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LEGACY YOUR CHURCH'S MATTHEW 25

# Matthew 25: A Life-Changing Journey

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By Richard Stearns

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AS PRESIDENT OF WORLD VISION U.S., Rich Stearns calls Christians to action on the greatest needs of our day. His award-winning, best-selling book, *The Hole in Our Gospel*, has encouraged hundreds of thousands of readers to open their hearts to those who are hurting in our world.

# Introduction

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## MATTHEW 25:31-46 (ESV):

*“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left. 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.’*

*“Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ Then they also will answer, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to you?’ Then he will answer them, saying, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’ And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”*

I won't mince words. Matthew 25 is a difficult passage of Scripture. At the very least it's sobering. But to be honest, it's more than that for me. The words “Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire” send a chill down my spine.

And yet these verses are among the most quoted in the Bible. Alongside Isaiah 58, it's a remarkable passage that provides clarity on what God expects for those who claim to follow Him.

Matthew 25:31-46 describes what will transpire on the day of final judgment, when Christ will judge all of humanity. It's not a parable, like the previous passages, but a prediction—that's why we

need to pay attention. Our application of these words affects our eternal destiny!

The scene is the end of history, when Christ is sitting on the throne. The people gathered before Him will be divided into two clear groups, the sheep and the goats. Only those whose lives were characterized by acts of love done to “the least of these,” Jesus is saying, will be blessed and welcomed into His Father’s kingdom.

This is among many verses throughout the Old and New Testaments that underscore God’s great concern for the poor and marginalized. In the fullness of the gospel, we are called to share this concern as we build God’s kingdom. Reading this passage carefully, understanding it fully, and then living it out will change you. And as God intends, it will change the world, too.

Over the next four weeks, we will delve into the meaning and context of Matthew 25:31-46, consider its relevance for you, and explore how it can deepen your engagement in your community and world.

In this first week, let’s explore the important context of Jesus’ words and understand their revelatory implications.



## WEEK ONE

# Who, what, where, when—and why

EVEN WITH SCRIPTURE, IT'S HELPFUL to start with the facts. Budding journalists are taught about the five W's—who, what, where, when, why—and that's how we can begin to understand the context of Matthew 25.

The “who” is easy: Jesus was speaking to the rapt audience of His disciples. Jesus imparted a lot of information in this sitting: He spoke to them of way the world will end, the signs and the tumultuous final days; He told them a few stories, heavy with meaning; and He said He would soon be arrested and crucified. I can only imagine how the disciples' minds were blown by these revelations.

The conversation took place on the Mount of Olives, a ridge of hills east of Jerusalem forested with olive groves—a richly significant site in Jesus' life. It was here he wept for Jerusalem (Luke 19:41-44). The Mount of Olives was on the way to visiting His friend Lazarus. On the slope below was the Garden of Gethsemane, where Jesus would pray on the night of his arrest. And after His resurrection, the Mount of Olives is where Jesus appears to the disciples and is “taken up before their very eyes” to Heaven (Acts 1:9). Clearly, the “where” is important.

It's also critical to know “when” the events of Matthew 25 occur: just days before Jesus' death. These are among His last words. You've often heard the saying “famous last words”—what people say at the end of their lives is often profound, urgent, and essential. Their final words carry extra weight.

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So it is with the recorded sayings of Jesus in the last week of His earthly ministry. He was giving us final instructions on establishing on earth something Jesus had spoken of more than 100 times in the New Testament: the kingdom of God.

And “what” is involved? Feeding the hungry, giving the thirsty something to drink, clothing the naked, and visiting the sick and prisoners are key tasks of our mission—and not optional, as Matthew 25 makes clear. To fail to do these things qualifies as a sin of omission, which to Jesus is as serious as sins of commission. Thus the heat of Jesus’ anger toward the goats in Matthew 25, “cursed” and worthy of the “eternal fire prepared for the devil.”

To better understand this harsh verdict, let’s consider the preceding Scripture passages. In Matthew 23, Jesus brands the Pharisees as hypocrites, castigating them for paying their tithe but neglecting “the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness” (Matthew 23:23). And the passages in Matthew 25 leading up to the scene of final judgment support the notion that God will judge people based on the authenticity of their faith. The parable of the virgins warns believers to wisely prepare for their Lord’s return, or else they will be locked out; and the parable of the bags of gold (or talents) show that those who act in accord with their master’s expectations are rewarded, while the servant who had done nothing with what was entrusted to him is thrown out into darkness.

