

Caregivers, Caretakers, and Christ

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This morning I asked the A.I. engine in my Internet Browser what the difference is between a caregiver and a caretaker. It retrieved this post from Reddit:

A CARETAKER is a gardener, a maintenance worker, a property manager. They take care of things for someone. A CAREGIVER gives care (emotional or physical support) to someone because of age or illness. I'm not sure why we make that distinction, because that idea is not usually what separates "give" from "take."

Then the A.I. engine gave the following longer explanation:

Based on the provided search results, here are the key differences between a caregiver and a caretaker:

1. Payment: A CARETAKER is a professional hired to take care of someone or something, typically expecting payment in return for their services. In contrast, CAREGIVERS, especially those who care for family members or friends, often provide care without expecting compensation.

2. Focus: CAREGIVERS focus on providing emotional, physical, and psychological support to individuals, prioritizing their comfort and well-being. CARETAKERS, on the other hand, focus on maintaining, upkeeping, and performing daily tasks, often without a deep emotional connection to the person or thing being cared for.

3. Boundaries: CAREGIVERS tend to establish clear boundaries between themselves and the person they care for, recognizing the importance of maintaining their own emotional and physical well-being. CARETAKERS, however, may blur these boundaries, leading to codependency or over-reliance on the caretaker.

4. Professionalism: CAREGIVERS, especially those working in formal care settings, are often trained professionals with specific qualifications and certifications. CARETAKERS may not necessarily have formal training or qualifications, but may still provide essential care.

5. Scope: While both caregivers and caretakers perform similar tasks, such as assisting with daily living activities, CAREGIVERS may provide a broader range of services, including medical care, medication management, and emotional support. CARETAKERS, on the other hand, may focus on more practical tasks, like housekeeping or property maintenance.

In summary, the main differences between a caregiver and a caretaker lie in their motivations, focus, boundaries, professionalism, and scope of services. *Caregivers prioritize emotional support and well-being, while caretakers focus on maintenance and upkeep, often with a more transactional approach.*

That's a revealing summation of the differences, but it's missing an important element: *Caregivers and caretakers themselves need care, **because** they care for others.* Let me offer some counsel in that regard, as I pay tribute to these often-overlooked servants of Christ.

CARETAKERS may bring meals to the sick, mow their lawn, clean their house, do their shopping, care for their children, drive them to the doctor, etc. It's a ministry of relief. They provide aid, shelter, and necessities as a means to comfort and encourage those who suffer. Similarly, CAREGIVERS bring words of compassion and sympathy, offers to arrange help, and a friendly face to those who are kept from normal social interactions.

The CAREGIVER, then, directs his efforts to the **person**; the CARETAKER to the **tasks** at hand. *Both* engage in acts of ministry; *both* provide means of comfort. But we will find blessing in giving and in receiving comfort, only when it is driven by our love to one another, *for Christ's sake*: "As you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me." (Mat 25:40)

"Comfort, O comfort My people, says your God." (Isa 40.1)

The word for "comfort" in this verse, whether in Hebrew (*nacham*) or Greek (*para-kaleite*), means... *to comfort*. That modifier, *para*, means to come alongside someone as you comfort them. But the word imposes other duties on the caregiver and caretaker: to *sorrow* for those in their care, and to *console* them (*i.e.*, to be sympathetic, not indifferent). They also impose a duty to *beseech*, *urge*, or *exhort* the sufferer. That's intriguing, isn't it? We beseech, urge, and exhort the sufferer not to forget God's love, Christ's sacrifice, nor the Spirit's presence.

The Greek is an imperative verb; it's a *command*. It's in the present active tense, meaning it's an ongoing activity. It's not just the sentiment, "I wish you well." (Jas 2.15-16); it's practical in its outworking. But again, such constant ministry can take its toll on us if we forget that we're actually serving and representing Jesus Christ our Lord. And so Jesus exhorts us, "Pray and *do not lose heart*. (Luk 18.1) Paul repeats that exhortation: "As we ourselves have received mercy, *so we do not lose heart*. (2Cor 4.1) That is, the caregiver and caretaker must consider what they have received from Christ, and convey that care to others, *in His name* (Joh 15.12). *Persevere*: "Don't grow weary while doing good; we'll reap if we don't lose heart." (Gal 6.9; 2The 3.13) Don't be discouraged or dismayed by the trials others must endure. Paul writes, "Don't lose heart at my tribulations." (Eph 3.13) Trials are *necessary* to purify us. (Mal 3.3)

