



Matthew 25:31-46
Ministries of Mercy

Summary: There will be a judgment of eternal blessing or cursing based on our actions in this life: did we minister to others or ignore their needs?

Only a few days before His death, Jesus told His disciples to expect to see the destruction of the Jewish Temple and a time of terrible tribulation before He would finally return to earth and establish His kingdom forever.

This shocked His disciples who came to Him and asked in:

Matthew 24:3 ... "Tell us, when will these things be? And what *will be* the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?"

His answer to that question begins in verse 4 and continues all the way down to the stuff we're going to look at this morning at the end of chapter 25.

It's important for you to know that – it's important for you to remember the question Jesus is answering when He says these things we're going to read next. He's telling Christians what to expect and how to live until the day of His coming. He says:

Matthew 25:31 "When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory. 32 All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides *his* sheep from the goats. 33 And He will set the sheep on His right hand, but the goats on the left. 34 Then the King will say to those on His right hand, 'Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: 35 for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; 36 I *was* naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me.' 37 "Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed *You*, or thirsty and give *You* drink? 38 When did we see You a stranger and take *You* in, or naked and clothe *You*? 39 Or when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?' 40 And the King will answer and say to them, 'Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did *it* to one of the least of these My brethren, you did *it* to Me.' 41 "Then He will also say to those on the left hand, 'Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels: 42 for I was hungry and you gave Me no food; I was thirsty and you gave Me no drink; 43 I was a stranger and you did not take Me in, naked and you did not clothe Me, sick and in prison and you did not visit Me.' 44 "Then they also will answer Him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to You?'

45 Then He will answer them, saying, 'Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did not do *it* to one of the least of these, you did not do *it* to Me.' 46 And these will go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

There are so many things I want to show you here! But let's start by asking the question: in a world full of suffering, whom am I obligated to help?

There is such a thing as donor fatigue – when you hear about floods and tsunamis, famines and orphans and fires, Wounded Warriors and Children's Hospitals, and on and on you can start to go numb. In fact, that's a very natural reaction.

First you're moved with compassion, you experience an emotional stirring and ask, "What can I do to help?" That's great!

But then, as you see more and more needs, or the same need over and over again, it's easy to feel like nothing makes a difference or you can't do it all, and so you just give up and tune out. That's understandable. None of us are meant to replace Jesus – He's the only one sufficient for the world's needs.

So, what am I supposed to do?

Well, we begin by helping our family.

1 Tim 5:8 But if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.

This is said in the context of a discussion about taking care of widows. Should the church do that? Well, in very rare cases, the answer is yes – the church should help provide financially for widows, but first, her family has an obligation to provide for her.

And some of you are doing that: taking care of aging parents, aging siblings, and in some especially heart breaking cases, you're taking care of incapacitated adult children. This is good. God sees, He knows, and He is pleased – especially in those moments when it's hard and you're frustrated and your attitude stinks but you keep pressing on and pressing in, waiting for your feelings to catch up with your obedience.

We all got to watch Steve and Debbie Fitts lovingly and respectfully take care of their father Dick as he aged – Steve would pick him up every Sunday morning, bring him to church and then take him out to lunch, and finally take him home – it was a time-consuming commitment, it ate up most of his Sunday, but he was honoring his father, taking care of him, and demonstrating love and obedience to the rest of us.

Serving your family is a legitimate ministry, and if it's the thing God has called you to do for a season in a very intense way, then it is just as significant in His eyes as running a home for 400 orphans or preaching to 2000 people.

So, we have an obligation to take care of our immediate family, but we also have an obligation to take care of the family of God – notice Jesus says ... ‘Assuredly, I say to you, **inasmuch as you did *it* to one of the least of these My brethren, you did *it* to Me.**’

This is the third time Jesus has referred to His disciples as **My brethren** (cf Matt 10:40; 18:5; also 1 Cor 8:12) and it should have a RADICAL impact on how we see other Christians!

John, one of the disciples who heard Jesus say the things we read in Matthew 25 would later write

1 John 3:16 By this we know love, because [Jesus] laid down His life for us. And we also ought to lay down *our* lives for the brethren. 17 But whoever has this world’s goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him?

God questions if you know His love if you don’t show it to others, which illustrates that thing we talk about so often around here – that we are called to receive and reflect – first receive the love of God and then reflect it to others, in this case by meeting needs.

Remember, Jesus just described in Matthew 24 how much conflict would precede His return - people are going to suffer, Christians are going to suffer, life is going to be hard, and one of the ways God intends to relieve that suffering, loneliness, sickness, and need is by using other Christians.

Think about that! People pray to God, pour out their heart, maybe even cry out with tears and God’s answer is to move you, to prompt you, perhaps even to send you – to give, or just to be there, and to care. You are going to be the answer to their prayer!

In the early church Christians met the needs of other Christians sometimes even selling off material belongings to raise funds – now that was an exceptional case that we don’t see repeated again, but we do see churches taking up a collection to send to other Christians in need, churches sending out missionaries and then sending out people to meet with the missionaries, or visit them in jail – ministering to the family of God.

