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CHRISTIANITY TODAY



**The Robots
Are Coming
For Your Job**

**BUT FEAR NOT. YOU WERE MADE
FOR MORE THAN YOUR WORK.**



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THE ACTIVISTS SO ON

Why the fight
for social
justice must
start within.

*BY JEDD
MEDEFIND*

*ILLUSTRATION
BY DANTE
TERZIGNI*



little over a decade ago, no emblem of young Christians' blooming justice activism flashed brighter than Invisible Children. It was born in 2004, shortly after Jason Russell and two other recent college graduates returned to the United States from Uganda with burning hearts and miles of amateur film footage.

The trio produced a shoe-string documentary baring the pain of Uganda's civil war. Within three years, tens of thousands of activists were participating in the group's "night commutes" to raise awareness of Uganda's child soldiers. In 2012, Invisible Children launched another video, *Kony 2012*, which struck hard at warlord Joseph Kony and pressed for

stronger government efforts to capture him. *Time* magazine declared it the most viral video in history, garnering 100 million views in the first week after release.

But the stunning rise was short-lived. In Uganda, Kony proved tenacious. In the United States, stress and the glare of the public eye sent co-founder Russell into a tailspin. Ten days after the video's release, another video went viral—this one of Russell's public mental breakdown on the streets of San Diego. In December 2014, BuzzFeed announced "The End Of Invisible Children." The pronouncement was premature—the organization is still active today—but many advocates parted ways.

Looking back on the battle that he and millions of supporters had waged against a single African war criminal, Russell concluded bluntly, "I feel like Kony won."

AN ALL-TOO-COMMON STORY

Russell's story is dramatic, but he is hardly alone. His is merely the amplified tale of countless other advocates, activists, social workers, and nonprofit founders.

Christians never look more like Jesus than when humbly serving amidst the world's hurt—caring for orphans, battling trafficking, promoting urban renewal. But this good will inevitably be short-lived if rooted in zeal for justice alone. To sustain this good work, our commitment to justice and mercy must be paired with an even stronger commitment to cultivating a vibrant inner life rooted in Christ.

For decades, author and Menlo Church pastor John Ortberg has consoled and counseled fellow leaders through disillusionment, burnout, and worse. In recent years, Ortberg noticed the sad stories were increasing. So last fall, he invited executives from Christian justice ministries to gather privately to dig at the roots of the problem.

Many of their organizations had grown dramatically, and interest in their causes had never been higher. But like Ortberg, the leaders had also seen how this enthusiasm for justice could be precarious. It was sincere, but top-heavy, like a tree whose branches have grown faster than its roots.

"Increasingly we find Christian people who are involved in ministry . . . experiencing stress and burnout" and overwhelmed by compassion fatigue, Ortberg said. "I can be tempted to think I don't really have to pay much attention to my spiritual life since I'm working for God all the time."

When I spoke with Russell, he offered a similar diagnosis of his own crash five years ago. "I think that's what took me under," he said. "Listening to the ego more than the Spirit."

Today, Russell is back to designing successful

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advocacy campaigns for major organizations and feels he's in a better place. But he also acknowledges that something may still be lacking. "I haven't made internal, tangible goals for how to navigate achieving inner spiritual peace and tranquility, but it sounds nice," he said. "It sounds like a great thing. I wish I had better advice or tools."

SLUMPED SHOULDERS

Over many years of work in both government and ministry, I've noticed a common storyline among the justice-minded, including myself. First comes the *waking*: We begin to ache over the wrong we see and yearn to set it right. Waking springs into *working*, a noble undertaking with encouraging initial progress. But eventually disappointment strikes, and we *weary* as the world's brokenness proves far more stubborn than we'd imagined. Finally, one day we can find our idealism has *withered* to a lifeless husk.

A few years after college, I worked with friends to create a nonprofit to help revitalize neighborhoods in inner-city Los Angeles. We thought it would be a game-changer. Everyone seemed eager to join us, from pastors to politicians to entrepreneurs, rallying behind slogans

like "sustainable partnership" and "urban renewal."

About two years in, however, all those big commitments, confabs, and community events seemed to amount to little more than lots of activity. If anything, the hurt and need we saw were growing worse.

One day I was helping at an event at a small, cement-block church billed as "community empowerment." But aside from a small table of employers offering job applications, it struck me that our food box handouts and the swaying bounce house weren't empowering much of anything. Then the church's pastor pulled up in a new Cadillac Escalade. Something in me began deflating.

I kept at the work for several years, but my passion thinned. I was easily dismayed by needs I encountered—frustrated not only at injustices, but sometimes at the very people I was trying to help. And I often asked, *Have we done any good at all?*

Today I work with amazing people who serve orphans and struggling families all over the world. They do worthy work, and do it well. But nearly all of them know this story. I hear it almost weekly in someone's voice.

I think of the African couple who poured all they had into starting a children's home, only to discover house parents abusing children in their care. I think of a leader who restores children from orphanages to their families in Central America, sharing in anguish that a girl who recently returned home had been raped by her uncle.