That last caution is vital. Providing care requires sympathy, but it can also lead to a feeling of helplessness if we substitute ourselves for Christ, by trying to "fix" it. To some extent, there's less danger of that in caretaking than in caregiving, being primarily task-oriented, rather than people-oriented. But talk to anyone who's involved in disaster relief, and they'll tell you how consuming, how exhausting it can be just to distribute food, clothing, and supplies. Caretakers do for others at the expense of their own time, relationships, and needs. Thus they're often torn between the two. They may be the sole provider for their family, and will feel guilty when employment competes with providing care, especially for a family member. We must accept the fact that there are practical limits, even to care. But if we disengage ourselves emotionally from those in need, and focus on the tasks alone — simply as a means of self-preservation — we can easily leave Christ out of the mix *for ourselves*. And that's a recipe for burnout.

Conversely, it's not good to be completely absorbed with this person. Oh, we pray with them and for them. We listen to their tale of woe, just as Job's friends did for him at the start. We do for them what they cannot do for themselves, and should not do alone. That's all good. Sufferers may want to vent their frustration, or escape for a time the isolation of their sickbed. A listening ear, a sympathetic heart, can be highly therapeutic. The sufferer needs someone

to share this part of the journey with them. The danger is that the caregiver, focusing solely on this person, may identify with them, and be drawn into their trial as if it were their own. Sufferers are desperate for affection, understanding, and acceptance. They need to know they're not pariahs. To console them, we let them know that they're not forgotten or alone. However, if we let ourselves get too emotionally involved; if we let the one suffering become overly dependent on us, instead of being entirely dependent on Christ — that too is a recipe for burnout. There is only *one* Messiah, *one* Mediator. (1Tim 2.5)

We must feed ourselves first, to be capable of feeding others; that's not selfish. Caretakers and caregivers are to be purveyors of the *love of Christ*, shed abroad in the land (Rom 5.5). Any practical and emotional support they can offer others, must pale beside the true need for all concerned, which is to be drawn closer to God, through Jesus Christ, by means of this trial.

Recall those other duties of comfort: to *beseech*, *urge*, and *exhort*. We might think, "Now is not the time;" or "That's unloving, as if chastising them." It is never unloving to direct the heart and mind to our true Comforter, the one whom the Spirit represents to us, the one who alone comforts His people (Joh 14.26; 15.26). The caregiver or caretaker must minister the word of God to themselves, as they minister it to the one they're caring for. Listen carefully to Christ's words as He describes the ministry of the Comforter. This is *our* ministry as well, because "we know Him — for He dwells with us, and He is in us." (Joh 14.17)

He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you. (Joh 14:26)

But when the Helper comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, He will testify of Me. (Joh 15:26)

And when He has come, He will convict the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment: ⁹ of sin, because they do not believe in Me; ¹⁰ of righteousness, because I go to My Father and you see Me no more; ¹¹ of judgment, because the ruler of this world is judged ... ¹³ He will guide you into all truth; for He will not speak on His own *authority*, but whatever He hears He will speak; and He will tell you things to come. ¹⁴ He will glorify Me, for He will take of what is Mine and declare *it* to you. (Joh 16:8-14)

We minister to, comfort, and care for the people of God, by bringing to them the word of God; by reminding them of the truth of God, and of the promises of God.

As I said earlier, *caregivers and caretakers themselves need care, because they care for others*. What I've suggested so far is *self-care*, mostly through awareness of the pitfalls. But at some point, these givers are spent; they've got nothing left to give. They've come to the end of themselves. They may be frustrated, disillusioned, cynical, or angry. "Where is Christ?" "Where is the Church?" "Where is my family?" "Where are my true friends?" Others offer help, and ask what such help might look like. But the giver rarely has an answer. "Isn't it obvious? Do I have to spell it out?" Such a response would indicate the giver has exceeded the bounds of reasonable care. And now being in need of care themselves, they don't know what to ask for, or who to ask. They're shell-shocked. "If only they'd asked last week, last month, last year, while I still had energy, and hope." That's despair speaking.

