

Explore the Bible Series for November 18: Show compassion and love to those in need

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Show compassion and love to those in need

- Matthew 25:31-46

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Compassion, mercy, grace, forgiveness, sacrifice and love. As we have discussed in previous lessons, these words represent true power in the kingdom of God. These words have potential to change the world in which we live radically. We have seen each of these qualities in Jesus as we have read through Matthew's Gospel over the past several weeks. In Matthew 25:31-46, these words move from impressions of the heart to action he demands from his followers.

Jesus in our midst

Jesus said: "Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your

inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry, and you gave me something to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave me something to drink; I was a stranger, and you invited me in; I needed clothes, and you clothed me; I was sick, and you looked after me; I was in prison, and you came to visit me” (Matthew 25:34-26).

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He instructed his disciples about how, in the kingdom of God, those who cannot yet take care for themselves should be shown mercy and compassion by those around them. No judgment. No condemnation. No theoretical solutions lacking substance. No evangelical tracts left behind. Just food, water, friendship, clothes, the warm care of a mother and companionship. That’s it.

Why doesn’t Jesus say, “I was lost, and you preached the gospel to me,” or “I had errant theology, and you disabused my heresy,” or “I voted wrongly in the last election and, thanks to your organized public picketing and active political 7006 site, I am now a better person”? Why is it that what we care so deeply and so passionately about (e.g., preaching the gospel, proper theology, political activism) does not receive attention in the narrative about separating sheep from the goats.

Righteousness, here, is not about proper preaching, theology or party affiliation but about compassion, mercy, grace, forgiveness, sacrifice and love in action. Jesus demands, by way of strong hyperbolic metaphors, that his followers be directly involved in the suffering present in the world around them.

I attended a conference where Jürgen Moltmann said that if we want to see how we can contribute to building the kingdom of God here on earth, we should “look at ourselves through the eyes of our victims.” How do we voluntarily or involuntarily contribute to human suffering? How can we remedy the problem? We can offer solutions by ceasing to do evil and by taking care of those less fortunate.

Christ is ever-present among those who suffer. He is the great physician; he offers hope to those who have none; he offers his body (bread) to those who are hungry; and, according to Matthew 25:46, he offers “eternal punishment” for those who do not care for those marginalized in society and “eternal life” for those who do.

Many Christians in America are extremely fortunate. We have jobs and can support our family with the basic necessities of life. Some of us go to very large churches with enormous budgets for staff salaries, building maintenance, running programs at the family recreation center, multimedia equipment used during worship, and energy costs to keep the sanctuary heated or cooled depending on the season. The church does all this in order to glorify God.

Do we have enough left in the church operating budget to feed, clothe and visit Jesus? Do we care? I believe the church does care about meeting people’s physical as well as spiritual needs. It’s just that sometimes we need to be reminded about where Jesus is in the midst of all that keeps us busy at church. Does Jesus prefer the cushioned seat in the air-conditioned/heated sanctuary that has the most recent multimedia presentations where film clips are shown along with the Sunday sermon. Or is Jesus outside—in the winter cold or the summer heat—with those who care more about where their next meal is coming from than what the pastor has to say to the congregation that given Sunday.

Have you heard these excuses before: “God takes care of those who take

care of themselves!” or “There are plenty of jobs available; if they’d just stop looking for handouts and get a job like the rest of us”?

I’d hate to think what Jesus would say in response to these statements: “I was naked, and you called the cops” or “I was hungry, and you told me to get a job.” As Christians, we are commanded to take care of the poor; we are not supposed to come up with the solution to cure poverty or stop crime, although working toward those ends is admirable. We are required simply to show compassion and love to those in need.

Why?

Because Jesus did it for us.

Discussion questions

- How does your church minister to those who are down-and-out?
- How do we voluntarily or involuntarily contribute to human suffering?
- What can we do to remedy human suffering?
- Do you believe the statement that belief and behavior are two sides of the same coin? Why?

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