

A Job to Do

Sermon by Pastor Charlee Blabey of the Kendalwood Church, Ontario
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Have you ever neglected something that was right in front of you? You knew that you must work on it. You knew that the task needed to be completed within a specific time frame, but you simply did not do it. What were some of the reasons as to why you failed to complete the task before you? Perhaps it was a lack of time or resources. Maybe you felt inadequate or overwhelmed. Or perhaps you just did not want to do it.

Now, let's pretend you are in university. You are excited and as far as you can tell you are prepared to complete your four-year program. You buy pencils, paper, backpack, a brand-new laptop for taking notes, all the books you will need for your classes. In fact, you can practically smell the diploma you will receive, your name written across the top with the degree stated underneath. Your heart begins to swell with pride at the thought of what your parents, siblings, friends, and enemies will say when they see you walking down that aisle, smile plastered across your face, gown flowing, all eyes on you. Ah yes, you dream about that moment, you rehearse that moment in your room over and over again. Reach out, take hold of the diploma, shake hands, and smile broadly.

The weeks begin to turn into months, and the months into years. You know that moment is getting closer. You can feel it in your bones. Then one day you are called into the registrar's office.

"Why haven't you completed any homework?" The stern looking registrar looks over his glasses into your confused face. You think to yourself, *Homework? No one had*

said anything about homework. The graduation is what it's all about, is it not? There's no work required! Right?

This entire situation seems absurd. Who could expect to graduate without having put in the work? However, Jesus ran into a problem similar to this in Luke 14. He had been invited to dine at the house of one of the leaders of the Pharisees on the Sabbath. As they were preparing to eat, Jesus could not help but notice that the guests were all quarreling about where they were to sit. Everyone wanted the place of honor near the head of the table.

After some observation, Jesus remarks, "When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, 'Give this person your place,' and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place. But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, 'Friend, move up higher': then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you." (Luke 14:8-10)

This verse is intriguing in that it goes directly against what was found to be common sense among those sitting at the table. To them it only made sense that one should seek the place of honor. They each felt important in their own right and wanted to assert that importance over others. But Jesus flips the norm on its head, challenging them to think of others before thinking about themselves.

Jesus' challenge at this point is still couched within their comfort zone. The scenario presented is merely allowing someone else of your same status, religion, and social ranking, to have the better spot. This hardly seems like a bad a thing to do. In fact,

it almost seems doable. It simply requires an act of selflessness and placing the focus on your friends and colleagues, your equals.

However, Jesus does not stop here. He lets this thought sink in for a moment before continuing, “He said also to the one that had invited him, “When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbours, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteousness.” (Luke 14:12-14)

I’m sure the shock in the room could be felt. Had Jesus really just said what they thought he had said? Could it be true that he had taken a giant leap and told them that instead of inviting your equals to instead invite those who are beneath you? Was Jesus really saying to care for those who could never repay the kindness? Where would the honour and status in that be?

You can almost imagine the gasps that went around the room. Imagine inviting those people who are not of your religion, your status, or your social ranking. That sounds like a very uncomfortable situation. It seems the dinner guests thought so too as one responded by saying, “Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!” (Luke 14:15b) In other words, “Let’s change the topic of our responsibility here on earth and instead let’s focus just on heaven.”

Essentially what this dinner guest said is, “Let’s look forward to graduation without worrying about the homework.” It is much easier to simply dismiss the problems and look forward to that great day when we can celebrate in heaven with everyone.

However, this idea of focusing solely on heaven and neglecting the work yet to be done here on earth is as absurd as looking forward to graduation without doing the homework you've been given.

In Matthew 24, Jesus has outlined to the disciples an exciting time in earth's history. "And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars; see that you are not alarmed; for this must take place, but the end is not yet. For nation will rise against nation and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines, and earthquakes in various places; all this is but the beginning of the birth pangs." (Matthew 24:6-8)

A lot is happening in these verses and it seems as though the world is falling apart. But just when it seems at its darkest, Jesus continues, "Immediately after the suffering of those days, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of heaven will be shaken. Then the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory." (Matthew 24:29-30) This is indeed a great promise that far exceeds the idea of graduating. We should be excited and we should look forward to this moment with great anticipation.

