Serving the Least of These

Sermon 5 in the summer series The Primary Purposes of the Church

# Scripture: Matthew 25:31-46

# Key idea: Our service to others is one of the two critical items on God’s accountability checklist for each of us.

# 3 Important preliminary observations for understanding this text

## This passage is in a context that teaches us of our accountability before God.

Matt. 24:30, 31 – Jesus will come again and gather his elect

Matt. 24:45-51 - The proper response for Jesus’ followers is to be busy about the tasks they have been assigned to do, just as an ancient servant who was expecting his master to return at any moment would do.

Matt. 25:1-13 - Illustrated the need to be ready for Jesus’ return using the Palestinian wedding customs of the time. In those days, the wedding party waited for the bridegroom to arrive. If they were not there and ready when he arrived, they did not get to go to the wedding.

Matt. 25:14-30 Illustrated the need to be responsible for what we are given using three servants who were entrusted with money by the master when he went on a long journey. Two of them increased the money while one buried it. The first two were rewarded when the master returned by being given increased responsibility. The third servant was cast out into punishment.

Now in Matthew 25:31-46 Jesus gets very specific about what the servants are to be doing while he is away.

Placing this teaching of Jesus in its context will help us interpret it well.

## Who are those being referred to as “The least of these brothers of mine?”

2 main possibilities

brothers - his disciples - Jesus often used the word “brothers” in this way.   
Matt 28:10 after resurrection "Go and tell my brothers."

Earlier in Matthew he had warned about not causing these “little ones who believe in me to sin” (Matt. 18:6 NIV) -- using a related expression.

On the other hand, brothers could be basically a means of address like "friends." It was used this way by Jewish speakers in addressing their countrymen. Example: Acts 1:16 Peter addresses the upper room group – a mixed company of men and women as “brothers.”

Personally, I think immediately of Jesus’ teaching in the parable of the Good Samaritan. The immediate question he was answering was, “Who is my neighbor?” He choose the broad and inclusive answer by making a hated Samaritan who crossed barriers of culture to do the kind and caring deed, the hero of his story. Certainly, Jesus has the widest meaning in mind here too.

Gal. 6:10 as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people,   
especially to those who belong to the family of believers.

John Wesley -"What encouragement is here is assist the household of faith? But let us likewise remember to do good to all men." (Explanatory Notes on the NT p.84 )

Jesus example also commends broad service to all. Examples of Jesus’ service to those outside his Jewish nation include: woman of Tyre whose daughter was healed and the man among the tombs in Decapolis.

## How does this passage relate to salvation by faith

For those of you who come from strong evangelical backgrounds, this passage seems troubling for what it does not say. Here we have a rather detailed description of Jesus as the Divine Judge separating those who will receive eternal reward and those who will receive eternal punishment. And there is no mention of having faith, of believing, of receiving Christ. How do we reconcile these words of Jesus with passages like John 3:16 - 0r John 6:47? Or Ephesians 2:8, 9?

I would suggest several quick ways to answer this question.

1. Remember that the context is to teach those who are followers of Jesus what they are to be doing as they await the Master’s return and prepare to give an account of their stewardship.
2. That is why I had us read James 2:14-24 because I believe meditating upon James will answer our question. James reminds us that our faith and or works go together. Faith is logically prior and works necessarily follow. Our service is the evidence for our faith. How we treat others demonstrates that we are the Lord’s disciples. 1 John 4:20 "If anyone says, I love God, yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen cannot love God, whom he has not seen." So service to others is not another way of salvation, it is the necessary evidence of the one and only way, faith in Jesus!
3. In John 5:19-29 where Jesus taught that God the Father had appointed him to be the judge of all men, Jesus also taught that God had two concerns that would be evident in that judgment. God wanted all persons to “honor the Son” and to “do good.”

