Toxic Charity Book Study Guide

Guiding Theological Reflection

Read: The Parable of the Sower – Matthew 13:1-9

- What does this parable teach us about stewarding our resources as followers of Christ? What principles does it suggest we should be striving to emulate and how do those relate to our missions work?
- How is love characterized in this parable? What might this suggest about the places we choose to plant seeds and the tools we use to cultivate in our mission efforts?

Read: The “Least of These” – Matthew 25: 34-30

- How is love characterized in this passage? How might this be used to guide missions work?
- Who are the “least of these” in your community?
→ How can these two passages be read in light of one another? What do they mean for our churches in mission?
→ What other Scripture passages/stories offer other voices to guide our call to mission? How might they interact with the two offered above?

As you continue in your study of Toxic Charity and engage in critical reflection about your own church’s mission, keep these guiding theological reflections in mind.

Chapters 1 and 2

1. Begin by discussing what kind of mission projects you have been involved with as individuals or as a church/group. Feel free to go around in a circle or allow those who are interested to share about their experiences.
2. What was your motivation for being a part of this (these) project(s)? Why did you want to be involved with something like this?
   a. In Chapters 1 and 2, Lupton asserts that “good intentions” are not a sufficient basis for mission work. Do you agree? Disagree?
   b. Where should our motivation and guidance for mission projects come from?
3. A similar critique raised by Lupton is churches exhibiting “unexamined generosity” (p. 21). What do you think he means by this term?
   a. How does your church/group make efforts to examine its generosity? Where is there room for improvement?
Chapter 3
Lupton talks about how our charities are so often guided by *mercy* without careful consideration of *justice* because we respond in compassion without taking the time to consider how our actions might affect the recipient. On pages 41-42, he lists four characteristics of mercy combined with justice.

1. How do you see your church living out these principles? Where do you see room for growth?
2. Lupton gives the example of turning a clothes pantry into a thrift store, employing those who have no money. What concrete ways can you transform your mission projects to ensure reciprocity?

Chapter 4
Lupton poses a candid but critical question: Do we give away food, knowing it fosters dependency, because it is easier than forging real relationships with those in poverty? He also challenges us to think about the dynamics of relationships that are typically formed in service activities, asserting that “giver-recipient” relationships inevitably result in resentment and either must change drastically or end. He provides the example of turning a food pantry into a food co-op as one way of fostering more equitable relationships.

1. How have you experienced a giver-recipient relationship? How did/does it compare with Lupton’s account that these relationships cannot be based on trust and accountability and inevitably breed resentment?
2. How can you help eliminate the insider/outsider, giver/recipient dichotomies in your ministry? What dreams and ideas do you have for growing or creating your church programs to foster reciprocal relationships based on trust?
3. How were reciprocal relationships emulated in Jesus/disciples? What about other biblical narratives?

Chapter 5
In this chapter, Lupton makes the claim that most mission trips are equivalent to religious tourism. They are ultimately more about us than about those we serve, even if there are good things about them and we can experience God through them. Though you may not choose to discuss this as a group, spend some time reflecting on your personal experiences on mission trips and how they fit with the theological themes introduced at the beginning of the study.

1. Lupton asserts that most churches’ mission programs are guided by a managerial spirit: meeting the needs of others and allocating our resources to reach as many varied locations and populations as possible. However, Scripture teaches that every aspect of Christian life should be guided by the work of the Spirit. This suggests that rather than choosing what we want to do, missions should prayerfully discerned. How do you sense God calling you personally to be in mission in the world? What gifts and strengths does your group or church have and how can you hone in on those to serve God in the ways you are called?
2. Read the parable of the talents in Matthew 25. How can you exercise wisdom in choosing where to invest your resources as a church (and what are the fruits of your past investments)? What areas have room for growth? As Lupton notes later in the book, there will always be a plethora of needs to be met in your community, but “need does not constitute a call.”

Chapter 6
Key sentence: “Governments can give millions, rock bands can do benefit concerts, ex-presidents can champion causes, and churches can mobilize their volunteers. But in the end what takes place in the community, on the street, in the home, is what will ultimately determine the sustainability of any development.” (85)

1. Do you agree with this? How does your church exhibit a top-down approach to mission? How does it exhibit community development?
2. What are some of the challenges to a grassroots, community development approach? What sacrifices are you willing to make as an individual and as the body of Christ?