However, Jesus has not finished his sermon at this point. Matthew chapter 24 and chapter 25 are part of the same sermon and as such both chapters deserve our attention. While chapter 24 outlines the worldwide events leading up to the second coming on a cosmic scale that includes everyone, believer and unbeliever alike, chapter 25 becomes specific to those of us who have chosen to believe in Jesus. As we wait with great anticipation for the second coming mentioned in chapter 24, chapter 25 gives us our "homework" in the meantime. To put it simply, before we can look forward to the

great graduation in the sky we must first do our assignment here on earth. Not that the assignments or homework get us into heaven but rather it is the small part that we are privileged to play while we wait, because we are believers.

And so, in chapter 25, the first homework assignment is given. Jesus tells a parable that is very familiar to each one of us. He tells the story of ten bridesmaids who are eagerly waiting for the coming of the bridegroom. After waiting and waiting for the bridegroom to come, it is determined that he is delayed. No excuses or explanations are made for the delay. He is simply delayed. The bridesmaids become so sleepy that they can no longer keep their eyes open. Slowly, each and every one of them falls fast asleep.

Have you ever been in a deep sleep when suddenly the phone rings or your alarm clock goes off? The piercing noise from outside your subconscious usually jolts you awake in a panic as you attempt to figure out what is happening. Where are you? Why is sheer panic running through your veins?

As our bridesmaids are sleeping, they have this same experience. They go from a sound sleep to a call being made that the bridegroom is coming. What ensues next is almost a panicked situation as the girls look around, realizing that it is now dark. Some begin to light their lamps. However, there is a problem. Half of those waiting lack enough oil to welcome the bridegroom.

The point of this parable is then presented, “Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour when the Son of Man returns.” (Matthew 25:13) Put simply, the first homework assignment is to stay awake and keep alert.

Jesus then begins to tell his second parable in the same sermon, on the same afternoon, on the same topic of the end of the world in general (chapter 24) and now the responsibilities of those who believe in Jesus (chapter 25).

The second parable begins with a wealthy landowner setting out on a journey. He knows he will be gone for quite some time. So, he calls together his trusted servants. It is now time to dole out responsibilities. The servants line up and to their shocked surprise the landowner pulls out a bag. They wait, wondering what it is that they are to receive when suddenly they hear the *clink clanking* sound of coins falling against each other. Could the master possibly be giving them money? The landowner reaches into the bag and gives the first man five talents; to the second man he gives two talents; and to the third man he gives one talent. Now keep in mind that the landowner leaves them no real instruction as to what they are to do with the money. What is made clear is that the money does not belong to them. It is still their master's. Therefore, when he returns, he will ask to see what was done with the money left with each servant.

We know how the story goes from this point. The first two men decide to trade and invest and make the money work for them. In return, their money is doubled. But the third man is the real “star” of the parable.

The landowner returns and demands to see what was done with his money while he was gone. The first servant is proud and shows how his five talents are now a magnificent 10. The servant with two has had the same fortune and proudly presents four talents.

The third servant approaches and I wish there was a description of how he approaches because it almost seems as though he is proud that his one talent has remained one talent. He chose to bury it rather than to invest it.

It is at this point that the verdict is decreed against the shocked third servant. The master says, “For unto every one that has, shall be given, and he shall have abundance; but from him that has not shall be taken away even that which he has.” (Matthew 25:29)

The second assignment is to keep busy using that which God has given you because one day you will have to give an account. What have you done or not done with that which has been given you?

It is at this point that we could say, ok, I get it. Jesus is coming soon and as such we are supposed to stay alert, stay busy, and use what has been given to us. But this leads to a question...what exactly should we be busy doing? How exactly should we be using what we've been given?

Thankfully, Jesus' sermon did not simply finish with these two parables. He has one more major point to drive home to his disciples and for that matter, those living at the end of time. Jesus is about to tie it all together.

