

When Did We See A Stranger

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[0 : 00] One of the sort of senior Iraqi statesmen the other day said, which really got to me, a lot of things get to me these days, you sort of, it's like when you listen to the news now, it's like being sculptured alive.

You're cut and hacked at and pinched and poked and it's terrible watching. However, what they did was, they did this.

They epitomized the United States as Rambo. And that was the sort of picture of the enemy that they're up against, the super technological Superman.

And they take some delight in thinking, I think, that they're going to do things to him. God forbid that we should think that way.

Remember, I mean, it's, I just can't tell you, but this, this is, remember, I guess the Emperor Constantine was told a long time ago, in this sign, conquer, you know, that the weakness and the humiliation of the person of the Son of God on the cross, in his powerlessness, is he who is Lord of all.

[1 : 30] And that victory belongs to him. It doesn't belong to some sort of Rambo figure like this. Anyway, I tell you that because here we are in the midst of this, this very stressful week and wondering where we're going to be this time tomorrow or this time next week.

Very difficult to know. And I, I want to just tell you because I, I, I'm impressed with the fact that people think it's important to pray.

Nobody's stopped to figure out who you pray to for a long time now. But they at least have come to the conclusion that whoever you pray to, it's important to do it.

And so I would like just to show you again, because I think all of you should be praying. I'd like to show you how we have been taught to pray. We are to talk to the God of the whole of the universe as Father.

And that we are taught by his Holy Spirit indwelling our hearts. So we speak to God as Father. We say five things to him.

[2 : 41] The first thing we say to him is hallowed. And I can't get past that word because it means that the thing that we honor above all is to be the name of God.

That is the ultimate reality that will ultimately be vindicated in history will be the name of God. It will be hallowed. So no matter what's going on, we are looking for the name of God to be hallowed. The second thing that we're to do when we pray is we're to pray about the kingdom. And very important. Because we know the frailty of the kingdoms of this earth, that they will pass away. And that the ultimate kingdom on which we must have our eye is not the kingdoms that come and go.

It is the kingdom of God. And we pray in the midst of all the tensions of our world and the disagreements of our world. We pray, thy kingdom come.

[3 : 49] We recognize that we are dependent on God for bread. And the whole sort of environmental issue, all the issues that are around that.

What you need is an environment which is blessed by God so that the needs of people, the deep primary needs of people the world over will be met.

And we pray that God will meet them when we pray, give us this day our daily bread. The fourth thing we pray for is forgiveness. And this is the personal transaction between us and God.

We have been forgiven, as Wendell said, and we are to forgive one another. And that knows no bounds. We have the authority to forgive one another.

We have the reason to forgive one another. That the basis of the whole world community can only be established upon forgiveness.

[4 : 52] That's the only way it ever will work. And the sign of human maturity will be when we are capable of forgiving. And so we pray, forgive us as we forgive those who trespass against us.

That we get that dynamo working amongst men. And the fifth thing that we're told to pray for is temptation. And this brings me back to where I started from because I think the great temptation in our world is to believe in ourselves that we can do it.

The problem is too big. The implications of it are too wide. All the issues caught up in it are too much for us. We cannot do it. The temptation that we are in is to think that we can.

And that we are not utterly and completely and ultimately dependent upon God. And that's what you do when you pray. That's what Jesus told us to do.

So if you want to know how to pray in our world, there's the five things that you pray for. These are the five things that guide and direct your prayer during the stress of these times.

[6 : 07] So don't watch the national without saying the prayer. The next thing that I want you to look at is this business of Matthew 25.

And we want to deal today with the stranger. And let me just give you a little more background. I listened to the tape of my talk last week.

And about ten minutes into it, I said to myself, I mean, the fellow on the tape who was talking to me, who was me talking to me. So I was talking to myself in that sense. But I said as I listened there in agony, Harry, get to the point.

And he never did. So I hope I can make up for it this week by getting there. It was, as I say, an agonizing experience.

