

Mentoring and the Foster Child

If you listen to Christian radio, you probably have heard a great deal about orphans recently. It is hard to grasp the fact that there are 143 million children without parents in this world. As a matter of fact, more children became orphans in 2003 than the total number of people living in NY City. Now, that is easier to comprehend but no less easy to imagine doing anything about. However, this is not a matter that Christians can sacrifice to the altar of the overwhelmed mind. Scripture mentions God's heart for widows and orphans 60 times. Just one call to action should be enough for us all. Quoting from **James 1:27**. ***"Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world."*** He calls us to action and there *is* something we can do about it. Many are adopting orphans. It is not easy but obedience rarely is. Some are not called to this important ministry. But I want to share how more of the Body of Christ can make a significant difference with this growing problem by responding to our Lord's very clear call. It is called **mentoring**.

A mentor is not a disciplinarian but a friend who listens and a guide who helps to make sense out of life circumstances that a child often lacks the experience to understand. For example, one sixth grade adopted child is a sweet polite girl to everyone but to her adoptive mom. Everyone wondered why this beautiful, intelligent child is so hard on Mom until it came out. ***"All the other adopted kids I know were adopted as infants. Why did mom leave me in the orphanage until I was 6."*** From her limited perspective, she was left six years longer than a loving mom should have allowed her to suffer without parents. This may not be a logical conclusion to us, but a child's perspective is based on very limited life experience and her experience has often been laced with trauma.

The orphans in the United States are called, 'children in foster care'. Kids in foster care have usually also experienced things that we would never want anyone, let alone children to endure. Whether by death, abandonment or addiction, they have lost the adults that God placed into their lives to protect them and raise them up in the way that they should go. Often times, these children have been moved from home to home missing out on the consistencies that come with the love of a healthy family. If a child acts out, he or she may be threatened or actually moved from the home and possibly into even more difficult circumstances. Because these kids have been moved so much, they have experienced discipline outside the context of a loving relationship and, as Dr. Dobson puts it, "discipline outside of relationship leads to rebellion". The dilemma is this, how can we redefine discipline for a child who has only experienced it in ways that can only be understood as destructive and not instructive.

These children long for and need consistency just like every other child. When an adult finally provides consistency in the form of necessary discipline, it can be mistaken for a lack of love. A mentor does not have the role of disciplinarian: so, he can be there to explain the new foster mom or dad's behavior in a way the child can understand. Therefore what was seen as negative – discipline -- can be shown as a powerful expression of love within a family. A mentor is often a friend who is a translator of the language of family love. Larry was a foster kid and he came to live with my family when he and I were both 12. I was not what I would usually consider a mentor because of our

age similarity, but for some reason, I played that role in his life from the first week. I remember the third day he was with us, the weekly chores changed like they always did on Saturday. He randomly got the job of taking out the garbage. He informed everyone that he was no garbage man. My father sent him to his room saying he needed to stay there until he was willing to take it out. He was there for hours before I went in and sat down next to him. He told me his perspective. He saw it as a sign of great disrespect. I told him that we all have jobs to do every week. Last week, I took out the garbage and I am my father's son. This is not a sign of disrespect, but a sign that you are a member of the family -- not a guest who won't be here next week or next month. He had a task to do because he was a permanent, loved member of the family. He got up and took out the garbage with a big smile. I was a friend who did not have to discipline: so, I was in a unique position to translate the family language of love to this orphan child. Sometimes fatherless, and or motherless, kids need translators because their life experiences have given them expectations and models that do not lead them to acceptable behavior. A mentor can be a valuable asset in helping a family transition a child from survival mode to family life. A Christian mentor can also be another adult through whom an orphan experiences the love of their heavenly Father.

A mentor is not taking the huge responsibility of bringing a child into his or her home. It just takes 2 hours a week. Yet a mentor can be used by God to introduce a post adoptive child to some of the truths of his new family's language of love. A mentor can also be used by God to help a foster child adapt to a new foster family while exposing him to the love of his Heavenly Father. Mentoring is a way that Christians can obediently answer the call to '*look after the orphans*'. Jesus said it. Let's do it.

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