this conversation starter and we invite you to keep the conversation going by joining us at [1MILLIONHOME.com](https://1millionhome.com)*

*Brandon Stiver, our Director of Community and Church Engagement is available as a resource for your questions, input, or next steps to engage your church. You can email Brandon at [brandon@1millionhome.com](mailto:brandon@1millionhome.com)*

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