

“Busy Christians”

As a pastor, I have signed a lot of community service forms for high-schoolers, which I'm always happy to do. I've signed forms acknowledging volunteer help for things like VBS, Touched by Hope, Night to Shine, Brown Bag, and the Youth Servant Event. Being a parent myself, I understand how important it is to document these community service hours, because most schools require the student to accumulate a certain number of hours to graduate. But I have to be honest with you. I'm starting to get the feeling that all these community service hours are mainly becoming a means to an end. Please don't take this the wrong way. I have seen first hand the joy and sense of accomplishment many of our youth have experienced through their volunteer service. But more and more I find myself questioning what message “mandatory” community service hours is sending and often times wonder how many students would actually choose to do these things themselves if the requirement of a certain number of hours was lifted. I'm sure many of them would, but I'm also sure many of them wouldn't. And while I would never pretend to know what exactly motivates people, I do think that when it comes to making the decision on whether to serve others or not, those decisions have a lot to do with the examples of the most influential people in a person's life. People like parents and grandparents, teachers and mentors. In other words, people like you and me.

I know in my own life growing up I witnessed my mom and dad taking care of the needs of others countless times. Sometimes it was with a particular church group or civic group, but most of the time it was because they recognized an opportunity and actually did something when someone needed help. I remember going with my mom to homes of people I had never met to drop off clothing or meals. I remember delivering fire wood with my dad to families in need or helping him clear the yard of a neighbor after a storm. Things like this had a tremendous impact on me and I have tried to follow their lead with my own children. But I could always do more. We all could. I mean every day we have so many opportunities to serve others with simple acts of mercy and love. And sometimes that's just what we do, but many times we don't. Yes, we all have a lot going on and are pulled in many directions, but as Christians, is there an expectation that we help take care of people? And even more than that, do we actually have an obligation to serve and support not only our church family, but our family of neighbors in need? And

where does Jesus fit into all of this? What is it that he wants from us? These are challenging questions for sure, but we have answers. And these answers aren't based on our opinions or our desires. They are based on the Word of God.

In our Gospel lesson from Matthew, Jesus says when he comes in glory, he will separate people one from another. On his right, he will place the sheep and on the left the goats. Those who God claims as his own, those saved by grace through faith in Jesus are the sheep and those with no faith in Jesus are the goats. We get this I hope. But then it gets interesting. To the sheep Jesus tells all the things they did for him like feeding him, clothing him, and visiting him when he was sick. And to the goats he tells of all the things they didn't do for him like not feeding him, clothing him, or visiting him. What should get our attention here is that neither the sheep nor the goats had any awareness that Jesus was talking about his presence being hidden in the form "of the least of these," because they both ask the same questions! "When did we see you hungry? When did we see you naked and clothe you? When did we visit you when you were sick?" That the goats don't get it is no surprise I guess, but that the sheep have no awareness of Jesus lurking behind those on the receiving end of their efforts should give us pause.

You see, what this text reminds us of is that sheep served for the sake of their neighbors and this wasn't because they perceived Jesus standing on their neighbor's shoulder signing off on their community service forms until they reached a certain number of hours. No, they were busy Christians serving the needs of others with the gifts they had been given, because that's what Christians do! Not to earn their place in heaven—that part is covered by God's grace in Christ, but because they had this profound awareness that Jesus expects his people to act like his people. I love that fact that Jesus has to remind the sheep that in doing things even for the least of them, it was as if they were doing those things for him. And even though we sheep are on this side of glory, the same is true for us today. Jesus expects us to be busy Christians looking for opportunities to serve with our time and treasures both inside the church and out.

But even still, we can get this busy part really wrong in our lives. Just the other day while searching for a station on my satellite radio I was left speechless by a well known figure in American Christianity who was saying something like, "if you really believe in Jesus, you need to do these things to serve him." You need to get busy not giving into temptation like Jesus. You need to get busy calming storms like Jesus. You need to get busy giving your life for others, like Jesus. To use one of my mother's favorite

adjectives, viewing things like this as the goal of the Christian life is asinine, because these are the things that only Jesus could do. He perfectly served God the Father, for us. He died for us. He calmed the storm of death when he rose from the dead. We are the sheep who will inherit the kingdom prepared for us from the foundation of the world only because Jesus did it all for us. And now, through faith, it's not serve the Lord or else you will be a goat—it's the expectation that Christ's people act like his people. It's the obligation we all have as his sheep to take care of our neighbors. The obligation we all have to support the church's ministry. The obligation we all have to try and reach others in the name of our Lord and Savior using the gifts that God has given us.

And we Christians should find remarkable comfort and encouragement in this reality because no deed of service or giving, regardless of how obscure, insignificant, or unappreciated is ever wasted or lost. Because Jesus keeps track. Not in the community service tracking kind of way, but because our good works honor him while benefiting our neighbor. Here that again—Jesus keeps track because our good works honor him but the one who benefits in all this is our neighbor. That's what he is telling us in our gospel reading today.

You know there's a funny *Geico* commercial where this alligator is sitting at a table in a restaurant with a bunch of co-workers when the check comes. The alligator says, "I got this," and reaches out. But of course he can't reach the check because he has short alligator arms. The announcer comes in and says, "if you have alligator arms, you avoid picking up the check, it's what you do." It's hilarious, but it actually makes a great point, I think. What you do is based on certain things, most important of which is who you are. We are the Lord's people, the sheep of his pasture. We are Christians. And Christians get busy taking advantage of opportunities to serve with our time, talents, and treasures in the name of Christ Jesus our Lord. It's what we do. **Amen.**