

Load vs. Burden

The Helping Paradox.

By Mandy Barkhaus

Well, happy New Year, everyone. Yeah, I know it's not January 1st, but it is the beginning of the new year in the life of the church advent. You may know it as, during Advent, we are going to be looking at the world, and we are going to be reminded that God is about to do something big.

And without God, hope does not exist. Now, if you don't believe in God, of course, you can still hope for things. You can hope for a new job or a new car or a wife or a husband. You can hope for all sorts of different things, but it's a kind of hope that doesn't last. God offers a hope that lasts, and that's what we are.

We look forward to Advent. Well, this new sermon series that we are in comes right after we have just discussed one of our values, that we are going to help others and do things in our community and world to impact the world. And the value leading up to Advent is perfect because it's about helping people and impacting the world.

And we are moving into this time of the year where we give more than any other time of the year. It's the season of giving. It's that feel-good time of year when we have the holiday spirit, right? We're a little extra nice to people, we give a little extra, but there's this paradox when it comes to helping.

When do we help? When do we not help? Can helping do more harm than good? Now? Does God really want us to help everyone selflessly, regardless of the harm it may do to us? And if that's not the case, how do we set boundaries? My best friend Shayla and I both have sons who live in Kansas City and so several months ago, we drove down to Kansas City.

One day, to take our sons out for breakfast, and I was driving, and we drove down to Kansas City, and we got into the city, and we pulled up to this intersection, and there was a guy standing at the corner with a sign, and the sign said something like, Anything helps. God bless my best friend, Shayla.

She rolled down the window. The guy walked over to the window, and she dug through her purse. She pulled out a \$20 and handed it to the man standing outside of the window. Now the light turns green. I drive away, and I say to her, What are you doing? And I say it in a really judgmental way because we're best friends, and we have this agreement that we are allowed to do this to one another.

And she says, Who am I to judge? I have the money and he needs help. I can give him money if I want to. And I responded with, Yes, of course you can. But then I had all these other reasons why maybe we shouldn't just roll down our window and give someone money. Now, most of my reasoning comes from my sister, who worked at the Open Door Mission for 17 years.

Now, the Open Door Mission is the big mission in Omaha, and my sister would tell me what the mission would recommend. If you saw somebody standing on the side of the street, a beggar or panhandle or whatever you want to call them, somebody asking for money. And the mission would say, don't give them money, because it does not help them in the long run.

Now, they also would say, if you do want to do something good, providing long-term support for someone, then you give to organizations that help with that kind of thing. But is my friend right to give without expectations or without explanation? Without judgment? That sounds like kind of a Jesus thing to do, or am I right? Do we collectively all say that we will not hand out money so that people can get the help that they really need?

Am I right? Is she right? There is a passage in Galatians chapter six. These are Paul's words to the church in Galatia. And let's see what this can maybe teach us. So it says, Brothers and sisters, if a person is caught doing something wrong, you who are spiritual should restore someone like this with the spirit of gentleness.

Watch out for yourselves so that you won't be tempted to carry each other's burdens. And so you will fulfill the law of Christ. If anyone thinks they are important when they aren't, they're fooling themselves. Each person should test their own work and be happy with doing a good job and not compare themselves with others. Each person will have to carry their own load.

Now, this passage really is about turning back to God, and it's about the accountability that we need from one another. The emphasis in this passage is really more on moral weaknesses or moral failings. But some people will use this, especially the part about carrying one another's burdens, to manipulate people. They do it to the church. You might have family or friends who may do it, too.

Unfortunately, some people use Galatians 6 to carry one another's burdens to fulfill the law of Christ. Sometimes, people turn this into a kind of full-time job where they are always asking for help. They twist God's word and use this word as an excuse to dodge responsibilities. Ask the church for help. Ask family members or friends for constant assistance.

