

TO KNOW AND GROW IN CHRIST

Serve: Part 3

Matthew 11:1-15

We will try to look at the whole chapter of Matthew 11 as an overview, but we won't be able to look in depth at all of it. As I said earlier, our theme is "Serving." And I just want to say as we begin, as we open the scripture, that our emphasis is that we serve God with our time, our talent, and our treasure. We serve God with our time, with the abilities that God has given us, and with the resources, with the money that God has given us. We serve here in the local church, in the community, and into the world. That's the call of God for us -- to serve and to share God's message and God's kindness with others. We like to say that we serve in word and deed.

It's very interesting, because there was a time when churches were known as either word churches or deed churches. There were churches that were true to the scripture, proclaimed the message, and taught the whole counsel of God. Then there were churches that emphasized doing acts of compassion and mercy. Sadly, if you go back in history not too far, you find a dichotomy, a separation. The churches were identified as either/or. We want to be both, because we believe biblically the call of God is not either/or, but both/and. We are called to be faithful to the message of God, to the truth of God, and to proclaim that message of the salvation that's found in Jesus Christ, but also to do works of kindness, of God's mercy and compassion, and to help those who are in need.

So, as we look at the topic of serving, today's focus is going to be on the deeds, on doing, and I think that this passage is going to help us do that. Let's begin in verse 1 of Chapter 11 in the gospel of Matthew. "When Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and preach in their cities." As we read, I call this to your attention. Though the focus of the message is going to be on the deeds of God's mercy that we do, don't miss the fact that Jesus is giving himself to teaching and preaching as well. We find this dual emphasis of preaching and doing throughout the ministry of Jesus.

Verses 2-6:

Now when John (this is John the Baptist) heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look

for another?" And Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is the one who is not offended by me."

Before I continue reading, let me call your attention to the fact that as John the Baptist is in prison, he sends two of his disciples to Jesus to ask him this question: "Are you the one? Are you the Messiah?" Now, he has already proclaimed that Jesus is the one, but yet he sends them to ask Jesus. We'll talk a little bit more about that in a minute, but I find it curious that Jesus' answer is what John already knows. Having heard about the deeds of Jesus, he sends these messengers. Then what is Jesus' answer? He recaps for him his acts of kindness, coupled with his preaching good news to the poor.

I think what that tells you is that the works of Jesus Christ had a validating effect on the message that he proclaimed. It's not that Jesus' words needed validation. His word went forth with its own authority, and yet his acts, his actions provided a platform of credibility for that which he proclaimed. They demonstrated they were living parables, if you will, of what Jesus is all about.

I believe that means for you and me that our lives, what people visibly observe about you and me, should be a platform of credibility for the message that we proclaim about Jesus Christ and who he is. It really does matter how we live and the values by which we live. And that includes not just what we might think about more conventional religion, which is not anything that I want to make light of. Not sinning and walking in holiness and doing the things that we might associate with more traditional religion are clearly laid out for us as of God and from God, but also acts of mercy and compassion, where we take the wealth of God that he has freely bestowed upon us, and we share that freely with other people.

We continue now in verse 7:

As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds concerning John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who wear soft clothing are in kings' houses. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is he of whom it is written, "Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you."

Know and Grow in Christ - Serve: Part 3

Matthew 11:1-15 | Sunday, February 26, 2017 | By Brian Brookins



In identifying who John the Baptist is, Jesus says he is a prophet, but he's not just a prophet. He's not just someone who speaks the word of God. He is someone who is actually prophesied about. His very presence, his very ministry was predicted in prophecy, so he is both the subject of prophecy and a prophet of God.

Verses 11-12:

"Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force.

If you will allow me to give an explanation of verse 12 there, it's a confusing verse. It's a verse that's difficult to translate from the Greek into the English and there is a lot of debate about it. What does it mean when the violent take the kingdom of God by force, and is that the most accurate translation? It's very possible that the emphasis in the verse is actually on the violent coming against the kingdom. I think I personally prefer that translation. With John in prison and Jesus headed to the cross, the emphasis is on those that oppose the kingdom.

I think it's important to stop and take note and to wrestle a little bit with what that verse means. I think it certainly does not mean that we advance the purposes of God through violence. If it is meant as a positive expression of taking the kingdom, I think it means violence in spirit, violence in prayer, violence in not settling for a "no" from God. It's Jacob wrestling with God until he receives the blessing of God. So that's option #2. As long as you choose one of those two options, we'll be okay. Just don't choose the option that God wants me to go out and use violence to advance his kingdom.