Taken together, these parables convey that Jesus wants us to embody genuine faith—a lifestyle consistent with the teachings and commands of Christ. The gospel *in action*.

**“For it is by grace that you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.”**

### **“Why” are works important?**

**MATTHEW 25 INEVITABLY PROMPTS THE FAITH VS. WORKS DEBATE** that can be so divisive in the body of Christ. I believe faith and works were never meant to be in dichotomy. Of course it’s not true that we can achieve salvation through doing lots of good works. Ephesians 2 makes this quite clear: “For it is by grace that you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast” (Ephesians 2:8-9).

But if we look at the very next verse, we understand the harmony between faith and works:

“For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do” (verse 10). These powerful verses tell us that we are indeed saved through faith alone, the amazing gift of a loving God, but that we are saved for a purpose—to do the good works God actually prepared beforehand for us.

**When we demonstrate God’s love to the least and the lost, we are literally doing this to Christ Himself.**

The logical outcome of our faith, then, is to do good works. This is the evidence of redemption and renewal in Christ.

Let me illustrate this by asking you to picture two large apple trees. One is brittle, dry, bereft of leaves and fruit. The second tree is lush, leafy, and green, and so laden with fruit that the branches bend down toward the ground. Obviously, the evidence suggests the first tree is dead. The second, the one bursting with fruit, is alive. But it isn’t the fruit that produced life in the tree—it is the life in the tree that produced the fruit. So it is with our salvation. Our good works and deeds are the evidence of our salvation, not the cause of it.

Of course, what’s most important about the final judgment in Matthew 25 is not that we do good works just to prove our faith to the world or even to God. When we demonstrate God’s love to the least and the lost, we are literally doing this to Christ Himself. We do it out of love. It is exactly what Jesus describes as the two greatest commandments: Love God, and love your neighbor. Our concern for “the least of these” flows from our hearts out of love for our Savior.

## **Understanding “the least of these”**

**FINALLY, THERE’S MORE TO UNPACKING** the “who” of Matthew 25:31-46. Specifically, who are “the least of these”?

Some biblical scholars believe that in referring to “the least of these brothers,” Jesus meant His disciples who suffer while spreading the gospel—in other words, caring for the needs of persecuted Christians is serving Jesus Himself. But I believe that Christ’s meaning here encompasses all who are poor. A narrow interpretation of the term seems incongruous with the many verses throughout the Old and New Testaments that convey God’s special concern for the poor. Verses like these:

*For he will deliver the needy who cry out, the afflicted who have no one to help.*  
—Psalm 72:12

*I know that the LORD secures justice for the poor and upholds the cause of the needy.*  
—Psalm 140:12

*Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the LORD, and he will reward them for what they have done.* —Proverbs 19:17

*The poorest of the poor will find pasture, and the needy will lie down in safety ...*  
—Isaiah 14:30

*“He defended the cause of the poor and the needy, and so all went well. Is that not what it means to know me?” declares the LORD.* —Jeremiah 22:16

Jesus continues this theme throughout His ministry, often connecting the concern for the poor with action. “When you give a banquet,” He says in Luke 14:13-14, “invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.” He gave unequivocal directions to the rich young ruler: “Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me” (Mark 10:21). To the crowds who came to be baptized by Jesus, John the Baptist said, “Anyone who has two shirts should share with the one who has none, and anyone who has food should do the same” (Luke 3:11). And Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount is the ultimate realigning of status on God’s terms: “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God” (Luke 6:20).

  
**“When you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed.”**

Within the broader themes of Scripture, Matthew 25 is another expression of God’s love for the poor and His desire for justice to be carried out for the poor. And frankly, it seems more dangerous to risk the fate of the goats over the interpretation of one word or phrase and neglecting the many people of other faiths living in need in our world today.

In Week Two we will delve into what this landmark Scripture means for you—your view of the world and your role as Christ’s handiwork.





## WEEK TWO

# Adjusting your vision

ONCE WE DIGEST THE CONTEXT of Matthew 25, we've got a good foundation for a deeper, more personal exploration of what its message means to us as individuals and followers of Christ. After all, anyone can be a “do-gooder.” But in order to serve the least and the lost with love, it's just unavoidable that we'll need to make adjustments.

