

# What Does the Bible Teach About Caring for Orphans?

(Compiled by Paul R. Blake from multiple sources)

## Introduction:

A. "They huddled inside the storm door--two children in ragged out-grown coats. 'Any old papers, lady?' I wanted to say no... until I looked down at their feet, little sandals slopped with sleet. 'Come in and I'll make you a cup of hot cocoa.' Their soggy sandals made marks upon the hearthstone. Cocoa, toast and jam to fortify against the chill outside. The girl held up her cup, looking at it. The boy asked in a flat voice, 'Lady, are you rich?' Am I rich? My, no! The girl put her cup back in the saucer carefully and said, 'Your cups match your saucers.' They then left, holding their papers against the wind. Plain blue pottery cups, but they matched. Potatoes and brown gravy, a roof over our heads, my husband with a good steady job. These things matched, too. The muddy prints of small sandals were still wet upon my hearth. I let them be. I wanted them there in case I ever forget again how very rich I really am!" (LeRoy Brownlow via Greatest Questions in the New Testament, p. 94, 1961)

B. James 1:27 - "Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world."

C. This is not an orphans' home sermon. 50 years ago, this was an issue that divided churches of Christ from within and alienated brethren all over this country. The fallout from that division is evident everywhere, but the lines between sound and institutional churches are well defined and nearly impossible to breach.

1. The issue never was over whether Christians should care for the orphans among them. Both sides of this issue, institutional and non-institutional agree that Christians should provide for their care.
2. The issue was over church sponsorship of institutions to care for orphans in proxy of Christians and the elimination of the New Testament defined differences between individual and collective works.
3. In spite of frequent ad hominem, ad hoc, and ad absurdum arguments made by defenders of institutionalism against sound brethren, the truth remains the truth.
4. However, orphans are still the true losers in this fight, neglected by professed Christians on both sides of this argument.
  - a. Institutional brethren have distanced themselves from their care by throwing money at impersonal, inefficient, and often neglectfully abusive orphans' homes.
  - b. Non-institutional brethren pat each other on the back for refusing to support orphans' homes from the treasury and then tell the orphans to go their way to be warmed and filled in orphans' homes operated by the state.
  - c. While neither of them will sit together in fellowship in a church building, both of them will sit together in perdition.

- D. This lesson is about what the New Testament teaches individual Christians to do for the care of orphans
1. Harry Rice and his wife took in four foster children over the years and raised them along with their own children in their home into adulthood, including sending them through college. An institutional preacher made the foolish mistake of saying to him in defense of the liberal churches' support of orphans' homes: "I like the way we're doing it better than the way you're not." He didn't know to whom he was talking.
  2. Do not say, "Way to go! That how we do it in sound churches!" That's what Harry Rice did as a member of a sound church. What have you done to care for orphans as a member of a non-institutional church?!

## **I. WHAT IS WRITTEN?**

- A. What has been God's pattern since the beginning?
1. In the Patriarchal Dispensation, every child was to be cared for. Abraham and Jacob had children by servants and were required by God to care for them and to give them an inheritance equal to those of children born to their wives. Abraham had to receive special permission from God to send Ishmael away - Gen. 21:9-13
    - a. Even the non-believers in Babylon had a law requiring this (The Code of Hammurabi, Anet 157, and the Lipit Ishtar Code 24).
  2. God condemned, utterly destroyed, and sent into oblivion the Canaanite nations that practiced child sacrifices, including those who sacrificed the children taken as spoils of war after killing the parents - Lev. 20:2-5
  3. God commanded in the Law of Moses that Israel must care for orphans
    - a. Deut. 10:17-19, 24:19-22, 26:12-13, 27:19
    - b. Those who neglected them were sent to perdition - Mal. 3:5-6
  4. God made caring for the fatherless a condition of salvation for the Children of Israel - Isa. 1:16-18
    - a. He still defines religion by the care of orphans - James 1:27
- B. Orphans are not mentioned often in the New Testament, because by that time, God had already clearly revealed His thoughts regarding them, as well as His thoughts toward those who would neglect them - John 14:18; James 1:27

## **II. VISITING ORPHANS**

- A. Who are orphans?
1. "Orfanov, orphanos" - bereaved, parentless, comfortless, fatherless (Strong's). The word means fatherless. Children without fathers and mothers to support them physically, intellectually, emotionally, and especially, spiritually
    - a. Eph. 6:4; Gen. 18:19; Psalm 78:4; Prov. 22:6
  2. Without parents, not only are children at risk of dying of starvation or exposure, but they grow up without knowing love, belonging, and security, but most importantly, without one to teach them of the Lord

## B. What is visit?

1. I am wearied to the bone by those who pompously declare that visit means more than just go see them; that it means to visit help upon them. Such disciples don't get it either!
2. God is a Father to the fatherless - Psalm 68:5. If we profess to be like our Father in heaven, in what way are we fathers to the fatherless?
3. Visit is episkeptomai - "to look upon or after, to inspect, examine with the eyes, in order to see how he is, to visit, go see one; to look upon in order to help or benefit; look after, have a care for, provide for" (Thayer)
  - a. "To go to see and relieve" (Strong's)
  - b. "To look upon, care for, exercise oversight" (Vines)
  - c. Note that the word episkeptomai is related to the Greek word for overseer, episkopos, the word from which we derive the office of bishops or elders who oversee the work of a congregation and feed the flock among them.
4. So what is meant by visiting orphans? To oversee their care, and upbringing and to feed and clothe them

## C. How is visit used elsewhere in the scriptures?

1. Luke 1:68, 78-79 - Zacharias prophesied that God would visit mankind, a prophecy about the coming Messiah. Christ did not have brief chat with humankind. His visit was a direct, personal interaction to help us.
2. Acts 7:23-24 - Moses' visit to his brethren involved his taking personal action in their defense.
3. Acts 15:36 - Paul and Barnabas visited the brethren directly to see how the work was progressing and to help them with whatever they needed.
4. Matt. 25:35-36 - Visiting those in prison means taking care of their needs, not by sending gifts but by directly interacting with them in prison
5. "James strikes a downright blow here at ministry by proxy, or by mere gifts of money. Pure and undefiled religion demands personal contact with the world's sorrow: to visit the afflicted, and to visit them in their affliction." (Vincent's Word Studies)

## Conclusion:

- A. It is evident that placing money in the collection plate will not fulfill the command to visit widows and orphans.
  1. This is not taking them into our oversight and care
  2. This is an individual duty, not a collective command
- B. It is also evident that just being a member of a church that doesn't support orphans' homes will not fulfill the command to visit widows and orphans
  1. Ask: who is James talking to? The context says "oneself"; that means you and me as individual Christians.
  2. Ask again: What are you doing to help widows and orphans?
  3. Now ask: Are you comfortable facing God in Judgment with that answer?
- C. Consider this text in light of what the Bible says about the care of orphans
  1. Matt. 25:41-45