

Matthew Barnett: Lessons I've Learned From 28 Years of Inner-City Ministry in LA

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When I was just 20 years old arriving in the city of Los Angeles, it was unbelievable what I saw. For the first time in my life, I saw tents lining the streets, people begging for food and money at stop signs, many of them on drugs and just not mentally there anymore. To be honest, it felt like I was in for a rude awakening.

The goal was for me to stay here for three months until my father could find a pastor to lead the church, but it was inevitable that my stay would be longer than that. Now, 28 years later, my five-year goal to have a church with at least 500 people turned into God's dream for my life: a lifelong mission of serving people through the Los Angeles Dream Center that houses thousands of individuals recovering from life-threatening issues.

Since we founded the Dream Center in 1994, here are just a few of the important lessons I've learned about how to truly make an eternal impact on a city:

1. You need to spend an abundant amount of quality time among those you wish to serve. Having lofty goals of solving big problems is important, and remembering we serve a God that will bless our righteous efforts is critical. But another element that is absolutely essential is spending weeks, months and even years building personal relationships with the distraught individuals you hope to serve.

If you want to help a homeless woman, you need to meet her where she's at, share meals with her and take time to listen

to her story. If you want to rescue an abused teen, you need to give them time and space to get comfortable, be equally vulnerable with them and be willing to spend countless hours of quality time with them before you can begin to mentor them and help them heal.

Before you utter one word of advice, just listen. Be a genuine friend, a shoulder to cry on, and you'll be blown away at the level of impact you can have moving forward.

2. You need to squeeze out of yourself every ounce of grace and compassion you can muster. We've all heard this countless times throughout our lives, but success doesn't happen overnight. And this is absolutely true if you're in the market to help someone overcome a drug addiction. It is a slow and painful process of leading someone away from something that has been their crutch for so long. Guilt and shame will be of no use. Medications will not be a quick fix.

It will take months, and often years, for a full recovery to take place. Many setbacks will happen, repeated disappointments are a near certain guarantee. The journey for you will be endless grace for each slip up, each moment of weakness. Forgiveness and reconciliation, over and over again, will be a pattern you'll need to master.

When you feel like giving up on someone you love, ask God to give you the strength to show love and offer mercy each and every time. You won't be able to do that on your own, that ability will come from him alone.

3. You need to provide a spiritual solution, not just a physical or emotional one. It's true, we must meet the physical needs of those around us. Jesus made this clear over and over again. He told us in Matthew 25:36, "I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me," referring to anyone who his disciples helped as helping Jesus himself.

But this is only one part of the journey. As we are reminded in Ephesians 6:12, "Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms." We have to help everyone we serve to understand they have a soul. And the soul needs to be transformed as much as the body does.

Leading someone away from substance abuse, a harmful relationship, a destructive lifestyle, this will leave a void. The question is, are you prepared to show them how to fill that void? Are you prepared to remind them that each grasp at comfort and identity in someone else, or something else, is a reminder that they are truly longing for the love of God the Father?

Please don't skip this step. Remember that Jesus' promise to give us life, and life more abundantly, is the only permanent solution for whatever problem we're looking to solve.

Whatever breaks your heart in whichever community you're serving, I'm confident that each of these lessons I've learned (and am still learning!) will be useful for your ministry. And be sure to give yourself the same level of grace and patience you extend to those you're serving. Because when you set out to change a life, yours will be changed in the process as well. {eoa}

Matthew Barnett *is the co-founder of the Los Angeles Dream Center and senior pastor of Angelus Temple. The Los Angeles Dream Center is a faith-based non-profit dedicated to transforming the lives of individuals and families in Los Angeles through residential and outreach programs.*

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