

CHAPTER 4

GOOD WORKS
VERSUS
GOD'S WORK?

HOPELESSNESS: MY FUTILE ATTEMPTS TO IMPACT THE CITY

Fresh out of prison, Jada and Chandra visited my office with contagious joy. Having participated in a prison ministry that I helped start, they'd faithfully studied the Bible, attended group sessions and completed their prison stay without incident. They made a profession of faith to follow Jesus and committed to our post-prison care program, wanting to reclaim their families for Christ.

The faith-based nonprofit helped with personal needs, such as shelter, clothing and food, but left a void. Not having a church family to replace the bad relationships they'd formed over the years, both women slipped back into their former lifestyle. Within two weeks after leaving prison, Jada died from an overdose and Chandra returned to prison. These women lacked a support system, a new family, and positive role models who could help launch them into a hope-filled future.

Unfortunately, I've seen this cycle repeat time and time again. Without a church family, countless children, youth and families succumb to the negative influences of unhealthy relationships. Many of the same kids in my afterschool programs landed in a casket or a prison cell because of lack of real behavioral change. Countless kids had responded to the gospel and studied the Bible in my programs, yet local and national news articles reported crime, violence, and poverty in the inner city had worsened. These articles, along with frequent visits to funerals and prisons, burdened my heart.

Where was the hope? It seemed so short-lived.

While I realized the vital importance for the church to extend into the city, I didn't know exactly how to proceed beyond the nonprofit and love outreaches. When I first moved into the inner city, the prevailing thought was to work through the faith-based nonprofit—not the church—if you wanted to truly change the world.

The nonprofit sector extended in a way I had not seen in local churches. Whether through homeless shelters, after school programs or other social services, nonprofit organizations meaningfully and practically touched lives. Churches, however, seemed disconnected and distant. They didn't seem to have any activities that impacted the brokenness in my community. With

this in mind, I decided to base my transformation strategy on the nonprofit sector.

With renewed passion and an intentional focus to impact my city, I began to engage the unchurched through the faith-based nonprofit, programmatic approach. I wanted my faith to make a difference and change the world.

In my zeal for Christ, I helped start over two dozen faith-based nonprofits to help meet the different needs in the inner city. However, after 15 years of diligent efforts, I realized the incomplete nature of my faith-based nonprofit approach. Children would accept Jesus into their lives and then age out of the program. Without ongoing support, real change diminished, and they lost sight of God. My good works with the nonprofit programmatic approach didn't transform my inner city as I had dreamed and worked toward, nor was there much growth in the church. While I helped to provide needed services and programs, I never saw real cultural change.

UNDERSTANDING BIBLICAL COMPASSION

I worked in the inner city for almost two decades before I understood the reality that my nonprofit-based compassionate outreach efforts did not produce kingdom transformation and disciples. Despite my tireless work and pure motives, my efforts failed. I loved Jesus, but no matter how much energy I exerted, my compassion strategy didn't produce the kind of change I hoped to see. Something was missing.

Compassion, in its most simple definition, is best defined as “concern for the suffering of others.” When people see others suffer, compassion moves them to action. Having a desire to alleviate suffering and pain is at the very heart of compassion.

Humans reflect God's image, so people everywhere express some level of compassion and goodness. Even before I became a Christian, a level of compassion and goodness drove me to help others in need through charity.

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As Christians, we are called to advance Christ's kingdom through love and compassion. Our acts of compassion and charity should be a cultural inroad that connects us with others and inspires hope in the good news of the gospel. Our good works and our faith must be intertwined, resulting in the ultimate goal—eternal hope.

Compassionate good works follow a person's faith in Jesus Christ, AND the reversal of this equation means connecting those good works back to faith. Faith and good works, in their pure gospel form, are eternally linked together. (James 2:14-26 NIV) Disjointing faith from good works is simply a humanitarian act of goodness. As Christians, we want to steer clear of the Santa Claus Syndrome—being good for goodness sake. Our compassionate good works must lead somewhere. Christian charity must move people to Christ and his church—God's answer for a broken world, his hope for lost people.

WHAT IS ULTIMATE SUFFERING?

If the heart of compassion is a heart to alleviate suffering, then Christians must understand the depth of real suffering. Ultimate suffering, according to God's word, is life without Jesus—to live without eternal hope. (Luke 16; Romans 6:23) To the world, this is a radical way to view suffering.