Here's what happens. Look, the Gospel of Matthew is divided into five great discourses. If you look at the end of each discourse, you find these words, when Jesus had finished saying all these things.

[7 : 20] So if you want to divide Matthew's Gospel up, you look for those words, and you'll know that's the end of a discourse. Our story ends with the end of chapter 25, and verse 1 of 26 is, when Jesus had finished all these things.

So this is the last discourse on which the Gospel of Matthew is built. The last thing, the last body of teaching, because in chapter 26 and verse 1, it goes on to say, as you know, and with a kind of finality that January the 15th had for our world, as you know, the Passover is two days away. The Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified. And then the rest of the whole of the Gospel is the narrative of the crucifixion. So this passage that we're looking at is the final story in the fifth discourse, which brings to a conclusion the teaching content, Jesus' teaching in the Gospel of Matthew.

So it's important for that reason. You'll notice that there are three stories in chapter 25. One is the parable of the virgins, which was that they were to be ready for the call that was to come in the night, ready for the bridegroom to come.

The second is the parable of the talents, in which people are to be held accountable for what they've been given. And the third is this judgment story of the sheep and the goats.

[9 : 03] And those are the three stories that end this final teaching passage in the Gospel of Matthew. Now, I told you last week, I started off with that great piambal about a detective story.

Detective stories are when nothing appears, you're given first a setting where nothing appears to be wrong, and you have nothing but delightful, gracious, social people mixing with one another.

And then the crime is committed, and the detective comes in, and you look at it through his eyes, and you see that everybody is under suspicion. What used to be a lovely picture of social equanimity suddenly becomes a dire, threatening situation where everybody looks guilty.

And then out of that comes the final part of a detective story when justice is seen to be done, and crime is rewarded appropriately. Now, the reason I use that detective story analogy is simply because detective stories are always built around a personal tragedy, a murder of some kind.

But the Gospel stories are built around a kind of reverse to that, that life emerges out of them. You know, things don't look so good, then they look a little better, but then you find out that they're infinitely better than you ever imagined they could be.

[10 : 36] And that reality is what we call the Gospel. The Gospel breaks out of the story. The good news that nobody could ever have imagined breaks out of the story, and you suddenly see how the whole thing fits together in the light of the person of Jesus Christ.

And that's why I want you to continue to examine this story with me in order to try to understand it. So, what happens then at the end of the Gospel of Matthew and the teaching, you get this glorious picture.

And the glorious picture is the beginning of the story in verse 31, when the Son of Man comes in His glory, all the angels with Him.

He sits on His throne in heavenly glory. Now, this is the despised and rejected Christ of the cross.

The man who is under a curse because cursed is every man that hangs on a cross.

This man who in his humiliation is tried and scourged and crucified, now comes in glory. So, this is the glorious ending that breaks through in the story.

[11 : 48] And you get the throngs of angels, the glorious throne, all the nations are gathered before Him, and He comes as undoubtedly the judge.

And He is there before all the nations as the God-appointed judge of the nations. And they all must face Him. So, what happens then?

He divides them. He divides people into two groups. The sheep and the goats. To the sheep, He says, Come, blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.

This is what the world was all about. This is what God, even before it ever started, had in mind. And now, I want you, having been through this travail of tears and sorrows and suffering, to enter in to the inheritance of the kingdom which the Father has prepared for you.

That's on the one side. On the other side, depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire which was prepared for the devil and all his angels.

[12 : 56] It's the only place I got, but that's where you're going. And you get that kind of distinction between these two so that the division has taken place.

Well, then you get on to the basis of judgment. How does this glorious figure with absolute justice and impartiality make this division, putting some on this side and some on this side?

And the part that I want us to look at today of that story is, I was a stranger and you welcomed me on my right.

I was a stranger and you did not welcome me on my left. And that's the way Jesus makes it. Jesus always approaches us really as a stranger.

Jesus is a stranger to you. The reason we have these sessions downtown on Wednesday noon is because Jesus is a stranger to the downtown community.

