

While serving as a missionary in Laos, John Hess-Yoder discovered an illustration of the kingdom of God. Before the colonial powers imposed national boundaries, the kings of Laos and Vietnam reached an agreement on how to tax people in the border areas. On the one hand, those who ate short-grain rice, built their houses on stilts, and decorated them with Indian-style serpents were considered Laotians. On the other hand, those who ate long-grain rice, built their houses on the ground, and decorated them with Chinese-style dragons were considered Vietnamese. The exact location of a person's home was not what determined his or her nationality. Instead, each person belonged to the kingdom - either Laos or Vietnam - whose cultural values he or she exhibited. Here's the parallel: as a follower of Jesus, you live in this world and from your outward appearance you look pretty much like everyone else. But as a citizen of God's kingdom, you live according to His kingdom's standards, values and culture.

What was Jesus' favorite subject? The Kingdom of God! Today, I'm concluding a message series on several parables Jesus told about the Kingdom of God. Each story gives you insight into this spiritual entity where Jesus reigns as the King. It's a spiritual country that you become a citizen of the moment you begin to follow Jesus personally. The Kingdom of God is real and present and yet it hasn't been fully revealed yet. One day all there will be is the Kingdom of God. Right now, it's the place where you connect with God, but it's also the full expression of God's heart, mission and will for the universe. Today's parable is the last of three stories Jesus told in Matthew 25. Each of these three stories helps answer a question raised by the previous chapter. In Matthew 24, Jesus predicted His second coming at an unknown date and time in the future. Here's the question: If Jesus is coming again (by the way, that's a certainty; what's uncertain is when) and God's Kingdom is to be fully revealed, how should you, His follower, live today? The first story – sometimes referred to as the Parable of the Ten Virgins – gave this answer: live wisely. The second story – sometimes called the Parable of the Talents – provides this answer: live productively. Let's read the third story now and discern what answer it provides. When Jesus is King, you live every day passionately. Let's think through this passage together by considering three main themes. Here's the first one:

KINGDOM PEOPLE PUT FAITH INTO ACTION.

This parable makes me feel uneasy. Not only do I find it convicting but also perplexing, too. The convicting part is easy to figure out because it challenges me to be far more compassionate than I am by nature. More about that later. But here's what perplexes me. It seems to challenge what I've read elsewhere in the Bible about how people get into heaven. In numerous places, the Bible teaches that you're saved by grace and grace alone. In other words, you receive eternal life as a free gift from God not as a result of doing good things for others. I was taught – and still firmly believe – that trying to earn a place in heaven by

doing good deeds is a waste of time and energy. Is Jesus contradicting all of that here? Is He teaching here that eternal life is given to people who show compassion to others in need? Likewise, is He saying that the willful neglect of those in need gets you rejected from heaven?

This passage is a good example of the principle that you never interpret a Bible passage all by itself. To some extent, you have to understand the entire Bible before you can fully understand each story or statement in it. No, Jesus is not teaching here that there's another way to heaven. He's not denying the need to put your personal trust in Him and what He did for you at the cross and the empty tomb. But here's what He is doing. He's giving you and me a picture of what genuine saving faith looks like. You and I have a tendency to think of faith as just believing certain good and correct things about God. That's a great start, but real faith doesn't end there. Unless your faith results in some kind of action, then it becomes (as one person described it) "easy believism." Sadly, this is how many American Christians define faith – something that amounts to little more than warm, sentimental feelings about God in your gut that make absolutely no impact on how you live your live every day.

In the New Testament letter written by James, you find these words, "Dear friends, do you think you'll get anywhere in this if you learn all the right words but never do anything? Does merely talking about faith indicate that a person really has it? For instance, you come upon an old friend dressed in rags and half-starved and say, 'Good morning, friend! Be clothed in Christ! Be filled with the Holy Spirit!' and walk off without providing so much as a coat or a cup of soup— where does that get you? Isn't it obvious that God-talk without God-acts is outrageous nonsense? I can already hear one of you agreeing by saying, 'Sounds good. You take care of the faith department, I'll handle the works department.' Not so fast. You can no more show me your works apart from your faith than I can show you my faith apart from my works. Faith and works, works and faith, fit together hand in glove." (James 2:14-18 MSG) Jesus' story makes the same point. What good is a faith that doesn't do anything? If faith makes no difference in how you live, what good is it? Who needs a faith that never meets a need or makes a difference in someone else's life?

When you are truly born again by the Spirit of God, there will be an unbreakable, seamless connection between what you believe and what you do. You will live and act in certain ways. Of course doing good deeds will not make you right before God. But here's just as an important truth to hear: a life without good deeds hasn't been made right before God. Genuine, Holy Spirit-inspired faith does stuff – real, practical stuff like feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and welcoming the stranger. Kingdom people do this because they believe in Jesus. The people in Jesus' story get into heaven not because they did good things. The good things they did simply give ample evidence of the relationship to King Jesus they already had! Here's a second theme:

KINGDOM PEOPLE SHOW COMPASSION AND PASSION.