He begins his final section by relating it with Matthew 24:29-30. "When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then he will sit on the throne of His glory." (Matthew 25:31) Right away the hearer would remember what Jesus had said in Matthew 24 in regard to Christ coming at the end of all these terrible calamities. Their minds would race as they remembered all the horrors that Christ had said would befall the world before His coming but ah yes; now Christ has come. The scene is a beautiful one to ponder. The Son of Man coming in glory surrounded by all the angels. He's surrounded by not just some of the angels, but all the angels. Then there is the vision of the great throne with Jesus sitting on it.

But Jesus is not yet finished talking. He goes on to describe a great difference between those witnessing his coming. Again, one would think of the difference between the virgins in the parable, with five being prepared while five were not. Why the difference?

After sitting on his glorious throne, Jesus speaks “Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me.” (Matthew 25:24b-26) The great difference between the two groups is because one was prepared to help, to stay busy, to stay alert to the needs of those around them. The other group was not.

Much like the five prepared virgins or the two servants who just went out and doubled their master’s talents, it was something they simply did. The five wise virgins were not told to bring extra oil and those two servants were not told to go and double the money. It was something they just did naturally. This is why they reply to Jesus, “Lord when did we see You hungry...thirsty...a stranger...naked...sick...in prison and visit you?” (Matthew 25:37b-39) And Jesus says to them, “Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me.” (Matthew 25:40) Our third assignment is to care for those who cannot care for themselves.

So, as we stand on the precipice of time and gaze upon natural disasters, wars, famines, and other calamities that are affecting the human family all around us, we cannot simply ignore the responsibility that Jesus has given to each one of us to use our abilities and our talents to serve Him as we await his second coming.

Just as it seems absurd for a student to look forward to graduation without doing homework so it is unrealistic for a Christian to look forward to the second coming without realizing and responding to the great needs all around us.

ADRA has taken the three homework assignments literally. It stays alert and ready for any disaster that may strike. It uses what is entrusted to it, multiplying it and making it stretch further to save as many lives as possible. And it actively responds in areas of the world that are experiencing hardships of varied kinds.

Today is the Disaster and Famine Relief Offering. This offering is critical to ADRA's ability to respond right away to disasters. This offering means there is no delay, which means more lives are saved.

Some of our offerings last year fed thousands in eastern Africa who faced starvation. Their hunger was due in part to a prolonged drought and to various conflicts in the area.

In Somalia, already a poor and struggling country, there are over 70,000 refugees. Many of these refugees come from conflict and famine-stricken areas in Yemen and Kenya. They have lost everything.

One mother ADRA helped in a refugee camp in Baidoa, Somalia, had five children ranging from 10 years old to 1 year old. When ADRA met her, she had been living in the refugee camp for three months. You can understand or at least imagine the difficulties of raising children in good conditions. Now compound all those normal stresses of parenting with the strain of losing most of what you have and living in a makeshift camp. No water, no food, no grass, no firewood, no source of income, no medicines, no doctors, no home, no hope. And you're too afraid to go too far from the camp because those who would harm you are mere kilometers away.

Before fleeing to the camp, this mother had farmed the 10 hectares of land that she lived on. It had always supplied her family's needs. But after three years of severe famine, she was forced to flee.

Now she lives in the camp where conditions are tough. In fact, although her children are presently still alive, everyday two to three children in the camp die from diseases related to malnutrition and contaminated water like measles, diarrhea, malaria, and hunger.

Your generosity provided her with a food voucher. With it she was able to visit the local shop and receive flour, oil, salt, beans, milk for her children, and other essential items.

This is just one example of how our gifts to the Disaster and Famine Relief Offering are saving lives. Families around the world, facing the worst situations, are able to receive much-needed help and comfort. ADRA works around the clock to help meet the needs but their resources are limited. Our help is necessary and welcome. Our gifts save lives.

As we wait for Jesus to return, we have three assignments. We are to be alert and busy; we are to use what we've been given; and we are to give to the least of these. While we wait, we witness the heartache and suffering in our world that is on its last gasps. What a gift it is to be given something to do to alleviate the suffering while we wait. What a gift it is not to be powerless and superfluous. What a gift it is to have something meaningful that we can do to pass the time until Jesus' return. And in so doing, we are showering our broken world with his love, and by his grace and through his Spirit, pointing hearts back to him. We all have a job to do. May we each be found faithful.