

Community Church of Issaquah
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Doing the Work of the Lord

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The Bible verses shared today leave no room for doubting what Jesus was saying about doing the work and deeds that he had been preaching for quite some time. These are words that we have all heard a hundred times, but let me repeat them as we dive into what these commandments mean for us today. From the Gospel of Matthew:

‘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.’

In our world today, this sounds much like a mandated “to do list,” but in reality, many believers in Jesus Christ have been doing these deeds most of their life in Christ yet so many do not realize what these acts mean for our everyday life. I certainly cannot alter the words of Jesus as he spoke, but in my heart, I believe there is a much deeper meaning for you and me today. If you will permit me, I’d like to share words of encouragement as we are called to do the work of the Lord.

I was hungry and you gave me something to eat. When reading that the first time, we might have in our mind that we are to be like Christ as he fed the five thousand

listeners on the hillside with only the few fish and loaf of bread. Unless I am mistaken, none of us has the magical power from God to recreate that miracle. Our real lives have different outcomes. If you are to feed the hungry, you do so in several ways. When you donate items to a food bank: or when you host a meal for family, friends or others; when you donate to the program that provides lunches for kids during the summer; or when you provide treats for the fellowship time at this church – all of these are ways you have engaged in doing the good work of the Lord. We were hungry and you fed us. But feeding or nurturing someone is not always done with food. Have you ever been hungry for someone to simply reach out and care for you? Were you hungry for someone to listen to you as you shared the inner pain you were having due to difficult life circumstances. This hungry person will be fed by your giving the love and compassion that Christ has given you.

I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink:

There are certainly times in all our lives when we have a thirst for something other than water. When we thirst to know the meaning of God's word in the Scripture; when we thirst to find a way to deal with life's circumstances that leave us dry and empty; when we thirst and long for the Lord to show us how to deal with the emptiness that creeps into our life from time to time; and when we feel our life's journey is leading us across a dry and painful desert that seems to have no place to rest or no fountain of hope. It is at these times in our life and in the life of everyone we know that doing the Lord's work asks that we provide the well of relief and care. That person experiencing a time of thirst might be a stranger or a loved you, and it could also be you. We must always remember that everyone person

has some need that we have the power to offer God's water of life.

I was a stranger and you invited me in. Do you remember the first time you went to a new environment, one in which you had never been before? Perhaps it was the first time you went to a church, or a school, or a workplace, or something like the senior center. Whatever it was, you were a stranger and, in your heart, you hoped to be invited in and accepted. I vividly recall the first time I came to this church praying deeply that I would be accepted and invited into the faith family. I am sure I am not the only one who anxiously hoped I would be on my best behavior and that my presence would be welcomed. The message Christ is giving to all of us is that even in the simplest of our life's experiences, a stranger can be welcomed and invited in. My hope is that our church family will always remain as accepting and welcoming for any stranger as it has been for me.

I needed clothes and you clothed me. If we think outside the box about being clothed only means what we are wearing, we will have a deeper understanding of how this very message is a part of our daily life. Yes, I am sure each of us has donated clothing to a charity or shared our hand-me-downs or loaned a Christmas sweater to someone who didn't have one. That is part of this command, but it is deeper than that. There are times in each of our lives when we desperately need to be clothed in love and care. Time after time as I sat beside my spouse and watched the interaction of him with the medical staff, it was so evident and touching to see his deep need to be clothed in compassion and understanding when healing does not seem to be possible. Or when I feel a deep sense of needing

to be clothed in a listening and love spiritual embrace. I am not alone in this need to be clothed in something other than a garment. And I am quite certain that each of you has been in a place in your own life when you have needed to be clothed in the love of God that we all long for.

I was sick and you looked after me: There isn't anyone in the church who has not already spent much time looking after someone who has been ill. Certainly, in the days ahead for each of us, we will move to the role of caretaker if we are not there now. The intent of these instructions from Jesus is not to send us out searching for the sick, but to be ready when we are needed by someone who is ill. I received word this past week that a minister friend from the Disciples of Christ church in Mount Vernon has passed away. The word came from his son who had been with him for the weeks prior to his death, just as this pastor friend had been at his wife's bedside during her final days before she died of cancer. This is but one example of how those of us who seek to do God's will are doing it as we look after the sick who are in our life now. Surely no one wants anyone to be sick, but that will be the reality for each of us. God wants us to do His work in caring for anyone who might be in need of our looking after them. This is as simple as making sure someone gets medical care or visiting someone who is ill and needs your presence.

I was in prison and you came to visit me. Our immediate thought is that to follow this instruction, we must go to the local jail or prison, but there is deeper meaning. When I pastored the church in Seattle, one of my ministries was to do a bit of chaplaincy at the prison in Monroe. The prisoner I was assigned had an interesting

story about his history and why he was there. It was not until he told me his offense that I became aware that the prison there is for sexual offenders. Certainly, that is a clear example of visiting someone in prison. But there is more to this message from Jesus. We are called to visit others who are in a different kind of prison, mental or emotional times in life that leave an individual in a lockdown that often has a long time of feeling sentenced or confined. Being in a difficult relationship with a person, or a profession that seems deep in negativity, or a personal circumstance that seems to have no hope or solution. It is when we become aware of that need that we do God's work of visiting, whether in person or in spirit.

All too often we see these verses as a task that we are divinely called to accomplish. The truth is simple. If you are trying to live the life of a faithful believer, you are likely already doing every one of these works in the name of the Lord. God doesn't want us to feel as if we must do more in order to make sure we have done the work we are called to do as Christians. We have already done it. We are doing it now. And it is my deepest belief that the Lord is very pleased with the work you are doing in His name. In doing all these tasks in the Lord's name, we can rest assured that Jesus knows that in our doing this for others, we also are doing the same thing for him in spirit. If you listen, you will hear His words of gratitude. Can you hear Him? He just said, "Well done, thou good and faithful servant." He's talking to you.