# 4 Principles of Service that Pleases God

## Service that pleases God is unaffected, guileless, unstudied, self-giving

The righteous gave food, drink, hospitality, gave clothes gave healing care (sick), gave time and attention (visit). There was something unusual about it – it was uncalculating

People who give for effect upon others or to be noticed are not surprised by recognition, they are looking for it, even seeking it. But the righteous here are a little surprised to be noticed.

This suggests to me that the kind of giving in human service that pleases God is natural - to happens naturally out of love. A good understanding of Romans 12:1 (KJV reasonable svc - NASB spiritual service of worship) supports this idea.

Gal 5:13 "Serve one another in love."   
ill. Dr. Arturo Nolasco (LI-SE) Doctor who left lucrative practice to practice among the poor of Mexico city.

Dr. Nolasco does not think of it as giving up - but as the natural thing to do if one loves God - exactly Paul's concept

## Service that pleases God is meeting everyday human needs

joke - two zealous boy Scouts who helped lady across the street she had just crossed. Well, we laugh. But how many times are we guilty of doing service that is defined by what we need to do to feel good rather than by what is required by the human need that presents itself in our neighborhood.

Another mistake we often make is to define service only in religious ways or only as serving the church or doing something pious.

As a correction for that mistake, look at Jesus’ statement of ministry intention in Luke 4: 18,19. It is well rounded. Jesus aims to meet the real spiritual, physical, emotional needs of humanity.

Look also at the life of Jesus. For example in Matt.

4:23 teaching good news and healing   
5:1 teaching   
8:1 healing man with leprosy   
8:5 healing of centurion’s servant   
8:14 Peter's moth-in-law   
8:28 demon possessed man  
9:1 paralytic healed - sins forgiven   
14:19 healed sick, fed 5000

The Conclusion: Jesus was intimately involved in meeting real life needs

The was no disunity between being involved in meeting spiritual, physical, or emotional needs

ill. world conference of evangelists - EV Hill - closing speaker   
He was asked for his message title – “I don't know, God hasn't told me yet.”   
The congress had gotten mired in argument between those who gave priority to evangelism and those who gave priority to helping with physical needs. After listening to this seeming tug of war all week, finally, God impressed upon EV Hill a powerful and also reconciling message.

EV Hill's spiritual baseball

First base - evangelism, second base -discipleship or holiness; third base, service to others in love, fourth base is the heavenly home. Full-orbed vision of the Christian life takes us all around those bases.

## Service to others is personal service to Christ

This is the element of surprise in this story. In any parable or story of Jesus - look for the surprise - that is the key to finding Jesus' main point.

The saved were not surprised at their destination, nor at being reminded of their service. What is surprising to them is that the judge says, "You did it to me."

ill*. cowboy talking to other cowboys about what it means to be a disciple.*

*I work fer Jim. Suppose all I ever do is sit around campfire singin ballads about Jim, braggin him up, maybe even gettin up at night to serenade him. If that's all I did fer my boss I'd git fired.*

*But when I git on my hoss, ride them hills to see that Jim's herd's OK; see that they have water, feed em, help 'em when they're sick; see that they're not wanderin off or getttin branded by thieves, then I'm servin Jim as he wants to be served.*

Similarly, many Christians act like their service to God is all done in services at church.

But if we would serve him as he expects and as he gives example, we'll be involved in meeting the everyday spiritual,   
physical, and emotional needs of people around us.

## Those who serve others will receive great reward

Not one cup of cold water given in my name will lose its reward. Matt. 10: 42

I Peter brotherly kindness, love added to faith in increasing measure lead to a "rich welcome into the eternal kingdom"

Matt. 25:34 come you who are blessed by my Father, take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world."

We do not serve to get rewards, we serve out of love for God and others, but when discouragement comes, when it seems like no-one cares that we have given and given and given, then it's good for us to know God has not forgotten. His records are true. The ledgers of our inheritance are complete and without error!

# Conclusion

Chuck Colson on ordinary people used of God through service – more impressive to inmates that the service of stars who bring the cameras. (LI-SE)