Chapter 7
Lupton asserts that wise giving necessarily entails community building. To use his example, you can teach a man to fish and he will eat for a year, but if you don’t keep the lake clean, he won’t eat at all.

1. What are the larger scale problems that you have noticed in your own community that keep the underprivileged stuck in cycles of poverty? What larger scale influences are particularly hindering your church’s programs from empowering others and what community-building efforts might be a possible solution?

2. Lupton gives the example of Geralyn who moved to Nicaragua to work with Opportunity International’s community building efforts there. It took what many would see as a large sacrifice for her to uproot her life and move there to do the slow work community building; it took years to see the fruits of that labor and undoubtedly required a great deal of patience and trust. What kind of sacrifices might you have to make in order to serve God’s kingdom by building your community?

3. Not everyone is called to move to Nicaragua or become a political lobbyist. Consider praying about these questions and how God might be calling you to wisely steward your funds toward building his people and their communities.

Chapter 8
The Oath for Compassionate Service
- Never do for the poor what they have (or could have) the capacity to do for themselves
- Limit one-way giving to emergency situations
- Strive to empower the poor through employment, lending, and investing, using grants sparingly to reinforce achievements
- Subordinate self-interests to the needs of those being served
- Listen closely to those you seek to help, especially to what is not being said – unspoken feelings may contain essential clues to effective service
- Above all, do no harm

1. Examine the Oath for Compassionate Service (for more detailed descriptions of each component, look on pages 129-132). Which components has your church done well in the past? What components have room for growth? Are you willing to adopt the oath as a guiding philosophy for your mission efforts?
2. As Lupton notes, no community development efforts will be successful unless you have a vision for your target neighborhood and transformation goals, and listen to and respect the dreams of the indigenous community leaders. What mission efforts have you been involved with that have displayed this vision and respect well? What projects have displayed poor vision or listening to community leaders?
3. Why is it important for Christians to be driven by a contextual vision and the dreams of local leaders? Consider going through each principle in the Oath and discussing how it may be an important part of faithful Christian mission.

Chapter 9
“Life offers no fulfillment without work.” – Work as an integral part of God’s design for humanity

Lupton demonstrates that, in his experience, you need at least six months of being a listening, supportive neighbor before you should attempt to initiate any new activity in a place. Actively seek to learn about your community before assuming that you know what they need. Position of learner vs. initiator. (How might this fit with the Gospels and Jesus’ example?)

1. Considering and affirming the dignity of every person in mission work is a strong theme throughout the book. As Lupton puts it on page 147, “Made in the image of God, we are created with intrinsic worth. And anything that erodes a rightful sense of pride and self-regard diminishes that image.” Can you think of a time when you felt your dignity being eroded or self-respect diminished? Share and discuss if you are comfortable.
2. How does Christ’s life and ministry affirm the dignity of all people? What biblical stories come to mind? How does Christ’s death and resurrection equalize the dignity of all people?
3. Another strong theme throughout the book is the importance of work for both those in poverty and the wealthy. Seen from the beginning narrative of Scripture in the creation story, God sets the example of the rhythm of work and rest, and God’s people follow in

Chapter 10
This chapter focuses on how to move forward towards new ways of doing mission and charity work. Though the questions may be somewhat overwhelming for a pastor or missions coordinator to confront alone, getting a group of people behind the idea of doing missions differently will generate energy needed to sustain the change! Lupton gives a list of seven suggestions for moving forward toward change on page 183. Then, beginning on 186, he gives practical steps to take in planning a mission effort with the guiding principles of reciprocity and empowerment.
Change is almost always difficult, no matter what the circumstances. But when it involves well-intentioned Christians who have proudly served God in certain ways for years and years, it can be difficult to critically reflect on how those hours of service might not have been dignifying to the poor. It is likely that not everyone in your church will be open to the idea of empowerment-driven missions. What sacrifices are you willing to make personally to see such changes? How will this be a way of following Christ?

What costs will be incurred in your communities or groups of people over the long-term if you continue to do missions in the same way? What opportunities are there for gain? What would it look like for you to be served by those you may have once pitied?

For more information on how all of this relates to ZOE’s empowerment-driven ministry, visit our website, www.zoehelps.org, or contact Rev. Gaston Warner at gaston@zoehelps.org.