Verses 13-15: "For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John, and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come. He who has ears to hear, let him hear." John the Baptist, I think, is doubting what he at one time clearly understood. It's interesting. We have trouble with that. As I studied this passage, there were commentators who said that it clearly can't be that John is in doubt. We have to come up with another explanation. We are troubled by the fact that this bold prophet of God, who stood out in the wilderness with no care for what he wore or what he ate -- this fearless man is now in a position of doubt. I think there is great encouragement to be had

here, not that we are happy for John's weakness in this moment, but it points to the fact that circumstances in our lives can have a very powerful impact on what we believe to be true.

It's always interesting when we observe other people in the middle of a trial and we foolishly say, "Well, they shouldn't do this. They should do that. They should act this way." As if we know exactly what we would do if we were in that same trial. It's foolish, because we really don't know what we will do until we get in the trial, right? Sometimes we are surprised at ourselves at how we act when we are in the midst of difficult circumstances.

John, I think, is struggling. In fact, if you listen carefully to the response of Jesus, he is answering that. He is saying, "Hey, who did you go out to hear? Was it a reed blown in the wind? No, John is a true prophet of God. Don't be dismayed by this moment in John's ministry. This man is a true prophet of God. More than that, he is the Elijah of God, the one promised to come to prepare the way for me." This is Jesus, speaking of himself. That was John's call. Really, Jesus is not just giving validation to John the Baptist's ministry, but he is saying again, "I am the Messiah. I am the promised one." Someone even as great as John the Baptist is seen here as having some struggles spiritually. And what is his specific question? "Are you the one?"

Now, I've chosen this passage to address the issue of what we might call social justice or acts of mercy, acts of kindness, helping those who are in need -- the works of the Church, the good works for the poor. The reason I've chosen it is not just because Jesus' answer reveals compassion in these areas and of helping those in need, but because of the question that he is answering. John the Baptist is looking for assurance that Jesus Christ is the Messiah, and this is how Jesus defines his own ministry. In fact, you can go to quite a number of passages (I'll try to give you a couple here in just a moment) where this is exactly what happens. There is a definition of true religion, a definition of the essence of who Christ is and what his mission is and what he is about.

Again, let me make it obvious here. We are not just going to passages where helping the poor is referenced. We are going to multiple passages which teach and illustrate that this is essential to what it means to be in God. So you and I must take this particular teaching and understand that this is not like a teaching on marriage or parenting or self-discipline - various teachings that would all be important, that would apply to some of us, or maybe most of us. It's not just a compartment. It's not an appendage. It's not an add-on. It's not a "nice to have." This is critical to our very identity in Jesus Christ and who God calls us to be in this world.

So Jesus answers this question with these words: “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them.” Jesus references here his help to people. If you lived in the first century you would hear in that list not just those that are suffering, but those that are really outcasts: the leper, the blind, the marginalized in society, the very vulnerable, those without resource, those without power, those without means of addressing their own situation.

Micah 6:8: “He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” To do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God. The “do justice” represents the action in the verse. “Love kindness” -- maybe a better translation is love mercy or love compassion. It represents the heart, the motivating drive. And then “to walk humbly with God” is our disposition.

That’s the gospel at work in us. We know our own individual need. We know our own helplessness before God, and that God meets us and shows us mercy and forgives us, paying himself in the person of his son the debt that we owed, that we might be not just forgiven, but completely forgiven, forever forgiven. The bondage of sin would be lifted off of us. The power that it has over our lives would be broken. The destiny that we deserve because of sin is now completely altered -- we receive the future of Christ in our place. That sheer mercy of God places us in a position of humility to walk humbly before our God.

We walk humbly before God with a heart of mercy, doing acts of justice, doing acts of kindness, helping those who are vulnerable and marginalized. Milton Vincent writes: “When I see persons who are materially poor, I instantly feel a kinship with them, for they are physically what I was spiritually when my heart was closed to Christ.” There are visual demonstrations all around us of our spiritual condition apart from Jesus.

In the Old Testament there were categories of individuals who represented those who were most marginalized in society. In Zechariah 7:9-10 we are told: “Thus says the LORD of hosts, ‘Render true judgments, show kindness and mercy to one another, do not oppress the widow, the fatherless, the sojourner, or the poor, and let none of you devise evil against another in your heart.’” Those verses represent what has come to be known as the quartet of the vulnerable: the widow, the fatherless, the sojourner, and the poor. We might say: the widow, the fatherless, the immigrant, and the poor.

