

MATTHEW 25:31-40
I WAS HUNGRY...

Ever tried to impress someone? Maybe it was your first date, and you were keen to impress the man or woman of your dreams; what do you do? You spend hours trying to make sure you're wearing the right clothes, your hair is in the right place, you have the right perfume or after shave. Did it work? Or did it fall flat on its face? Maybe you were meeting your prospective in-laws and you are meeting them for the first time and you want to make good impression because it matters: you want to take a present with you, but what should it be? Should it be flowers, or chocolates, or a bottle of wine – these all have their pluses, they all have their downsides, especially if it seems you've not spent the right amount of money; but how much is the right amount? Did they warm to you? You want to impress someone famous whom you know you are going to meet, a celebrity, royalty. There are certain protocols to follow if you are meeting royalty, but you still you want to make a good personal impression; you want them to remember you! You take care to speak properly, with no swears words, no slang words; it all has to be proper and good; what happens is that you end up getting tongue-tied and you know that you've been trying too hard and you should just relax and be yourself, but it is too late for that now!! You have tried hard to impress and it has fallen flat. We are forgotten in 5 minutes. How embarrassing!

What would you do to impress Jesus? Somehow we think it matters that Jesus thinks well of us, that we make a good impression on Him. It is our great ambition in life as a Christian that Jesus thinks well of us, that we make a good impression on Him. Maybe He will remember us for more than 5 minutes! So what do we do? We make a great show of our religion; a previous generation dressed up to come to church much more than we do now, big hats and the like. Or we carry the largest Bible we can find to make sure that everyone sees it and sees how pious we are. When we pray we tell Jesus how much we have done, how good we have been, "here are the twenty-five people that we have helped this week". This is a kind of caricature, but you can recognise it, I hope. We're out to make an impression, a big impression on Jesus because we want Him to think well of us, because he is King and judge and so it matters that He thinks well of us!

A glance at our Bible reading this morning from Matthew 25 might seem to add to that; it might seem to suggest that we need to make a good impression on Jesus and here are the ways by which we might do that. We impress Jesus by helping others. But when we dig more deeply into what Jesus actually says, we find something else, something very different; this is not about making a good impression on Jesus; this is about living out our faith in world in some of the quietest, humblest ways possible! There is to be no show! There is nothing of which to boast! But this is people helping others quietly. Jesus cannot think more highly of us than He already does; He loves us with all His love; we trust Him and we live our lives by faith. This is about living out that faith in most practical ways.

Jesus paints a picture of judgement. He is King and we have seen over the last couple of weeks the promise He has made that He will come again to the world in power and trailing clouds of glory, as King of Kings and Lord of Lords. He will come to judge world and that is picture we have here. Judgement is seen as dividing the sheep from the goats, right and left, good and bad favour. It has always been the hope that Messiah would be a great King: when Jesus came first He spoke about His kingship, but there was always something left unfinished. Here is the end of the story, in a sense: the Son of Man comes in glory, the King in all His glory. When He comes, He will judge the world and here He gives us some idea of what that will mean.

Here is criterion: *“He will...” (Matthew 25:34ff)* The picture He paints is of people who have done things for Him. We have fed Jesus when He was hungry and so on. The actions He describes are very simple things, but, rightly, the question is asked *“Lord, when...” (Matthew 25:37)* We would have remembered! We are not aware of ever having done these things for Jesus! He has not been here for us to do these things for Him. *“The King...” (Matthew 25:40)* There is some debate as to who are “these brothers of mine”: are these our Christian brothers and sisters? Are these simply other people that we come across in the world? But that is to get side-tracked. Jesus looks for us to be people who love and who care, people who are kind and who do simple acts of kindness to people in need; by doing such simple acts of kindness for others, we somehow do them for Jesus. Some have taken the list and said “here are six kinds of good we must do in the world” and used this as a kind of tick-sheet of kindness, but again that is to get side-tracked and to miss the point; these are examples and pictures of kindness and love; this is not a tick-sheet, but we are to be people with kindness in our hearts to others.