Matthew 25 demands a sensitivity to justice that doesn't come so naturally to us. Note that both groups assembled before Jesus in the final judgment ask, “Lord, when did we see you ...?” (verses 37, 44). They missed something important—they did not see Jesus in those in need. The righteous group acted compassionately anyway; the other group, the goats, probably thought that if it had just been more obvious that it was Jesus in front of them, of course they would have responded.

We are often blind to injustice, because our vision is distorted. As the apostle Paul lamented in 1 Corinthians 13:12, “we see through a glass, darkly” (KJV).

It's as if we are all wearing thick glasses with multiple distorting lenses that cloud our vision. There's the lens of our race. There's a rich lens and a poor lens. A male lens and a female lens. A Republican lens and a Democrat lens. A Protestant lens, a Roman Catholic lens, an Orthodox lens. An educated and uneducated lens. A white-collar lens and a blue-collar lens. And many of us struggle to peer through our

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American patriotic lens. It is no wonder we have such a hard time seeing.

Previous generations of Christians did not see slavery. We didn't see the oppression of women or civil rights for African-Americans. And we still don't see clearly God's great concern for the "least of these" in our world, who often don't look or speak like us.

God sees all people without the distortions of race, sin, class, and culture. And we must do our best to see the world as God sees it.

## Looking at Lazarus

WHEN WE TURN TO SCRIPTURE, God begins to peel away those cloudy lenses. Jesus tells a powerful story in Luke 16 about justice and disparity. It's a simple story of just two people—a rich man and a beggar named Lazarus who sat at his gate. Read Luke 16:19-26:

*"There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores and longing to eat what fell from the rich man's table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores.*

*"The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried. In Hades, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. So he called to him, 'Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.'*

*"But Abraham replied, 'Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony. And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been set in place, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.'"*

I want to make three observations about justice from this story.

First, injustice and lack of mercy are often passive rather than active. Luke 16 paints a shocking picture of

**First, injustice and lack of mercy are often passive rather than active. Luke 16 paints a shocking picture of disparity between rich and poor—the "haves" and "have nots."**

disparity between rich and poor—the “haves” and “have nots.” But the first thing to notice is that the rich man did absolutely nothing to harm Lazarus. He didn’t beat him or mistreat him in any way. Undoubtedly the rich man felt quite innocent of any wrongdoing—until he found himself in Hades.

As we learned in Week One, sins of omission are serious to Jesus. Each time the rich man walked by Lazarus he was missing his Matthew 25 moment. And like those whom Jesus cursed for their apathy in Matthew 25, the rich man failed the test.

Second, injustice and lack of mercy are the result of objectifying people. While the rich man knew Lazarus’ name, he didn’t actually consider him a person worthy of his concern. As a beggar, Lazarus was invisible—a non-person.

Most of the disparity, violence, and oppression in our world is the result of objectifying and dehumanizing others who are not like us. We place labels on entire groups, attempting to make them somehow less human and less worthy of our mercy and compassion. They are the homeless, they are refugees, they are illegal immigrants; they are Palestinian, Muslim, Asian, Hispanic, or Black—pick your label. Using labels to diminish the humanity of whole groups is a tactic as old as history itself. If the “other” is not really like us, we always find ways to ignore, exploit, exclude, or even kill them.

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Third, injustice is personal. Regardless of what created the disparity between Lazarus and the rich man, the rich man had a personal opportunity to set things right. It would have been very simple for him to instruct one of his servants to bring to Lazarus the scraps that fell from his table—just a little food, a comfortable mat to sleep on, and maybe some lotion for his sores. But he didn’t.

Here’s my point: We are the rich man. We’re the wealthy, the educated, the privileged, and the powerful in the world today, by any measure. And just like the rich man, someday we’ll have a sobering conversation with God.

And it won’t cut it to object, “But God, we didn’t see you!”

## **No body but yours**

LIVING OUT MATTHEW 25 REQUIRES US to see the world as God sees it, to look hard at the need and injustice and see the things that break God’s heart. But just as importantly, we need to see

ourselves as God sees us—as God’s workmanship, “created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance” (Ephesians 2:10).

Jesus called us to a critical mission in the world, and every one of us was made to join that mission. Believe it or not, ordinary people like you and me are God’s plan to change the world.

One of the most common mistakes we can make is to believe that we have nothing of significance to offer to the kingdom—we’re not rich enough, smart enough, skilled enough, or spiritual enough to make a difference. Yet the Bible is filled with examples to the contrary.