They might say things like, Well, you're a Christian. You should be helping. Or aren't you? The church, isn't this what you are supposed to be doing? And I'm sure that my friend Sheila probably said something about me being a pastor in our disagreement. I'm guessing that she did. I don't remember for sure. But when we hear these things, and when I hear these things, I cannot help but feel a little bit guilty because I know that there is more that I can do.

I know that there is more help that I can give. I know that there are more people's burdens than I can carry. And we can all probably agree on this: living a life that is centered on sacrificial love and giving, living a life shouldering one another's burdens, and treating our neighbors like ourselves can get pretty tiring.

And then when we start giving, and we keep on giving, sometimes we think, Am I, am I even really making a difference? And when we start to feel a little bit overwhelmed by whether our helping is actually helping or not, sometimes we just need to take a step back and we need to look at the bigger picture. Mother Teresa says, If you can't feed 100 people, then feed just one.

Following God's word is hard. It's difficult. It's like walking this tightrope between thinking without thinking of yourself, right? Give without thinking of yourself, give selflessly, and set healthy boundaries. And if you lean too far on one side, we get all self-centered and super independent. And then, if we lean too far the other way, then we start taking on other people's messes as our own.

I want us to look again at these two of the verses that we just read, Galatians Chapter six, verses two and verse five. So verse two says, Carry each other's burdens and so that you will fulfill the law of Christ. And then, in verse five, each person will have to carry their own load. And I think of it this way: we are all given a backpack when we are born, and some of us, right from the very start, are given a heavier backpack than others.

And then along the way, we start picking up pebbles, and we start picking up rocks, usually from our own doing, and we start picking those things up, and we start putting them into our own backpack. And then sometimes life just throws stones at us, throws these rocks at us, and we have to pick those up too. All right?

We pick them up, and we put them in our backpacks. And sometimes our backpacks get really, really full. But we have to carry our own load. We carry them as we get through life, but then, sometimes, life throws at us a boulder in our backpacks. We're already carrying our backpacks around, and now we are trying to balance this giant boulder and carry it through life.

And this is when the church needs to step up and help. This is when we, as Christians, come together and help carry one another's burdens. But of course, the question is, who gets to decide? Who gets to decide whether what somebody is dealing with is just a rock or a stone that they must put in their own backpack or whoever, or it's maybe a burden, a big boulder that we need to help each other with?

Well, there is this book, and it is called *When Helping Hurts: How to Alleviate Poverty Without Hurting the Poor and Yourself*. And it's by Steve Corbett and Brian Finkel. And this book is for churches, and it's for Christians to help us with this helping paradox. So, in order to show you or explain to you one of the examples they use in this book, imagine somebody is asking for help.

Maybe somebody walks into the church building and asks for money for rent or to pay their utilities. Or maybe a family member calls you again, needing just a little bit of money to get by to their next paycheck. The first thing that this book tells us to do is to discern the situation and to decide if this situation calls for relief, rehabilitation, or development.

And I'll explain those three things later. But the first thing that we are called to do is to pray. We are called to ask God to help us and give us directions on what we should do in a certain situation. Now, prayer is really important. If you can pray with the person, that is great.

But even just a silent prayer to God, asking for guidance, is really helpful and kind of the foundation of what we need to do. And so, as we discern, we ask God to help us decide what the situation calls for. And the book says that some situations call for relief. And here's what they say about relief.

Relief can be defined as the urgent and temporary provision of emergency aid to reduce immediate suffering from a natural or manmade crisis. Now, let's say you have an emergency like a health emergency, and you take yourself to the E.R. The nurses and the doctors are going to respond differently to each person who comes into the E.R. They are going to respond differently to someone who comes in bleeding from the head.

Then, they are going to respond to somebody who comes in with a twisted ankle. Now, both of these things are worthy of emergencies. People brought themselves, or they were taken to the emergency for

these reasons. Well, sometimes people will ask for help, and they will come in at ten. Right? They are they are really saying that this is urgent, and they are at a ten.

