

Engage – The Missional Church

Matthew 25:37-46

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It is a total joy to speak today on a subject dear to my heart. I love to think about what the Bible says about the Church impacting the world. Part of the reason I love it so much is that I grew up in a brand of Christianity that spent much of its time distancing itself from the community around it. It was Christianity by isolation which is helpful if you want to avoid the influence of the world, but it's a terrible approach if you think God has called the church to be transformational to the culture by the power of the gospel. Our *Beyond these Walls* series last year was a call to take the church to the world:

"You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men. You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven. (Matthew 5:13-16)

Salt and Light. Salt makes people thirsty. Light helps people see. Does that sound like run and hide ministry? Verse 14 is explained as the "good deeds" of God's people in verse 16. The result is that the world sees the good deeds and ends up praising God for them. That's transformation. That's a transformational Church.

So this third *E* in our series is *Engage*. As we saw last week from 1 Peter 4:10, *Engage* is about serving Christ. But you know what? I haven't seen Jesus lately. I can't minister to Him directly. He's not here. He's in heaven. So how I do I serve Christ? I serve Christ by serving His people and serving in His church with the gifts He's given me. Christ has gifted all of us with spiritual gifts to be used in the ministry of the church. Much of that is ministry to one another. However, these gifts are not just inward, but also outward. And they have to be or the church becomes self-focused and self-consumed. When that happens, look out. An inwardly focused church thinks it's all about them and then they get all wrapped up with their personal preferences, personal comfort, and pet issues. Then the church feels more like a country club than an army. So we constantly need to keep before us that we are to take our eyes off ourselves and put them onto a world that needs to be able to see by our lives that Christ is an all-satisfying Savior.

Let me show you from just one place in Scripture - Matthew 25:31ff. This is often called the parable of the Sheep and the Goats. The problem is that there is no parable language here. It's not a parable; it's the way it will be. Jesus gives us a glimpse into the throne room of heaven on the day of final judgment:

"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. (Matthew 25:31-33)

On this great and terrifying day, God will divide every person who has ever lived into two groups. One group, here described as sheep, will go to His right. The other group, goats, will go to His left. Right and left meant something in that culture: The right hand meant

favor; the left hand meant rejection. The sheep represent those that are under divine favor. The goats represent those that are not.

"Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.'

"Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?'

"The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.'

"Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.'

"They also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?'

"He will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.'

"Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life."
(Matthew 25:34-46)

I can assume that all of us want very much to be in the group that goes off to enjoy eternal life and all of us want very much NOT to be in the group that goes away to eternal punishment. So I think this story has all of our attention. The question is, *What is truly different about the two groups?* This is one of those passages of Scripture people go to great lengths to make clear what it isn't saying and miss what it is saying. If you just read this passage ignoring the rest of the Bible, you *could* come to the conclusion that what sends you to hell is not doing good works and what sends you to heaven is doing them. Of course the entire Bible from Genesis to Revelation is about man's inability to save himself and that our good works can't do it either. Jesus taught the same thing. The problem is when people read this passage and see the kindnesses as the cause of salvation. That can't be. So what are these acts of compassion? **They are not the cause, but the evidence of salvation.**

This is what we must understand here. Compassion and service for Christ are always the result of the transformation that salvation brings. They're not done perfectly in our lives, but they must be evidenced in some ways in our lives. Jesus teaches here that service for Christ is so inextricably linked with real salvation that the King can divide by those who do and those who do not. So, if that's the case, how important is "Engaging in ministry"?

Engage in what? Jesus lists several compassion ministries here (Verses 35, 36). They fall under three broad categories: Food, shelter and companionship. (See Phil Ryken, *The City of God*.) How many are convenient? Comfortable? Super easy to do? They are all physical in some way and meeting physical needs requires exertion and effort. They all involve giving of ourselves for someone who has a need. People with needs generally don't have anything to offer us. That is the real test. Will I serve someone who cannot serve me back? Hence God's preoccupation with how widows and orphans are treated. He doesn't say, *What you've done to the most important in society, you've done to me.* That ministry is too easy. Ulterior

motives are often there. The world is happy to do that. But minister to a child, a poor person, or a prisoner; it's hard to fake that.

