

The Underground Church Network
Freedom Sunday Sermon Sample #3

“Least of These”, Matthew 25:34-40

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February 21, 2010

How many of you watch the game show Jeopardy? Alex Trebek gives answers and the contestants ask questions. So let me give you a Jeopardy answer this morning. Category is: God’s heart and purpose for the Church. Answer is: A contagious movement of passionate followers of Jesus Christ that live out the Great Commission and Great Commandment within arm’s reach of every heart and home in mid-Missouri and around the world.

Question: What is Christian Chapel Church?

In other words, what are you? God’s heart for us as a community of faith is to live compassionately within arms reach of people in our families, in our church, in our work place, our hang-out place, in Columbia, Boone County, in mid-Missouri, in Nicaragua, in Ghana, in Philippines, India, around the world.

When I think of God’s heart I think about the “least of these” in our world. When I think about God’s vision, I see you becoming a compassionate people armed with kindness, grace, service, love, hope, lived out in front of the world. My hope for each one of us is that we would develop a rhythm of demonstrating the love of Jesus Christ, that God would give you and me his heart, his vision for the “least of these” in our world.

I want to share with you three Great Initiatives of God. I’m going to tie a loose knot with each of them. I believe these Great initiatives of God are not to be taken in isolation, but understood as the heart of God.

If you’ve been in the church any length of time you have most likely heard the first two initiatives spoken about many times. So I will use the first two initiatives as foundational, setting the context for God’s heart in today’s message and next week’s message.

The First Great Initiative of God, is the Great Commission: Go where God tells you to go. Just get going.

And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age." (Matthew 28:18-20, ESV)

When you hear the word “teach or preach” what do you think of? I wonder if the Church has minimized the way it’s to preach and teach? Some debate one should preach loudly, spitting, and shouting, mentioning hell in every other sentence. Others believe you ought to preach the gospel in a conversational manner, engaging and involving the audience. I certainly speak a passionate, conversational style. As someone who speaks as my full-time calling, preaching and communicating the gospel verbally is of utmost importance. However, I wonder if we have minimized the “preach and teach” to a Sunday-morning style of verbal expression at the neglect of preaching and teaching by going into all the world demonstrating God’s love in practical ways.

Eugene Peterson in the paraphrase version, The Message Bible, says: “...Then instruct them in the practice of all I have commanded you. I'll be with you as you do this, day after day after day, right up to the end of the age.” (Matthew 28:20, MES)

I believe Peterson is on to something. The word practice is actionable. Just don’t tell them what to do, teach them by doing what to do. Have we sat back, satisfied with chewing the biblical cud on our back teeth, Sunday after Sunday? Do we believe that Christ’s work is over? He said on the cross, “It is finished.” So, there’s nothing else for us to do, right? You know, Jesus took care of everything so we can chill out until He comes back.

Well, salvation is by faith in Christ’s death and resurrection. We have forgiveness of sins and restoration to God through Christ and Him alone. But for many followers of Christ, that is where we have stopped. If Christ’s work was finished, why would Jesus say: “You shall do greater works than what I’ve done”? Why would He say, “I’m going to heaven, while I’m away I’m sending you the Holy Spirit who will empower you to do my great works—to be my witnesses”?

Sometimes the busy-ness of life, the pains of hurts, the burdens of finances, the brokenness of unrealized dreams, all get us stuck. Rather than going, we stay. Rather than loving, we judge. Rather than giving ourselves in service to the least of humanity, we save ourselves for the best of humanity.

In a way, this is what happened to Peter. He was stuck. Rather than loving and serving the Gentiles, the least of these to a Jew in that day, he saved himself for the best of humanity, the Jews of that day.

Remember the story? “About noon the following day as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray. He became hungry and wanted something to eat, and while the meal was being prepared, he fell into a trance. He saw heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners. It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles of the earth and birds of the air. Then a voice told him, ‘Get up, Peter. Kill and eat.’ ‘Surely not, Lord!’ Peter replied. ‘I have never eaten anything impure or unclean.’ The voice spoke to him a second time, ‘Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.’ This happened three times, and immediately the sheet was taken back to heaven.” (Acts 10: 9-16, NIV)

Peter placed people into two camps, the clean and unclean, or the best and the least. God said, "I'm doing a new thing." There are no more distinctions between the Jew and Gentile, the best and least in Peter's mind. Peter almost missed out on God's work. He almost missed discovering the heart of God for the least of humanity because he thought he had this religion thing all figured out.

You know, he had been in the "church" a long time. He was the leader of the Jerusalem church. We all need rescuing. God rescued Peter from judgment and prejudice, from the mundane and status quo. God told Peter to go, to step out of his box, his comfort zone and point Cornelius, a least of these persons, to faith in Christ.

Now notice, the spiritual dream from God grabbed Peter's attention but it was Peter's obedience, Peter's going, that changed his life and the life of Corneilus, a least of humanity. When you go and serve the least of humanity, you are saved from self-focus, selfish ambition. You are saved from hoarding what you have and from not being satisfied with what you have. Giving yourself away opens your eyes wider than your own needs. When you go you will capture God's heart and be captured by what God is doing.

The Second Great Initiative of God, is the Great Commandment: Love God and Love People.

In response to a group of religious leaders attempting to stump Jesus, they asked Him, out of the 613 commandments which one is the most important? Jesus boiled it all down to two commandments. "And he (Jesus) said to him, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'" (Matthew 22:37-40, ESV)

Listen closely: loving God is not enough. If it were, Jesus would have only said: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." Is God's vision for the community of faith to simply come to a building where the church gathers to worship each week? Loving God passionately is right and beautiful, but there is more. Jesus said of equal importance is: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

This whole love thing started with God. "This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us." (1 John 4: 9-12, NIV)

God said He loves the world. The reason for the incarnation, Jesus leaving heaven and coming to earth to move into our space, is because God so loved the world. God loves this messy, crazy culture, confused, topsy-turvy world. When I think about what I love, what I naturally think about is not God and not the world. It's me. I love me. I think you

love you, too. Everyday, most of us begin our day by taking care of our needs. Who is the focus of your first hour?

