

“Do It For Me”

Matthew 25:31-46

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When I was in college, I didn't have a car, at least after I totaled my 1968 Mustang at the end of my Freshman year, so I hitchhiked from time to time (not that I especially recommend that today.) The farthest I ever hitched a ride was from 45 miles north of Portland, Oregon to Vancouver, British Columbia, to catch a flight to Montreal. That's about a four-hour drive, and I left about fifteen hours before my flight, so I figured I'd be fine. But it turned out I was waiting at the Canadian border an hour before my flight, and I was getting really nervous.

Then a Corvette pulled up, and a guy offered a ride. I told him where I was going, and he said, "Lucky for you, I work for the airline. I'll get you on the plane." And he drove me to the airport, parked in employee parking, ran me straight to the ticket counter, and had me on the plane five minutes before takeoff. He extended himself to a stranger in need, and he showed me mercy.

In our passage for this morning, Jesus' public teaching ministry comes to an end. He opened his public teaching ministry with the Beatitudes, when he said, "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy." Now, he closes his public teaching ministry, where he shows how showing mercy makes a difference in eternity.

A Picture Of The Coming Judgment

The passage this morning is a picture of the coming judgment. It tells us that there will be justice on earth one day, a great accounting. In the end, there is no escaping the consequences of sin. What seems to be done behind closed doors and away from the gaze of others is known to God. It reminds us of Paul's words,

“Judge nothing before the appointed time; wait till the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men's hearts”
(1 Corinthians 4:5).

Our God is the Holy One, and he cannot abide evil and wrongdoing. But what about God's mercy? That is the miracle of grace, that although sin must be punished, for the person who trusts Jesus, their sins were punished on the cross. He stood judgment in our place. And so, in the end, with all the endless variety of human beings, there are really only two sorts of people. There are those who choose to receive Christ, to accept Jesus who paid the price in our place, and those who will pay the price for their own sins. That is the fundamental choice of all humanity. The coming judgment is universal, and it is irreversible. The king who does the judging is absolutely authoritative.

This picture of the coming judgment appears only in Matthew's gospel. That seems to make sense when you think how Matthew has emphasized Jesus as king.

He showed how Jesus came from the royal line of David. In chapter 1, Herod was afraid because he heard Jesus was born as "King of the Jews." The wise men offered the gifts

of a king, and in the temptation Satan offered Jesus all the kingdoms of the world. Jesus was entitled to them! Jesus was called the Son of David, a royal title, and he records Jesus' story of the king's son. The gospel even ends with Jesus' words, "All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me" (Matthew 28:16). Is it any wonder he is coming again to judge the earth? In his first coming he came in humility, born in a barn; in his second coming, he's coming in glory, the all-powerful king in all his splendor and majesty.

The Heart Of The Matter.

The heart of the matter is how we actually get into the kingdom. Jesus indicated this when he said,

"Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.'" (Matthew 25:34)

Notice the basis for coming into the kingdom. There is one way. Not by doing good works. Not by earning it. None of us can. The way into the kingdom is to be blessed by the Father. He is the source of salvation. Jesus is saying, You are entering the kingdom because the Father has determined to give you life. He is the source, not us, and it is all grace. That's why he says "Come into the kingdom *prepared* for you." Our salvation is secure! We have a home in heaven with Jesus, because we inherit everything he inherits on the basis of his work. And the good works of compassion and mercy are signs of the grace at work in us.

We're saved by God's underserved kindness, not by what we do. But every true believer knows that when you receive God's grace, you give it away. We're blessed to be a blessing. It's why Paul writes,

"For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do" (Ephesians 2:8-10).

We're saved, we're taken into God's family, and we're given an eternal home to look forward to, not because we do good to others. But when we're saved, that always, *always* finds expression in our life if it's real. We love, because God first loved us. What makes the difference is how we treat others—the love we show and the mercy we demonstrate.

I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, ³⁶I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.' (Matthew 25:35-36)

Jesus says our destiny comes down to how we respond to him—even serving others is secretly service to him.

So, we need to have compassion for believers.

Jesus means for us to care for one another in God's family, the church.

“And the King will answer them, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my *brothers*, you did it to me.’”

His brothers and sisters are his disciples. Matthew records,

“And stretching out his hand toward his disciples, he said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.’” (Matthew 12:49-50)

Jesus uses the word “brothers” in this passage, and I think he means it in a couple senses. That’s consistent with Paul when he writes,

“Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to *all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers*” (Galatians 6:10).

So, on one hand we’re motivated by wanting to encourage the faith of a suffering brother or sister in Christ by giving help, and on the other, we’re motivated by wanting to help unbelievers come to faith in him.

