

Jon High. 23rd November 2008. Matt 25:31-46

Serving Jesus

Series on 'community' - what it means to love on another, live together, work together, worship together, learn together, grow together and serve together. Looking at how to get to know Jesus together, and how to make Jesus known together.

'Serving Jesus' - why do we do it? Either the foundation or the roof. (the icing on the cake?!)

"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left. Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who 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 drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.' Then the righteous will answer him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?' 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.'

"Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you cursed, 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 no drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' Then they also will answer, 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?' Then he will answer them, saying, 'Truly, I say to you, 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."

Matthew 25 v 31 - 46 (ESV)

What is this passage about?

Talks about the time when Jesus will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead. It also appears to show the criteria on which people will be judged - it's this criteria that we'll look at today.

Does this say that we will be saved because of our actions? does this mean that people that care for the poor, visit people in prison or run charity shops are more likely to be 'saved' than those who do not?

If we read this in isolation that may be the conclusion we could draw.. but it marks the end of a few chapters of teaching on the same subject.

Starts by saying that he will come back one day soon.

Then tells 4 stories ('parables') about his return:

But know this, that if the master of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.

Matthew 24 v 43 - 44

The purpose of this story was that Jesus was coming back, and that his followers should be prepared for his return. 'Don't rest until I return'.

Don't rest from what?

Friend who went to Canada for a fortnight, came back Canadian = we become like the people we admire. 7 of top 20 books on Amazon are biographies or autobiographies. We find people compelling and want to read about them and be like them.

In the book of John particularly, but also elsewhere when Jesus is addressed by the disciples they use the title 'Rabbi' (hrab-bee):

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Which was an official Jewish title that we often see referred to as 'Teacher'. Although it means more than that (master would be closer), there was an understanding at the time of what it meant to be a Rabbi's disciple:

[At around age 14 or 15 the best students of the Talmud] would apply to a well known rabbi to become one of that rabbi's talmidim (disciples). We often think of a disciple as a student, but being a disciple was far more than just being a student. The goal of a disciple wasn't just to know what the Rabbi knew, but to be just like the rabbi.

Rob Bell, Velvet Elvis¹

When a Rabbi decided that he wanted a talmidim, he would go them and say 'come, follow me'. At the beginning of Matthew, right at the start of his public ministry Jesus says these same words to two fishermen - Simon and Andrew.

Significant because Simon and Andrew were working and so would have been rejected as not good enough to be disciples of a Rabbi. Jesus begins his ministry by pointing out that his followers are those that don't achieve, the 'have not's of the world.

For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, so that, as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord."

¹ p. 129 Chapter (movement) 5 - Dust.

1 Cor 1 v 26 - 31 (ESV)

Jesus began the religion for misfits, for those that the world dismisses... compare with:

You don't get rich writing science fiction. If you want to get rich, you start a religion.

L. Ron Hubbard (founder of Church of scientology and science fiction writer)

Jesus didn't just teach his disciples, he mentored them - he didn't tell them what to do, he showed them. We can see this when Jesus walks on water: Peter isn't satisfied to just watch, he wants to get out of the boat and do it too.

Jesus taught about the kingdom, prayed for the sick, fed the hungry... and the disciples knew that that was to be their life also. When the disciples saw that Jesus was about loving people and not being self-serving but serving others, they knew that that's what they were supposed to do to.

So before this morning's passage, Jesus is encouraging the disciples to keep busy loving people, serving people, caring for people, teaching people, preaching the gospel in anticipation of his return. He then tells another story:

"Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom his master has set over his household, to give them their food at the proper time? Blessed is that servant whom his master will find so doing when he comes. Truly, I say to you, he will set him over all his possessions. But if that wicked servant says to himself, 'My master is delayed,' and begins to beat his fellow servants and eats and drinks with drunkards, the master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he does not know and will cut him in pieces and put him with the hypocrites. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Matthew 24 v 45 - 51

So again Jesus is encouraging the disciples to keep busy ready for his return. (Jesus is coming - look busy!)

So Jesus starts by saying 'I'm coming back soon', then 'I'm coming back soon keep busy', then 'I'm coming back soon, keep busy' then he tells two more stories:

"Then the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. For when the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them, but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. As the bridegroom was delayed, they all became drowsy and slept. But at midnight there was a cry, 'Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.' Then all those virgins rose and trimmed their lamps. And the foolish said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.' But the wise answered, saying, 'Since there will not be enough for us and for you, go rather to the dealers and buy for yourselves.' And while they were going to buy, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the marriage feast, and the door was shut. Afterward the other virgins came also, saying, 'Lord, lord, open to us.' But he answered, 'Truly, I say to you, I do not know you.' Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.