This story can play out in a single crash-and-burn moment, or in the slow wilting of hope—the slumped

shoulders of the nonprofit director, the once-singing public school teacher who now speaks in monotone.

What sustains us when the rain stops? Here's the simple and age-old truth: If we have no source beneath the surface, we will eventually run dry. The work of justice and mercy cannot be sustained apart from a vibrant inner life.

JUSTICE GROWS DEEP

Christians have, at various points in history, sorted the ideas of justice and the inner life into opposing categories—action versus contemplation. In their volume *Spirituality for the Sent*, editors Nathan Finn and Keith Whitfield argue that recent trends in missional living and spiritual formation are encouraging, yet often unconnected. “If more intentional intersection was to occur,” the Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary professors write, “it would only strengthen both movements.”

To paraphrase the Book of James, an inner life that produces no outward works is already dead. But just as surely, works of justice and mercy not rooted deep in the inner life will also perish.

Any other source of nourishment—whether pure-hearted idealism, desire for recognition, or sincere ache at others' pain—may propel us for a time. Eventually, though, the world's great hurt will outlast our passion to address it.

“If you remain in me . . . you will bear much fruit,” Jesus promised (John 15:5). This abiding is mostly unseen, like an oak sinking its roots deep into hard earth; it

is as mysterious as the way a tree's xylem heaves water upward from roots into leaves. Abiding is all gift and wonder, undeserved grace.

Yet somehow, we also choose it. We must participate in cultivating that deep-down life, just as good farmers tend their crops even knowing that only something far beyond them can actually make plants grow.

Saints throughout history have found small, humble choices that irrigate the soul. Francis of Assisi's simple devotional habits, including extended times of solitude in the mountains above Assisi, were central to the vast Franciscan movement of simplicity and service. William Wilberforce viewed his habit of Sabbath rest and daily hour in Scripture and prayer as essential to his work to abolish the slave trade. Mother Teresa gathered every morning with her Sisters of Charity to worship and pray before going out to attend the dying.

Jesus himself depended on these practices, too, from his 40 days of solitude in the wilderness to how he “often withdrew to lonely places and prayed” (Luke 5:16). If Jesus needed these things, how much more do we?

Several such habits have been especially life-giving for me. I'd have run dry long ago without a Sabbath each week for rest, corporate worship, and play. It refreshes body and soul and helps free me from the ridiculous assumption that “everything depends on my work.” My wife and I also gift each other 24 hours away for solitude twice each year. This time alone, attending to God's still small voice, calms the uproar within and tunes my ears to whispers of eternity. I've also found memorizing Scripture causes God's Word to sink deep, where it nourishes me day and night with truth greater than all the world's sorrow.

Communal practices are also immensely valuable. The Christian human rights group International Justice Mission (IJM) sets a powerful example, weaving habits of spiritual development into the daily rhythms of its offices in Washington, DC, and around the world. Every staff member spends the first 30 minutes of the workday in silence—for prayer, meditation, and spiritual reflection. IJM

also gathers staff for 30 minutes of daily corporate prayer, in addition to hosting quarterly offsite spiritual retreats and providing employees with an annual day for private spiritual retreat.

This commitment may seem extravagant, especially in the nonprofit sector. But IJM CEO Gary Haugen believes “prayerless striving” leads only to exhaustion. “I have learned just how crucial it is to settle my soul in the presence of Jesus every morning,” said Haugen, who has worked for two decades to combat human trafficking and other forms of violence against the poor. “Even though it is tempting to hurry into our work, we intentionally still ourselves and connect with our maker: the God who delights in restoring and encouraging his children.”

WHAT THOSE WE SERVE NEED MOST

This is the crossroads at which we stand. Will we simply strain onward, hoping that passion and hard labor will carry our work for a lifetime? Or will we set one commitment above even the noble calling of justice: an inner life rooted deep in Christ?

That is as costly, and simple, as small daily choices—decisions that become habits over time. Whatever else I do today, I will spend time with my Father. Whatever else I prioritize this week, I will receive the gift of Sabbath. Whatever else I put on my calendar, I will set aside a day for solitude.

We must not underestimate the stakes. Worse than quitting is persisting in giving without love. We may continue to serve, but with passionless eyes and cold touch.

Virtually every foster youth, orphan, recovering addict, and returning prisoner I know expresses some version of the same truth: Our greatest need as humans is not merely to be tended. It is to be loved and to know that we are loved.

This happens for the little girl in foster care only if she sees our eyes light up when she enters the room; for the teen mother only if she can sense we are wholeheartedly present as she shares her story; for the juvenile offender only when he hears tenderness and respect in the way we pronounce his name.

That kind of love is not something we can simply put on. It cannot be faked for long. It rises only as fruit of a vibrant inner life, roots sunk deep into God's love and drinking daily of it. And it is the only sure way to persevere amidst the hurt and disappointment that will come, our one hope of keeping light hearts while carrying heavy loads. **CT**

JEDD MEDEFIND serves as president of the Christian Alliance for Orphans. He and his wife, Rachel, live in central California with their five children.