

# The Invalid's Father

The message was over and we had a five minute break before worship started. An older man, who had just entered the church, wheeled a thirty-something invalid man to the front of the church, plugged in his medical equipment, and started setting it up. Not knowing what else to do I went up to him and said, "Sir, you need to set up somewhere else. The band is coming up in a couple of minutes." He snapped back at me, "I'm not 'setting up.' He needs his mucus cleaned out; it'll just take a second!" He proceeded to shove tubes in and out of the man's mouth and nose in front of a stunned audience. His donation jar hung conspicuously from the back of the wheelchair.

Time awkwardly stumbled forward.

Anger. Compassion. Unloving. Confused. Nauseated. Used. I was paralyzed by a barrage of conflicting emotions. Should we stop the service and pray for the man? Unplug his suction machine? Call the police? I learned that he had come in angry. Rejecting handshakes. Complaining about the absence of Jesus. Refusing help.

Finally the man finished and moved into the front row.

Worship started.

I prayed for wisdom. I didn't know what would happen next. Obviously he wanted money. There was no doubt that he had put on a demonstration to show us all his level of need. Yet it was undeniable that his need was genuine. I wished he had asked for permission to address our small church, but I also knew that I probably would have said, "No."

As the music played I moved to where I could read the signs attached to the wheel chair. Without bending over and staring, I could only catch parts of the story. "Father and son...Lyme disease...healthy 16-year-old...brain dead..."

For nearly twenty years this father had taken care of his son. Mistakenly, or not, the doctors had declared him to be brain dead, and the father had refused to believe it. He disdained the lack of care that medical workers had provided, so he took over himself. Telling his story. Writing the President. Begging for equipment. Whatever it took.

As worship continued I thought about the gall that he had to parade his son to the front of the church. It was wrong. Yet I could imagine his journey. Polite phone calls. "Sorry, but, 'No.'" Urgent calls. "I wish we could do something!" Talking to pastors in their offices. "We'd love to help, but..." Desperate pleading. "No." After years he learned what works. Just barge into the church. Start shoving tubes down his throat and guilt them into giving.

In a strange way, it was admirable. He was willing to go to all extremes for his son.

How often our kids become a nuisance to what we are trying to accomplish in life. It is rare for a dad to give so much.

He reminded me a little of the Canaanite woman who bantered with Jesus (Matthew 15:28), and the persistent widow (Luke 18:5). And it's hard not to think of this verse:

*1 John 3:16 This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. NIV*

Worship ended.

I approached him. “Hi, I’m Steve.” He ignored me.

“You know sir,” I gingerly offered after a long, painful silence, “your son is really lucky to have you as a dad.”

He finally let it out. He spewed out a lot of anger, rambled about his story, and complained about his treatment from churches. Several of us men in the church had a good talk with him. We prayed for his son, and, even more so, for him. It was a long, hard conversation, and God led some of the men in amazing ways.

Tony and Steve, the invalid and his father, may be back one or two more times before they leave town. We’ll see. Pray that God leads us. Steve, the dad, shook my hand when he left. Perhaps at least one of them is healing.