It's in their desperation, bending under the weight of their responsibilities, that they feel there are no alternatives, no viable options. Maybe they're right. Maybe there's nothing anyone else *can* do, or *could have* done. "It is what it is." Perhaps it was a burden they felt unable to cast on anyone else, even Christ (Psa 55.22; 1Pet 5.7). Despite knowing that "apart from Christ I can do nothing" (Joh 15.5), they feel compelled not only to do *something*, but to do *everything* they can. Out of love, and fear, they've exceeded their limits. After all, Christ isn't going to bathe the one in their care, take them to the toilet, administer their medications, stay up nights with them, bandage their bedsores, put them in the wheelchair, feed them, etc., etc. Strangers, even friends, won't move in to perform these needed chores over a long period of time. There's no one else they can turn to, not in a practical sense anyway. So they say to themselves with stalwart resolve,

"This is *my* burden; it is *my* duty. It is what it is, and I'll fulfill it to the best of my ability, until I can't do it anymore — or until it's no longer needed."

That may take years, or a lifetime. It always has a financial component. Maybe you think I'm talking about you. I'm not. I'm talking about my own experience. I found my dad weeping at his desk one night, not knowing how to pay for my mother's care in an institution. She was schizophrenic. So I took on that burden of care at age 10. It ended when she died; I was 24. Dad had died years earlier. There was no one else for me to turn to, no one else she would trust. I made sure no one else knew what I was going through; it was a self-imposed prison sentence, born of irrational shame and fear. I needed everything else in my life to remain as normal as possible, for my own sanity. That burden became an idol; I worshipped it faithfully every day. Caregiving can be a lonely, secretive, and *therefore* thankless task.

Having been there, I'm in awe of other caregivers and caretakers. They're my heroes. They serve in silence — unseen by men, but seen by God. They'll gladly and continually pour themselves out like drink offerings, never seeing it as anything other than an honor and a privilege. But still, it takes its toll; it has a price they don't hesitate to pay. They're not seeking recognition or admiration. They don't need to be relieved of their duty — they just need an occasional respite from the struggle.

I'm saying that the loneliness and pain experienced by the sufferer, is shared by the caregiver. It's part of being sympathetic. They may see offers of assistance as tempting them to abandon their charge, to limit their love, to admit failure or inadequacy. They know all too well what they'd be asking of someone else, so they don't ask. What if that person gets confused about the medications, or the doctor's appointment, or food restrictions? How could the giver put that on someone else? So the giver thinks, "I need to hide or minimize what I'm really going through. I need to put on a happy face and be brave. I don't want others to see me sweat." Why not? "Because I don't want to let *them* down either; and I won't let *them* feel guilty if they let *me* down. I couldn't bear that added burden." Givers give to all alike, all the time.

If you didn't know, *givers find it hard to receive*. Let me caution you: that's not always pride speaking. It may be a valid assessment that their burden *shouldn't* be delegated. But neither should it be diminished, as if it's something *anyone* can do. Instead of being admired for their sacrifice, I've seen those givers who are reluctant to receive, accused by fellow Christians of being fearful, of not trusting God, of being antisocial, or lacking faith, or exalting themselves. The church can sometimes be a cruel and unhealthy environment for those enduring trials.

How then do we minister to caretakers and caregivers? How do we lighten their load without undermining their duty of care, especially where the needed care is long-term and intense?

1. *Give to them without being asked.* Let them say no, rather than make them ask for help. Start small – a home-made meal, tickets to a ballgame or theater, a hotel room nearby, while you and others fill in for them at home. Let your gifts grow with time, whether that's doing it more often, or giving to them financially. You need to earn their trust, and also the trust of the one being cared for. So be reliable, punctual, and consistent in your care for the caregiver. Be trustworthy. This is a typically private matter, with ramifications for other members of their family. That means you need to let them control who knows what and when. Keep their confidence (within limits), and you'll earn their trust.

