



The Lad from Lo-debar

PISTORIUS

I guess we've all seen pictures of this man, Oscar Pistorius, who has been nicknamed the Blade Runner because he runs on carbon fibre composite blades as he's a double amputee below the knee. He's distinguished himself as one of the fastest men on Earth. He's a gold medallist in the Paralympics but he has also won the right to run against able-bodied athletes. There was considerable opposition to him running on his blades. It was claimed that they gave him an unfair advantage over able-bodied athletes. Various courts decided that was not the case.

So is Oscar Pistorius disabled? Let's have a look at a definition. The WHO tell us that **disability is an umbrella term covering impairments, activity limitations, and participation restrictions.**

DEFINITION

An impairment is a problem in body function or structure; an activity limitation is a difficulty encountered by an individual in executing a task or action; while a participation restriction is a problem experienced by an individual in involvement in life situations. World Health Organisation

Thus disability is a complex phenomenon, reflecting an interaction between features of a person's body and features of the society in which he or she lives. In other words, disability has a double whammy. People may not just be disabled by these three things, but also by the attitudes and actions of the society in which they live.

We live in a society that generally has a positive attitude to disability – in fact the UK is one of the leaders in disability awareness and provision for those with disabilities. That advance has come through changing attitudes as well as through improving technology and provision. If you contrast the UK and Spain for example, you'll find that even though both countries are governed by EU laws relating to disability, service, provision for disability is much more conspicuous in the UK. Those of you who remember Alex Cooke's visit in May will remember that in Russia, attitudes to disability are very different as it's a society where disability is strongly marginalised.

QUOTE

So is Oscar Pistorius disabled? Here's what he says: *"You are not disabled by the disabilities you have, you are able by the abilities you have."* Now that's positive isn't it? I wouldn't think he sees himself as particularly disabled. That said, people with different or more extensive disabilities will find that a very difficult quote and we need to recognise that too.

How should we as God's people respond to disability issues? Let's dip into the Word of God and look at the life of one man, who I've called the Lad from Lo-debar.

1 SAMUEL 9

I'm sure most of us have heard the story of Mephibosheth. In 2 Samuel 4 we learn how his nurse dropped him whilst fleeing from David after the defeat and death of Saul (his grandfather) and Jonathan (his father) at Mount Gilboa. He was permanently disabled as a result of the fall. As a grandson of Saul and the only son of Saul's eldest, Jonathan he was directly in line to the throne and therefore a direct threat to David, so he was presumably hidden for his own safety in an obscure town on the other side of the Jordan – LO-DEBAR. It's name means "No Pasture" - a semi-desert place but the word Lo-debar can also mean "No Word" - a useless place where no-one in their right mind would settle.

And there was Mephibosheth – stuck in this useless backwater – and he was disabled and in those days people looked down on disability. Disabled folk were disadvantaged, often beggars, often thought of as being forsaken of God. Useless, worthless. For Mephibosheth even his name actually meant "from the mouth of shame", "one who scatters shame".

And why did David want to show favour to Mephibosheth? Was it because he had compassion on him? Mephibosheth's disability had nothing to do with David's decision – it was because of the close friendship that David had with Mephibosheth's father, Jonathan. David felt that he had a debt of honour to repay to Jonathan's family and wondered whether anyone had survived the purges that come when David took the throne. He found from Ziba, King Saul's ex-servant that there was this man. He brought him to the palace,

returned his lands to him and treated him as one of the family. It didn't matter that Mephibosheth was disabled even after David found out. Mephibosheth became one of the family.

It's a wonderful picture of grace as is a great picture of the way in which God welcomes us into His family when we trust and follow Jesus. But I also gives us an example to follow.

Just as our heavenly Father has ministered to us and accepted us, we accept and love all He brings us into contact with, without discrimination, favouritism, partiality. That's God's way; the grace way. Look at how Jesus dealt with people. It didn't matter who they were He accepted them: rich, poor, sick, well, disabled, able-bodied, Jews, Gentiles, Samaritans, those in high places and the lowliest of beggars. No-one was left out. Even His enemies recognised that He showed no favouritism. VERSE Matt 22:16 *"Teacher, we know that you tell the truth. You teach the truth about God's will for people, without worrying about what others think, because you pay no attention to anyone's status."*

The only criticism Jesus got was from the rich and able-bodied because He ministered to those who society – *they* - had marginalised. Down the ages, Christians have followed the example of Jesus in embracing all those who come to Him without distinction as God shows no partiality. We've often got it wrong too as we'll see. The God who shows no partiality is a basic truth about God and it appears in both testaments – we shouldn't have a bias to anyone or against anyone because God doesn't.