There are people of all ages: teenage David, who took down a giant and became a great king; preteen Mary, who accepted an unplanned pregnancy that brought forth our Savior; 100-year-old Abraham and 90-year-old Sarah, who became first-time parents in a covenant to create a great people; and Noah, a spry 500 years old when he started building the ark that would help reboot humanity. There are people of all skill sets: Peter, a fisherman; Nehemiah, a cup-bearer in a king’s court; and Moses, an adopted prince turned shepherd. And there are the unlikely people whose small gestures (but not their names) are recorded forever in human history: the woman with the alabaster jar who anointed Jesus’ head, the boy who volunteered his bread and fish for the miracle of feeding the five thousand.

The common denominator of all those people is that they were willing to be used by God. Each of them was God’s workmanship with a purpose for His kingdom. And it’s the same with us. As I often like to say, we’re God’s Plan A to change the world—and he doesn’t have a Plan B.

One of the most poetic expressions of this remarkable concept is by St. Teresa of Avila. Read this excerpt whenever you feel reluctant, daunted, or ill-equipped:

*Christ has no body but yours,  
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,  
Yours are the eyes with which he looks  
Compassion on this world,  
Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good,  
Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world.  
Yours are the hands, yours are the feet,  
Yours are the eyes, you are his body.*

**Jesus called us to a critical mission in the world, and every one of us was made to join that mission.**

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- ① What parts of the story in Luke 16 really stood out to you?
  
- ② What other stories inspire you about God using ordinary people?
  
- ③ Why do you think a “sensitivity to justice” often isn’t natural to us?
  
- ④ What adjustments in your life do you need to make to be ready to fully live out Matthew 25?
  
- ⑤ What are some barriers in your life that may be keeping you from being willing to be fully used by God?
  
- ⑥ What is one thing you can commit to doing this week to improve your sensitivity to justice?



## WEEK THREE

# Living out Matthew 25 locally

AFTER ADJUSTING OUR VIEW OF JUSTICE, we've started to envision ourselves as people God has chosen to change the world. So what does that look like in practice? Do we need to don superhero capes? Should we run out and get tropical-disease vaccinations so that we can serve in remote, developing-world villages?

Not really. Things might not look so different on the outside. Matthew 25 helps you reorient your life for faith-filled compassion and mercy. You become a person with deep concern for the needs of other people. World Vision's founder, Bob Pierce, has a famous saying that you may recognize: "Let my heart be broken with the things that break the heart of God." That's what Matthew 25 is prompting us to do. Your eyes are open to see as God sees, and your heart breaks for the suffering that breaks God's heart.

And there's suffering all around us, wherever we live.

Some or probably all of the needs listed in Matthew 25 are literally true in your neighborhood. There are hungry people, those without adequate clothing, and sick and disenfranchised people. That's why all U.S. cities have food banks, soup kitchens, clothing drives, and volunteer opportunities at hospices, hospitals, and prisons. But God will show you more needs right around you. There's an elderly neighbor who is hungry for companionship; a teenage boy without

**"Let my heart be broken with the things that break the heart of God."**

a father in his life who is thirsty for a male role model; a coworker who struggles with alcoholism; an immigrant family treated as strangers everywhere they go. You will find no shortage of opportunities to love the “least,” the lost, and the lonely.

None of us was meant to go on this world-changing journey alone, however. God has wisely chosen to organize His individual followers into communities that carry out His purposes in the world. These are our churches. Starting with Jesus' disciples, to us today, and on until the day of judgment Matthew 25 describes, communities of believers are the outposts of God's kingdom.

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### **Look how they love**

WHEN I READ THE BOOK OF ACTS, I'm inspired by the description of the first-century church of Jesus Christ coming to life. In tandem with preaching, teaching, and prayer, the early Christians paid special attention to the needs within their community, including the widows, the elderly, and the poor. Let's look at Acts 4:32-35:

*All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all that there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need.*

These brothers and sisters in Christ lived together in a way that was radically different—a beguilingly attractive alternative to every other model of human community. This early church appealed to nonbelievers, and “the Lord added to their number daily” (Acts 2:47).

I like the image of people living harmoniously together, breaking bread in each other's homes and sharing everything while praising God. I would join that club! In the time of Acts,

nascent Christianity was spreading, but what happened later during desperate times threw gasoline on the fire.