As I go through my day, I don't have to say to myself, "John, be sure you eat lunch today." No, that happens naturally.

When God says to love your neighbor as yourself, is it possible that God knows just how much we love ourselves, how we care for ourselves, how we are sure to do what it takes to meet our own needs? Wow, if we loved people the way we love ourselves, the world would be a different place.

Jesus came to earth to show the world He loves the world, in spite of its mess. Aren't you glad because we are a part of the world and its mess? God loves you and God loves the world. That's exactly what you find Jesus did with the disciples. He showed love to people who were lost like sheep without a shepherd. What if we followed His example?

As you serve, you feel love for this topsy-turvy world. You are unstuck from your comfort zone. You begin to hearing the heartbeat of God for the lost world and the least of humankind. What if rather than condemning a way-ward women, like some of the religious leaders in the Bible were doing, we reached out in love and grace the way Jesus did?

Jesus offered the enslaved, the least of these, a new way of life. As we follow in his footsteps, his Spirit flows through us, and we incarnate Christ in the space of the most vulnerable. So, would it be appropriate to consider God's heart for the world is much bigger than our heart for me and what's mine?

The third Great Initiative of God, is the Great Compassion: Live Compassionately.

Following his wilderness experience, Jesus begins his three-year public ministry. He launches His ministry in his hometown of Nazareth, at the local synagogue.

Invited to read the Scripture, Jesus unrolled the scroll to Isaiah 61 where Isaiah described hundreds of years earlier the mission of the coming Messiah. Jesus read: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, for he has anointed me to bring Good News to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim that captives will be released, that the blind will see, that the oppressed will be set free, and that the time of the LORD's favor has come." (Luke 4:18-19, NLT)

After he had finished, he rolled the scroll up, handed it back to the attendant, sat down and said, "The scripture has come true today before your very eyes." What he meant was that he was the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy. He was the Christ and Isaiah 61 was his purpose. This made the audience mad. People still flinch today when Christ is proclaimed as the flag of freedom for all humanity.

In the beginning of Jesus' ministry Luke records in chapter 4 Jesus' acceptance of his ministry to the lost and broken world, to the least of these. He spent the next three years among the devastated, rejected and broken, spent time with the common person, the most unlikely persons.

Three years later we find Jesus talking to some of his disciples on a hillside in Jerusalem just before his crucifixion. This is recorded in Matthew 24. They asked him about what the last days of the earth will look like.

He illustrates a portrait of suffering humanity, global crises.

- Wars and Rumors of Wars
- Famines
- Earthquakes
- Spiritual decay
- Human suffering
- Violation of the most vulnerable

He said all this and more would happen prior to his return to earth of which no person would know the time or hour.

In Chapter 25, He told three stories, all of which were about accountability.

He first told of ten virgins that were to prepare themselves for the bridegroom's coming. Five take their responsibility seriously five didn't. The bridegroom came unexpectedly. The five that took responsible action were ready to go with him. The five passive virgins missed their door of opportunity.

The second is about three servants whose owner had entrusted them with his property and then went on a journey. When the owner returned unannounced, he held the three servants accountable based on how well they cared for and stewarded the owner's household. The servant burying His responsibilities was judged for failure to act in a responsible way with that which he was given.

The third story is about the final judgment and a time of separation between the wicked and righteous. It was here that Jesus said those famous words: "Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. 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 hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?' And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.'" (Matthew 25:34-40, ESV)

The sheep curiously responded by asking Jesus when any of this ever happened to him, and he simply said, “As you (followers of Christ) do this to the least of these (least of humankind) you do it to me.” Caring for suffering humanity is the charge entrusted to those who profess to follow Jesus.

There is physical suffering, emotional suffering, mental suffering, spiritual suffering. Friends, Jesus isn't physically here for us to serve. So, we serve others, we serve the least of humanity in His name. And, by doing so, we serve Christ. The distressed, the diseased, the weak, the hurting, the poor, the hungry, the enslaved, and the most vulnerable, we serve them by doing good to them.

He said, “Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.” (Matthew 5:16, NIV)

May God enlarge our compassion for the suffering, the weak, the least of humanity.

“Least of These” Group Questions

The Great Commission: Matthew 28:19-20

When God tells us to go into all the world and preach the gospel, what does that mean to you?

How can we live the gospel out in our everyday lives? What would that look like for you?

Acts 10:9-27 tells the story of Peter having a dream about things that were clean and unclean. What was the significance of this dream? What happened after the dream? Read Acts 10:44-47 to find out what happened as a result of Peter being obedient and sharing Christ with these Gentiles who were in Jesus' day “the least of these”.

How did Peter almost miss out on God's plan for the expansion of His Kingdom? What does this say to us today?

The Great Commandment: Matthew 22:38-39

Who does God love most? Who do we love most? How can we shift our natural inclination to focus on ourselves and focus on others instead?

Loving others happens as we live our lives daily. What are some ways we can incorporate loving others into our daily lives. Give examples.

The Great Compassion: Matthew 25: 34-40

What does this passage say about “the least of these”? Who are some people who are least in your life: physically, spiritually, emotionally, mentally?

Read Matthew 5:16. What are some ways we can let our light shine for God in the community? In our nation? In the world? Are there some everyday ways we can do this? Name a few.

Think of one person who is a “least”. Think of a way you can reach out to them without judgment and serve them this week.