

“Inequality in the Kingdom”

Reading: Zephaniah 1:7, 12-18; Matthew 25:14-30

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Our Scripture passage today is one that has to do with judgment, and it comes in the middle of a chapter that’s all about judgment. Judgment is something of a bad word in our culture today, especially in a religious context, and it’s not without good reason. Many people, even those who know very little about Scripture, have memorized Jesus’ statements such as, “Do not judge, or you too will be judged,” or “Let he who is without sin cast the first stone,” and some people are quick to trot those lines out whenever they feel at all judged by someone else. And it is certainly true that the church has not always been correct in her judgments; there have been times when we have judged people harshly for things that didn’t really matter. And there have been other times when the church has judged correctly but not lovingly — often by claiming the line about “speaking the truth in love,” which in my experience usually involves more opinion than truth and very little love.

Judgment is not a popular concept to begin with, but we share much guilt in making it even less popular. We have to admit that, and we have to learn from our judgmental mistakes, and we have to go forward carefully. However, this passage of Scripture and many others like it make it clear that judgment is an integral part of what God is doing. We can’t preach the kingdom of God without including, at some point, the message that God will make judgments on us, on our actions, on our choices, on our lives. Judgment is not necessarily a bad thing: if the judgment falls in your favor, it’s probably quite welcome. If, however, you are wrong and you know it, or worse, if you’re wrong and you *like* it, judgment is a terrifying thing.

We have been reading from the Olivet Discourse for a couple of weeks now; it’s one of the large blocks of teaching that Jesus gives us in Matthew’s Gospel. This one comes while Jesus is in Jerusalem at the end of His ministry, right before He is betrayed and murdered and raised from the dead, and appropriately enough, the focus of this Discourse is on the rest of the story, the fulfillment of the kingdom, the completion of God’s plan. The first half of the Discourse, Matthew 24, focuses on the signs that will indicate that Jesus’ message of the kingdom has been vindicated as well as the repeated insistence that though people may recognize the signs, no one can know the final date or time of the fulfillment. In the second half, chapter 25, Jesus moves His focus and uses a series of parables to emphasize the return of the rightful King to His kingdom. You can’t know the date when God’s kingdom will be complete, but rest assured that it’s going to happen.

And Jesus makes it very clear in these parables that there is a strong element of judgment involved in this finale. God making all things right involves sifting out the wrong. God the Father vindicating the work and message of Jesus His Son requires the rejection of those who serve a different kingdom. The enthronement of Jesus Christ means the deposing of all usurpers and false kings. And so we see three parables in which the bridegroom returns, or the master returns, or the king returns, and at His return there is judgment. Some people are included in the final celebration, while others are excluded. Not everyone automatically gets in, which makes some people shocked, some people smug, and some people mourn. What is significant for our purposes today, though, is the basis of the judgment. On what qualities or actions is the judgment based? What gets you included or kicked out?

For all of our world's complaining about how judgmental the church can be, the reality is that our world does an awful lot of its own judging. Again, it's not all bad, though some of it certainly is. But think of it: we're judged regularly throughout our lives in a variety of ways and in a variety of settings. In school, we're judged as passing or failing based on whether you have been able to assimilate and make use of what has been given to you. There's an external standard, a grade, that is assigned to you based on whether you have either been smart enough or hardworking enough to learn the information that has been given to you. If the judgment is in your favor, you move forward and learn new and harder things, until eventually you're judged competent to go out and get a job. Maybe you go out on a date, which certainly involves a lot of judgments by both parties. In that setting, you're being judged based on who you are and, frankly, what you look like. There's not really a lot you can do to affect the outcome other than to be on your best behavior. You can dress up and learn some good jokes, but ultimately you're relying on who you already are. You might be able to bluff or lie your way through a few dates, but sooner or later the other person will see you for who you really are. If the judgment goes in your favor, you get to build a relationship with someone; if not, you have to try someone else.

You go out and get a job, and again, you're judged based on who you are and what you can do. Do you have the skills and knowledge and motivation to do the tasks that are assigned to you? If not, can you learn them quickly enough to be an advantage to your employer? Your judgment is generally based on very straightforward means; it's a question of profit and loss. Help make a profit, and you get to keep part of it; lose them too much money and you don't get an income. Are you worth anything to the company or the organization? And while you're working and learning and dating, you probably also want to make some friends along the way. Again, how you are judged is largely on you: in social settings you're judged based on whether you're likeable, or funny, or useful, or attractive.