When plague struck the Roman Empire in the third century, as many as 5,000 people were dying each day. You can imagine people's panic as this killer disease (probably smallpox) raged from person to person. When loved ones fell ill, the common impulse was to banish them in hopes of avoiding contagion. What did the Christians do? Bishop Dionysius of Alexandria records their heroic actions:

*"Most of our brother Christians showed unbounded love and loyalty, never sparing themselves and thinking only of one another. Heedless of danger, they took charge of the sick, attending to their every need and ministering to them in Christ, and with them departed this life serenely happy; for they were infected by others with the disease, drawing on themselves the sickness of their neighbors and cheerfully accepting their pains. Many, in nursing and curing others, transferred their death to themselves and died in their stead . . . The best of our brothers lost their lives in this manner, a number of presbyters, deacons, and laymen winning high commendation so that death in this form, the result of great piety and strong faith, seems in every way the equal of martyrdom."*

This counter-cultural faith in action helped win over many Gentiles, contributing to the astonishing growth of Christianity from about 1,000 followers in the time of Acts 2 to as many as 33 million people by 350 A.D., according to Rodney Stark in *The Rise of Christianity*.

By serving those no one else served and embracing those whom society discarded, Christians reflected the character of Christ. Tertullian, a third-century Christian author, observed, "It is our care of the helpless, our practice of loving kindness that brands us in the eyes of many of our opponents. 'Only look,' they say, 'look how they love one another!'" Persecution, imprisonment, and even death didn't stop them. Love was their brand.

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## Be the church

SO HERE WE ARE TODAY, 2.1 BILLION CHRISTIANS—280 million here in the U.S. Love might not be the first quality the American public associates with us. But in living out Matthew 25, we have limitless opportunities to not just go to church but to be the church, transforming our communities. Imagine if Christians met the needs of all “Lazaruses” at our local gates—what a witness to Christ that would be!

One way to think about contributing to God's kingdom is to look at what your church body has in the form of the “three T's”: time, talent, and treasure. Some members might have more time than money; others might be happy to write a check; and some may not realize that talent is an important resource to share with others. All of these contributions are needed, and in God's economy, none are wasted.

A colleague of mine is involved in a ministry at his church called James Brigade, focused on caring for the widows in the church body and community. It's inspired by James 1:27, “Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress . . . ” Mainly what this requires is time—the men volunteer to help widows with home repairs, yard work, and whatever else they need. Women from the church interact with widows as care coordinators to schedule the men's labor. This ministry is a fully biblical expression of love for people who often quietly fall through the cracks in our society.

A church in Glen Rose, Texas, puts talent and treasure together to offer a free health clinic to local residents. Volunteer medical professionals from the church treat patients in a large RV parked outside Grace Community Church, financially supported by church members. Many of the patients are Hispanic residents who don't have health insurance and can't afford medical care, so the faith-based clinic fills a critical gap in the community. The clinic founder and lead physician, Dr. Long Huang, who has a day job at the local medical center, told a newspaper interviewer, “We want to be able to have the opportunity to share our faith with other people, and part of that is meeting some needs in the community.”

And there's a church in my own city that has had significant impact by combining all three T's in addressing the needs of at-risk youth. Bellevue, Washington encompasses both tremendous

**“Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress . . . ”**

wealth (Microsoft billionaires live just miles away) and serious social problems—gangs, drugs, crime, homelessness. Eclipsed by affluence, minority children are often unnoticed and underserved. A decade ago, Bellevue Presbyterian Church decided to help those kids. They started a nonprofit, Jubilee REACH, that has grown to offer more than 20 after-school clubs and sports as well as a range of family services, all with the goal of empowering Bellevue youth. I interviewed Pastor Scott Dudley while writing *Unfinished*, and he told me that Jubilee REACH has “changed the church’s DNA. We’re closer to getting our hearts broken, and it’s made us more of a kingdom church.”

Serving “the least of these” in our neighborhoods and communities helps us build relationships, which, though sometimes messy, is a faith-stretching, rewarding experience. It allows us to enter into a person’s life and circumstances and see Jesus in the vulnerable people around us. And conversely, they get to see Christ in us.

That said, serving locally doesn’t replace engaging globally. It’s not either/or. And we don’t have an obligation to care for Americans first or only—a patriotic and myopic rather than Christian notion. Matthew 25 develops in us a concern for all people. In God’s eyes, there’s no geographic priority for care. I like the way Bono says it: “Where you live in the world should not determine whether you live in the world.” In Week Three we will expand our view of who our neighbor is—not just people in your zip code but also those many time zones removed.

