

When Did We See You In Prison

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[0 : 0 0] Somebody pointed out to me with, you know, something I had never even begun to notice yet. And that is that the function of faith in the marketplace is to try and make sure that you don't have faith in the marketplace.

So you may be deceived by that title. And if you've come for that reason, then I trust you'll be deeply disappointed. However, today we're looking at the, I was in, when did we see you in prison?

And what I think we're trying to do is, you know, is to talk about you as an individual or anybody as an individual.

And somebody who's here and this relationship that exists. And the point that seems to be important here is, what is the direction that you're moving in?

What's the sort of gravitational pull of your life? And whether that gravitational pull of your life is towards the exalted and the important people in the world, in which case we should draw in somebody up here, only whose boots show.

[1 : 3 1] He's up here so high. Or whether you gravitate towards the people who are hungry, thirsty, sick, strangers, in prison.

I never can get them all, but they're all there. And which way you gravitate. And that really is the story that's there.

Now, today we're talking about the prisoner. One of the, like you complain about the fact that we've gone over this story again.

I don't know whether you're complaining or not. But I, now that we've been through it six times, I really begin to think I'm going to understand this. If I could only keep at it for another six weeks or so. But I'm not going to, for your benefit anyway.

Anyway, I told you at the beginning it was kind of like a detective story where you get into the story and you see all these different parts and the mystery begins to unfold you.

[2 : 3 4] You have the happy confidence that the person who wrote the novel knows how it's going to come out in the end. And you're just being fed a few clues. And when you pick up those clues, then you'll begin to see what's happening and where you're going.

And then you'll begin to see the outcome of the story and you won't be able to put it down until you follow it through. And I suggested that this story is somewhat like that. There's a whole lot of mysterious elements in it that you have to look at again and again and again.

And I would say that it's perhaps in our modern world is one of the most misunderstood passages of the New Testament. That people don't understand it.

It's nice that I do. But I apologize for saying that. But I saw the corner I was painting myself into and had to get out.

But because it really is something which is not easy to come to terms with. And it's easy to misinterpret and I think has been widely misinterpreted.

[3 : 45] So that we have this story and we're working it through and trying to get hold of it. The other thing about it, which I think it illustrates in a way that perhaps better than almost any other.

And that is, if you were to take one simple passage of scripture like this one, because this is a story complete in itself in a way.

And you were to say, I'm going to spend a year figuring out what this story is about. And I'm really going to work on it and I'm going to follow it through and I'm going to examine every word of it.

And I'm going to see every reference that comes out of it and everything that goes into it. I'm going to trace it all the way through. And that is, once you've grasped this passage, then you have a kind of viewpoint from which to see the whole of scripture.

So it's very important to take a passage like this seriously and to follow it through. Don't just skim the milk off the top of it, but really try and get at it. And the people, these people here that you relate to, if you relate to them, these people are spoken of in this passage as in as much as you have done it to the least of these my brethren.

[5 : 14] These people are somehow related to the person of Jesus Christ. Somehow he identifies with the people in these six categories.

How? I don't know. That's one of the mysteries. How you sort out exactly how that works. One of the clues you can get to it, which I think is a significant clue, is when Paul is out persecuting the church and going after them.

What he's doing is saying, you know, he's going after the Christians here and the Christians there. And he's got scripts that he had can arrest these people and put them in jail for their blasphemy and their offenses.

And finally, when he is stopped on the road to Damascus and struck down by a light, which is brighter than the brightness and then the sun at noon. And the words come to him.

Why are you persecuting me? You know, that's that's I think an important clue to this story, because what it means is that Paul was obviously persecuting the heretics.

[6 : 25] But from Jesus point of view, he wasn't persecuting them at all. He was persecuting him. He was persecuting Jesus. And that's that's I think important that you've got to understand these people, because in as much as you've done it to the least of these, my brethren, you've done it to me.

And that's that's the way this this this this picture is set up. So when you go on from there and look at the particular category that we're looking at today, you find Jesus in prison.