Jesus lays down a fundamental principle in this parable about what it means to serve Him. Whenever you serve people in the name of Jesus, you are serving Jesus Himself. When you are obeying Jesus, following Jesus and loving Jesus, your life will be full of doing things for other people. By the same token, when you dismiss the needs of people or you find little joy in serving people, you are rejecting Jesus Himself. But let's take this caring for people a step further. Clearly, Jesus teaches here that His followers will find ways to serve the poor, the weak, the disadvantaged, the imprisoned and the oppressed in this world. In other words, Kingdom people show compassion.

There was a time – it started about 100 years ago in our country and its effects are still around today - when evangelical, theologically conservative Christians like you and me got very uncomfortable with that kind of emphasis. Why? Many theologically liberal Christians replaced the need for personal repentance, personal trust in Jesus and the born again experience with being compassionate. In effect they said, "Forget the spiritual stuff, the sin stuff, the cross stuff, just love people and take care of them. That's all that God wants." And our spiritual ancestors said, "No way! Don't replace the Gospel with a watered-down social Gospel! The only way to ever solve the social ills in our country or our world is to get people right with God first." I'm convinced that this should never have become an either/or issue. By all means, we need to call men, women, boys and girls to repentance and personal faith in Jesus, but we also need to feed the hungry, clothe the naked and work for justice for the oppressed. The Bible teaches both. Jesus embraces both. In fact, Jesus' story teaches that finding ways to show compassion is proof that you're getting into heaven!

Tony Campolo is an American Baptist professor and well known speaker. He tells about walking down Chestnut Street in Philadelphia. There he happened upon a filthy bum, covered with soot from head to toe. He had a huge, gigantic beard with rotted food stuck in it. He held a cup of McDonald's coffee and mumbled as he walked along the street. He spotted Tony and said, "Hey, Mister. You want some of my coffee?" Tony knew he should take some to be nice and he did. Tony gave it back to him and said, "You're being pretty generous giving away your coffee this morning. What's gotten into you that you're giving away your coffee all of a sudden?" The man said, "Well, the coffee was especially delicious this morning, and I figured if God gives you something good you ought to share it with people."

Tony figured that was the perfect set up. He said to the man, "Is there anything I can give you in return?" Tony was sure he was going to hit him up for five dollars. The man said, "Yeah, you can give me a hug." Tony was actually hoping for the five dollars. The man put his arms around Tony. Tony put my arms around him. Then Tony realized something. The man wasn't going to let him go. He was holding onto Tony. People passed them on the street. They were staring at this

odd scene. Tony was embarrassed. But little by little his embarrassment turned to awe. He heard a voice echoing down the corridors of time saying, “I was hungry. Did you feed me? I was naked. Did you clothe me? I was sick. Did you care for me? I was the bum you met on Chestnut Street. Did you hug me? For if you did it unto the least of these, my brothers and sisters, you did it to me. And if you failed to do it unto the least of these, my brothers and sisters, you failed to do it unto me.”

Brothers and sisters, since becoming your pastor I've been seeking to discern what God wants for this congregation in the years ahead. I've been praying, talking with and listening to leaders in our church, reading books, thinking and discussing issues with our Long Range Planning Committee. I wish I could tell you that God's given me this crystal clear vision of our future. Frankly, He hasn't. I don't doubt God does that for some church leaders or spiritual leaders, but it just seems to me that I'm lucky if I get shown the next step to take much less a detailed picture of the future! But I will tell you something I'm feeling more and more in my heart. I do believe God would have Karl Road Baptist Church move more and more into ministries that demonstrate compassion in some way, shape or form. If done well, those ministries will help us develop relationships with people. If done with reliance upon the Holy Spirit, they'll create opportunities to share with those we serve how they can know Jesus as their King personally. What will those ministries of compassion be? What will they look like? I don't know yet, but I believe the Lord will show us at the right time.

One additional thought. Compassion isn't just about economic status. At the end of the day, it's responding to the Holy Spirit's urging to meet a need – any need you can meet – in someone else's life. To limit this parable only to the care of the poor and needy is to restrict it needlessly. Whenever you reach out and meet a need in someone else's life in Jesus' name and because of Jesus, you are serving Jesus Himself regardless of the economic status of the person you serve.