2. *Assess, divide, and conquer.* Be realistic about what their need for a respite might look like. You need to know their situation well, before you can make that assessment. Their isolation and privacy will make it difficult; so will their reluctance to pull you into to the fray. Please be realistic about what you personally can and cannot offer, and how often you can contribute to their needs. Divide the load they're bearing, their individual tasks, into manageable chunks like house-cleaning, food-shopping, lawn-mowing, painting and repairs, transportation, etc. Then enlist a *group* of folks to share the load, each doing their own part.

3. *Stay in constant communication.* Remember, it's not the tasks alone that matter, but the relationship. Feed and water the caregiver with practical gospel love. Share their suffering. Share their joy. Listen attentively, and say little – two ears, one mouth. Pray for them. Be the visible hands of Christ at work. He's the cause of your caring; make Him known to them:

“As you did it unto one of the least of these my brothers, you did it unto Me.”

Let their gratitude be to God, for you. Give their Shepherd his due, so they're drawn nearer to Him through this hardship. Give them hope, by helping them see God's hand at work in it, *positively.* Don't offer trite maxims; that only salts their wounds. You don't truly know what they're going through, even as you go through it with them. Therefore, be sincere, genuine, honest, and humble. Your role is to comfort and console them, *in the name of Christ.*

George Bowen, missionary to India in the 19th century, wrote a meditation on this key verse:

“I will not leave you comfortless. I will come to you.” — Joh 14.18.

More literally (Bowen says), I will not leave you *orphans* – bereaved of all that you hold most dear, most necessary – helpless in the presence of many foes – friendless in the presence of many trials – skill-less in the presence of an immense task. The parents are the complement of the little child. It operates through their wisdom and power and resources, to keep its place in the world, and act its part. The Christian without Christ, if such a thing can be conceived, is the most deplorably helpless being in the world. For he has been awakened from the delusion that possesses mankind, that they are complete in themselves; he has seen the length and breadth of the law of God; he has discovered the bitter hostility of the world to the righteous; and in just the measure that his sense of need has been increased, he has seen the ability to help him vanishing from the world and all created things, to concentrate itself in Christ.

The nearest approach to such an orphan state of the Church was in the period between Christ's death and the resurrection. To the disciples at that time, Christ was really dead; his power, wisdom, grace, were all dead; the promises were dead and buried with him; all the advantages conferred by his teaching, all the blessings derived from his presence, were crucified and gone. These disciples had been taken up by the Saviour almost into heaven. And now, by the unexpected death of their leader and commander, they were let drop to a point of helplessness far below that of the rest of men. They shut the doors for fear of the Jews who had crucified him, and who might come at any moment and crucify them.

They looked at the swords which Christ had told them to take, instead of all the promises; and a full conception of their misery burst upon them. Hundreds of thousands of enemies on the one hand; and they, a few inexpert fishermen with two or three rusty swords on the other. Could anything be more absurd than the idea of a conflict? One little word of promise had once invested them with power over all the power of the enemy. But all the promises were now buried with Christ; a great stone was rolled upon them, and they were left alone with their wretched swords. But Christ fulfilled his word. He did not leave them prey to the wrath of man and the malice of the adversary. He came to them; and with Him came all the promises. In fact, they themselves arose with Him. They breathed, they lived, when they again saw Him breathing, *living*.

If at any time a soul is brought into a state of orphanage, and seems to itself separated from all grace and power and hope, let it lay hold of this word. It may have been fitting that it have a taste of the misery of being without Christ, and under a sense of the need of Christ; but a taste suffices. "*I will come to you,*" says Jesus.

That's what we need to remind those who are suffering; not that we have come to them, but that their Lord Jesus has come to them, through us. Let *that* be their comfort, and ours.

²⁸ Have you not known? Have you not heard?

The everlasting God, the LORD,
The Creator of the ends of the earth,
Neither faints nor is weary.
His understanding is unsearchable.

²⁹ He gives power to the weak,
And to *those who have* no might
He increases strength.

³⁰ Even the youths shall faint and be weary,
And the young men shall utterly fall,

³¹ But those who wait on the LORD
Shall renew *their* strength;
They shall mount up with wings like eagles,
They shall run and not be weary,
They shall walk and not faint.

— *Isa 40:28-31*