

Making It Part of Everyday Life
Series: St. Paul Partnership In Ministry
Matthew 25:31-46
July 10, 2016

Well, it's good to be back in the pulpit today. I've never had 3 weeks off as a senior pastor, and I was worried I might have forgotten how to do this. I'll let you be the judge of that.

Next week, we are returning to our series "Days of Elijah." There were several passages we were unable to get to, and I want to explore those with you. So, when you see this sermon image and think, "Didn't we just do that?", well, thank you for paying attention.

This is our final Sunday of our 4 week series and focus on missions and especially our Partnership in Ministry with St. Paul UMC. Our purpose has been to elevate our understanding of the needs of missions, increase our participation in missions and especially with St. Paul, and raise \$2,400 to fulfill our promise as a Covenant Partner to support St. Paul's ministry.

And during the first 3 weeks of our series, I would say we have been challenged. I have been challenged to think through my attitudes. We have all been challenged, and for some, you may have heard something you did not agree with and it upset you.

We were challenged in our thinking regarding immigrants. We were challenged to think not in terms of "we're helping these poor people", but "we need to be in relationship with people, regardless of their social, economic situations."

There is a saying: the job of the preacher is to comfort the afflicted... and afflict the comfortable. And while I tend to be more of a comforter than an afflicter, the saying is true, and sometimes we who are comfortable need to be afflicted, need to be challenged in our belief system, our thought processes, and the living out of our Christian faith.

You see, there is a distinct difference in the way we can choose to live out our faith, and it has to do with our view of Holy Scripture. Progressives and liberals look at Scripture as **containing** the word of God, not **the** Word of God. If their experience in life does not match what the Bible has to say, then they reimagine the Scriptures to fit their present context. They change, discount, or ignore those places in Scripture that go against their lived experience.

But orthodox, evangelical, tradition view of Scripture is different. We look at Scripture as **the** Word of God, inspired and authoritative in our lives. Paul wrote in 2 Timothy 3:16

*All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It corrects us when we are wrong and teaches us to do what is right.*¹

Therefore, when we look at Scripture and we find a passage that does not agree with our lived experience, we call that sin. Now through the power of the Holy Spirit, I can receive forgiveness and the ability to bring that area of my life under the leadership of Jesus. Therefore, it is not Scripture that is discounted, ignored or changed. I am the one that needs to change. Do you see what I mean? If we read something in Scripture

¹ 2 Timothy 3:16 (NLT)

that is against something in our lives, we don't change Scripture – we change ourselves. That's what Paul means when he says, "It corrects us when we are wrong and teaches us to do what is right."

Paul goes on to say in that passage:

*God uses it [Scripture] to prepare and equip his people to do every good work.*²

So, we have been challenged these past weeks. A couple of passages of Scripture have been pointed out to us that quite frankly have made some uncomfortable, challenged us in our thinking. And these are questions that have challenged us: what does the Bible say about immigrants, and what does it say about the needy?

First, what does the Bible say about immigrants? Now, I know that this is a hot button topic in the political arena right now, and I am not endorsing one candidate's view over another. I'm looking at what the Bible says about the subject, for that is my source for behavior and attitudes.

I looked up through Scripture and found 10 references to the treatment of immigrants, foreigners, or aliens – which ever translation you use. Most of them are in the Law of Moses, and they say pretty much the same thing, and are best summed up in Leviticus 19:33-34:

*"Do not take advantage of foreigners who live among you in your land. Treat them like native-born Israelites, and love them as you love yourself. Remember that you were once foreigners living in the land of Egypt..."*³

Did you hear what the Bible said? God says to treat foreigners as you'd treat fellow countrymen, to love them as you love yourself. And He reminds us that in reality, we are all foreigners, aliens in this world because it is only our temporary home. So we are to view strangers, newcomers, and foreigners as opportunities to demonstrate God's love.⁴

God spoke through Jeremiah the prophet as well and said:

*But I will be merciful only if you stop your evil thoughts and deeds and start treating each other with justice; only if you stop exploiting foreigners, orphans, and widows; only if you stop your murdering; and only if you stop harming yourselves by worshiping idols. Then I will let you stay in this land that I gave to your ancestors to keep forever.*⁵

Now, while these passages are directed specifically to the Israelites, there is no reason why it should not apply to us. God calls us to love, mercy, and justice – always, not just within our family, our church, the people like us.

So, no matter your political persuasion and the rhetoric that is being used today, as Christians, we must follow Scripture, which may mean we need to reconsider our positions. We are not to take advantage or exploit the aliens among us, but treat them as we would treat anyone else and love them as we love ourselves.

I have to change some of my thoughts and preconceptions in light of the Scriptures. I don't know what all that means, but I cannot ignore the Word of God in this matter.