And when somebody comes to you asking for help, and they are at a ten, you're going to react as you should react. That person is in distress. But just because that person comes in at a ten doesn't mean that you are a ten. Also, their emergency is not necessarily your urgency. You have somebody coming looking for food or rent, and if you can provide that, that's great.

But remember that if it's not urgent and if it's not a temporary thing that you are providing, it's probably not going to help them in the long run. Being Christ-like means that we can stay, you know, in unselfish, helpful ways. Sometimes, that love requires us to say no to people. Sometimes, even people that we love. For example, if a family member is abusing alcohol at a family gathering, then it is Christ-like to tell them not to do that anymore.

You have set a proper boundary; if you say that, and if their response is to get angry or to leave, then that person simply could not respect a boundary that was set. It's not sinful to say no to someone if they are crossing a personal boundary in harmful or destructive ways. So when this urgent and immediate need is care cared for, then the situation calls for rehabilitation.

So, the book says this rehabilitation begins. As soon as the bleeding stops, it seeks to restore people and their communities to the positive elements of their pre-crisis conditions. The key feature of rehabilitation is the dynamic of working with the victims as they participate in their own recovery. Now, let's say there is a natural disaster, a tsunami, or a hurricane like we've been in.

We've experienced this before, right? There's someplace in the world that was struck with some sort of disaster. And what do we do? We get sent immediate relief. We send clean water and food and temporary shelters, and we send doctors and nurses to care for the immediate needs and the injuries that people may have. Eventually, the water is restored, and maybe temporary housing has been set up.

They have adequate food and water. And now, this is where the rebuilding starts to happen. That immediate need is taken care of, and they start rebuilding and restoring the community or an individual's life. And when we are in this rehabilitation stage, we are working with people to help them recognize that they're their own gifts. We help them recognize their own gifts and their own place in the community.

Now, most people will, if they're there, are going through a disaster. Most people, without question, will accept relief. They'll accept those immediate needs that will help them. But sometimes, people will not accept help when it comes to recovery. So a question that we might ask if we're in a situation where we're helping someone is, do we care more than they care?

Do we care more than they do? Let's say you are trying to help your friend get a job, and they still just sit all day, and they don't do anything to improve their situation. If you care about it more than they do, it might be time to stop helping them because part of rehabilitation is doing the work together.

Now, everyone has a purpose that is part of rehabilitation, which is to try and help people understand their purpose. The story of Zachariah found in the Gospel of Luke reveals this, that it reveals that Zachariah has a really important purpose in life. Now, Zachariah is John the Baptist's dad, and John the Baptist is a really important person in Jesus.

This story is because John the Baptist prepares the way for Jesus, and it's a perfect story when we think about and as we prepare for this Advent. So, in the Gospel of Luke, before we read about the beginning of Jesus's life, we learn about the beginning of John the Baptist's life, and we learn about it through his parents, Elizabeth and Zachariah.

Now, Elizabeth and Zachariah are too old to have children. But one day, this angel comes to Zachariah and says, You know what? You are going to have a child. Now, Zachariah was not in a place to accept this. He didn't want to hear this wisdom that the angel was sharing. He questions the angel. He kind of made excuses as to why this wasn't, and this couldn't be.

He was unable to see what the angel was trying to teach him. And so Zachariah had consequences. He didn't accept this help or that wisdom that the angel had, and he had these consequences, and he was unable to speak up because he couldn't recognize his own purpose. Sometimes, people in our lives will not accept help, especially among low-income people.

Sometimes, people feel like they are inferior because they are low-income like they don't see themselves as a child of God made in God's image. And when you don't feel like you are a child of God, it can be really hard sometimes to accept help. Now, people who are not in low-income situations often find themselves on the opposite end, and they find themselves in this God-complex sort of way like we are all saviors coming in to help and save people who have less than they do.

Rehabilitation is really about recognizing the dignity and the worst of people and working alongside them like no. And no matter how we help, no matter when we decide to help, we have to make sure that we are treating people with dignity and respect. Now, the third stage of this helping process is development. Here's what the book says.

