

The Disposable Society and the God Who Restores

Why Christian restoration begins where usefulness ends

Kyle Hetrick

Original article | Approximately 2,027 words | Scripture: NIV

I know what it is to become expensive to love.

There was a season when my promises could no longer bear the weight I placed upon them. My choices did not injure only me. They created consequences for people who had prayed for me, trusted me, and stood close enough to be wounded by my collapse. If human worth were measured by reliability, I had made a strong case against my own retention.

What I needed was not someone to pretend the damage was smaller than it was. I needed truth severe enough to interrupt me and love strong enough not to leave when the truth became costly.

Those two gifts are often separated. Some forms of mercy refuse to name the harm. Some forms of accountability name nothing else. One protects us from consequence; the other imprisons us inside it. The gospel does neither.

I was not disposable. I was responsible. Both were true.

That tension is increasingly difficult to maintain in a culture practiced in replacement. We replace devices when repair becomes inconvenient. We abandon institutions when they cease to flatter us. We reduce strained relationships to questions of personal benefit. More dangerously, we learn to speak of human beings as problems to be managed, risks to be removed, markets to be reached, votes to be won, cases to be closed, or stories to be used.

The habit of disposal does not remain among our possessions. Eventually, it becomes a moral imagination.

When a Person Becomes a Leftover

Pope Francis has called this a “throwaway culture” in which human beings themselves are treated as consumer goods and the excluded become society’s “leftovers.”[1] The language is unsettling because it names something deeper than neglect. Exploitation still recognizes that a person can be used. Exclusion decides that the person is not even worth using.

We see this logic whenever a human life is collapsed into a single condition: *addict, offender, homeless, illegal, failure, burden, threat*. The words may describe something real, but they become dangerous when they claim to describe everything. A diagnosis becomes an identity. A record becomes a destiny. A season becomes a name.

Churches are not immune. We can proclaim redemption while quietly measuring people by usefulness. We celebrate the dramatic testimony, the restored family, the successful graduate, and the person who returns ready to serve. These are worthy occasions for gratitude. But what of the person whose healing is slow, whose story remains untidy, whose illness does not lift, whose trustworthiness must be rebuilt inch by inch, or whose limitations mean that he may never contribute in the ways our institutions reward?

Sometimes a person becomes welcome only after becoming impressive.

That is not restoration. It is a delayed transaction.

The gospel begins somewhere else. Scripture locates human worth before achievement, innocence, productivity, or social approval:

“So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.” (Genesis 1:27, NIV)

The image of God is not a performance review. It is not earned by the strong or forfeited by the inconvenient. Sin can disfigure our lives, corrupt our loves, and devastate our neighbors. It cannot repeal God’s claim upon the creature he made.

This is why Christian mercy can tell the truth about wrongdoing without concluding that the wrongdoer has become less than human. It is also why the Church must resist any social order that makes usefulness the price of dignity.

A society becomes cruel when it has no category for a person who is costly but still sacred.

The Father Refuses the Contract

Jesus gives us one of Scripture's clearest pictures of restoration in the parable commonly called the prodigal son. The younger son does not merely make a mistake. He fractures a household, squanders an inheritance, and returns only after his alternatives have collapsed. On the road home, he rehearses a bargain: "Make me like one of your hired servants" (Luke 15:19, NIV).

It is an offer of usefulness. He no longer expects to belong, so he proposes to work.

The father refuses the contract.

Before the son can prove himself, the father runs. Before there is a probationary period, there is an embrace. Before the son can negotiate a position, the father restores the signs of belonging: robe, ring, sandals, table.

"But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him." (Luke 15:20, NIV)

The father does not call the far country harmless. The son names his sin, and nothing in the story suggests that the squandered inheritance magically reappears. Grace does not reverse history. It restores relationship.

The son comes home prepared to become labor. The father receives him as family.

This is the difference between the gospel and salvage. God does not recover damaged assets so they can become productive again. He reconciles persons to himself and one another. Our usefulness may be restored as a consequence of grace, but it is never the cause of grace.

John Wesley described the Christian life as "the restoration of the image of God, pure love, in every child of man."^[2] That is a richer vision than moral refurbishment. Salvation does not merely return us to respectable function. The Holy Spirit reorders our loves so that we can love God and neighbor with an undivided heart. Restoration reaches inward toward holiness and outward toward mercy.

The opposite of disposability, then, is not usefulness. It is covenant.

Mercy Is Not Moral Evasion

At this point, restoration can become sentimental if we are not careful. Some wounds require distance. Some crimes require legal consequence. Some leaders must never return to the authority they abused. Forgiveness does not eliminate the need to protect the vulnerable, and reconciliation cannot be demanded from those who have been harmed.

Restoration and reinstatement are not the same thing.

Peter is restored after denying Christ, but his restoration passes directly through the truth. Beside another charcoal fire, Jesus asks him three times, “Do you love me?” (John 21:15–17). Christ neither humiliates Peter nor pretends the denial never occurred. He returns Peter to the place of failure and meets him there.

Even then, the scene begins with breakfast. Before Jesus gives Peter work, he gives him bread. Before “Feed my sheep,” there is “Come and have breakfast” (John 21:12, NIV). Communion precedes commission.