Now, countries can get to the state where the only honest people in the country are in prison. And you've seen that illustrated lots of times.

But there's been some amazing people. You almost wonder if if prison isn't God's university where you get your postgraduate training for the purpose that God has for you.

And if you look at people like Solzhenitsyn and the time he spent in in the as a prisoner of the state in Russia, if you look at people like John Bunyan, who wrote Pilgrim's Progress, having spent lots of time.

[7 : 45] And when you look even at people like Nelson Mandela after 24 years or something in prison, when you look at Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the impact of his writing, you can see when you look at some of the leaders of Eastern Europe today and how they seem to have been schooled for their job in in prison.

When you look at the fact that several of the epistles in the New Testament are called prison epistles because Paul had the time to sit down and think about them and write them while he was in prison.

When you think that Joseph was trained to be a leader of Egypt by spending a long time in prison. When you think that Chuck Colson, who is a sort of eminent Christian leader in North America today, really got his his most significant training while he was in prison.

You begin to see that maybe the richness of what life is all about is to be found in these kind of relationships rather than in these kind of relationships. You know, where you're just about at the right level to lick somebody's boots.

That this is seems to be what this what this story is about. And what it does, what this story does for you.

[9 : 03] And this is where I think you need to spend a lot of time thinking about it is it talks about the judgment day. Now, this judgment day is different, you know, because when you go and sit in the in the corridors outside.

The courtrooms now and you see a lot of anxious people waiting for the policeman to stick his head out and say, Robinson, Robinson, Robinson, three times.

If you're not there, you're done. You see a lot of people who are hoping that the truth will not come out. Some who may have hired a lawyer to see that the truth does not come out.

And some who hope that the judge will be will not be totally impartial. But this judgment day is different because I think everybody comes to this knowing that the truth will come out, that it will be just and it will be seen to be just.

And there will be no hiding from the sort of high noon of justice, which is this judgment day. The sheep will know that they are sheep and the goats will know they are goats and judgment will be done because this is a judgment of the heart by the one who looks on the heart.

[10 : 22] That is, men look on the outside, but God looks on the heart so that a lot of people in the Bible. Let me remind you of this. I know I've told it to you before, but I want to tell you again, a lot of people in the Bible are looking for judgment.

They want it to happen because they consider their whole life to have been that they have been the victims of injustice. And now they want justice to be done.

And so they are looking for this place of judgment. And they work on that basis. And I think that's the setting you've got to see it in.

You know, there's no nobody in this judgment day scene who thinks they're going to get away with anything. What they recognize is that the die is cast and the results are being announced.

You know, there's no, you're not waiting for anything that you didn't know. Well, now, in this passage, then, I have seen several things which I call for me great difficulties.

[11 : 31] One of the great difficulties that this passage creates is that it allows you to separate good works from good motives. So that you can visit, you know, feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, visit the prisoner, visit the person who's sick and clothe the naked.

You can do all those things and you can get a sense of, my, haven't I done well? Oh, you know, that's, that's there for you to do. You can read this story and think that that's what it's teaching you to do.

But this story is not teaching you to do that. It says you may have done this, but even if you've done it, you won't know that you've done it. Because what you will have been done, what you will have been doing, you will have been doing in accordance to the dictates of your heart.

You will have been doing what you want to do. You will have been doing that which is an expression of who you really are. And you won't be particularly conscious of having done something very great or very noble or, or worthy of some great reward.

You won't have done that. And the story, the way people read the story is they think, well, I must visit old Aunt Matilda on the way home because she's been confined to bed for so long and I need to visit the sick today to bring up my auntie a little.

[13 : 02] I didn't intend that one. It just happened. That the New Testament, I think, teaches, and the Anglican articles say, and I don't know whether this will stick in your throat or not, but from the point of view of the New Testament, it is impossible to do a good thing for the wrong reason.

Leave it with you. You cannot. That's because, you see, judgment is of the heart. And what you do is an expression of your heart. And therefore, if you do a good thing, it's because your heart is good.