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## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- ① How can you make sure your heart is breaking with the things that break the heart of God?
  
- ② What are the greatest needs you see in your neighborhood and your community?

- ③ How can you better use your time? Your talents? Your treasure?
  
- ④ What relationships in your community do you feel God calling you to build?
  
- ⑤ How do you think your church could be more involved in your community?
  
- ⑥ How does the story in Acts make you rethink how you could be living differently in Christian community?
  
- ⑦ What is one action you will take this week to live out Matthew 25 in your community?



## WEEK FOUR

# Neighbors near and far

THE STORY OF SCRIPTURE IS A LOVE STORY—the story of a Father’s love for His children. And Jesus is the ultimate fulfillment of that love, God in flesh, sent to teach us to love as the Father loves us. Jesus made this beautifully clear in Matthew 22:37-39: “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”

To live out Matthew 25 today in all the ways available to us, we need to understand the full definition of the object of our love. Who is our neighbor?

People in Jesus’ time understood this term to mean fellow Jews and people in the same community. So a literal interpretation of Jesus’ words would have been a slam-dunk for most upstanding citizens—do right by the people just like you! But when “an expert in the law” pressed Jesus about this, seeking to understand the limits of his responsibility, Jesus answered with the parable of the Good Samaritan. He expanded the meaning of “neighbor” to involve not just identity and location but action. To show another person mercy and compassion is to be a neighbor.

But there was still the reality of reach. For most of the past 2,000 years, “loving our neighbors as ourselves” meant caring about people immediately around us. Without the modern modes of travel,

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it was impossible to reach people hundreds or thousands of miles away, even if we knew what their needs were. Until the mid-20th century, three major impediments stood in our way of loving distant neighbors:

### **Awareness**

We couldn't be held accountable for needs we didn't know about. And before 1900, there were no mass communication vehicles spanning the globe. Radios weren't in wide use until the 1920s, and television didn't become a mass medium until the 1950s. People relied on newspapers for information, which devoted little space to global humanitarian issues. But in today's media-saturated, web-connected world, awareness is no longer a problem. In fact, we're assaulted by images and stories about human suffering 24/7.

### **Access**

Lack of access was similarly a problem prior to World War II. International air travel was extremely uncommon for average Americans, and very few people were able to go to remote corners of the world to see the needs firsthand. Today, not only can we be on the other side of the planet in fewer than 24 hours, but tens of millions of Americans fly internationally every year. We can now reach our global neighbors with relative ease or access them through the many international organizations such as World Vision that are there on the ground.

### **Ability**

Even after our awareness of and access to the world's poorest people improved, our ability to provide effective assistance was limited for a time. But just in the last 50 years we have learned a great deal about the complex relationships between poverty, health, culture, and economics. Today the international humanitarian community has unparalleled expertise and an array of programs, tools, and technologies to reach out to our desperate neighbors around the world and eliminate some of the most extreme forms of poverty.

Looking through the lens of the Good Samaritan story, the responsibility of the three travelers hinged on those factors. The priest, Levite, and Samaritan were all aware of the injured man, had access to him, and had the ability to respond. Similarly, if we're aware of the suffering of our distant

neighbors—we are—and if we have access to them, either personally or through aid organizations—and we do—and if we have the ability to make a difference through programs and technologies—which is the case—then we should no more turn our backs on those neighbors than the priest and Levite should have walked by the bleeding man.

## Hope in the headlines

YOU MAY BE THINKING, BUT THERE ARE MILLIONS upon millions of “bleeding men” in our world! And news headlines would back you up. Conflict is raging in Syria, South Sudan, the Central African Republic and dozens of other places (at the writing of this study), producing more refugees globally than at any time since World War II. Not a week goes by without a terrorist bombing somewhere in the Middle East, Africa, or elsewhere. The Zika virus stalks mothers and children throughout tropical regions and desperate people are fleeing violence in Central America in record numbers.

**“Historians may conclude that the most important thing going on in the world in the early 21st century was a stunning decline in human suffering.”**

But that’s not all there is to know about the state of the world today. There’s also astonishingly good news. The New York Times columnist Nicholas Kristof wrote about this in a recent column entitled, “The Best News You Don’t Know.” He said: “Historians may conclude that the most important thing going on in the world in the early 21st century was a stunning decline in human suffering.” It’s true—more people have been lifted out of extreme poverty in the past 25 years than in all the rest of human history. One of the most important indicators: Child mortality has been cut in half, from 35,000 deaths per day in 1990 to less than 17,000 today.