[13 : 59] If you went to the Vancouver Club, Jesus would be a stranger in your midst. If you went to the Arbutus Club or the Lawn Tennis Club or any of those places to the Stock Exchange, Jesus would be a stranger.

And if you were to tell anybody in those select company of people that you have a very good friend who is Jesus, you would immediately get the impression, well, I don't know who your friend is, but he doesn't belong here.

He doesn't belong in the city. And so what we do is we create for ourselves a community in which Jesus is a stranger and he is to be treated as a stranger.

And he's a stranger to the way we think, to our thinking. He's a stranger to our social arrangements. He's a stranger to our emotional life. He's just a stranger to us and we would basically avoid strangers.

You get that picture all the way through the New Testament. In John chapter 1 and verse 10, he was in the world. The world, though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him.

[15 : 08] He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave power to become the sons of God.

That people basically reject him when he approached the woman at the well. She said, you're a Jew, I'm a Samaritan. Why do you ask me? We are strangers. And when Jesus approaches anybody, that's our first and instinctive reaction.

What have you got to do with me? You're not part of my life. You don't fit into my understanding. We regard him as a stranger and we treat him as a stranger.

Jesus presents himself to those who should have known him in John chapter 8. And they end up by saying to him, you are a bastard by birth, not a true son of Abraham, and you are demon possessed.

So, Jesus is treated always as a stranger. And Jesus approaches us as a stranger and we have xenophobia.

[16 : 19] You all know what that means? I do because I looked it up and what it means is we have a fear and dislike of strangers. That's what it means.

There is, in fact, a New Testament word which is phylophilia, which means you entertain, you love, you offer hospitality to strangers, which is the opposite of it.

So that what is being taught here by Jesus is that what stands as all-important on the day of judgment is your relationship to Jesus, whom you know.

Let me tell you, just finally, how you know it. It works this way. It's as though you are standing before him in judgment.

He says, come up to the bar. Have you ever seen me before? Think again. Have you ever seen me before?

[17 : 26] And he asks us that question. We might be inclined to say no, but as we gaze on the person of Jesus Christ, we are forced to recognize we have seen him before.

We do know who he is. We thought he was a stranger. We thought he was somebody we should have nothing to do with. We thought he was preposterous in the claims that he made.

He approached us in a person whom we didn't have very much respect for and who didn't really belong to our circle. I just assumed he was a stranger and you know what I do with strangers.

Always done it. It's the only way to deal with our kind of world. And so as we gaze upon the person of Jesus Christ, we are forced to acknowledge that his face is in fact familiar and that we know him and that we've chosen to reject him or we've chosen to accept him.

And you see, that's what that's what the story is about. That becomes the ultimate basis of human judgment.

[18 : 48] Who is Jesus Christ? And what is the answer not just of your intellect to that, but what is the answer of your life to the person of Jesus Christ?

And I know we think that God should approach us as someone whom we would naturally admire and respect and look up to.

And, but he doesn't. He approaches us as a stranger. He's a stranger essentially because we've drawn a little circle around our little world and said, I know who belongs here and who doesn't.

And he doesn't. And so we don't admit him into our lives. Well, I haven't got to the point I wanted to make.

However, I will next week. Let me, let me pray. In our prayer, can we look on the face of Jesus Christ?

[20 : 04] And as we look on the face of Jesus Christ, not contorted with agony necessarily or suffering, but the face of him who has died, who has risen, who has ascended, and who has come again in glory to judge the quick and the dead.

And we look on him. And if we say to him, I never knew you, no doubt will say to us, I never knew you.

So our God, give us the heart to entertain the stranger that Jesus is to our world, to our sophistication, to our way of life.

give us grace that we might entertain this stranger, that we might receive him and not reject him.

And help us each to realize we are called to do this in the circumstances of our personal lives, and we need your grace in doing it.

[21 : 28] We ask because you have told us to ask. We ask in the name of Jesus Christ because that's the name you hear.

Amen.