Know and Grow in Christ - Serve: Part 3

Matthew 11:1-15 | Sunday, February 26, 2017 | By Brian Brookins



We are told that these represent individuals in society who are in a very vulnerable, fragile place, and that the love of God compels us to work on their behalf.

I am aware that the issue of immigration is a politically hot topic. I'm not advocating for, insisting on, or pushing for a particular immigration policy. I'm really not smart enough to figure that out. I have my opinions, but I think it's wise for me to walk in humility regarding those opinions. Issues of national security, various options in terms of what this country's policy should be -- I doubt very seriously that we are going to completely agree in this room, even on those important issues.

I'm not at all insinuating that we should neglect those issues, but I'm addressing something very differently. I'm addressing our attitude towards individuals who are freshly, newly immigrated and are living as strangers in our midst, that we recognize that that is our spiritual condition before God apart from Christ. And that we be merciful to offer God's help and God's kindness and God's love to those individuals. So please do not email me articles about immigration, immigration numbers or issues or security issues. I'm serious when I say I'm really not pushing a particular agenda.

I find this is very much a personal perspective. I find the closer I get to Jesus Christ, the less that I feel I fit in various parties and positions and factions. I find myself drawn to a Lord who isn't accurately represented by anyone other than the Church in this world. That may not be your position. You may be quite at home in a particular party or faction or group. God bless you. I certainly would not want to see us abandon the political arena. I think we need Christians to be working and living out their values and running for office. We need to be voting and we need to be voting according our values. I am just sharing with you a 45 second personal opinion. Amen, Brian, thank you for sharing that.

Church, listen. Let's be about Jesus Christ first and foremost. Let's have the grace to disagree. I can promise you, you won't have to go far from where you are seated to find someone who thinks differently than you do on some of these issues. Let's love one another in Jesus Christ. Amen? Amen. This would be a bad time to get up and walk out and go to the bathroom.

Alright, I promised you that I would give you a couple other examples. Let me just do that right now. Don't turn to these, because I'm going to move very quickly.

- *James 1:26-27: "If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep*

oneself unstained from the world.” Notice both the call to live a life that is holy before God and one that is compassionate towards others. The passage is emphasizing that which is pure and undefiled in our walk with God.

- *Matthew 25:35-40 -- the Day of Judgment. Jesus tells us that on the Day of Judgment that there will be those he welcomes into his kingdom to inherit the kingdom prepared for them. And he will say to them: “For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.” Then the righteous will answer him, saying, “Lord, when did we see you in these various conditions?” And Jesus will respond: “Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.”*

Notice again that we are not just finding passages that reference helping other people. This is the Day of Judgment. This is a marker for you as a follower of Jesus. This is a means of self-identification before God. I don't believe, and I want to be careful here that we are not saying we earn our way into heaven. Salvation is a gift. It's the mercy of God.

In fact, the James 1:26-27 passage says that undefiled religion consists of three things. Part of what's so amazing about it and part of how you know it is true religion is that these three things are so difficult to do. One of them by themselves takes a miracle. To bridle your tongue, to have self-control when it comes to what you speak, takes a miracle. To be unstained by the world takes a miracle. Then to sacrificially care for and love those who are marginalized in society, represented here by the widow and the orphan, again takes the grace of God.

James is describing for us the life that is transformed by God's grace. We don't go out and earn God's salvation, but we receive this amazing gift of salvation. We walk humbly before God because we know of our own need before him.

- Isaiah 58 is another passage that talks about the nature of true religion. The prophet rebukes very religious people who are fasting and praying and seeking God. The prophet tells them, “Your entire approach to God is rejected because of your oppression of others.”
- In verses 6 and 7 of that chapter, these ringing words: “Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the

homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?”

- An additional example is found in Luke Chapter 4. Jesus goes to preach his inaugural sermon. He is in his hometown. It's the very beginning of his ministry. He stands up in Nazareth, in the synagogue, and he reads these words from the prophet Isaiah: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.”

We proclaim a message that there is freedom in Jesus Christ and our deeds demonstrate that liberty, that mercy, that undeserved gift of salvation, where God meets people in all kinds of suffering, to show his love, his power, his wisdom, his greatness. Just seeing the obvious there. Jesus, after reading from the scroll, sits down and says in his hometown synagogue, “I am the fulfillment of that passage. This is what my ministry is all about.” It is a defining moment in his ministry.

- Acts 10:38, Peter stands to preach and he says this about Jesus: *“He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed.” There was a ministry of good works that accompanied the proclamation of good news.*

So we minister in word and in deed, doing justice, loving mercy, walking humbly before our God.