And if you do a wrong thing, it's, if you do a right thing for the wrong reason, then it doesn't count. And that's, that's, that's going to be part of, that's part of the difficulty, I think, of allowing people to separate good works from good motives.

And, and ultimately, I mean, you, you know how you get things like food bank burnout, you know, we've, we've done a good thing and it's as far as I can go because I've given all that I want.

Or you get these famine burnout things where people have contributed to the famine in East Africa for long enough and they can't do it any longer, you know, because all the virtue they can derive from it, they've derived.

[14 : 36] They've given all they could ever be expected to give. So quit. But what he's talking here about is a condition of the heart. You're doing it for reasons that God has placed in your heart to do it.

And you're not obeying the circumstances out there or doing that, which is seen as a good deed out there. You are acting out of a heart that God has prepared for that.

The thing that, the thing that happens then, you see, is that these people do these good things. And then they are separated into sheep and goats.

And then, and then what happens is they say, Christ says to them, in so much as you have done it to the least of these, my brethren, you've done it to me. And both those, the sheep and the goats ask exactly the same question.

When? When? When? I don't remember. I don't remember. I don't remember seeing you hungry, thirsty, sick, naked, in prison. I don't remember any of those.

[15 : 42] And that's when Christ says, in as much as you've done it to the least of these, my brethren, you've done it to me. Now, the way I'd like to explain that to you, so the way that it made sense to me, and I hope this will make sense to you, is, if your name is John Doe, and you have a .45 revolver in your left pocket, and you walk up to somebody that you can stand, not at all, and you say to him, I have a message for you, and you pull out your .45, and you shoot him, bang, bang, bang, through the heart, and he crumples up dead and hits the floor, and you feel that you've done what was in your heart, and as far as you're concerned, the man whom you hated is now gone.

And that's the end of the story. Except that, at your apartment that night, there comes a knock on the door, and somebody says, you are under arrest, John, because you shot this person this afternoon at 4.45.

And you're going to be taken to jail, John. And when you get to court in the morning, you're going to find that you are arraigned on a charge of murder. And the case will be described as Regina versus John.

The queen takes exception, John, to you murdering one of her citizens. And therefore, she has provided certain detectives and police forces and criminology labs and so on to deal with you because you have offended her majesty very deeply.

And she feels it's her responsibility to punish you for what you've done. Now, the dead man can say nothing, you see. He can't do anything.

[17 : 43] But the queen can. Now, I think that is a parallel in a kind of reverse way to what happens here. You see, when you, out of the motivation of your heart, feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, you fill in the words.

And when that happens, Jesus, in a sense, arrests you and says to you, you've done that for me.

And in the same way that the queen punishes John for murder, Jesus acknowledges you because you have done that which is pleasing to him.

And so what you've done is not just pleasing to the person you've done it for. It's pleasing to Jesus, that you have acted in a way that pleases him.

Well, that's how I think it works. And that's why I think it's important to underline and come to grips with the fact that as John didn't realize that he was offending Her Majesty the Queen, so Christians don't realize that they are serving Christ their Lord.

[19 : 09] They're doing because that's in their heart to do it. And Christ sees it and recognizes it and records it and brings it out at the judgment day, to your great surprise, just as it was to John's great surprise when he found out how keen the queen was on the life and well-being of his friend.

So I come to great difficulty number two. The unseenness of this whole transaction.

And what I think you have to understand is that the kingdom of God has come and it has come in the person of Jesus Christ.

And it's not marked by flags or bastions or bastilles or castles or great endowments or anything like that. It's not marked by any of those things.

The kingdom of God has come in the person of, and this is quoting from Leslie Newbigin, in the person of the vulnerable and powerless Jesus Christ.

[20 : 25] And he has established his kingdom, which when the powerful of the world look over the world scene, they don't see anything significant except a vulnerable and powerless Christ.

But when you come to faith in Jesus Christ, you look over the world and see an array of passing empires and vain and pompous proud people.

whom you know are caught up in the imagination of their own minds and for whom there is no ultimate meaning at all to their lives.