So when Jesus gives you the opportunity to serve Him by serving others, what should it look like? Kingdom people show compassion and, also, they do it with passion. Richard Foster, an insightful Christian author and speaker, offers some perspective on serving Jesus based on this story and particularly between being a true servant or a false servant. For instance, false servants use serving as a way to meet their own ego needs. They automatically classify serving opportunities as small or big. The bigger the better because it feeds their ego. True servants, on the other hand, never distinguish between small or big serving. The examples Jesus uses are instructive. These aren't monumental, heroic tasks. They're remarkably simple ways to help people – feed a hungry person, a cup of cold water, visit a sick person, give some clothes to someone who needs them. True servants welcome any and all opportunities to serve King Jesus.

False servants want rewards for their service. Applause. Appreciation. Results. Recognition. True servants, on the other hand, find supreme delight in the act of

service not any reward that comes from it. In Jesus' story, the true servants are oblivious to the effects of their serving. "Oh, we were serving You, Jesus? Fancy that!" The false servants, on the other hand, say, "Well, Lord, if we'd known it was You, of course, we would have helped. We just thought they were ordinary people. That's wasn't being very fair now, was it, Lord?"

False servants select who they will serve based on what advantage it may bring to them personally. They calculate. True servants, on the other hand, never distinguish between those who deserve help and those who don't. They just love Jesus and out of that love flows a love for people regardless. False servants serve temporarily - when and if they feel like it. It's important to false servants to feel good when they serve. True servants, on the other hand, make serving a lifestyle. They serve regardless of feelings – sometimes in spite of them!

False servants are apathetic and joyless in their service. No fun. No energy. No enthusiasm. It's a duty to be done and to get over as quickly as possible. True servants, on the other hand, are enthusiastic and joyful in their service. It's just the greatest fun in all the world to serve the King! No, serving Him isn't always fun and games, to be sure. But if there's no joy, no satisfaction, no sense of fulfillment in serving Jesus, I guarantee it won't be long before you stop. False servants must be reminded and prompted to serve. Why? If you're not passionate about something, you forget to do it every opportunity you can. True servants, on the other hand, are self motivated to serve. You don't ever have to be reminded or prompted. You remember whatever you're passionate about. What kind of a servant are you? True or false? Here's a final theme:

KINGDOM PEOPLE KNOW GOD HOLDS THEM ACCOUNTABLE.

The scene in Jesus' story is the Last Judgment. He's the Judge. The King and His Kingdom have been fully revealed in all of their magnificence and majesty. What's all this about sheep and goats? What's that about? In Jesus' day, shepherds kept flocks of both sheep and goats together. At the end of the day, it was necessary to separate the sheep and the goats. Why? The goats – without any protective wool – preferred to spend the night indoors from the cold. The sheep, however, preferred the fresh, cool air out of doors. At the end of the day, there was a necessary division. Jesus teaches here that there will be a necessary division at the end of history. There will be a Judgment Day. Some will spend eternity with Him. Others will spend eternity separated from Him. Yes, you must repent of your sins and - in simple faith – put your personal trust in Jesus. But your faith must be more than getting your doctrine right. Has your life been marked with compassion and passion for King Jesus?

This parable also underlines that no excuses will be accepted and that the King's decision is final. Not the excuse of ignorance: "Lord, I didn't know it was You in that person who was in need!" Not the excuse of busyness: "Lord, I was just too busy to meet that person's need!" Not the excuse of unworthiness. "Lord, I just

never felt good enough about myself to help anyone else.” On that Day every excuse will fail. Those who receive eternal life on that Day don’t want to be ashamed before the King. But they don’t serve King Jesus out of fear of being damned to hell. That’s not what Jesus teaches here. They serve Jesus out of love and gratitude. They know they’ve been entrusted with the greatest message and the greatest power in the universe. They get it. They just get it. If Jesus is coming again... if one day all there will ever be is the Kingdom of God, how should you live today? The first parable in this chapter teaches, “Live wisely.” The second story teaches, “Live productively.” This last story teaches, “Live compassionately” or “Live passionately.”

A university professor tells of being invited to speak at a military base one December and there meeting an unforgettable soldier named Ralph. Ralph had been sent to meet him at the airport. After they had introduced themselves, they headed toward the baggage claim. As they walked down the concourse, Ralph kept disappearing. Once, to help an older woman whose suitcase had fallen open. Once, to lift two toddlers up to where they could see Santa Claus and again to give directions to someone who was lost. Each time he came back with a smile on his face. "Where did you learn that?" the professor asked. "What?" Ralph said. "Where did you learn to live like that?" "Oh," Ralph said, "during the war, I guess." He then told the professor about his tour of duty in Vietnam, how it was his job to clear mine fields, how he watched his friends blow up before his eyes, one after another. "I learned to live between steps," he said. "I never knew whether the next one would be my last, so I learned to get everything I could out of the moment between when I picked up my foot and when I put it down again. Every step I took was a whole new world, and I guess I've been that way ever since." The abundance of your life isn't determined by how long you live, but by how well you live. When Jesus is King, you live every day compassionately – you live every day passionately.