

Matthew 25.1 An Exclusive Jesus? 11.06.05

Scripture Introduction Matthew 25:1-13

Today we continue the sermon series “Jesus and Judgment” with its second sermon titled “An Exclusive Jesus, question mark, where we look at some of the most difficult and disturbing texts in the New Testament.

In the closing chapters of Matthew,
 grace and tolerance have gone undercover.
Judgment, Exclusion, and condemnation have taken over.
As I’ve studied these scriptures some other titles have come to mind.
I’ve thought of naming this sermon series:
“Sermons We’d Rather Not Hear.”
I know that’s not very catchy.
Or
“America’s Least Wanted”
or perhaps
“The End of Matthew – Connecticut’s Choice for Scripture Texts Most Likely to be Avoided,”
you Get the Point.

As we near the end of the gospel according to Matthew and the end of the lectionary cycle, we do not hear the sermon on the Mount or the Beatitudes; We listen to some very difficult scripture readings.

But the texts are important.

They address what it means to be Christian, and what it means to be Jewish.

At the center of the gospel according to Matthew is a concern for both of these questions because the gospel writer, Matthew, was almost certainly Jewish, writing to a Jewish community that was trying to follow the way of Jesus.

As he recorded the words and the life of Jesus he goes to great lengths to determine how Jewish Christians can live faithfully.

So how shall we listen to the word of God and be led by these words?

Listen carefully as we attend to God’s Holy word.

Scripture

Prayer

Holy living God,

Come now and in power, with your presence
SPEAK.

Take these human words and make them your word to us.

Take our human hearts and make them hearts that beat for you.

Take this common time and make it a Holy time that meets the needs of each person in this room.

We ask it all in the powerful and precious name of Jesus the Christ.

Amen

Sermon

How would you describe the kingdom of God?

If you had one metaphor, one picture of the kingdom, what would it be?

In Matthew, one of the most common metaphors that Jesus uses is a wedding banquet.

The gospel practically begins with a wedding banquet as Jesus turns water into wine.

Then in chapter 22 and 23, Jesus uses a marriage feast and bridesmaids to describe the kingdom of God.

But something goes horribly wrong in chapter 22 and 23.

Everyone is invited, but not everyone makes it to the party.

In chapter 22, many people do not enter the kingdom of God because they are too busy.

In chapter 23, the chapter we just read, some are not permitted entry because they did not have enough oil. It's not the happy ending we expect, and quite frankly, we're a bit surprised at Jesus' harsh, exclusive behavior.

Why would a bride groom care if a guest brought enough oil?

Quite frankly, it seems a bit unfair.

Let's listen to the text one more time, but I need to warn you, I've taken some liberty in this translation to place it in a modern setting.

God's kingdom is like a bachelor's party, hosted by the groom.

The groom was very rich, and told his bridal party to meet him on his ranch in the middle of the desert, there, he would throw a party that they would never forget.

They all knew he was beyond generous, but five were wise and brought a gift, and five were foolish and didn't bring a thing.

When they heard he was coming they gathered their things and went to meet him at the house and the five fools noticed the gifts and said:
“Hey, nice gifts!”
“Do you mind if we present them to the groom together? We’ll pay you back when we get home.”
But the five wise said:
“Why don’t you go to Wal-Mart and find something for yourself?”
And so they did, but when they returned, the groom stood at the door and saw their big white bags from Wal-Mart and said:
“Nice wrapping paper! I recognize the bags, but I don’t recognize you. Go home!”
And he shut the door.
And so Mathew concludes:
Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day, nor the hour.

What do you make of Jesus' harsh treatment of the foolish bridal party?
How can Jesus include some people and *exclude* others from God’s kingdom?

Let me put it a little bit differently.

When I interviewed with Westminster Presbyterian Church nearly seven years ago, I was asked one question that stood out.
One question that I remember today, the rest I have forgotten.
Can you guess the question?
The Pastor Nominating committee asked me?
How do you feel about inclusiveness?
I said very simply:
Look at the life of Jesus;
he was constantly reaching out to the people on the edges,
healing the lepers, eating with prostitutes, and calling tax collectors.
Jesus was inclusive.
That’s good enough for me.

Do you agree?//

At the time, I obviously wasn't reading the end of Matthew because here, in chapter 22, most of the village is left out of the wedding banquet, in chapter 23, Jesus condemns the Pharisees, and in chapter 25 Jesus condemns half of the nations, Jesus is downright exclusive.
So how are we to respond to an exclusive Jesus?

First, let me say that I am treading lightly on ground where I would rather not travel, I would rather preach about forgiveness, grace and Gods' love.

But the lectionary, the word of God, forces us to look at some areas where we would rather not venture.

Secondly, what we are about to consider is a matter of life and death. Let me explain.

Charles Kimball, in his book, *When Religion Becomes Evil*¹, discusses the problem of exclusion.

He says:

“A substantial number of Christians embrace some form of exclusiveness that says: “My way is (absolutely) the only way. Any other form of religious understanding is ...a fast track to hell. ...this exclusive view has permitted them to do great harm to those they consider damned, and been the back story to one thousand years of Crusades, hundreds of years of slave trade, marching Jews into furnaces, and crashing airplanes into buildings.

