

June 14, 2009
Week 37

Marks of a Kingdom Mindset Matthew 25:31-46

You can feel the urgency in his voice. Jesus is marching toward arrest, death and resurrection. While all of his teachings are critical, these last chapters before the cross are so passionate and ultimate. “I’m leaving soon,” says every story and teaching moment. “So you must hear this in order to be ready for the things to come.”

The Parable of the Talents in the early part of the chapter literally says, “A master went on a long journey and entrusted his property to them.” After speaking of the master’s return, Jesus elaborates on matters of judgment on the last day. The Son of Man will come like a shepherd to separate sheep from goats.

Who are the sheep? Those who have invested in the underdog—the poor, the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the imprisoned.

This will forever be a troubling scripture. Like verses that deny forgiveness to those who refuse forgiveness, Jesus seems to be making heavenly citizenship conditional on our behavior. So much of scripture, including Jesus’ own words, would shape our fitness for scripture around God’s grace, or faith and the saving work of Jesus on the cross. But here, Jesus seems to be tying our eternal outcomes to our earthly investments. Do we accuse Jesus of bad theology? Do we trump other scriptures with these seemingly conditional prescriptions for heaven-boundness? Or do we somehow live with the tension and try to understand why Jesus is so emphatic on a subject that creates some theological cloudiness.

By the way, before we dare to soften his words in any way, let’s actually pepper them with the addition of the next image—the goats who don’t invest in the underdog are sent to eternal punishment. Jesus is serious, so I don’t want to minimize the critical nature of these words or explain away how dire eternal judgment is in light of these matters.

I want to share how I resolve—not solve—the dilemma that I just mentioned. Is heaven a place for people who earn it by applying themselves to important advocacy for the forgotten and down trodden? Or is heaven a place for sinners forgiven by God’s grace, cleansed by Christ’s blood and secured by real faith?

Without wanting to sound like a smart-Alec, the answer is “yes.” Heaven is reserved for those sinners forgiven by God’s grace, cleansed by Christ’s blood, secured by real faith and applied to the advocacy of people in need. I’m not suggesting that we, or Jesus, would add advocacy as a prerequisite of heaven versus real faith. I am suggesting, as James the brother of Jesus does, that real faith proves itself in a lifestyle of advocacy. In other words, for Jesus (as James knew very well) it is unfathomable to imagine real faith without application. It’s simply not within Jesus’ definition of authentic faith to claim the benefits of God’s grace without extending God’s grace, or to enjoy the freedom from Christ’s blood without wanting others to be free or to believe in the mission of Jesus to save the world

without believing that I've been called into that mission.

All that to say, "whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 14:15), and "whoever loves him will obey him" (John 14:15), or at least submit to a journey that leads to obedience.

We decouple faith from actions. Jesus can't fathom sincere faith without it. And the actions that Jesus taught and modeled are all about lifting up those who need a lift, defending those who need defending, serving those who need real help and loving those that many would dismiss or ignore or even scorn.

I do not want to take too much comfort in Paul's steady New Testament reminders that salvation is by grace through faith, as if grace and faith ask nothing of me. To believe in Jesus is to believe in his will and way—to be a disciple, follower, learner, apprentice.

Yes, I take some comfort in knowing that not all causes or battles are mine. We're each geared and gifted and oriented towards a particular field of advocacy. You might feel called to feed the poorer person desperate for help and a future; I feel called to come alongside the poorer church desperate for help and a future, or the floundering marriage hungry for resolution. This list in Matthew 25 is not exhaustive, but indicative. God will open your eyes and unleash your passions so that you can find your place in the wide work of Christ's body, the church, continuing the saving work of Jesus.

But I don't want to be rescued from the tension altogether. If my life is solely self-indulgent and unmoved by the plight of others, my faith might be counterfeit. If my energies are aimed almost entirely at feathering my own pillow and barely at all toward bringing comfort to the pillow-less, then I should go back to the basic seed of the gospel and make sure that it's germinated and taken root in my life.

And of course, our families need our care and advocacy. But is it possible that their development could be served better by recruitment into the cause of Christ than by distraction from it?

And of course, there are seasons that require rest and self-care, and even seasons when all we can do for others is pray.

But as we have energy to give and resources to apply, the best test of the authenticity of faith is an inventory of our investments.

I hold suspect every "yeah, but ..." that rises up in me. I'm sickened by my own justifications and meanderings around this central truth of scripture—without a lifestyle of kindness and advocacy, my very faith is suspect. Without kingdom thinking—making this temporal world a better place in the name of Christ—I might not even be a kingdom citizen or kingdom bound. I must plead with God to grant me real faith and a God-ordered lifestyle.

We started this whole series from Matthew out of a woeful observation that there are places we can never go as a people whenever we as persons have prioritized other things ahead of God's kingdom. We chose Matthew 6:33 to remind ourselves that God's kingdom and priorities must be first and central and best—the core life ordering elements of life; or else we're all subject to selfish whims and false gods.

Are we closer now, after nine months, to thinking in kingdom-centric ways? Have our time allotments and financial investments and energy applications been affected at all by week after week of scriptural appeals to make Jesus the King of our lives?

If so, hurray and keep going.

If not, why not? Where is the hesitation? What is the entanglement that makes the path of Christ impossible for us to travel? Who is standing in our way? How do we topple the rightful king from his throne and insert ourselves or others in his place?

Of course, we're not done calling these questions. But we will move on to other scriptures and other related topics; which aren't difficult to find, since every topic is related to this one—is Jesus the Lord of your life?

Finally, who do you give authority to and why? Parents? Teachers? Pastors? Bosses? Experts? Authors? Mentors? Your children? Yourself? So many voices asking for your attention and allegiance. Who do you listen to and in what order?

Jesus says, "Come to me. Follow me. Listen to me. I will help you sort and prioritize, giving meaning and purpose and proportion to make you whole and useful to God."