

To the Least of These
Matt 25: 31-40

Brothers and sisters in Christ, do you remember back in high school, that group of popular kids who were at the center of your High School universe?

The coolest, most attractive, athletic, wealthiest group of students that we all wanted to be like and hang out with – but they were exclusive, and it was hard to get in.

And this isn't new, every generation that's gone through high school had to deal with being popular, or not, or being somewhere in between. And I guess it would be an ok way to organize high school, and even society in general, if it wasn't so pretentious and mean spirited.

Now I don't know where you fit in during in High School, but if you spent any time on the outer reaches of the High School universe you know how lonely and isolating it can be. And if you tried to get closer to the center you quickly found out how ugly things could get as you got put back in your place.

Or if you managed to get in with the cool kids, you were expected to keep out those who were deemed less worthy.

I think most of us are glad that this is now just a high school memory and no longer a reality for us, or is it?

You see, without even realizing it our church life can become pretty "High School." We get focused on ourselves, we forget about the people on the outside we're called to serve, just like the Jews back in Jesus' day did.

At the center of Jewish life were the religious leaders who were really righteous, kept the purity laws, didn't associate with the unclean. Around them were those who were less rigorous with the Law, not as observant with their devotion. Then you had the outer rings reserved for the sick and the poor; lepers, widows and orphans, those who had committed crimes, and of course the gentiles.

The Gentiles were the non-Jews, they didn't know God, His Laws and they weren't part of the Covenant either.

And we know the Jews hated Gentiles, they were impure and immoral, AND they often persecuted, conquered, or tried to annihilate the Jews and wipe them off the face of the earth.

So the Jews took comfort, whenever they were conquered, that they were God's chosen people, and that one-day God would come, dispense justice and destroy the wicked Gentiles.

God had given them such promises through the prophets. Isaiah 13:10-11 for example. *"I will punish the world for its evil, the wicked for their sins."* But the Jews were overlooking some important reminders in the Prophets. Like Isaiah 49:6 *"you are light for the Gentiles... to bring my salvation"*

Because, brothers and sisters it's hard to serve others when you have an exclusive attitude and you want to see those whom you are supposed to serve be destroyed in judgment!

As I said God's people had become pretty "High School," and when it comes to who we are to go and make disciples of, we can end up acting just like the Pharisees and the Jews did.

Without even realizing it, we can start to look down upon non-Christians and avoid serving them, especially those whose morals and lifestyles are so obviously non-biblical, or those who don't fit into our vision and mission and won't really be able to give back and contribute to our congregation.

So, we get a little warning from Jesus this morning in Matt 24 about becoming internally focused, exclusive, and not looking outwardly at those He calls us to serve.

It starts with an example about sheep and goats to correct **misunderstandings** about the final judgment. Yes, there will be a judgment for all the nations – but wait a minute, where are all the familiar elements that we've heard elsewhere?

Gone is the wrath and anger, the punishment for sin... and where's the lake of fire? And what happened to the familiar qualifying factors for those who go on to eternal life?

What is going on here? Well brothers and sisters, by leaving out all the typical characteristics of judgment that are present

in other parts of the scripture **Jesus is not redefining the requirements to get into heaven** – *rather He is confronting our exclusive and judgmental attitudes to get rid of them.*

He does this by swapping the familiar requirements with a focus on how we serve those who don't really matter – widows and orphans, those who make us unclean - the sick, lepers, serving those who were reckless spenders and got themselves into debtor's prison and now require our help!

Serving the lowest of the low who probably have contributed to, and are suffering the consequences of their actions, and kind of deserve to be in their situation. And that convicts us.

Because we'd definitely go out of our way to help an important person, someone like Jesus, the Messiah! He's the Son of God, he deserves it AND He'd thank us and reward us!

And this is convicting in regards to final judgement because we know that we need to know Jesus to survive all the elements that have been left out here – BUT... the criteria

which shows we truly know Jesus is how we relate to those whom the world says have no value. Do you know Jesus?

Then you know Jesus was born into this world as the lowest of the low, born in an animal food dish, as one who had no value.

Thus, to serve those who are not really worth serving brothers and sisters, is like serving Christ himself. *“Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.”*

Now please understand – there is nothing inherently more noble or spiritual about being the lowest of the low, as some would like to say.

And you may have heard this scripture passage quoted by progressive people in their efforts to present Jesus as someone who fits into the tolerant, non-judgmental spirit of our times because they claim that *“no other requirements of judgment are listed here, aside from taking care of the poor and pursuing social justice.”*

But friends - that's not why Christ told this story and that's not the proper way to interpret and apply it. First and foremost because that doesn't tie in with the rest of Christ's teaching on repentance and forgiveness followed by obedience.

No brothers and sisters, this example is about serving those who are considered worthless, because we know the world considered Christ to be worthless... BUT also because... if we truly know Jesus, we are drawn to the value of the Image of God His father in those who are otherwise worthless to us.

So, its worth asking who is considered to be worthless these days? Animal abusers and drunk drivers, radical jihadists and terrorists, pedophiles and human traffickers, I could go on but you get the picture. There's always a list of people who are despised who do despicable things – they are worthless!

But Jesus says *“Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these; you did not do for me.”* Ouch!

Brothers and sisters, the more we get to know Jesus and have His Holy Spirit living in us, the more we are able to see the Image of God in those whom our society says are worthless.

Because that indicates we have come to realize the truth that there is something which affects us, and makes us unfaithful covenant partners with God – worthless to him for all His intents and purposes... and yet He set out to redeem us and restore our value to himself through Christ.

So – if we really know Christ, we know that no matter **what** someone may have done, whatever their situation might be, whatever value or return they may or may not have for us, they also bear the mark of their Creator, they share it with us.

The Word of God which created us, also created them and because we are redeemed and transformed by that same Word made flesh, Jesus – whom we know - we are compelled to help them, to serve them – with no benefit to ourselves.

So, can you see the difference between serving others because we see their value as an image bearer of God – albeit a fallen and distorted image - versus serving someone because it somehow benefits us or they are worth serving?

Do you see how this really reveals whether we truly know Jesus or not? And at the final judgement brothers and sisters that is really all that matters for us – do we really know Jesus?

So brothers and sisters – my prayer for us this morning is that if there is any hint of exclusiveness or judgmentalism has begun to take root in our hearts, that is keeping us focused inwards as a congregation, that is preventing us from looking outwards, from going out into our community, and into our country, and into God’s great world - and serving others...

Or if we are in danger of serving only those who seem to have value to us, or whom we value for reasons other than the image of God in them, or who are worth serving because doing so will benefit us in some way...

Brothers and sisters I pray that Jesus’ words will speak to our hearts, convict us and correct us, and turn us around and fill us with Agape Love – a love that serves with no regard for reward, or results, or requirements.

And may this agape love motivate us to serve others in whatever capacity God has gifted us – and that we would pay special attention for the opportunities and ways we can serve those who who seem worthless.

And know this brothers and sisters. when we serve in this way – Christ takes his rightful place at the center of the universe and everything revolves around him and our congregation goes out with a magnetic force which draws people to become a part of Christ’s Body here at Valleyview.

If we know Jesus, then we know that He said *“the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”(Mark 10:45)*

May the Holy Spirit open our eyes to see these opportunities, and the willingness to step up to serve in this capacity; today as we hear Mike share about the work of CCI; tomorrow as we go out – back to school, to work, to our neighborhoods, and in the months and the year ahead; so that we know the cost of following Jesus, stepping out in faith to become a new congregation, to continue to serve our community – is worth it.

To the least of these brothers and sisters, to the least of these.

Amen.