

To the Least of These
Matt 25: 31-46

Brothers and sisters in Christ, at this time of year we often pause to congratulate and celebrate with our young people who have reached that milestone of High school graduation.

And for all that we could ask them to reflect on about their high school experience – this morning I would be most interested to know how they have dealt with their relationship to “the popular crowd”.

Remember??? That group of guys, or girls who formed the center of the High School universe around which the entire student body tends to revolve.

They are the coolest, or most attractive, athletic, wealthiest students who gather together and create a magnetic-like force that attracts other students who are less cool, less attractive, and less wealthy.

And these other students fall into the orbit around the popular crowd, wishing they were cooler, more athletic, etc... and the less cool, and attractive and athletic you are the farther out you orbit around them.

And the center of the High School universe is exclusive, only the elite few can occupy it while the rest of the students gather in their own little groups relative to the center.

To be sure not everyone in school is set in this orbit, you do have some rogue individuals who don't care and streak through high school like a comet or an asteroid going on its own path, sometimes causing a collision - but for the most part everyone circles around that elite group of students at the center – the clique.

And this is not something new, your grandparents dealt with it in the 40's and 50's, your parent's dealt with it in the 60's we went through it in the 70's, 80's and 90's and our kids still deal with it today.

And I suppose this would be an ok way to organize school, and even society in general, if it wasn't so pretentious and mean spirited.

I don't know where you found yourself in the High school universe 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 were put you back in your place.

Or if you were found worthy of being closer to the center, you were expected to protect your ranking and keep others less worthy from coming in.

In fact this dilemma is used for the plot line for most teenaged high school movies... "Will the hero join the clique and turn their back on their true friends in order to belong to the popular crowd?"

I think most of us are glad that this is now limited to a movie experience and no longer a reality for us, or is it?

You see friends, the sad truth is that in the midst of all the wonderful growth and fellowship and experience of what Christ is doing in our lives - church can end up become pretty "High School" and focused on ourselves, forgetting about the people we are called to serve.

Now brothers and sister this would not the first time that God's people have adopted an exclusivist attitude in their dealings with others around them.

During the time of our Lord's ministry on earth, the attitude of the Jewish people and their leaders had become extremely exclusive, in other words it was pretty "High School."

At the center of Jewish society were the religious leaders, those who were really righteous, those who kept the purity laws of the temple and didn't associate with those who were unclean.

From there you had varying degrees of social status until you reached the outer rings reserved for those sick with leprosy, the poor, the widows and orphans, those who had committed a crime to try and survive, and of course the gentiles.

The Gentiles were those to whom God had not revealed himself, those who did not know God, those who were not part of the Mosaic Covenant relationship with Yahweh.

And the Gentiles were particularly hated, not only because they lived impure and immoral lives- but because they often persecuted, conquered, or otherwise tried to annihilate the Jews and wipe them off the face of the earth.

However the Jews took comfort - especially as an occupied nation - in the fact that Yahweh was on their side. They were his chosen people and He was their God and come judgment day He had promised to dispense the justice and destruction on Gentiles for their wickedness.

Isaiah 13 is an example of such a promise...

See, the day of the LORD is coming —a cruel day, with wrath and fierce anger— to make the land desolate and destroy the sinners within it.... I will punish the world for its evil, the wicked for their sins. I will put an end to the arrogance of the haughty and will humble the pride of the ruthless. (Isaiah 13: 10, 11)

However, the Jewish people were being a bit selective in their reading of the prophets. They focused only on Yahweh's promises to destroy their enemies and ignored the prophetic call for Israel to be a light to the nations around them.

I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth."(Isaiah 49:6)

Friends, 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.

We might want only make disciples of those whom we like, or those who are most like us.

We might want to only serve those who are nice, those who make us feel comfortable, or those who have the same level of spiritual maturity as we do....????

It's easy to want to exclude those people from our outreach efforts who are difficult, hostile, or just plain indifferent to the truth and hope of the gospel message.