When Jesus says our eternal destiny rides on whether we show compassion for the least, his brothers, he means that serving his followers is really serving him. It’s what he’s getting at in Matthew chapter ten when he says,

“Whoever gives one of these little ones even a cup of cold water *because he is a disciple*, truly, I say to you, he will by no means lose his reward” (Matthew 10:42).

That means that if you’re really a Christian you’ll show compassion to Christians because they belong to Jesus. It’s one of the ways we show our faith is real. That’s why it’s a matter of heaven or hell, a matter of life and death. It’s what James is talking about when he says,

“Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, ‘Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed,’ but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead” (James 2:15-17).

If we don’t love to brothers and sisters, then our faith is dead, and we’re not followers of Jesus after all. So, we have to apply the ministry of compassion to other believers. It’s what families do.

We Need To Have Compassion For Unbelievers, Too.

But we have to show compassion for unbelievers, too. It’s not enough to care for our Christian brothers and sisters who are hurting. We’re not off the hook when it comes to those outside the family of faith. Jesus says if we *only* serve those who know him, we’re no different from unbelievers. If you only love people in your own tribe, if you’re only concerned about their suffering, you’re being just like an unbeliever.

Listen to what Jesus says about that:

"You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5:43-48).

The word "perfect" in that passage is *teleios*, perfect in the sense of complete, of fulfilling its purpose, and Jesus is saying, "be indiscriminate in the quality of your love." Show it to the outsider like the insider.

That's why if we're really disciples of Jesus, then we'll show compassion to some suffering people because they're followers of Jesus. And we'll also show compassion to other suffering people because they're *not* followers of Jesus. We'll be like our Heavenly Father, who blesses both the good and bad alike, when we love both God's children and our enemies. That means we do good to them.

It's not always easy to know how to do that. When the needs of the world are so overwhelming, and when we have access as close as our computer or TV to the great suffering of Haiti or the Sudan, of Chile or North Korea, of a city hit by tornado or hurricane or tsunami, or of the problems of our own cities. It's always present to us; like Jesus told his followers, "You will always have the poor with you" (Matthew 26:11). You can't even take a walk in an American city without running into the homeless, the drunk or addicted, the mentally ill.

One time I was walking in a downtown when I passed a ragged woman, and our eyes met for a moment. Suddenly, she stopped, and started yelling at me. I kept on going, and she followed me down the block, screaming at me. What are we supposed to do with a meeting like that? How are we supposed to help? It isn't easy. Jesus didn't say it would be. He just tells us "love your neighbor as you love yourself." And then he died and rose again to cover all our sin and brokenness, and to make compassion possible.

We show mercy to Christians, because we see Jesus in them. And we also show mercy to non-Christians because we want to see them *come* to know Jesus, and in some way, Jesus is already at work in them in their point of need. Either way, we should be known by the quality of our mercy for others.

Another thing about feeding people, giving them clothes, visiting them—those aren't complicated things to do. You don't have to go to seminary to understand them. Every one of us can do those things.

We Need To See People Like God Sees Them.

A good place to start is to ask God to help us see people like he sees them. When we do that, we'll see Jesus right in front of us, and we'll be on our way to caring for them like he does.

I saw this when kind of compassion once when I brought a team to minister to the poorest of the poor in Guatemala. We went to a terrible place, to a slum outside Guatemala City, a place with hundreds of thousands of people living in tin shacks cascading down a hillside, an open sewer running down the street, smoke from burning trash stinging your eyes. We went to visit a young widow we sponsored in her ten foot-square house, and the only place to sit was on her bed. We were talking with her when her little son came through the door carrying a crate of sodas. She had sent him to buy them to show us hospitality, even though it cost her most of the money she had to live on for the week. We came thinking we were doing her a favor by serving her, but we ended up seeing in her the love Jesus has for us.

I think it comes down to this. Love is humble, sacrificial, self-giving interaction that helps people know Jesus and to treasure him more than anything else. Love tries, whatever the cost, to bring people into a joyful passion for God through Jesus. And when we do that, we see him in a new way ourselves.

On the Day of Judgment, when you're brought before the Lord, will he say "Come, blessed one, take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you"? You belong there because your life is a demonstration of Jesus' love. You belong here because your actions show the reality of God's work in you. That is the central question of your life. What are you doing to show Jesus? Because when you care for someone in need, you're really caring for Jesus.

Eternity is going to play out in two places, and you and I are going to be in one or the other. It's not what a person does that endangers their soul, it's what they *don't* do. So come to Jesus in faith, and then show his love to others, and when you do, you'll be showing love for him.