

Matthew 25:31-46
“Serving Christ, the Poor Person”

It is often said that the message of Christ gives comfort to people who are in trouble and gives trouble to people in comfort. In telling this story, Jesus' main purpose is not to make us feel good about ourselves as we are now. He wants us to be uncomfortable and see our need to change and grow before we become able to move to a deeper level of peace and joy. So He speaks about God's judging us. He is speaking about people who call ourselves Christians, but some follow Christ in the way we treat other people and some don't.

Jesus is making it impossible for us to say, “I'm just focused on my relationship with God. I'm not interested in social action, politics, and all that messy stuff. I just want a pure, spiritual relationship with the Lord.” He tells us that, if we are really committed to knowing Him and following Him, we go where He goes and join Him in what He does. He is all places, but He is especially with the poor, He says. He does many things, but He especially reaches out to lift up people that life has pushed down.

Jesus talks about helping “one of the least important of these brothers of mine.” In other versions, it reads, for example, “one of the least important of these followers of mine” (New International Version) or “one of the least of these who are members of my family” (NRSV). Please don't misunderstand. Jesus does not mean that “the least” or “the least important” are really not as important as others. These are people who are seen and treated *by others in society* as less important or not as good, as others. God does not feel that way about them at all, so He sends us to “the least, the last, the lost.” We, as people who have received God's love, have this gift that He wants us to pass on to them in His name. Living as Christ's disciples means actively serving other people together with Him, being His hands and feet.

Again, who are “the least of these”? They are not just the ones without enough money. They can also be people without enough friends, or health, or chances for a job. They are people in need, ones not accepted by others. For example, one topic of hot debate today is LGBT sex and rights. Some people think these categories of sexual acts are good, natural, and healthy, while others do not. But one thing is clear to almost everyone paying attention. People in these lifestyles have for many years received cruel and abusive treatment from many others. They have been treated as “the least.” So when Jesus sends us out to serve, he sends us out to serve them along with everyone else in need.

So I hope you’ll see “the least” as a broad category of people we call the poor. And yes, we are all poor in different ways. But let’s not allow that to take our eyes off the fact that many people in our world are *economically* poor. Many don’t have things like enough food or a decent home. Jesus does not forget them by defining them too broadly, so let’s not do so, either.

Jesus is teaching that the clearest mark of a true follower of His is not how strong that person’s beliefs are. It is not how much he or she knows about the Bible. It is how that person treats people who are in need. If the love of God is in action in that person’s life, helping other people, it shows that his or her relationship with God is a healthy, strong one.

But how often is that really the case? Our faith can slip into the kind in the following prayer, written (in slightly different words) by Richard Woike.¹

O pleasant, comfortable, kindly, good-natured God, I am so glad that today I can look forward, with a reasonable degree of certainty, to another ordinary day. Keep me today from anything that tests my faith, from anything uncomfortable, from unnecessary stress, and from unusual problems, especially those involving sickness or death or the need to support relatives and friends with money.

Dear Lord, save me. Make it so nothing will happen that will stop me from being happy with myself the way I am. Make me able to keep the things I say, the thoughts I think, the actions I take, and the many things I leave undone, just as they are. Give me this day, in addition to my daily bread, the butter, meats, and sweetmeats that are my necessary diet. And help me not to feel guilty about the amount of time and money I spend on food and clothing or my pastimes good and bad. Free me from feeling bad about spending my time on things which have no real spiritual value but are seen as normal for a person in my position in this modern community and modern age.

About the future and the darkening trend of things, keep me from thinking too much. Events in the world happen one after another. Can the shocking things I hear in news reports really be signs of the ways your hands are at work in this world? Can you really be leading us to the end of time, when we will hear the shout of the words: "Look! He is coming"? Oh, Lord, such troubling thoughts! Keep me from worrying about such things. And guide me safely to and from my office and my home. Amen.