In fact we can start to become judgmental in our attitudes to people outside the church, just as the Jews did to the Gentiles.

Without even realizing it, we can start to look down upon non-Christians and avoid finding ways to serve them, especially those whose morals and lifestyles are so obviously non-biblical.

And it's easy to selectively read the scriptures to justify avoiding serving others, especially non-Christians just as the Jews did. For example we might read Rev 21:7 where it says: *The cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars—they will be consigned to the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death.*

But, brothers and sisters – when we do this, our perspective does not line up with the heart of Jesus' mission until the day of His return. He says *"It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."* (Mark 2:17)

And he has saved us – while still sinners – so that we escape that judgment. Now He has called us to be the light of the world and has instructed us - *let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.*(Matt 5:16)

But brothers and sisters our sinful nature is so subtle in its deception that it take these instructions and twists them so that we try to look good trying to help the sinners, and shinning our light before others... and before we know it we have become exclusive and self-righteous.

So Jesus needs to warn us about this exclusive, disparaging attitude that can easily develop in us. And if it has begun to take root in any way friends, this morning the Holy Spirit wants to turn it around towards love and service.

And in the scripture passage from Matt 24 this morning we see Jesus confronting his disciples about this issue.

And he gives this example about the sheep and the goats to correct their understanding about the final judgment and what it will be like – so let's listen for what the Holy Spirit wants us to learn about this as well.

So we begin by noting that in chapters 24 and 25 Jesus had been explaining what life will be like in the world now that God's plan to save the world is in the "Messiah phase."

Because once Jesus Christ completed His work – His death and resurrection, ascension and pouring out the Holy Spirit – the only remaining part of God's plan to be fulfilled is the return of Christ to bring in the New Heavens and Earth – the final judgment.

So in chapter 24 Jesus gives some descriptors of what those "end times" would be like – the Temple will be destroyed, and there will be many impostors.

And he warns the disciples that the time of the coming judgement is unknown and that it will be unexpected and then gives four examples to illustrate what the final judgement will be like – and the Sheep and the Goats is his final example.

And as that last example, it sets the concluding tone which will linger in the disciples' ears as they reflect and mull over what Jesus has been teaching them about the Day of Judgement.

Yes, there will be a judgment, yes it will involve all nations – but wait a minute. As Jesus' disciples listen to this concluding example, we wonder where are all the familiar elements?

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?

Doesn't being a Jew count for something? Having kept all the purity laws, staying away from those who are unclean? Doesn't that qualify you?

And we might hear this and ask; *“Where is the confession that Jesus Christ is Lord? Did any of those people say the sinner's prayer? What about the Lord's Prayer? There's no mention at all about reading the bible or going to church or anything.”*

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 pride, our exclusive and judgmental attitudes and bringing them to the surface in order to get rid of them.*

So what are the familiar requirements replaced with? What is the focus in this description of the final judgment? Friends Jesus focuses on how we serve others.

“Well, that's not so bad...” we might say along with the disciples. *“I could see myself serving others in grand and magnificent ways...”*

And from what we know of the disciples they were likely thinking about how wonderful it would be to serve alongside Jesus the Messiah as the liberators of Israel, who had come to see them free from Roman oppression!

But wait... what kind of service does Jesus mention here?

It's taking care of the sick – the lepers... It's feeding the hungry, clothing the poor, taking care of the widows and orphans, its associating with those who spent recklessly and can't pay back what they borrowed and are in the debtors' prison...

Jesus' service list reads like an episode of The Dirtiest Jobs. There's no glamour in this kind of service.

Oh sure if we knew that an important person was in this kind of trouble, if Jesus was in trouble - we'd help Him out – because Jesus is great, He's the Son of God, He'd thank us and reward us.

But helping the lowest of the low... those who probably have contributed to, and are suffering the consequences of their actions, and kind of deserve to be in their situation?

Ummm – that's a different story isn't it.

But brothers and sisters what Jesus wants his disciples to see, and what He wants us to see in this – is that the deciding criteria to whether or not we truly know Jesus is how we relate to those whom the world says have no value.