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Christianity is counter-intuitive. If we want to be the *greatest*, God's word says we should become the *least*. If we want to be *first*, we should be *last*. If we really want to *live*, we must *die*. These counter-intuitive statements reveal the vast differences between the natural mind and the mind of God as described in Romans 8:7. In fact, the human mind is often at odds against God's thinking.

Because God's ways are not man's ways, compassion is seen differently from the world's view. Christian compassion reexamines suffering beyond only the natural—physical, mental or emotional needs. Christians desire to alleviate suffering at the deepest level of pain—spiritual. They view suffering through the lens of an eternal perspective.

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For example, poverty is more than physical. Providing a pathway to employment and economic gain is good but does nothing for the poverty of the soul. We can fix up every house in the inner city, but if there isn't a heart change for the occupants, the new houses will ultimately deteriorate. The heart and soul are bankrupt without the richness of Jesus at the center of life. As written in Mark 8:36, "What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?" (NIV)

When caring for the sick, a Christ-follower goes beyond focusing on the physical need to addressing the pain that occurs in life without Jesus as healer.

Broken relationships create sorrow and loneliness, exposing the basic human need to be fully loved. Christians point to the most intimate relationship available—with Jesus.

Christian compassion reexamines suffering and addresses both the natural and the spiritual. We know that no matter how much suffering we alleviate on earth, eternity is in the balance. If ultimate suffering is life without Jesus, then Christian compassion must be inclusive of both the temporary and the eternal. (Acts 19; Jeremiah 22:16; Jeremiah 29:7) Ultimate hope is eternal hope.

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THE SHALLOWNESS OF HUMANITARIAN GOODNESS

In twenty years, I helped start over two dozen nonprofit organizations committed to supporting and developing inner city youth and their families. Whether it was an after-school or prison program, faith-filled, young charismatic leaders led these nonprofits with a passion to see lives transformed by the good news of Jesus.

Well over a thousand youth and families participated in the programs. These kids and their families genuinely loved participating in our programs, and the leaders genuinely loved working with them. However, in twenty years, there's been little to no evidence of increased spiritual transformation, discipleship or church growth. Many of the youth continue to engage in destructive behaviors while the overall climate of the inner city continues to struggle with crime, violence, school dropouts and high unemployment.

A Christian tract I once read told me to give my life to Christ, read my Bible, pray, go to church, and do good. The words *do good* struck me. When did American Christianity reduce our mission to *doing good* and *being nice*? Early Christians included church at the center of all their activities and made incredible sacrifices, including becoming martyrs, to reach and disciple those far from Christ.

Overwhelmed with the disheartening results, my leaders and I wrestled with several questions.

- What is the difference when a Christian does something compared to a non-Christian doing the same thing? In other words, if Christianity is so radically different from the world's way of doing something, what are the unique differences?
- What does it mean for a Christian to show Christ's love? Do we simply express *goodness*, or is there something entirely different when we express *God's love*?
- Are we displaying the *kingdom of God*, or are we displaying an *earthly good*? Do we offer *temporary benefits* or *eternal hope*?

Sadly, twenty years later, many of the youth we've worked with are dead, in prison or living an unhealthy, destructive lifestyle. Seeing the lack of transformation has weighed heavy on my heart over the years. These disheartening realities prompted me to dig deeper in understanding what was missing.

FROM TEMPORARY HELP TO ETERNAL HOPE

Viktor Frankl, a world-renowned physicist who survived Auschwitz during World War II, said you could predict who would die in the concentration camp. It wasn't the sickest or the weakest, but the person who had given up hope. When you give up hope, you lose the will to survive.¹⁰

So, if hope is such a powerful thing, where do we find hope?

There's a profound difference in *good works* alone which bring blessings from God and *God's work* which brings a relationship with God. Is our hope based on the blessings or on a relationship?

Good works bring temporary results. God's work leads people to repentance and eternal hope. The church should do both. God's work always includes good works, but good works alone don't necessarily include God's work. God's work involves an invitation to a heart change and real transformation. In our humanity, we can all do good things, but that is different from God's work which leads to eternal hope and salvation.