So, we have these immediate obligations: to our own family, and to the family of God.

But, Jesus also told us to love our neighbor and that led to the story of the Good Samaritan who was willing to help someone who was not a member of his family, not a member of his church, someone he actually had significant theological differences with – but who was right in front of him experiencing a tremendous need. And that was the point of the story – we are to do good, in Jesus’ name, wherever we have the opportunity.

Which means we need to explore our prejudices and our thinking. Some of you have

worked very hard, studied very hard to get to where you are now. And because of that, you can be tempted to think that if other people did the same thing, they would get to the same place. If people would just work hard and put in some effort, they wouldn't need a handout – hard work can get anybody out of poverty.

But that's not always true – you have ask: *what is the source of their suffering?*

Have they brought their need, their illness, or their separation on themselves? In some cases, yes. And if that's true, they need the gospel – they need to know forgiveness is available in Christ, that they can make a U-turn and a fresh start and then work hard by God's grace.

But others may be suffering because of spiritual attack. Look at the book of Job, or listen to Paul talk about his thorn in the flesh as “[a messenger of Satan to buffet me](#) (2 Cor 12:7).” Maybe they need your help and it's not their fault.

People also suffer because of the actions of other people – this can happen on a large scale like refugees fleeing because of a war, or on a personal scale. Paul suffered endlessly for the gospel, and spoke of men like “[Alexander the coppersmith \[who\] did me much harm](#) (2 Tim 4:14).” Once again, maybe some people need your help, and it's not their fault.

And then there's the fact that we live on a fallen plant so you have hard working farmers who do everything they can, but can't make it rain on their crops in a drought. Or you have people born with physical or mental disabilities or who receive them in life from things like concussions and TBI. They need your help, and it's not their fault.

And then finally, you have some people who suffer as a result of society and structures that reinforce or perpetuate poverty. They need your help, and it's not their fault.

The sources of poverty and need, suffering and difficulty, are complex and they're a mix of both nature and nurture so be careful about passing judgment too quickly.

Now, we can't fix everything or help everyone, and Jesus doesn't expect you to – but He does want us to be ready and available. And that means you might have to make some changes to the way you live. It means you need to work hard to be in control of your calendar and your credit cards because, if you're always maxed out on time and expenses, you have no margin to meet the needs of others.

We all need to take a hard look at the choices and commitments we make because this stuff manifests in very practical ways like, do you try to find the nicest car you can afford, or one that's good enough? Do you try to find the nicest housing you can afford, or the nicest neighborhood? When it comes to spending your time and money do you max things out for your own enjoyment, even what you might call your own “needs” or things you feel you “deserve” or do you intentionally adjust things down a bit ***so that you've got margin and therefore you're freed up to care more about others?***

Christians, we need to understand that it's OK to live feeling a little pinched, feeling like we wish maybe we had a little more, but understanding *the reason we don't is because we give.*

Can I tell you about a man I knew who modeled this?

His name was Ty, he was a medical doctor who lived down near Virginia Tech. He drove a beat up old Honda Civic and took a job as a contractor for the prison system so he didn't have to build up a practice and keep patients. That was important because it meant he could serve part of each year on the mission field. He would go to super remote areas of Kenya and Nepal, where there was only one missionary doctor for hundreds of miles. And he would relieve that doctor for several months so they could go home on furlough or take care of other business without shutting down the only hospital in the entire region.

Then, when the missionary doctor returned, Ty would head back to the states and work with med school students, preparing them to do the same thing – trying to plant a seed for a different view of life – trying to show them, practically, how it could be done and trying to do that before they built too much of the frame of their lives and made commitments that would make longer trips like this impossible.

Christians, one thing we learn from Matthew 25 is: we need a balance of both Doctrines and Deeds in the church and in our own lives. We need a strong emphasis on what God's Word says, we need good preaching, we need good Bible studies. But we also need a strong emphasis on evidence of all this truth in our lives. We need fruit that is produced by the root of the gospel.

You don't solve every problem with another Bible study, *but* you don't save souls with a bunch of good deeds – the two go hand in hand. Because we believe God's Word, we serve God's people.

That's already happening in some ways. When you give to the church, we give some of that to support missionaries like the Ayeles in Ethiopia. Their ministry is literally an outreach to widows and orphans. Stephen and I are leaving this week to visit them and prepare for the team headed out this summer.

And some goes to support Vic and Suebee in their ministry at the County Jail where Vic serves as the chaplain and oversees all the religious programs for over 1100 inmates.

Some of you serve in those programs, by leading Bible studies for inmates. But there's also a lady in our church who is a gifted seamstress. She volunteers to work with the inmates, teaching them to sew – they repair jumpsuits worn by inmates and learn a practical skill – she gets double credit – visiting those in prison and clothing the naked!

Some of you serve with Assist Crisis Pregnancy center and come alongside pregnant women and couples in need. We'll hear more about that in a few weeks on March 10th.

Others reach out to visiting Chinese scholars and give them a place to come and belong, to be welcomed as strangers in a new country.