The point is that there are lots of judgments being made all the time, and in most cases they are based on who you are or what skills you have or how useful or attractive you are to other people. We could go on and on, but it would just be variations on a theme. And the point is that those judgments made by the world are fundamentally different than the judgment we see taking place in Jesus' description of the fulfillment of God's kingdom. These three parables show us that rather than the world's way of judging us based on our skills or our being or our usefulness, we are instead judged based on our response to what God does and who God is. Last week we told the story of the kingdom as a wedding party, and those who were ready were invited in. The judgment, therefore, came based on whether you were ready, prepared, expectant for the promised arrival of the bridegroom. He promised to come; do you trust Him enough to wait expectantly?

But today we have a different parable. This is not a bridegroom coming to the wedding party, this is a master returning to his servants. The master has left his assets in the care of his servants and then gone on a journey. While he was gone, two of the servants put the money to work for him and doubled the amount. The master is understandably pleased; if anyone knows someone who can double an investment with no work on my part, let me know and I'll give you a generous cut. He rewards his servants for their faithfulness, recognizing that they have been faithful with what they were given, and they are deserving of greater things. One servant, however, says this: "I knew that you are a hard man, harvesting where you have not sown and gathering where you have not scattered seed. So I was afraid and went out and hid your gold in the ground. See, here is what

belongs to you.” This man is called a wicked and lazy servant, and what he has is taken from him, and he is cast out.

The moral of the story is, somewhat surprisingly, “For whoever has will be given more, and they will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them.” That may be how economics works in our country, but that hardly seems like how the kingdom of God is supposed to operate. Jesus has preached many times on the need for generosity and grace, and He has asserted that the first will be last and the last will be first. Those who give up everything will be given everything; those who lose their lives for His sake will find what true life really is. There’s often a reversal in God’s kingdom, but in this parable, the reversal seems reversed.

It’s a parable that is often used in the context of stewardship. Preachers often like to interpret the passage as an exhortation to use your resources wisely. Or maybe it’s used in the context of spiritual gifts, saying that you should use your gifts to the glory of God. And that’s certainly true, and it’s not an inappropriate way to read this passage. But the parable is set in the context of the coming of the kingdom and the judgment that comes then, and there’s that troublesome moral about those who have being given even more.

The question we have to ask, I think, is what counts as treasure in God’s kingdom. What is of value? What is the equivalent of gold in God’s eyes? Because actual gold is so worthless in God’s kingdom that it’s what’s used to pave the streets. What does God treasure? God treasures our faithfulness. Our faith is so valuable to Him that He’s willing to give Himself for it. He’s willing to enter into this ages-long risky plan of redeeming and reclaiming His fallen creation so that He can secure your faith. The things that we count as valuable — money, resources, skills, time — what are they to the God who created the entire universe with a word? No, the gold that He wants invested is something that He will not create out of nothing by His own will; He wants you to freely respond to Him. He wants your faithfulness in response to the faithfulness He has invested in you.

That word, “faith,” has a confused understanding in our world. It has been pitted against “knowledge” in our public conversations, such that “faith” is seen as the embodiment of religion and is taken to mean nothing but blind belief with no respect to evidence. But that is *not* the meaning of faith in Christ. The faith we talk about is trust in a person, not belief in an unfounded idea. We trust that Jesus Christ is God, and that God is who He says He is, and that He can do what He says He can do. This is the faith that we are called to, faith that Jesus is Lord of all creation, with all of the implications that come along with that claim.

So the point of this parable is that we are judged not as the world judges, based on what you can bring to it, but as the kingdom of God judges. God judges us based on what He has given us and on our faith in Him in response. It’s this mysterious interplay between what God does and what we do in response: is faith something God gives us, or is it something we give Him? Could we even respond to God if He did not first give us enough grace to be able to respond? To some people, God gives a great gift, a great investment of His presence and vision, and those people are judged based on a great response to the gifts of God. Some people receive less, a little glimpse of God at first, but do they respond in faith? As we give God a return on His investment in us, He then in turn invests more; we have proven faithful in our faith, and He takes us further into His happiness.

Some people, however, do not trust, regardless of God's investment in them. They insist on seeing God as "a hard man, harvesting where He has not sown and gathering where He has not scattered seed." It's a response of faithlessness; they do not trust that God is who He says He is. They do not trust that the gifts God has given them are worth using faithfully for Him, and they are cast out in response.

The currency of God's kingdom is faith, it is trust in what God says about Himself, and faith and faithfulness are two sides of the same coin. So the question for you today is whether you trust enough in the gifts God has given you to use them faithfully. Do you trust enough in the character of the giver to know that He is good, that He will be faithful to you, and that He will do what He says He will do?

Benediction: Go and be faithful with your master's investment, so that you may hear in the end, "Well done, good and faithful servant!"



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