And to these words, Jesus gives the surprising reply (v. 46): ". . . Go away to be punished forever." They are surprising to the people in Matthew 25 because they never imagined that the poor people they were passing by without helping were Jesus Himself. These are uncomfortable words for us to hear, are they not. But they are not the only surprising words in Jesus' story from the future. The people who receive His praise and eternal life are also surprised. They ask, "Lord, . . . when did we see you hungry and feed you, . . . thirsty and give you something to drink, . . . a stranger and invite you in, . . . needing clothes and give them to you, . . . sick or in prison and go to visit you?" They were not helping these people just to be seen and rewarded by God. They didn't even notice God was watching, so these "sheep" are just as surprised to hear this good news as

the “goats” are to hear the bad news. That’s because the “goats” were expecting something good, like a reward for all their social work, and the “sheep” weren’t.

Again, Jesus is pushing us to ask the question, How am I doing at helping the poor people around me that God cares about so deeply? And on a larger scale, how are our various cultures doing at building a life with equal opportunity? Is there a chance for people who are doing their best to know that their basic needs will be met?

One key social issue many cultures are facing today is economic disparity. The gap between the rich and poor is becoming very large for many, many people. As a result, a few have far more than they need while many have far less than they need and suffer greatly. According to the *Los Angeles Times*, the richest 1% of the world’s people own 46% of the wealth (Puzzanghera). We often hear in the news how shockingly large the gap is between the salaries of company bosses and the people who work for them. *The Economist* magazine recently said that in Japan, the gap is not so much between rich and poor. More, it is between people with permanent and temporary jobs. Those with permanent work receive around ¥5,000,000 per year, and those with temporary jobs around ¥2,000,000. That’s a big gap!

I have no reason to complain about high prices. God has always taken care of our family when we have placed our finances in His hands. But now we are experiencing something new in deciding how to pay for our daughter’s college education in the US. Recently we have received a number of messages from various universities that went something like this. “Congratulations. You have been accepted for admission. We will give you a scholarship, as well as a loan. If you will then pay the remaining \$50,000 (¥6,000,000) or \$60,000 (over ¥7,000,000) or more each year, you are welcome to begin your studies here.” So most of the places we have been in communication with are simply too expensive to be within reach. Looking at the extremely high prices, I

wonder what percentage of the population could actually pay them. I think it is quite low.

So I feel one part of the unfairness of life in the real world when I see how few people really have access to the strongest education they could receive. When I think that only six or seven percent of the world's people can go to college or university at all, I think I am only getting a hint at the unfairness many people feel. Our friend Pastor Harrington Wesseh from our sister church in Liberia is an example. He told me some years ago how badly he wanted to be able to send his daughter to college. There was a school nearby and he told me the prices. But he knew he could not send her without help. That is one of the stresses he lived with, and now he is gone and cannot provide this for his daughter. That is a sad thought for me.

What do the teachings of Christ tell us about things like this? The simple answer is that all Christians should be working to help the poor. This is because God teaches His people to love. You cannot be loving to people, the Book of James tells us, if you see people who have no clothes or food and say to them things like "Go in peace, be warmed and filled." (Compare James 2:16 in the New International Readers Version: "Go. I hope everything turns out fine for you. Keep warm. Eat well.") We should be telling people about Christ. Evangelical Christians focus on this. But telling the gospel is a form of love. If we stop doing it in loving ways (with respect and compassion), it is not what God sends us out to do.

God put people in this world to take care of His creation. That includes caring for people. He creates people with not only spiritual but physical, emotional, social, and intellectual needs. So how could we possibly think that our only job is to tell people the gospel? That will do a lot to meet their spiritual needs, but it is far from obeying God's call to love people as He has loved us.

God's purposes in saving people are to meet *all* our needs. He does not only care about our souls and forgiving our sin. All parts of our lives are important to Him. So the whole lives of people around us must be important to us, as well. It makes sense for Christians to say, "I want to work to meet all the needs I can of the people God sends me to serve."

According to the Bible, a righteous person sees his or her wealth as something that doesn't belong just to him or her. An unrighteous person looks at possessions as belonging just to him or her. God gives us possessions to use for the community. It helps you be kind to the poor to realize that what you have is a gift. You didn't do enough to earn it. You live by grace.

Lending to the poor is lending to the Lord. Oppressing the poor is oppressing the Lord, the Bible tells us.

If you think you have earned your own salvation, you will look down on the poor. If you think your salvation is a gift of God, you will look on the poor with love.

