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# LIFE IN THE COMMUNITY



*What do you like best about your community?*

**QUESTION #1**

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## THE POINT

*Loving Jesus means personally helping those in need.*



## THE BIBLE MEETS LIFE

Has your town made the list? A variety of companies and websites keep updated lists of the best cities to live in, the best neighborhoods for bringing up children, the best business-friendly towns, and so on. The criteria vary from list to list, and their choices can be highly subjective—especially if your community didn't make the cut!

One word that might be used to describe the foundation of these lists is “treatment.” How do we treat tourists and other visitors to our area? How do teachers and administrators treat our kids? How well do local governments treat businesses in the area?

In short, we can tell a lot about a community by how it treats others.

In a similar way, disciples of Jesus reveal much about our identities in the way we treat others. That's because how we treat others—how we love and respond to their needs—is directly connected to our love for God and our relationship with Him.

As we turn to the Gospel of Matthew, we'll find a powerful message from Jesus on how our identity as His disciples must be lived out in our communities.

# WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

## ***Matthew 25:34-36***

<sup>34</sup>“Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. <sup>35</sup> For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, <sup>36</sup> I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’

To help us live out our identity as His followers, Jesus told a parable that takes us to the end of history. It’s a picture of His second coming, with all the nations gathered before His throne (see 25:31-32).

In the parable, a King separated all of his people into two groups. He did this “as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats” (v. 32). Sheep were more highly valued in that day because of their wool. While telling the story, Jesus said these more highly valued animals were placed on the King’s right, symbolizing the place of honor.

Jesus issued an invitation to these “sheep” because of how they treated Him. Specifically, they had met several of His needs out of their own kindness and compassion. Jesus listed a number of these needs, including the following:

- ▶ **Hunger and thirst.** Water could be hard to come by in that region, especially in late summer or early fall. To share this precious commodity would be a great act of love.
- ▶ **A stranger.** In Jesus’ day, when a stranger—a non-resident—came to town, he usually came with no job or means of supporting himself. As such, strangers were viewed with suspicion, and they were often treated harshly. But notice what “the sheep” did for the stranger: “You invited

*What modern circumstances come to mind when you read these verses?*

**QUESTION #2**

me in.” That’s hospitality! That is more than handing over a little money and then walking on; it’s an investment of time, energy, and love.

- ▶ **Naked.** This phrase usually referred to a person wearing only an undergarment. Lacking the necessary clothing in any culture can be devastating, both physically and emotionally.
- ▶ **Sick.** People didn’t have “sick days” in this culture. Therefore, sickness typically meant a lack of daily necessities. Visits from caring were especially beneficial, even life-saving.
- ▶ **In prison.** Even today, a person who is incarcerated has no income, and therefore, no way to provide for his or her family. Prisoners in the first century had it even worse, since prisons weren’t interested in keeping their inhabitants healthy, or even alive; inmates were entirely dependent on the help and hospitality of others.

What’s interesting about this list of needs is that anyone can respond to them. There are no special skills or additional education required to feed someone who is hungry, to clothe someone who is naked, to care for the sick, and to help those in prison.

Our society has different views on how to handle needs like these, ranging from government involvement, to charities, to church ministries. There’s no reason to dismiss any of these approaches. Yet we should pay close attention to the personal touch in Jesus’ words: “I was a stranger and you invited *me* in” [emphasis added]. The “sheep” in Jesus’ parable didn’t just give money or help from a distance; they got personally involved.

We’re surrounded by needs: people hurting, people doing without basic necessities, people who can’t provide for their families, and more. We can’t meet every need, but we can do something—and we can do it in Jesus’ name.



*What emotions do you experience when you encounter someone in need?*

**QUESTION #3**

## **Matthew 25:37-40**

**<sup>37</sup> “Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? <sup>38</sup> When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? <sup>39</sup> When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’ <sup>40</sup> “The King will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’”**

We’ve been looking at people who struggle because they lack some of the most basic needs. But Jesus wasn’t talking about other people; He was talking about Himself. *He* was the one who was hungry. *He* was the one in prison. *He* was the one who was sick.

You’ve got to love the reaction of the sheep—the ones Jesus now called “the righteous.” They were surprised! They never recalled seeing Jesus in such dire straits. They didn’t deny helping others; they just couldn’t recall seeing Jesus among them.

So why did they help? They saw a need. Period. Because their identities were being conformed to Jesus’ identity, they gave no thought to the relative merits of the person in need; all they saw was a person in need, and they chose to do something about it.

To the surprise of the righteous, Jesus replied with the most powerful statement in this parable: “Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.” Parents understand this. If you want to do something for me, help my kids. When you step into the life of one my kids and help them avoid trouble, learn a skill, or land a job, you have my gratitude!

The second half of the parable (vv. 41-46) is symmetrical with the first half, but it involves the “goats.” These people failed to do everything the righteous did freely. They showed a completely different attitude in their reactions to Jesus’ list. Whereas the righteous helped out of an instinctual love, the attitude of the unrighteous was calculating. They only helped others when it would benefit themselves. They surely would have helped Jesus in order to win God’s approval, had they known He was in need—but helping “the least of these” just wasn’t worth their time.

***With so many needs in our community and beyond, how do we decide whom to help?***

### **QUESTION #4**

Surely to the horror of those He had placed on His left, the Lord answered: “Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me! “Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life” (vv. 45-46).

Jesus referred to “the least of these brothers and sisters of mine.” These were His brothers in a spiritual sense, of course, which also makes them our brothers in Christ. This parallels what Jesus said earlier in the Gospel of Matthew: “And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones who is my disciple, truly I tell you, that person will certainly not lose their reward” (10:42).

As Christians, we are family! Throughout the New Testament, believers in the church are referred to as brothers (and sisters). Jesus said, “For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother” (12:50). It’s a great witness to our connection to Christ when we, the church—brothers and sisters in Christ—love and take care of each other. “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:35).

Does this mean we don’t have to meet needs outside the church? No! Our love for Jesus compels us to love others—inside and outside the church. Our identity in Christ is demonstrated in how we live and serve in the community: first, the community of faith, and second, the community at large.

In short, let’s serve Jesus by serving others!

***What is something we will do as a group to serve Jesus by serving “the least of these?”***

**QUESTION #5**

## COMMUNITY NEEDS

*Use the space below to draw a rough map of your community, or to create a list of the major regions within your community. When finished, mark some of the specific areas in your community where there are major needs waiting to be met.*

*How has Jesus influenced your approach to meeting the needs of others?*

*"Christian brotherhood is not an ideal which we must realize. It is rather a reality created by God in Christ in which we may participate!"*

—DIETRICH BONHOEFFER

## LIVE IT OUT

What can you do this week to serve Jesus by serving others? Consider these suggestions as a starting point:

- ▶ **Start small.** You will see someone who needs help this week. It may be something minor, but step in and help—and do so without making a judgment call about whether or not he or she deserves it.
- ▶ **Work together.** As a group, identify a need in your group or church and create a strategy for helping that person or family through whatever hardship they are facing.
- ▶ **Get involved.** Look into the ways your church serves and ministers to those in need—both inside the church family and outside. Invest your time and energies in working in one of those ministries for a longer period of time.

You may not live in one of the best communities in the country according to some list. But you live in a place filled with needs. Therefore, you have so many opportunities to serve Jesus, your Lord.

My thoughts



Share with others how you will live out this study: **#BSFLidentity**