We try to use our facilities to be a blessing – for a while Church of the Apostles was using our kitchen to prepare meals for the homeless. And if you come by during the week you’ll notice a big white trailer in the parking lot – that belongs to Sojourn, a church that meets right down the road in Frost Middle School – we let them park it here and use our church van to tow it back and forth each Sunday morning as they set up and tear down.

On Friday nights, Jesse and others from our congregation often go down to the Central Union Mission where they serve the homeless. The Fitts family has a long-standing commitment to fostering kids from infants to teenagers. Another family spends every Saturday morning at a Senior Living facility conducting church services for those who cannot come to church.

On top of all that, we have a mercy ministry fund established in the budget. These are just a few of the ways we, as a church and as individuals in the church, are trying to live for Christ and in light of His return.

But here’s where I need to warn you: this morning could be confusing if you have limited exposure to the rest of the Bible. You could get the impression that at the end of your life God will weigh out all the good things you’ve done, all the community service hours you’ve logged, all the checks you’ve written to charity, all the times you’ve given to the office collection to help a co-worker and you might think: “Well, I’m good.”

But you need to keep reading Matthew chapter 26, 27, and 28. You need to see what happens next with Jesus. He’s going to hang on the cross and die, and He’s going to tell the disciples His death is a substitutionary atonement – that means, He’s being punished, He’s dying *in our place*.

If you could give enough community service, or volunteer time, or enough money to charity, why did He have to do that? Was it a mistake, or was it important?

You see, the Scriptures would read differently if we needed to earn our salvation – they would be full of charts and graphs so you could see: OK, I’ve done this much bad stuff, so I need to do this much good stuff and then I’m clear. But that’s not what you find – and you wouldn’t want to live in that kind of that world anyway. Can you imagine knowing someone who is a total jerk, mean, arrogant, rude, but each year he writes this enormous check to help with funding research for children’s cancer – so, he’s good, just barely, but he made it. No, something inside us says that wrong.

And so we don’t find charts and graphs in Scripture, we find things like this:

“all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” – Romans 3:23

If you're looking for inclusivity, here is where we find it – none of us starts off any better than the rest, we're all equal: equally sinners in God's eyes. We've all done wrong, had bad days, been less of the man or woman we hope to be. We've all been disappointed in our selves, and sometimes we've just flat out been mean, vindictive, greedy; we've lusted or lied. All of us – even your grandma.

And, God says

**“the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”
– Romans 6:23**

We earn death and eternal punishment by our sin, but we receive eternal life as a free gift from God the Father through Christ Jesus our Lord.

As Jesus speaks to His disciples, He wants them to know judgment is coming, and it will affect everyone. He said **The Son of Man [will] come in glory, and**

Matthew 25:32 All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides *his* sheep from the goats.

I have to get a little technical here for a minute to help you see something important – the word for “*nations*” is the Greek word *ethnos*. Does that sound familiar? It's where we get the English word ethnic or ethnicity; it's usually translated *Gentiles*, meaning anyone who is not a Jew.

So, this isn't like the opening ceremony at the Olympics with all the people from Peru following their flag, and then all the people from India following theirs. It's not *nations* in the geopolitical sense - it's a way of saying all the people of the earth – *everyone* will be gathered, no one opts out, it's not voluntary, it's inevitable, every one is brought to be judged by the King of the world and Creator of the universe.

And, Jesus tells us; it's a final judgment. After He divides them, on the basis of their conduct, Jesus says:

Matthew 25:46 ... “these will go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

Now, if you'll tolerate a little more technical commentary here, you need to know this has been translated so it reads well in English, but in the original language, the word describing the punishment *is the same* as the word describing life.

My Bible uses the terms *everlasting punishment* and *eternal life*. The words everlasting and eternal share similar meaning in English, but they're *the exact same word in Greek*. So, whether it's going to be good for you, or bad, the point is: *it will be that way, forever*. There

are no second chances, no explanations, no alibis. Nothing goes unnoticed; everything matters. The point is: your actions today impact eternity – for better or worse.

It's the same message as the parables He told of the virgins with their lamps and the servants entrusted with talents: *what you do today matters.*

But, the Bible goes on to say:

1 John 1:9 If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us *our* sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

And that cleansing is deep and permanent – as the imagery on the front of your bulletin reminds you:

Isaiah 1:18 “Come now, and let us reason together,”
Says the LORD,
“Though your sins are like scarlet,
They shall be as white as snow;
Though they are red like crimson,
They shall be as wool.

If you want to find eternal life, eternal forgiveness, meaning, and purpose for your life, you find it in and through Jesus. You confess your sins to God and ask for forgiveness in Jesus' name. And then, you go out and make a difference in the world in light of the difference He has made in you. God is demanding big things from you, but only because He's also offering tremendous things to you.

So, I want to encourage you to have your eyes open – to ask God: where are the needs you want me to meet? Where is there hunger or thirst that you want me to do something about? Where are the lonely people, or new people You want me to reach out to? Do you want me to go the jails or write letters to people already there? Do you want me to visit the sick, or gather clothes for the needy? What does God want you to do, out of response to what He has already done for you?

Lots to think about this morning.

Let's pray.