That’s still too many children dying. But the great progress we’ve achieved thus far never would have happened, I’m convinced, without people in wealthy countries using their awareness, access, and ability to help. They used their resources to provide clean water for millions of people, to give enough food and farming support to reduce the amount of chronically malnourished people by 45 percent, and to help more than 1 billion people rise above the poverty line of living on less than \$1.90 a day.

And I believe a sizeable portion of those people were responding with the love of Matthew 25—seeing Jesus in a hungry child halfway around the world.

## Spiritual dominoes

EARLIER IN THIS STUDY I TALKED ABOUT HOW we're God's plan to change the world. I know that sounds like a big job, but it really isn't. Individually we can each do something, and combined with the efforts of our church communities, it all adds up to a massive change.

Think of yourself as a domino that Christ has placed strategically, with a critical role to play. All He asks is that we're willing to do the thing we're called to do where He has placed us to do it. When we're faithful in that task, God creates a chain reaction that sets off profound changes beyond our imagination.

I want to tell you about one of these "spiritual dominoes." In 1986, Gordon Cowden was a 26-year-old real-estate appraiser living in Waco, Texas. Even before he had children of his own he decided to get involved in God's kingdom by sponsoring a child through World Vision. He was connected with Timothy Mwate, a boy in faraway Zambia.

Timothy had been dealt a bad hand. He was born into poverty, abandoned by his father, and disabled after barely surviving polio when he was just 2—compounding factors that could crush a child's future in rural Africa. Timothy went to God in prayer for help. "I was always worried about how I would work because of my disability," he said. "I prayed that I could finish school and get a job."

Gordon was the answer to those prayers. Over the years, Gordon provided financial support to keep Timothy in school and his family fed and healthy, and he sent encouragement through letters. Timothy finished high school, and, remarkably for a boy of his circumstances, he went on to college. Today, he's married with children of his own. He put his degree in social work to good use by serving with several international aid organizations, working his way up to his current job with the government of Zambia as the provincial leader for the ministry of gender and child development.

Gordon and Timothy never met in person, nor did Gordon know how Timothy's life turned out. In July 2012, Gordon was among 12 people senselessly killed in a shooting in a movie theater in Aurora, Colorado. Yet his compassion is still changing the world through Timothy, who helps thousands of children achieve their God-given potential just as Gordon did for him. And the chain reaction continues as those children grow up to do amazing things, setting off more miracles.

But remember, that chain reaction starts small, with one, seemingly insignificant domino. Just one act of love can set it in motion. We can trust God to multiply our faithfulness into a big impact in the kingdom.

**Think of yourself  
as a domino that  
Christ has placed  
strategically, with a  
critical role to play.**

## God's mission, our mission

AS OUR STUDY COMES TO ITS CONCLUSION, let's look a few chapters past Matthew 25, to the last command given to us by Jesus Christ prior to His ascension into heaven—the Great Commission:

*Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."*

—Matthew 28:18-20

This is what I want you to see: Matthew 25 leads to Matthew 28. It is the key that unlocks the Great Commission. By showing someone love through the acts described in Matthew 25—feeding, slaking thirst, welcoming, and all the other forms of mercy—we earn the right to lead them to become disciples of Christ. And when people feel the love of Christ, it prepares them to hear the message of Christ. Matthew 25 without an expression of faith saves only bodies, not souls; Matthew 28 without compassion lacks power. These two commands together are formidable.

The mission of God is our mission, born out of God's love for us and our love for Him. That love, when demonstrated to the world through acts of kindness, compassion, and justice, is revolutionary. And when we become agents of it, we make credible the message of a Savior who transforms men and women for all eternity.

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### YOUR MATTHEW 25 MOMENT IS HERE.

How is God calling you to live out His mission? Visit [worldvision.org](http://worldvision.org) for real and practical ways to help children and their communities stand tall, free from poverty. This is absolutely your moment. So get out there. The world needs you.





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World Vision is a Christian humanitarian organization dedicated to working with children, families, and their communities worldwide to reach their full potential by tackling the causes of poverty and injustice. Motivated by our faith in Jesus Christ, we serve alongside the poor and oppressed as a demonstration of God's unconditional love for all people. World Vision serves all people, regardless of religion, race, ethnicity, or gender.