Your bank account, your membership in a club, your home, all your possessions are not your identity. People who have a different worldview may lift these up to the level of your identity. They may live with the belief that you are how much money you have. You are your accomplishments. But the gospel says no. You are a child of God. You are created, loved, understood, and accepted as a son or daughter of the Lord of the universe. Nothing else says who you are as fully or correctly.

When we talk about serving poor people, we often hear two words: *justice* and *mercy*. Many liberal people don't like the word *mercy*. It seems like a word people use when they are looking down on others, helping from above in a self-righteous, condescending way. Many conservative people don't like the word *justice*. It seems like a word people use who are a little too sure they

know what is right and wrong. They think that we aren't helping the poor enough, and they are ready to push everyone else to do that. Many conservatives feel, "My money is mine. I work hard for it. If I want to give it to poor people, that's charity, not justice."

But the Bible does not separate these two words so easily. There is a strong link between the two, and they are often used in much the same way. Let's take an example. In my country, many children in school are not even learning to read and write. When they get out of school at some point, their chance for a good job is far, far lower than that of kids who get a stronger education. Some liberals look at the situation and say, "The system is the cause. If poor people and people of minority ethnic groups had the money, facilities, teaching, and opportunity that others do, these problems would largely go away. The problem is discrimination." Some conservatives say, "No, the problem is the family. Even if people have all the material supports in the world, without the support of loving parents who will work hard for their children and teach them right from wrong, it won't be enough."

The problem is that both of these viewpoints are right, and they are both wrong. They can both be very self-righteous ways of looking at people. They will tend strongly to have justice *or* mercy in them, but not both. And one without the other simply will not work, according to the Bible's God. Christian faith does not fit neatly into any of the political, economic, and social systems we have in our cultures. It has much to teach all of them, and it pushes against all of them. But it does not serve any of them.

The Bible's God does not belong to any one political party or put the blame for the world's troubles on either racism or the family. But He does say, "It's not the children's fault. When you look at them, just think that you are looking at me. Then you'll know what to do." Poor people should receive support from Christians not just because we choose in Christ-like love to give it. Because of

God's grace and the way He sets up human society, they also deserve it, God's word shows. Helping poor people is not only nice but just. Not helping the poor is not only a lack of compassion. It is also injustice.

Is God leading us to focus more on relief? On development? On reform? One church may not be able to do a lot on all of these. But God will give us our role to play. Maybe we need to focus on a certain one of these, in certain programs, with certain goals.

The local church's main work is the ministry of the word. But the ministry of the word will not work without the ministry of deeds. We want the world around us to see that the gospel is real. Words often will not communicate it effectively. People who see Christians only telling the gospel often will see that and decide that we are only trying to increase our power. They will not hear our message until they see in our actions the love of God at work. Christ's ministry was one of both word and deed. He calls us to join Him in that kind of work that He is continuing today. Let's pray that we will.

God of mercy and justice, help us to know and love you more as we discover you at work in the lives of the people around us who need our help. Give us the wisdom we need to know how to help in the most effective and loving ways. And most of all, give us the power of your love, which makes all things possible. In Christ's name, amen.

¹ The original English is as follows.

O thou pleasant, comfortable, kindly, good-natured God: How glad I am that I can look forward, with a reasonable degree of certainty, to another ordinary day. Keep me today from anything that taxes my faith, from discomfort,

from unnecessary strain, from unusual problems, especially those involving sickness or death or the necessity of extending financial aid to relatives and friends.

Dear Lord, deliver me. Grant that nothing may occur which will disturb my satisfaction with the way I am, and the things I say, the thoughts I think, the acts I do, or the many deeds I leave undone. Give me this day, in addition to my daily bread, the butter, meats, and sweetmeats that are my necessary diet, and let me not be troubled by qualms of conscience concerning the amount of time and money I spend on food and clothing, pastimes good and bad, and those pursuits which, while not of spiritual value, are the accepted hallmark of the normal citizen of this enlightened community in this enlightened age. About the future, and the darkening trend of things, keep me from thoughtfulness. Events rush on. The world travels. Can screaming headlines prove Thy hands at work this very moment, bringing near that fateful cry, "Behold, He comes"? Oh, Lord. Such disconcerting thoughts! Keep me from worrying about such things. And guide me safely to and from my office and my home. Amen.

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