Our principle is and should be that we minister to people because we accept their intrinsic worth: they are loved equally by God. MINUS TO PLUS As a result of this we minister to their needs, felt or real, large or small. God loved each of us and in Christ turned our minuses to pluses. Jesus dealt without favouritism so as a result turned the minuses of the the blind, the lame, the sick into pluses. We are in the same business as God: we turn minuses to pluses fo each person He brings us into contact with.

Actually, as you probably realise, it's an important principle when **dealing with anyone**, not just those with disabilities. Recognising the intrinsic worth of people encourages us to help them find their potential and what God wants to do with their lives, rather than writing them off because of what they can't do.

I've come across plenty of situations both in my previous career as a teacher and in my present as a minister, where people have been written off because others couldn't be bothered with them because they seemed too much like hard work or not as co-operative as we liked them to be.

So Mephibosheth was turned form a "dead dog" as he described himself into a man with land, money and royal patronage and he should have lived happily ever after.

But later things went horribly wrong. David's son Absalom tried to usurp the throne and he was forced to flee from Jerusalem. However there were many who were loyal to David and who supported him.

1 SAMUEL 16

Absalom was later killed and David returned to Jerusalem.

1 SAMUEL 19

Ziba saw an opportunity to exploit Mephibosheth's disability. He saw an opportunity to benefit himself at Mephibosheth's expense. He deserts Mephibosheth and then makes up a fake story about Mephibosheth thinking he'll get his throne back. David of course is thrilled for the supplies and support Ziba has brought and swallows the story, giving Ziba Mephibosheth's land as a reward. He never thought things through. If he had, he would have realised that Mephibosheth could have taken the throne off Absalom. He couldn't even get on a donkey without help. What a stupid judgement for David to have made. It didn't get much better when he discovered the truth because Ziba still got away with a lot because David was so grateful for his support in a time of need. The only one that comes out of it well is Mephibosheth who was gracious, doubtless because of the grace that had been shown him: *Let Ziba have it all," Mephibosheth answered. "It's enough for me that Your Majesty has come home safely."*

THE WAY OF THE WORLD?

We live in a world of Zibas: those that exploit the weakness of others for their personal benefit. I've seen plenty of Zibas in Felixstowe, particularly in relation to those with disabilities. We may live in an enlightened society, but there's plenty of places the light hasn't shined on yet.

We live in a world of David's too: people who make appalling judgements and then fail to put them right when they realise their mistake either because they can't or won't. I've seen plenty of David's too – people who make judgements about others even though they don't know them, or understand their situation.

And if we're really honest with ourselves, we've all been a Ziba or a David at some point.

That's why understanding that God shows no favouritism is so important. We are called to love and value people without favouritism or partiality. God judges without favouritism, He loves all without favouritism, Christ died for all irrespective of who they are or what they've done, He brings salvation without favouritism. He makes us equally His children when we come to personal faith in Christ and follow Him.

That isn't the way of the world, but it should be always our way. We've got to set the standards in our dealings with the people, and that doesn't just apply to those who have disabilities, it applies to all. And we can fall just as short as the world. We can tolerate the Zibas and act as Davids but we are called to a much higher integrity.

I noticed in the press this week that the great 20th Century Bible teacher, John Stott has died. Stott was a great evangelical scholar. One of the things he led the way with was helping Christians to recognise that our faith in Christ should be reflected in the integrity we should have in engaging with the world. Our actions and attitudes should reflect the actions and attitudes of a holy God. Geoff Tunnicliffe of the World Evangelical Alliance describes Stott 's attitude in this way: *every part of life comes under the Lordship of Christ, and that all of life is a context for worship, mission, ministry and active Christian engagement.*

TITLE

The legacy of John Stott will surely be that in the latter part of the 20th Century he helped to wake God's people up to not just the need to share Jesus with others, but to be Jesus to others as they relate their faith to all the practical issues that life presents.

And the Lad form Lo-debar is our model and encouragement. When he was without hope he was shown grace, and acted graciously as a result. God has revealed His grace to us in Christ, now let's reflect that to all those God brings us in contact with, without partiality: the disabled, the able-bodied, the poor, the rich, men, women, old, young – whatever. For His glory.

Prayer

*Preached by Mark Reid
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