And you recognize that the continuing reality is in the vulnerable and powerless person, Jesus Christ. And in your relationship to him, you have become a part of the hidden kingdom.

That's who you are. That's how your world works. And you live not in terms of the measurable attainment of human progress or the advancement of human technology.

[21 : 36] You don't live on that basis. You live on the basis that God has made a promise concerning his purpose, which will be fulfilled when the vulnerable and powerless, Jesus Christ comes again in judgment as the son of man with all the angels and the glory of God, the reality of God is revealed.

And you are confronted by this one whom the world overlooked. You see, that's how you get in touch with the reality of the kingdom. And it's living in that relationship to Jesus Christ that gives to your life the reality of the kingdom.

Great difficulty number three. And that is that this story says a lot about hell. And I don't want anybody to go to hell. However, what I have to tell you today is that you can.

You are free to. It is your privilege. It probably is one of the great bastions of freedom in the world that you can go to hell.

You know, you can. That can be your choice. And you will go there. I mean, the goats didn't object to somebody.

[22 : 55] One of the commentators pointed out. The goats didn't object that they were being sent to that place, but they were surprised as to where things had gone wrong and how this judge knew where they belonged.

But they weren't surprised that that's where they were going. But hell is kind of like a refugee camp.

Because you notice the difference that's spelled out here. That when he talks, I think, in verse 37, and he says, no, no, it isn't.

It's verse 34. Come, O blessed of my father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. That place is prepared. But to God's great surprise, a lot of people don't want to go there.

So he has to provide an alternative. And the only alternative that is there, you can read about later on, when he says, depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire that I prepared for the devil and all his angels.

[23 : 59] And they can accommodate you in the light of the choices that you've made. So that hell is that kind of temporary accommodation that God has provided for people that didn't want to go to the place that he had prepared for them, to the kingdom of his blessedness upon those for whom he had prepared it.

And I think hell is very much like, perhaps I should say heaven, is very much like sobriety is to an alcoholic.

It's just not a choice he wants to consider. You know, I mean that for him, the reality is the bottle, and he chooses it every time. And I think the condition of our hearts is, not the condemnation of God, but the choice of our hearts is, that we would choose hell.

Rather than, and there's a, this is the reality, which I think is expressed and which underlies this story.

And so that's the, hell is a great difficulty, but I think hell is a necessary part of the freedom that God gives us. And it probably will turn out to be where you want to be, in the same way that an alcoholic wants to be close to a bottle.

[25 : 26] It's that kind of addiction, which you are free to choose. So then I just ask this last question, how shall we then live?

And that is, we live as those who see in Jesus the present evidence of the hidden kingdom of God, the eternal kingdom. Because it says at the end that there is eternal punishment and there is eternal life.

And that eternal life is made visible to us, historically, in the person of Jesus Christ. And we are asked to live by faith in him. We are to live as those who rely on the promises of God.

And one of the promises of God is that history has meaning. And it's a promise that you should hold on to with both hands as you watch the television news. Because it's liable to slip out of your hand if you haven't got hold of it.

That history has meaning. And that we may not know much about that meaning, but we have God's promise concerning the ultimate outcome of history. And finally, we are to live as awaiting people.

[26 : 34] The waiting people of awaiting God. And that is that God in his patience is waiting for the nations to hear the gospel and to respond to it. And that we are called upon, as those who have believed on him, to wait with him in prayerful expectation that the gospel and preparation that the gospel will get out to all nations.

Let me say a prayer. Our God, as we review again this amazing story and try and plumb some of the depths of it, we ask that you will make each of us in the circumstances of our own lives aware that we are confronted by a God under whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid.

And that this is to be our delight and not our fear. Our God, we ask that you will help us to put such faith in Jesus Christ, to know the reality of your hidden kingdom and to know the certainty of your ultimate promises.

and to share with you the longing that all the nations will come to know and acknowledge Jesus Christ as Lord. In whose name we pray. Amen.