To whom is ministry being done? Here there is some debate. Jesus says it's compassion ministry to "the least of my brothers" (Verse 40). Who is He describing here? For centuries, the majority view was that He was describing the down and out of the world. The untouchables. The forgotten. Many other passages of Scripture teach on the importance of this kind of ministry. The problem in Matthew 25 is that Jesus calls them "His brothers." Today, the majority view is also mine that He is talking about Christians of low resources and worldly significance; the least notable. It's an amazing thing that Jesus says, *Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.* (Verse 40)

When You do it for Jesus, You do it to Jesus

Clothing them was clothing Him. Feeding them was feeding Him. When ministry is done in the name of Christ or out of love for Christ, Jesus treats that ministry as being done to Him personally. This is a wonderful opportunity! I'd like to think if Jesus was here and hungry this morning, somebody here might offer to take Him to lunch. And if Jesus needed a place to stay the night, somebody here would let Him stay with them.

What? Are you kidding? We would be clamoring over each other for the opportunity. Nothing could be greater than to meet Jesus' need. Yet, that is how we must look at the ministry opportunities that are around us. Why do I do it? For the Lord. Ministry done *for* Him is ministry done *to* Him. Who wants to engage now? I do.

The opposite proves also to be true. In the case of the goats, **they are not condemned for doing wrong things; they are condemned for the failure to do right things.** They didn't feed the hungry. They didn't clothe the naked. They didn't care. Now they do, but it is too late. As J.C. Ryle said, *Hell is truth known too late.* They were too busy living for themselves to spend time ministering to people who couldn't help them achieve their personal ambitions.

How did we begin? In Matthew 5: *Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.* (Matthew 5:16) Matthew 25 tells us what "light shining" is. So that the compassion ministries we extend to one another and to the community around us proclaim the gospel in ways that are not only heard, but seen, and felt, and tasted. Have you helped anyone "taste" the gospel? Have you helped anyone "feel" the gospel of God's love?

Here is a question; do you love your Jerusalem? I know there's plenty things wrong in the Northwest Indiana world around us, but the way I hear some Christians talk about it, it's hard to hear much love. Those politicians! Those (pick the racial slur)! Those people in (pick the community)!

Did the city of Jerusalem have problems in Jesus' day? Yes. There was massive spiritual hypocrisy in the very city that He knew would kill Him. Yet Jesus wept over Jerusalem and said, *O Jerusalem, Jerusalem...How often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings* (Matthew 23:37). We will never be the church God wants us to be until we look at Crown Point and Merrillville and St. John and Schererville and Griffith and Gary or any of the other 45 towns and cities represented in our church and say, *Oh, how we long for you!*

It was Paul who said, *I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers.* (Rom. 9:3) (Romans 9:3). It was John Knox who prayed to God, *Give me Scotland or I die.* Do we have an outward personally sacrificial passion for people facing a hopeless eternity? If we don't care for their souls around here, who will? How will we reach out to them? In ways they can feel? Touch? Taste? Ultimately, in ways they will know through the hearing of the gospel.

- *Truth is not something merely known or proclaimed but Someone experienced, tasted, and seen as the Psalmist says, by grace, faith, and presence that not merely knows the Truth but loves Him.* (Driscoll)
- *The way Christians do church today is the equivalent of ignoring millions of desperate, but unrecognized, cries for help. We're letting an increasing number of our neighbors and friends die without a personal exposure to the life-giving good news of Jesus Christ. Unless we make some drastic changes, many people are likely to perish, and we'll fail in the mission of what God has called us to become and do.* (Clegg and Bird, *Lost in America*)

Are we a missional church? You say, what does "missional" mean? Missional is a buzzword right now. To be missional is to be externally focused; to have your sights set on the community around you; to be a church on a mission. This is in contrast to really lame forms of church where people think it's about them. It's the country club mentality I mentioned before. Do you want to be part of a church that's an army or a country club? A cocoon or a beehive? Which do you think we are?