Do we do this to impress Jesus? Do we do this to earn our salvation? No! That would be to contradict everything that the Bible says elsewhere. We are saved by the grace of God through faith in Jesus. God’s blessing is given to *“those on...” (Matthew 25:34)* The blessing of God is already ours; we are already assured of our eternal salvation by faith in Jesus; this is about the way we put that faith into practice, especially in our love for needy people in the world. What is the alternative? The goats are condemned not because they have done bad things, but because they have done nothing. They saw the same people who were poor and in need, but either they failed to notice, or they felt no compassion; they did nothing for them; they sat back and left them to muddle on. This is about putting our faith into practice by loving people in need. It doesn’t really matter who these people are, but we show our allegiance to Jesus by our love for people in need.

Christians should be first in the queue to help people in need. So often we are: the Trussell Trust that runs so many of the foodbanks in Scotland is a Christian organisation; Bethany Trust, Edinburgh City Mission, Fresh Start, all have Christian roots and Christian principles at their heart. Local Churches across the city are meeting the needs of their communities on an organisational level; the Salvation Army cares for poor people as well. Our community need is perhaps not quite so obvious as in some other places, but we should still be first in the queue to befriend people who are lonely, to provide for people in need in other ways, to comfort those who are sad, to visit people in hospital, to look after people in need. That is the challenge of being disciples of Jesus. Many of us already do things like this; it is putting our faith into practice to help people and show kindness in the world.

Most important is motivation: if we do this to impress Jesus, or to impress someone else, we do it for the wrong reasons and it will fall flat. We do this to care, pure and simple. We have no agenda other than the needs of the people for whom we care. This is not about making ourselves feel good or having impressed the person for whom we’ve cared, or impressed Jesus. This is not about massaging our own ego or making ourselves feel good. We can calculate what we do and say to ourselves “If I do this for so-and-so, then they will do this back for me; if I do this for so-and-so, then they will be my friend forever!” I was drawn up a while back by a conversation I had with someone I was getting to know, whose family was a little involved in some of the things we do and I found myself questioning my motives: am I her friend so that her family will come more to our church? Or am I her friend simply to be her friend? Rather, this is to be an uncalculating kindness, natural, instinctive, without any praise or publicity, with nothing selfish about it whatsoever, but a simple desire to be kind and loving. Our motive must simple: to care for people in need.

All of these six descriptions of kindness that Jesus uses are so simple. Anyone can do these things. You don't need to donate £1million to charity; these are simple, everyday actions that all of us can do. These are simple ways in which we can help people we meet every day. You don't need to swim crocodile-infested rivers, or climb Everest, or march across the Sahara desert to care for others; we do that by our simple acts of kindness to people in need next door, in your street, wherever you meet them. You might think that there is no such need in Juniper Green, Baberton Mains, or our other places, but behind closed doors there are many people who are hurting, lonely, lost, struggling with life; how do we care for them? The Church as an organisation can arrange some of that, but don't wait; do it yourself!

"The only thing necessary for evil to triumph is for good men to do nothing." (Edmund Burke) The Irish Statesman of the eighteenth century knew what the world was like. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German Lutheran pastor who was executed in Germany in 1945, was critical of the German churches in the 1930's because they did nothing, they said nothing about the rise of Nazism: "silence in the face of evil is itself evil; God will not hold us guiltless". We have sat back and watched governments across the world become corrupt and people are poor as a result and the chains of poverty are so hard to break. There are simple things that we can do to make a difference in the world: we can support Christian organisations that help the poor, like Tearfund; we can be involved in the work of Care Van; we can give to the Salvation Army in our Gift service; we can give to the shoebox appeal. All of these are ways of caring for people in need across world.

Most of all, this is about being kind and caring people. Jesus has been gracious to us and has saved us by His grace. We are people greatly blessed; His kingdom belongs to us. Being people who are loved and cared for, He looks for us to be loving and caring people; to notice people in need, to care for them in ways that are appropriate; to care without an agenda, with no ulterior motive; this is not about massaging our ego, or boosting our self-esteem; we are to care for people in need, to give food to the hungry, to invite the stranger in, look after the sick, to befriend the lonely and whatever else comes our way. *"I tell..." (Matthew 25:40)*