

Lesson Three

The Kingdom of God Working Hard in the Kingdom of Grace

Introduction

Sum up in your own words how a person is saved.

Lord-willing, participants will speak of salvation by grace alone, through faith, because of the works of Christ.

Now read Matthew 25:34-36 (a portion of Jesus' teaching about "the sheep and the goats" at the end of the world). Is there anything here that makes you uncomfortable?

Jesus himself seems to be attributing salvation to the works that the believers have done in their earthly lives.

Studying God's Word

The Bible clearly teaches that salvation is God's free gift that comes to us through faith. That's the message from Genesis through Revelation.

A number of parables of the kingdom might seem to attribute salvation (or damnation) to the works we do (or don't do). Since we believe that *all of the Bible* is the Word of God, we seek to understand what Jesus is saying and what his words teach us about life in his kingdom.

God calls us to respond to grace with faith

Read Matthew 18:23-35. **\$12-20M vs \$3-6K**

1. Identify any words or phrases that make it sound as though Jesus is saying we need to forgive people in order to be forgiven ourselves.

Verse 35: "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart."

2. What can you find in these verses that show this *isn't* the point Jesus is making?
What tells us that salvation is indeed a free gift?

The king forgave the first servant's debt purely out of his mercy with no strings attached (verse 27).

3. According to the parable, from what does our willingness to forgive others flow?

The forgiveness God has freely given to us.

4. If we, then, refuse to forgive others, what does that say about our faith?

This is a clear witness that we actually deny what we claim to believe: that salvation is a free gift won by Christ. **Why is refusal to forgive a statement of unbelief?** Faith is believing that God has forgiven all sins, for Jesus' sake. If I refuse to forgive, I'm rejecting that those sins are forgiven by God. That's unbelief.

Does this parable convict you or comfort you? Law – I hold grudges, keep score; Gospel – God forgave my bigger debt first

When would you use this parable in your life? – When I feel justified to judge.

Context: Peter's question: How many times shall I forgive the one who sins vs me? 7x?

Christ calls us to respond to his grace with faithful work

At times people attack the gospel as being a *disincentive* for doing good—after all, if salvation is free, why would you work hard at doing good things?

Our next parable emphasizes the opposite: that the gospel is the greatest incentive to do good.

Read Matthew 25:14-30.

- Summarize the different ways the servants acted.

The first two servants labored faithfully and gained a 100 percent return for their master. The third servant found fault with the master, made excuses, and failed.

- The servants had different amounts of money entrusted to them. What do the bags represent in real life? What is the point of the parable? (**money, talents, responsibilities**) “according to their abilities”

We aren't all asked to serve in the same way. For example, parents have more responsibilities than children do. Single people and married people have different ways of serving God. Yet we're all to labor faithfully. God commends faithfulness, not the results of their labors.

The focus in this parable is not on the various skills and abilities we have but on the act of serving God by using whatever he has given us.

- Evaluate the explanation offered by the third servant. (What did he mean? Why did he say it?) He's blaming the master for his own laziness. He is unrepentant. He is trying to excuse his behavior.
- What might this servant's words sound like today? “I was afraid to do the wrong thing. I didn't know what God expected of me. I'm my own master. I'll do what I want to do.”
- Finish the sentence: “A failure to want to serve God is an indication that a person . . .” **doesn't appreciate the grace of God, the undeserved gifts God has given, our accountability to our creator, redeemer God.**
- Agree/disagree: If you are faithful in using God's gifts, he'll reward you with eternal life. **Our faithfulness is not the cause of our eternal life; eternal life is the cause of our faithfulness.**

Summary

Read Jesus' account of the sheep and the goats (Matthew 25:31-46). While Jesus isn't shy about talking about good works, there's something to notice: He isn't describing them as the *basis* of believers' salvation but as *evidence* of saving faith in believers' hearts. They are saved because they were “blessed by [Jesus'] Father.” Key Points:

- Many kingdom parables call Christians to examine the works they are (or aren't) doing.
- The forgiveness we show and the ways we serve God are *outward indicators* of *inner faith*.

These kingdom parables don't teach us that salvation comes from works. But they do urgently warn us: if you aren't seeking to serve your King and bring glory to him, *watch out!* That's a sign that you aren't seeing God as the gracious and loving Savior he is. Your faith is weak and failing; run back to the Savior who makes you whole again!

During the Week

- Read the parables that call us to hold zealously to our faith as we produce fruits of forgiveness. Some key parables are found in Matthew 21:33-43; Matthew 22:1-14; and Matthew 25:1-13.
- Read and consider the parables that speak about serving God faithfully in our lives. Start with Luke 12:16-21 and 42-48. Notice how they emphasize the way that our actions are indicators of the health of our faith.