Christianity is not alone in this religious conceit. Muslims declare “jihad, or “holy war.” Hindus murder Muslim in order to cleanse a temple site. Palestinians suicide bombers kill Zionist settlers.

¹ Gulley, Philip, and Mulholland, James, *If God is Love*, pages 12-13.

Israeli bulldozers demolish Arab homes. All these acts of religious violence are defended as faithful to a God who, though called by different names, loves the elect and hates the rest.”²

Exclusion divides the world into us and them and causes the world inordinate grief.

So we need to be very careful as we attend to the final chapters of Matthew.

Most of all, scripture is almost always misused when we take it and use it to evaluate somebody else. The Bible becomes Holy when we receive it as a gift and guide to nurture and nourish our own lives.

So what are we to say about Jesus the gatekeeper, standing at the door, the one who denies entry.

Let me say this.

Grace that leaves us where we are is not grace at all. This exclusive Jesus tells us: “What we do matters!” Grace that only forgives eventually becomes pathetic. Grace does more than forgive, grace calls us forward. Grace does more than extend mercy.

² Gulley & Mulholland, p. 13.

Grace calls us to live as people who have been forgiven.

Grace does more than grant absolution, grace calls us forward to live as people who are set free.

Jesus forgives and forgives and forgives, but Jesus does more, Jesus calls us to offer a gift at the door. Not something that is bought at Wal-Mart on the fly, something that is far more valuable.

But here is the most difficult question.

What is the gift we were meant to bring?

What do the wise ones bring to the bridal party that lets them come into the kingdom of God?

What do the foolish forget?

Or, to use the language of the original parable:

What is the surplus oil that bids them to entry into the kingdom of God?

(pause)

What do you think?

According to Matthew, it is not having a perfect memory of the law.

Do you remember how Jesus condemned the Pharisees?

Being a perfect keeper of the law will not grant us entry.

The end of Matthew suggests it is acts of charity and kindness?

Looking forward to the end of this chapter, Jesus says: “When you did it to the least of these you did it to me, enter the kingdom.”

And it appears that Jesus admits those who shelter the homeless and feed the hungry.

Perhaps the oil is how we attend to the needs of others.

That’s not a bad interpretation, but taken to its logical extreme can become another form of self righteousness based on our own works.

Our admittance to the kingdom of God is based on what WE do.

Jesus stands at the door and says “Yes” to those with good works and “No” to the ones who have none.

It makes heaven look like the Ivy league of Good Works,

where some are admitted, but most are rejected.

Where is the grace?

Where is the mercy?

What does it mean to have oil at the ready?

What does it mean to be received into God's kingdom?

Earlier in Matthew, you may remember the way that Jesus summarized the law, saying:

The first commandment is:

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart might and soul, and the second is like it:

Love your neighbor as yourself.”

Love God and love neighbor.

What is the oil that Jesus expects us to bring to the door?

What is the gift?

It appears to be a gift not from Wal-Mart, but a gift// of love.

A love of God and a love of neighbor.

Having one without the other would be like showing up at the door with no gift at all.

I want to close with a story.

I think I've told it once before.

It's one of my favorite stories by one of my favorite people.

Tony Campolo tells about a conference he had to attend in Hawaii. He says he was having trouble sleeping because of the difference in time zones and he went out to find something to eat.

As he said the power of the flesh overwhelmed him. So there he is driving around the streets of Honolulu at 2 a.m. looking for something to eat.

He wandered into a sort of seedy neighborhood that had a diner open.

He parked his car went in and saw there was one glazed donut.

He ordered the donut and as he was “*breaking bread*” a couple of women came in who were dressed rather provocatively.

They started talking and it was very clear they were prostitutes.

The next thing he knows a few more prostitutes arrived and then some more friends and before he knew it,

Tony Campolo, respected Christian speaker is surrounded by a dozen or so women of the night at 2 a.m. in a diner.

Tony tried to attend to his donut but he couldn't help but overhear one of them say:

“You know it's my birthday tomorrow.”

Another responds: “Well what do you want me to do, throw you a party?”

Eventually they leave and Tony turns to the night manager and says:

“Hey, did you hear, it’s Donna birthday tomorrow, why don’t we throw her a party?”

The night manager loves the idea and they make plans.

The next morning at 2 a.m. they are there and they throw a surprise party for Donna.

And Donna doesn't know what to do.

They bring out a cake with candles on it, they sing her Happy Birthday,” and she blows out the candles.

But then Donna is shaking.

The night manager asks her: “What is wrong?”

And she says:

“Nothing, it's just the first time anyone has ever made me a cake for my birthday.”

“Could I take this home, would that be alright?”

And they say sure, and then she leaves, and there is silence.

The night manager says:

“What do we do now?”

Tony says:

“Why don’t we pray?”

They say OK and then they pray for Donna, for her care, for her future, and for her healing.

And when Tony says: “Amen.” The night manager looks at him and says:

“Hey are you some type of preacher?” and he says: “*Yeah.*”

The night manager says, “No you’re not! What type of church would have you as their preacher?”

And Tony said:

“They type of church that throws parties for prostitutes.”

That’s it.

What does Jesus ask of us?

What does Jesus want us to bring to the party of parties?

Jesus wants us to bring a love of God that is so deep, and a compassion for others that is so great that we throw parties for prostitutes.

What do we bring to the party?

Love, love for God, love of neighbor!

Amen