Development. I added discipleship because I feel like this fits with development, which is a process of ongoing change that moves all the people involved. Both the helpers and the helped closer to being in the right relationship with God, self, others, and the rest of creation. C Development or discipleship ship is all about being in the right relationship with God, with self, with others, and with all of creation.

This is why we help in the first place. This is why we give relief. This is why we walk alongside people in recovery, and this is why we do this to make disciples and to help people understand their calling and their purpose in life development. Discipleship is, again, not done to people. It's not done. It's not done for people, but rather it is done with people.

But we can't make people do things they don't want to do. It has to be both parties in order to help carry one another's burdens together. Now, maybe if you're in a situation where you are faced with helping somebody or not, the question is, I'm going to discern whether I'm going to help this person or not. A question you might ask yourself is why?

Why do I care? Why would I want to help this person? Is it because you value every person as a child of God? Or is it because if you help someone, it will make you look good, or it will make you feel good if you give that person help? Now, I did reach out to Pastor D.J. He is from the People City mission here in Lincoln.

And I said, hey, Pastor D.J., do you guys have a policy of how you know whether you should help someone or not? And he said, you know, we really don't have an official policy, but he said, here is from my working experience, here is what I have to say about it. He says, don't give out money.

He says instead, if you want to pay for a meal or pay for clothing, he said having bus tickets on hand is really, really helpful for a lot of people. Also, just McDonald's gift cards are also helpful. And then he says this. He says, When you do give and believe it's from God, give joyfully and freely knowing that it's in God's hands.

I think this is really helpful when I think back to my situation with my friend Shayla. I know that my friend Shayla has a big heart and that every person she encounters treats them like they are a child of God. And I love that about her. And I think that when we are faced with the opportunity to help someone, what we do is learn from the situation, and we stop feeling guilty.

Feeling guilty. Right. Whether we decide to help or not to help, we stop feeling guilty about it because God's Grace is available and abundant for us, and we just continue to grow. Now, to finish the Zacharias story, right? He's kind of suffered these consequences. He couldn't speak because he didn't recognize his purpose.

But then he does recognize his purpose. He listens to the angel. And he said this immediately. Zacharias' mouth was opened, and his tongue was freed. And then he began to speak, praising God. And he said, Blessed, be the Lord God of Israel, for He has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them. Thus, he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, and he has remained.

We met and remembered his holy covenant, the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham, to grant us that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness before him. All our days, by the tender mercy of our God. The dawn from, from, from on high will break upon us to give light to those who sit in darkness, in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.

That is what Advent is all about. Would you pray with me? Holy God, there is this time of year when we think more about helping others, and we want to have a servant's heart. We want to give selflessly without judgment. We want others to know that they are loved and that we care about them as individual Christians and as the church body.

But, God, it is it is tricky to knowing when helping actually hurts. And we ask that you would be with us, and you would help us discern when those situations come to us, and you would give us the right things to say, the right things to do, and above all else, that you would just allow us to speak kind words to every single person that we encounter, whether we give them help.

That is a physical need to fulfill a physical need. But God for sure allows us to help fulfill a spiritual need that they might have, help us to pray with them, help us to pray for them, and guide us in what in all that we do and all that we say. We want to be followers of you, God.

And it's not easy sometimes to know the right thing, but God, you are Grace-filled, and you are offering us this forgiveness. When we mess up, you offer us Grace to learn and to grow from our actions. So God be with us this year, not only in this season but in the year to come. As we help and share the love of Christ, we say this in Jesus' name: Amen.

These stand in spirit or body for the lighting of the Advent candle. We light the first advent candle, symbolizing hope. In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the word was God. In him was life, and life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.

In the spirit of anticipation, we kindle the flame of eternal hope, acknowledging the promise of a savior who brings light to our world. In this season of Advent, we light the candle of Eternal Hope, rejoicing in the anticipated creation of the light of the world.