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The Bible pairs good works with kingdom building. Paul writes in Colossians 3:17, "Let every detail in your lives—words, *actions*, whatever—be done in the name of the Master, Jesus, thanking God the Father every step of the way." (MSG) Likewise, John 10:25 says, "The *works* that I do in my Father's name, *they bear witness* of me." (NKJV) Matthew 5:16 further reiterates this concept. "Let your light so shine before men, that they may *see your good works*, and *glorify your Father* in heaven." (NKJV)

Could a non-Christian group do the same thing the church is doing? If so, how is our good work related to God's work? For example, if the church is running a food pantry, how is that any different than a food pantry run by a secular organization? Wouldn't it be better to build relationships with those coming to the food pantry with the ultimate goal of connecting them to the church, a lifelong family?

Bottom line—needs don't create a relationship; needs create dependency. The goal is to *meet people*, not simply *meet needs*. We can meet needs once a relationship begins. If the church is not connected to the good work, then we offer momentary relief rather than offering a womb to tomb support system.

The goal is to *meet people*, not simply *meet needs*.

I love the passage in Romans 2:4 which describes how “the goodness of God leads to repentance.” (NKJV) In other words, the good work of God takes people somewhere. God's work doesn't simply stop at a temporary benefit. God's work leads people to Christ and the fullness He offers.

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SHOWING & SHARING THE GOSPEL

We live in a broken, messy and challenging world. More than ever, God's grace and truth is needed. Brokenness is seen in the sick and hurting, in the exploitation of people, in hunger and homelessness and in many harmful and hurtful realities of this world. The overarching question begs us to ask: How should pastors, church leaders and Christians respond?

Many faith-based organizations in America focus on helping and improving communities. While I believe the intentions are sincere and that the work provides significant *temporary good*, most of these nonprofit organizations are not directly connected with a church, so they do not experience much discipleship fruit or lasting change.

Tyrell didn't have much opportunity. As the son of a pimp and a drug abuser, his early life was hard. He grew up in a low-income housing project across the street from a faith-based nonprofit. He not only enjoyed the activities of the faith-based nonprofit, he enjoyed playing basketball with another nonprofit in the community.

While many of these programs helped Tyrell navigate his childhood, these programs fell short as he entered adolescence. Most of his cousins belonged to gangs, so Tyrell found acceptance and love by joining.

Programmatic nonprofits do not have a support system from the womb to the tomb. Tyrell aged out of the programs and slipped through the cracks as he got older and eventually ended up in prison for selling drugs. While his first prison sentence was short-lived, he quickly returned for armed robbery and attempted murder.

While in prison he surrendered his life to Jesus and began attending church services. When he left prison on parole, he found a new church family who filled the gap left by his old gang. Tyrell graduated from college with a Bible degree and is a pastor today.

Tyrell is a great example of the importance of being connected to a local church. I made a radical shift in my nonprofit approach as I discovered God's work places the church at the center and focus of all our good activities.

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Conversion growth is a biblical priority along with improving the community. Community improvement has temporary value if the church isn't central. Showing and sharing the gospel, with a focus on getting people connected to the church, is essential. If the church isn't a direct part of the overall equation, conversions to Christ and discipleship doesn't happen at the power and rate that it should. Improving our community is important, but not at the expense of losing our primary mission. In our attempt to do good work, we must not lose sight of sharing the gospel to a broken world.

The apostle Paul defines what it truly means to follow Jesus and live for him. He makes it very clear that our mission in life is to glorify God by testifying to the gospel of the grace of God. “But my life is worth nothing to me unless I use it for finishing the work assigned me by the Lord Jesus—the work of telling others the Good News about the wonderful grace of God.” ([Acts 20:24](#) NKJV)

In living for Christ in a broken world, everything a disciple maker does points to the grace of God. We *demonstrate good works* and *communicate good news*. It’s not one or the other; it is both. Building a bridge between our *good deeds* and our *good news* is essential in accomplishing God’s work.

Two Types of Compassion	
GOD’S WORK	GOOD WORKS
Eternal Kingdom	Temporary Humanitarian

Bridge began to demonstrate good works through consistent love outreaches, but communicating the good news came with new challenges. As people began to show up at church because of the outreaches, the gaps became noticeable. Our church culture at Bridge was unfamiliar to the unchurched, so we struggled with getting guests to return. How could we communicate the good news and bring eternal hope to our neighbors without widening the chasm?

The answer came in the love-hope-faith revelation. Hope was the key to bridge the gap between our love outreaches and seeing people accept Christ by faith. We needed to build a culture of hope in the church if we wanted to reach the unchurched, so Bridge began to intentionally elevate and inspire hope