Lest we forget that is exactly how the Son of God entered into this world – as the lowest of the low, born in a feeding trough, as one who had no value.

So when we are serving those who have been declared to have no value - it is as though we are 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 interpretation doesn't tie in with the rest of Christ's teaching on repentance and our need for his grace.

Jesus says that unless our righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees, we will not enter the kingdom of heaven. (Matt 5:20)

So that also means that we can't earn or “social justice” our way into the new heavens and earth by serving others in the way Jesus is speaking of here.

And it most certainly is not about simply going along with whatever happens to be charitably trendy in our society; in fact it's quite the opposite.

Let me give you an example. Twenty or thirty years ago our society said that homosexuals and transgendered people were freaks, and it considered them worthless.

And a true Christian response at the time would have been to serve them with grace and love and understanding and compassion – at that point in time, a unified stance and voice from the Western Church about loving the sinner but not the sin could have made a big difference.

However – we did not; most churches just adopted the attitude of our society. We judged, reject and excluded them, or considered them projects to be fixed up, looking for immediate results of transformation in their life.

Now in the years that have passed since then, our society has become aware of the suffering they have endured from being considered worthless and rejected, and in view of that suffering it has changed its opinion about them.

Now society says; “you are not worthless anymore, you are worthy. You don’t deserve to be rejected, we will include you...”

But, and this is very important, this change in worth and inclusion came about because of our human Hubris, our PRIDE.

Our society is humanistic, our hubris comes from a deep seated belief and determination and that we can make, or re-make ourselves in our own image, or whatever image we believe to best reflect our identity.

This change in value wasn’t because our society considered them made in the image of the God who is the father of our Lord Jesus Christ – but rather because our society wrongly believes that humanity is divine.

We can be or become whomever we want, we chart our own course, we determine what is right or wrong by our own standards – and we need to extend this same privilege, this

same right to everyone and be sure that it is protected!
Otherwise we risk losing it for ourselves.

So provided our Hubris doesn’t hurt anyone - or more importantly - doesn’t preventing anyone from pursuing their own self-determined destiny – we will include them in our society and say they are worthy.

And the temptation for Christians is to believe that going along with this current valuing and inclusion, this humanistic tolerance and non-judgmentalism, that is what it means to serve others as Jesus did?!

After all, this is the point of the sheep and the goats?

No friends - this example is about serving those who are considered worthless!

Jesus’ point with this story is that those who truly know Christ are drawn to the image of His Father in those whom our society says are worthless.

So who does our society consider to be worthless now? The child-molesters and pedophiles, the people who abuse animals and drunk drivers, the radical jihadists and terrorists who shoot up a gay nightclub and kill fifty people, - I could go on but you get the picture.

“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 we have come face to face with the truth that there is something which affects us which makes us unfaithful covenant partners with God – worthless to him for all His intentions for us – and yet He set out to redeem us and restore our value through Christ.

So – now we know it to be true that no matter what anyone else may have done, whatever their situation might be, 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, we are compelled to help them, to serve them as well.

So can you see the difference between serving someone because we see their value as an image bearer of God – albeit a fallen one - versus serving someone because of our human pride?

Do you see how this is really the ultimate criteria for the final judgment?

Brothers and sisters – my prayer is that if any hint of exclusiveness or judgmentalism has begun to take root in our hearts and is preventing us from serving others...

or if we are in danger accepting the counterfeit value and inclusion which our society promotes – that Jesus’ story would shake us awake and turn us around and change our hearts and minds.

And that as we serve others in whatever capacity God has gifted us – we would pay special attention for the opportunities and ways we can serve those whom society says are worthless.

And 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 into Christ’s Body here at Valleyview.

Remember brothers and sister, our Lord 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)

We can’t claim to care as Christ did if we do not serve others, and we can’t claim to know Christ is we do not in some way

shape or form - serve those who are considered to be worthless.

May the Holy Spirit give us the insight to see these opportunities and step up to serve in this capacity in the months ahead - Amen.