² 2 Timothy 3:17 (NLT)

³ Leviticus 19:33-34 (NLT)

⁴ Life Application Study Bible, Leviticus 19:33-34

⁵ Jeremiah 7:5-7 (NLT)

So we have been challenged first with the question “What does the Bible say about immigrants?” Second, we’ve been challenged to ask, “What does the Bible say about the needy?” And we have been referred to Matthew 25:31-46. I would like for you to open that passage in your Bible. Matthew 25:31-46.

Matthew 25 has been a passage of Scripture that has been held up for us as an example of service and mission for the Christ follower. It is one of the most vivid parables Jesus ever spoke. I think we should in the time remaining really dig into the passage to find the incredible jewels of the parable.

Matthew 25:31-46 (NRSV)

“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’ Then he will say to those at his left hand, ‘You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ Then they also will answer, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?’ Then he will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’ And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”⁶

Jesus tells us in this parable that God will separate His obedient followers from pretenders and unbelievers. This separation conception is repeated in the books of Ezekiel and Revelation as well.

The lesson of this parable is crystal clear: the real evidence of our belief is the way we act. God will judge us in accordance with our reaction to human need. His judgment does not depend on the knowledge we have amassed, or the fame that we have acquired, or the fortune that we have gained, but on the help that we have given.

And there are certain things which this parable teaches us about the help which we must give.

First, it must be help in simple things. The things which Jesus picks out – giving a hungry person a meal, or a thirsty person a drink, welcoming a stranger (there’s that immigrant/alien thing again), cheering the sick, visiting the prisoner – these are things which anyone can do. These are acts we all can do every day, that do not

⁶ Matthew 25:31-46 (NRSV)

depend on wealth, ability, or intelligence; they are simple acts freely given and freely received. It is not a question of giving away thousands of dollars, or of writing our names in the annals of history; it is a case of giving simple help to the people we meet every day. We have no excuse to neglect those who have deep needs, and we cannot hand over this responsibility to the church or government. Jesus demands our personal involvement in caring for others' needs.⁷

The second thing this parable teaches us is that **all such help given is really given to Jesus, and all such help withheld is withheld from Him as well.** How can that be? Well, think about it this way. If we really wish to delight a parent's heart, if we really wish to move them to gratitude, the best way to do it is to help their child. God is the great Father; and the way to delight the heart of God is to help His children, those around us.

Finally, the parable teaches us is that **our help must be uncalculating.** Those who helped did not think that they were helping Christ and thus piling up eternal merit; they helped because they could not stop themselves. It was the natural, instinctive, quite uncalculating reaction of the loving heart. Whereas, on the other hand, the attitude of those who failed to help was, "If we had known it was you we would gladly have helped; but we thought it was only some common man who was not worth helping." It is still true that there are those who will help if they are given praise and thanks and publicity; but to help like that is not to help, it is to pander to our own self-esteem. Such help is not generosity; it is disguised selfishness. The help which wins the approval of God is that which is given for nothing but the sake of helping.

There were two men who found this parable a blessing. The one was Francis of Assisi; he was wealthy and high-born and high-spirited. But he was not happy. He felt that life was incomplete. Then one day he was out riding and met a leper, loathsome and repulsive man in the ugliness of his disease. Something moved Francis to dismount and fling his arms around this wretched sufferer; and in his arms the face of the leper changed to the face of Christ.

The other man blessed by this parable was Martin of Tours. He was a Roman soldier and a Christian. One cold winter day, as he was entering a city, a beggar stopped him and asked for alms. Martin had no money; but the beggar was blue and shivering with cold, and Martin gave what he had. He took off his soldier's coat, worn and frayed as it was; he cut it in two and gave half of it to the beggar man. That night he had a dream. In it he saw the heavenly places and all the angels and Jesus in the midst of them; and Jesus was wearing half of a Roman soldier's cloak. One of the angels said to him, "Master, why are you wearing that battered old cloak? Who gave it to you?" And Jesus answered softly, "My servant Martin gave it to me."

When we learn the generosity which without calculation helps people in the simplest things, we too will know the joy of helping Jesus Christ himself.⁸

That's why we are taking this special offering for St. Paul today. We are doing it out of generosity, and we should not do some calculation in giving it. We want to help St. Paul do ministry at times and places that we cannot. There are times we can help in the ministry, and that is something I am challenging us to do as well. But there are times we cannot be there. There are opportunities that we cannot tap into because we are

⁷ Life Application Study Bible, Matthew 25:34-40

⁸ Barclay's Daily Study Bible, Matthew 25:31-46

here in Germantown and not on Huffman Avenue. There are skills and structures that we do not have, but have been placed at St. Paul by Almighty God Himself to serve the immigrant/alien, orphans, widows, those struggling with addiction or mental illness, those for whom life has dealt a heavy burden or sudden and devastating blow.