Matthew 25 v 1 - 13

The custom of the day was for the bridegroom to go to the bride's house with his friends (symbolically leaving his home) and go to the bride's for the wedding ceremony, often at night. They would then return to the groom's house for the party. Each person would be responsible for refilling their own lamps.

Jesus doesn't explain this story, but the point of it is pretty simple - be prepared, I'm coming soon.

“For it will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted to them his property. To one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. He who had received the five talents went at once and traded with them, and he made five talents more. So also he who had the two talents made two talents more. But he who had received the one talent went and dug in the ground and hid his master's money. Now after a long time the master of those servants came and settled accounts with them. And he who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five talents more, saying, 'Master, you delivered to me five talents; here I have made five talents more.' His master said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master.' And he also who had the two talents came forward, saying, 'Master, you delivered to me two talents; here I have made two talents more.' His master said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master.' He also who had received the one talent came forward, saying, 'Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you scattered no seed, so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.' But his master answered him, 'You wicked and slothful servant! You knew that I reap where I have not sown and gather where I scattered no seed? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and at my coming I should have received what was my own with interest. So take the talent from him and give it to him who has the ten talents. For to everyone who has will more be given, and he will have an abundance. But from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. And cast the worthless servant into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'”

Matthew 25 v 14 - 30

A talent was a unit of money, representing about 20 years wages for a labourer. These days that would equate to £250k- £350k. The message here was that it wasn't important how much was earned, but the faithfulness in using the things that the servants had.

The message for us from this is that our achievements are relevant only inasmuch as that they are reflective of the ways in which we have used the things that God has given us. Our culture is becoming more and more about expecting instant results with little effort ('using your talent') over working hard. Whereas we may recognise some as being more naturally gifted at certain things than other people (be it drawing, musicianship, public speaking, connecting with children, talking to strangers) the important factor here is how we use the skills that we have - do we 'invest' them, using them, honing them, sharpening them, or do we just let them lie there unused?

We consider it a travesty when a gifted songwriter goes 'off the rails' and self-destructs so they don't write songs any more, or when someone with the gift of speaking clearly to the masses has nothing to say. Jesus was teaching his disciples that he was coming back soon, and that they should keep busy!

Then we come to this morning's passage and the pieces start to fall into place - there's an expectation of activity on the christian that they will be becoming more like Christ, that they will be Christ's talmidim themselves. Jesus was saying that there'd be two types of people in the world: people like him, and people not like him.

But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing.

James 1 v 22 - 24

There's an expectation in the New Testament that Christians should be actively living and working out their faith. The disciples were expected to continue Christ's work after he left them.

What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled," without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.

But someone will say, "You have faith and I have works." Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works.

James 2 v 14 - 18

How do people know that we are Christians? How is the world going to be convinced of the reality of the existence of God, and his ability to transform lives for the better? I wasn't convinced by clever argument alone...

Why is the focus of the passage particularly on the poor?

For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.'

Why is the particular focus on the hungry, the thirsty, strangers, the naked, the sick and the imprisoned?

God's kingdom is a kingdom of justice and equality. In God's kingdom there are none who go hungry, there is no poverty. The Bible often speaks of poverty and oppression together - the idea that in order for poverty to exist people must be being exploited and oppressed. These concepts are totally alien to the Kingdom of God. When Jesus talked about the kingdom of God coming he talked not only about the time after the judgement, but before it too, when bits of the kingdom would break into this present time, bringing hope, healing, freedom, release from captivity.

This was to be the activity of the disciples (and remains the activity of modern-day disciples): to bring the Kingdom of God to earth. Why the poor and the oppressed? why the sick? because they need the kingdom to come in their lives and in their situations. And in so doing the disciples will continue the message of Jesus that began in them - that God takes the weak, the low, the

despised and calls them into his kingdom. They continue what they saw Jesus doing, building a religion for misfits.

How to respond? Jesus valued the low, the rejected, the people normally despised so highly that he likened himself to them. He said, 'love them, love me'. 'Serve them, serve me'.

Night-shelter.

This is the most powerful message on earth - a faith that can so change hearts, so transform lives that those who would previously be regarded as the low, the rejected, the useless, the despised, these people are the people to whom God has chosen to bring his Kingdom.