This matters for churches that speak eagerly of second chances. A second chance is not immediate access to every former role. Trust may return slowly. Restitution may be necessary. Accountability may last for years. The safety of others matters more than our appetite for a dramatic redemption story.

But boundaries should guard restoration, not disguise abandonment. Consequences must not become an excuse to declare a person permanently unreachable. Paul tells the Church:

“Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently. But watch yourselves, or you also may be tempted.” (Galatians 6:1, NIV)

The command contains tenderness, responsibility, and humility. Restore. Do it gently. Remember that you, too, are vulnerable.

No one is restored by being told that the harm did not matter. Neither is anyone restored by being told that the harm is the only thing that will ever matter about them.

Grace does not call evil good. It refuses to call evil final.

The Church as a Restoring People

Christian concern for the whole person has never been merely theoretical. In the nineteenth century, William Booth’s social vision insisted that Christian mission address not only the effects of misery but also its causes. The Salvation Army’s developing ministries joined emergency relief, personal transformation, community development, and public advocacy because embodied suffering could not be separated neatly from spiritual need.[3]

That vision remains necessary, although every Christian institution must keep submitting its methods to Christ. People experiencing poverty are not raw material for our virtue. Men and women rebuilding their lives are not proof that our programs work. The lonely are not attendance opportunities. The wounded are not illustrations waiting for a sermon.

The Church does not restore people by turning them into projects. It becomes a restoring people by entering covenantal presence with them.

That presence is patient enough to learn a name before offering an answer. It helps meet material need without reducing a neighbor to that need. It tells the truth without using shame as leverage. It establishes boundaries without withdrawing love. It celebrates progress without demanding performance. It remains when another person's healing is slower, stranger, and less photogenic than expected.

This kind of ministry is inefficient. Love usually is.

Institutions need policies, measurements, and wise stewardship. But the body of Christ cannot be governed finally by the logic of throughput. A case can be closed while a person remains alone. A bed can be filled while a name remains unknown. A program can report success while quietly selecting for the people most likely to make the program look successful.

The Church must ask a more searching set of questions:

1. Do we still see sacred worth when a person cannot repay our investment?
2. Can someone confess failure here before the failure becomes a catastrophe?
3. Are we forming people in holy love, or merely returning them to productivity?
4. Do our boundaries serve truth and protection, or have they become respectable forms of disappearance?
5. Will we remain present when restoration does not produce a story we can publish?

These questions apply beyond ministries of recovery or poverty. They belong in congregations, families, workplaces, prisons, hospitals, and public life. Every community eventually reveals what it believes a person is worth when that person becomes difficult to keep.

The Wounds That Remain

The deepest Christian answer to disposability is not a program. It is the crucified and risen Christ.

After the resurrection, Jesus does not return without wounds. He shows his disciples his hands and side. Resurrection does not pretend crucifixion never happened. The wounds are neither erased nor allowed to have the final word.

This keeps Christian restoration from becoming nostalgia. God does not simply return us to the person we were before everything broke. In Christ, restoration becomes new creation:

“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!” (2 Corinthians 5:17, NIV)

New creation is more than repair, but it is not less. Christ gathers what sin has scattered, reconciles what hostility has divided, and raises what death has claimed. The gospel’s final horizon is not a more efficient civilization. It is a renewed creation in which God dwells with his people and makes all things new.

Until then, the Church is called to live as evidence of that future.

I remain grateful for the people who told me the truth and stayed. They did not rescue me from every consequence. They did something harder. They refused to confuse consequence with condemnation. They believed that repentance must become visible, that trust had to be rebuilt, and that grace could still form a life from what appeared ruined.

I was not restored by being returned quickly to usefulness. I was restored through surrender, truth, time, community, and the mercy of Jesus Christ.

There are people all around us who have already heard society’s verdict. Too costly. Too compromised. Too dependent. Too old. Too unstable. Too much history. Not enough promise.

The Church must speak a different word, and then become the kind of community in which that word can take flesh.

You are responsible, but you are not disposable.

You may not return to everything you lost, but you are not beyond redemption.

Your wounds matter, but they are not your final name.

God does not salvage human beings as damaged assets. In Jesus Christ, he restores his image, reconciles his children, and raises the dead.

That is more than repair.

It is resurrection.

Notes and Sources

6. Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013), no. 53; see also Francis, *Laudato Si’* (2015), no. 43. [Evangelii Gaudium](#) | [Laudato Si’](#)

7. John Wesley, "On Laying the Foundation of the New Chapel, Near the City-Road, London," sermon 132. [Wesley Center Online](#)
8. The Salvation Army International, *Go and Do Something: A Resource for Salvationists and the Global Goals for Sustainable Development*, 2nd ed., discussion of William Booth's *In Darkest England and the Way Out* and the integrated development of Salvation Army social ministry. [The Salvation Army International resource](#)
9. Scripture quotations are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide. [Biblica permissions information](#)

About the Author

Kyle Hetrick is a Christian writer and Corps Mission Associate with The Salvation Army in Orlando, Florida. His work is shaped by recovery, ministry among people rebuilding their lives, and a conviction that truth and mercy belong together. He writes about faith, spiritual formation, culture, and the restoring grace of Jesus Christ at *Burning in Peace*. Read more at <https://substack.com/@hetrickwrites>.