

*Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this:
to look after orphans and widows in their distress... (James 1:27)*

As Christians, we serve a God who is full of grace and rich in mercy. Because we are forgiven much, we also strive to follow the example of Jesus, who fed the hungry, washed dirty feet, touched unclean lepers, ate with sinners, forgave a woman caught in adultery, and showed compassion for a thief dying on a cross.

God's Word teaches us to serve those who are considered the "least of these" – the lonely children, the distressed families, the needy caregivers, and those who have become outcasts. Though many suffer in silence, we see them. These are the families of the incarcerated, struggling to survive in a world that seems to have turned against them.

Receiving the Children

The children of prisoners are growing up lonely and disadvantaged by the absence of a parent and important role model in their lives. The Church must reach out to them with unconditional love and guidance – not only to prevent them from following in their imprisoned parents' footsteps, but most importantly, to help point them toward God, the Father who will *always* be there for them.

- **Mark 10:13-16** And they were bringing children to him that he might touch them, and the disciples rebuked them. But when Jesus saw it, he was indignant and said to them, "Let the children come to me; do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God. Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it." And he took them in his arms and blessed them, laying his hands on them.
- **Matthew 18:2-6** And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them and said, "Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea."
- **Matthew 18:14** It is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish.

Training the Children

As the Church, we are called not simply to share the Gospel of Jesus, but also to disciple the children of the incarcerated. In doing so, we are not just helping to keep them out of trouble, but we are moving them into a life of maturity and responsibility. We are actually raising up the next generation of laborers for God's kingdom.

- **Proverbs 22:6** Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it.
- **Deuteronomy 6:7** You shall teach them [the laws of God] diligently to your children, and shall talk of them [the laws of God] when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise.

- **Deuteronomy 31:11-13** When all Israel comes to appear before the LORD your God at the place that he will choose, you shall read this law before all Israel in their hearing. Assemble the people, men, women, and little ones, and the sojourner within your towns, that they may hear and learn to fear the LORD your God, and be careful to do all the words of this law, and that their children, who have not known it, may hear and learn to fear the LORD your God as long as you live in the land...

Serving the Needy

Ministry to the children and families of prisoners should be motivated by the love God has freely demonstrated to the world. Christ came to earth and built His ministry on the cornerstone of serving others. In a similar fashion, the Church is called to profoundly impact society by becoming a servant to the broken and vulnerable.

- **Mark 10: 43-45** But whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.
- **1 John 3:16-18** This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue, but with actions and in truth.
- **Deuteronomy 24:19-22** When you gather your crops and fail to bring in some of the grain that you have cut, do not go back for it; it is to be left for the foreigners, orphans, and widows. . . . When you have gathered your grapes once, do not go back over the vines a second time; the grapes that are left are for the foreigners, orphans and widows. Never forget that you were slaves in Egypt; that is why I have given you this command.

Blessing the Hungry

Angel Tree provides an effective channel for the resources of grace to be given to those in need. Both givers and recipients are blessed as spiritual, emotional, environmental, physical, social, and intellectual needs of children and caregivers are met.

- **James 2:14-16** What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him? If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food, and one of you says to them, "Depart in peace, be warmed and filled," but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what does it profit?
- **Isaiah 58:6-10** Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; When you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh? If you pour yourself out for the hungry and satisfy the desire of the afflicted, then shall your light rise in the darkness and your gloom be as the noonday.
- **Proverbs 31:8-9** Speak out for those who cannot speak, for the rights of all the destitute. Defend the rights of the poor and needy.

Lifting the Oppressed

Most children and families of the incarcerated are overwhelmed by grief, confusion, sadness, and shame. They struggle with the pain of loss and separation, the stigma of having a family member in prison or jail, and the burden of keeping silent about it. These desperate families need the kinds of support that churches are called by God to provide.

- **Luke 4:18-19** The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.
- **Romans 12:15, 21** When others are happy, be happy with them. If they are sad, share their sorrows...Don't let evil get the best of you, but conquer evil by doing good.
- **Matthew 25:40** The King will reply, "Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me."

Welcoming the Outcast

When a crisis occurs in a community, a church, or a family, it immediately forces people to make decisions. Unfortunately, the decision is often made to shun or cast out the person who caused all the trouble. But the role of the Body of Christ is to be there for one another in times of crisis – to help people deal with their messy situations – and above all, to refuse to abandon them.

- **James 2:2-9** Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in shabby clothes also comes in. If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, "Here's a good seat for you," but say to the poor man, "You stand there" or "Sit on the floor by my feet," have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen my dear brothers: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him? ... If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, "Love your neighbor as yourself," you are doing right.
- **Luke 14:13** But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed.
- **Romans 15:7** Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.
- **Romans 3:23-24** For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God... and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.