

Compassion in the Face of the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Christian Perspective

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Religion and the COVID-19 Pandemic: Vulnerable Populations

Karuna (meaning “compassion”) is a key virtue in Karmic religions. It is also a key virtue in all Abrahamic religions (*raham* in Hebrew, *rahmah* in Arabic). Indubitably, *karuna/raham* is the common ethical call that beckons various religions together in their fight against the current pandemic.

The New Testament calls Christians to participate in caring for the vulnerable through individual and corporate endeavors. While the Good Samaritan is an epitome of individual compassionate action, we also see Christ’s compassionate mission involving a corporate effort when he calls his disciples to feed a huge crowd in an isolated situation ([Matthew 14:14–15](#)). Of course, the call underscores the doctrine that serving the vulnerable means joining hands with the all-compassionate God. In all respects, serving the multitude in a dependent and isolated situation was an act initiated by God himself.

We may observe the following structure of service in the New Testament:

1. Individual ethical obligation towards family members ([1 Timothy 5:4–8](#));
2. Individual and corporate ethical obligation towards community members ([1 Timothy 5:3–11](#); [Galatians 2:10](#)); and
3. Social ethical obligation towards fellow humans calling for both individual and corporate efforts ([James 1:26](#); [2:15](#)).

Karuna/raham calls one to go the extra mile, beyond mere “ethical obligation.” As the COVID-19 pandemic drives many into isolated situations, the sound of the call also grows stronger; for evidently humans do not suffer alone, but in all their suffering God also suffers ([Isaiah 63:9](#)) bearing them along. Our responses to the suffering ones within our reach are our responses to Christ ([Matthew 25:31–46](#)), as Christ says, “Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.” *Karuna/raham* functions as the true motivator of genuine service and assistance.

Karuna towards Vulnerable Ones in the Family

Paul instructs Timothy in [1 Timothy 5](#) that the primary caretakers of vulnerable ones (specifically here, the elderly and by implication anyone with vulnerabilities) ought to be their own immediate family members. In fact, “And whoever does not provide for relatives, and especially for family members, has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever” ([1 Timothy 5:8](#)). While physical assistance is an important aspect of caregiving, providing a strong sense of belongingness and care (in word and deed) is also crucial, especially when we find ourselves in a state of isolation. A great example of this is the

deep care that Christ showed towards his mother when he was in a dejected and helpless state on the cross. The COVID-19 pandemic reminds us the importance of karuna/reham towards our own family. The virtue of karuna gets often doused by utilitarian and selfish materialistic pursuits that instrumentalize other humans, objectifying them, and thus dehumanizing them. At such times, the Golden Rule speaks louder: "In everything do to others as you would have them do to you" ([Matthew 7:12](#)).

Karuna towards Vulnerable Ones in the Community

[1 Timothy 5](#) talks about the obligation of the church to help the totally helpless within the Christian community. The church is obligated towards its own and must go beyond mere obligation in its ministry of compassion. In response to the pandemic situation, churches throughout the world observe physical distancing and meet or reach out chiefly online. At the same time, there is an increasing synergistic move to reach out to and assist members of the Christian community both at the local level and at areas hard hit by the pandemic. Individuals and churches have responded to calls by national and international organizations ([Open Doors](#) and [Samaritan's Purse](#), for example) that are providing assistance to the needy. COVID-19 reminds churches of their ethical obligation towards the vulnerable within the community with the expectation that an understanding of this call will motivate each church to organize its own community outreach efforts during the present crisis.

Karuna towards Vulnerable Fellow Humans

Though it does seem that the biblical structure of caretaking is based on the priority order of kinship (we are called to care first for our own family members), there are clear instructions regarding compassion towards fellow humans as well. The greatest example of this is the Good Samaritan ([Luke 10:25–27](#)). The Samaritan, though an outcast who could not call the Jewish man "his own" was willing to do to him what "his own" (the Levite and the priest) were not willing to do. This karuna towards a fellow human constituted the fulfillment of the second Great Commandment, to love one's neighbor as oneself. While the Bible does call one to contribute to the needs of the saints, it also calls one to show kindness to strangers (*philoxenia* in [Romans 12:13](#) and [Hebrews 13:2](#)). Several Christian organizations have gone frontline in caring for people most vulnerable to COVID-19 ([Salvation Army](#), for example).

Conclusion

The model presented in this post holds both individuals and communities ethically obligated to assist the most vulnerable in the present crisis. But, family caregivers (the primary ones in the model) need to be well-informed. The John A. Harford Foundation provides a [list of resources](#) for the same. Churches can function as [resource centers](#). This is also an important time to come together on an inter-denominational, [interfaith platform](#) and also in partnership with non-ecclesiastical organizations to proactively fulfill the Great Commandment. Physical distancing should not mean social isolation. There are various ways in which [communication](#), [fellowship](#), and communion are possible, eliminating the risks of absolute social distancing. The call, certainly, is more urgently for genuine compassionate care for each other.

About the Author





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