I'll tell you where we want to be. We want to be sheep, not goats. We want to be at the right hand not the left hand. We want to be missional; a church on a mission.

We have taken some steps to get there. A big one was last summer when we did our series *Beyond These Walls* and a number of community ministries flowed from that series that we had never done before. Over the past year we have:

- Done construction for a local ministry to troubled teens
- Taken meals to community service agencies every month
- Adopted a classroom at an elementary school designated by the government as below the poverty level
- Helped build a house for Habit for Humanity
- Provided a Christmas Dinner for the homeless with gifts for them and their children
- Ministered to around a hundred women every two weeks experiencing unplanned pregnancies
- Handed out 15,000 cups of water at the Lake County Fair in August and provided basic necessities and supplies to the carnival workers
- Sent untold numbers of care packages to local homeless shelters
- Completed numerous construction projects for local compassion ministries and widows in our own church (done by our Nehemiah's Army, a group of men and women with basic handyman abilities)
- Began a ministry to the disabled
- Provided meals for local police and fire stations and school administrators

And just last Sunday, 500 of you signed up to engage in ministry on all different levels. Praise God!

Two weeks ago I and another Bethel pastor met with a key Northwest Indiana politician. As we sat down to eat at a round table, I leaned forward to sit and he leaned forward to sit and we banged heads hard! It stunned me. Lots of people say they're banging heads with a politician, but I have done it - literally. But we sat with him and said, *We want to be a blessing to this community. What can we do?* We're asking around.

Last year, we made a decision as a church for this very reason and took "Baptist" out of the name and took on a non-denominational name. Why we did that is summed up by a funny conversation I had with a woman in our community this summer. We were talking at a wedding reception and she said, "Are you from Bethel Baptist Church?"

I said, "Yes, but we're not a Baptist church anymore."

She said, "Really? You mean anyone can go there now?"

I said, "Yes, anyone."

Is that true? Is anyone welcome to the love and ministry of our church? That's not determined by who I say is welcome, that's determined by who feels welcome here sitting next to you. Are you willing to reach out to the immigrant, the racially different than you, the AIDS patient, the homosexual, the other political party, the poor, the smelly, the socially radical, the pierced? How about someone just different than you? Bethel, *You mean anybody can go there now?* Yes. God save us from any attitude other than Jesus' who said, *Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.* (Matthew 11:28)

This won't happen because I say it. This is completely dependent on the culture and attitude of our church family. This is a mindset. Are we engaging in active helpfulness? Are we thinking of others here? Do we offer the love of God and our love and a place to belong? In light of this mandate, we are re-thinking our entire approach to hospitality ministries and how we welcome people to our church.

Sometimes just a little extra attention can pay such rewarding dividends. I learned a lesson this past week. A woman I didn't know was considering signing up for a ministry at the fair last Sunday. I said hello and she said she was considering some options. In a strange moment of boldness I said, *Before you sign up here, there is a more important question. Are you a Christian?* She looked at me and I saw moisture gathering in her eyes. She wanted to, but she was confused. A godly woman stepped in and cleared away the confusion and this woman received Christ as her Savior. I was happy and convicted at the same time. How often have I talked to somebody whose heart is heavy and ready and I just keep the conversation light and superficial? The person probably thinks as I do, this isn't somebody who can help my soul.

But all she needed was a little extra attention; a little gesture of love and concern. How many hearts around us are dying to have somebody show just a little bit of the love of God to them? By that action we tell them that someone cares about them and then we speak the gospel of Christ and His love for them. A thousand churches consumed with themselves will never make a difference in their community. Let's not be one of them. Let's engage. Let's get the focus off ourselves and on a lost world that desperately needs a Savior. God has called us to go. We are to be salt and light. Make people thirsty. Help them see. Engage the culture with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

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