Let's go back to our text in Matthew 11 and continue there in verses 16-19, where Jesus says these words:

But to what shall I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to their playmates, “We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn.” For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, “He has a demon.” The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, “Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!” Yet wisdom is justified by her deeds.

So Jesus, rebuking the spiritual leaders of his day, points out their gross immaturity. To these individuals Jesus says, “You're like children leading children. And the children that are watching the leaders look at those children and say, ‘you're not doing it right.’ If they do one thing it's wrong. If

Know and Grow in Christ – Serve: Part 3

Matthew 11:1-15 | Sunday, February 26, 2017 | By Brian Brookins



they do the opposite it's wrong." Then Jesus makes this comparison. It's a very helpful, very instructive portion of scripture where he says, "John came, living a very austere life. He came fasting. He came with self-denial, and you rejected him. I came, reaching out, showing God's compassion to the rejected of society, and you have rejected me."

I think it's interesting that Jesus is saying both are ordained in the kingdom of God. We are not wanting to throw out very traditional responses to God of prayer, scripture reading, fasting, not sinning and walking in holiness before the Lord. These are essential in our walk with God and part of our God-given purpose. Then if we go over here we are saying, "Yes, but we are also giving ourselves to helping hurting people."

I want to suggest to you that if you are here and you're looking for a church and you are seeking to see what might be real about Christ, that you will not find the relationship you want with God until you embrace both a very robust orthodoxy and compassion towards those who are hurting. Both of those are part of God's work in this age and in every age. If you say, "You know what? I just want to go to a church where they don't talk about all those hard subjects. I don't want to hear about judgment. I don't want to hear about all the things I can't do." I think surely there are churches out there that will soften the tone quite a bit. And yes, there are churches that will soften the tone just about as soft as you want it to be.

Then, there is a need to not only have this robust orthodoxy. You need that challenge of truth in your relationship with God, but also the challenge that we don't want to just become religious, mean people. We want to give our lives away to helping others. Really, maturity allows us to rise just a little bit above the noise of the debate. We get tired of all that's going on in social media about this and that, and that and this. We start to get a focus of saying, "Listen, I'm unapologetically going to stand for Jesus Christ and the atonement that is found in Jesus and I'm going to live my life helping people that are hurting."

I would suggest to you that it would help you in assessing your own maturity to ask: Are you prone to a critical spirit? Are you prone to always finding fault? I find it amazing when I meet people who come to Riverside one or two times then give me a list of what they like and don't like. I say, "Wow, that was quick! That was faster than my doctor's appointment." I want to suggest to you that as much as I want to be approachable as a pastor, as much as it can be helpful to get people's impressions, and I value that and I want to be accessible, we all should be aware that if we are going

Know and Grow in Christ - Serve: Part 3

Matthew 11:1-15 | Sunday, February 26, 2017 | By Brian Brookins



through life constantly taking inventory of how people are doing, it is probably a representation of spiritual immaturity.

It takes no faith for you to see what God is not doing and what other people are doing wrong. It might take a lot of faith to come here (maybe a little bit of faith) and see, "Wow, look at what God is doing!" I challenge you: in your marriage, with your children, with your parents, with your aging parents - it's easy for us to rehearse where they are disappointing, where they are coming up short, where they are falling short of what our expectations are. It's easy to cultivate a long list of expectations about what our church should be and what our peer group should be. But God calls us to be a people that are grateful above else, grateful because we are overcome with this pervasive sense of: "Can you see it?! Can you see what God is doing? God is at work! Even in me! Even in us!" That's part of what it means to grow up in Christ, to grow up in God.

I will not have time to read all of the remaining chapter, but I do want to call your attention to it as we get ready to close, because what follows is a vivid example of what we have been talking about. There is a very difficult paragraph, starting in verse 20, where Jesus speaks a message of stern judgment. He pronounces judgment on cities that have seen his works and rejected him. He speaks about how unbearable it will be for these cities on the Day of Judgment. Then in verse 25, a very different tone.

At that time Jesus declared, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

I don't know about you, but I like the last paragraph more than the previous paragraph. I'm drawn to those places where my Lord and Savior is standing before me saying, "You're tired. You're weary. Come to me and receive rest. I'm here. Place my yoke upon you. Just let me be the Lord of your life and I'll take care of everything else. Follow me first and everything else will be taken care of."

Know and Grow in Christ - Serve: Part 3

Matthew 11:1-15 | Sunday, February 26, 2017 | By Brian Brookins



I think that that is the message for us to end on. I think the previous paragraph sets us up to embrace the last paragraph with a full-hearted gratefulness for what God wants to do in our lives. Amen?