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Matthew 23:1-12; Acts 16:9-15

### *Successful Christianity*

What a great day to celebrate our Disciple Bible Study Graduates. Over 30 weeks of daily homework and weekly meetings. That really doesn't sound too exciting; it wouldn't be good advertising. "Come! Join Disciple Bible Study. You can experience four years of intensive homework and weekly gatherings in your already overcrowded week!" Yet, every year as we celebrate those who have come through another session, I can listen to their hearts and they are ready to go again. They've met Jesus somehow. They not only learned something, but their hearts have been opened to a new level of knowing the Bible, and a deeper relationship with Christ. It is something to be experienced more than described.

Still, when you talk with those who have been through Disciple Bible Study, you will also hear, "I don't have it all done yet." Or, "I need to go back and learn what I missed." "I haven't mastered it yet." I know the feeling. I haven't arrived yet either. I keep going back and rereading Scripture only to find there is something new. If there is always something new, how will we know when we've got it, when we've reached a level of success? How do you know when you graduate?

In addition to Disciple Bible Study graduation, we are also celebrating our volunteers today. I am equally confounded by that. What do you do to express thanks to countless people who constantly work behind the scenes? If I asked everyone to stand who in some way helps out here – serving on committees, office help, providing desserts, *Courier* stuffers, bulletin folders, worship volunteers, TGIW helpers, teachers, prayer chain, mission and outreach folks, youth workers, visitation team, drivers – there would be very few seated. When you start looking at those jobs, that's what really drives the church. It's not me, it's not the staff, it's you. You are the essential piece to the entire working and functioning of this church.

I believe Jesus has a word to speak to all of this today. Go ahead and learn, he says. "The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat; therefore do what they teach you and follow it." Learning is essential. But the scribes and the Pharisees miss the mark when it comes to follow through. They put heavy burdens on others and don't help to carry them. They perform great deeds in public, take the places of honor and respect. They love their position. Jesus concludes, "The greatest among you will be your servant. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted."

Did you hear that? Jesus just blasted those of us credentialed in the church, or any who feel rather important here, at the top of the spiritually significant ladder. Jesus won't listen to that. He redefines success. He is not opposed to success, he just interprets it differently. Successful Christianity is giving life away, serving others, humbly, faithfully, loving other selflessly.

Before you get too far ahead of me, we're not talking about being used or becoming a doormat. A humble heart does not say, "I can't do anything. I'm just little ole me." But it does say, "I can't do everything. I know my piece of the puzzle, and I am honored and happy to do it." A humble heart, successful Christianity, is in your own way

servicing and loving the losers, the winners and the enemies, or perhaps you may say, the least, the most and the worst.

Jesus talks about the least. Whenever we reach out to the least, we are reaching out to him. The least – you know those people who often go unnoticed, who don't always dress or smell or look like we do. Jesus names them as the beggars, the hungry, the needy, the draining people. Or maybe it's the people who show up when you feel spent, when life is already in chaos, and they want you.

The story we heard from the Book of Acts is a nice story about the conversion of Lydia, a businesswoman and her household. The Lord opened her heart so that she responded to Paul's preaching and accepted Christ. It was testimony time!

But the real power of the story comes when we look at the larger context. Just before and after Lydia's story are stories of frustration and conflict. There was some parting of the ways between Paul and Barnabas, kind of like a church split. So they separated and took with them their own groups. That doesn't feel very good when you read between the lines. Paul was forbidden to preach in Asia by the power of the Spirit. He planned to go on to Bithynia but the Holy Spirit did not allow that. The way was blocked. Let's add more frustration. Directly after Lydia's conversion Paul and Silas are arrested and beaten for exorcism. Life was pretty rough.

Here in the middle of the simmering emotions, foiled plans, and persecution stands Lydia and her family, ready to hear the story of Jesus. What would have happened if Paul said, "Not now. I don't want to get into that right here with everything else going on." Well, many of us wouldn't be here. If you have European ancestry, you can trace your spiritual roots back to one person – Lydia, the first convert to Christianity on European soil.

Taylor Branch tells the story of the civil right movement and Martin Luther King Jr. He talks about how King graduated from Boston University with his doctorate in theology. Two search committees expressed interest in him being their pastor. One was a prestigious church in Chattanooga Tennessee. The other was a little church of people of lower income in Montgomery Alabama. King went to Chattanooga first and preached a trial sermon. The church voted not to invite him to be pastor, and King was devastated.

As a distant second choice, he decided to accept the invitation at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery. Three months after he arrived, Rosa Parks decides not to move to the back of the bus. The city and the nation erupted. The Montgomery community didn't know where to turn, so they asked this new unknown pastor if he could help. That church and their pastor led the crusade in servicing and loving the least of these of that time.

It's not only the least we are called to love, we are also to love the most of these. The most of these is the person you notice and resent. They are the ones always in somewhat of a competition – spoken or unspoken – with you, the ones who evoke your jealousy. On some level, they are your nemesis. They do what you do, but do it just a little better. Or you think you are about in the same bracket, but you can't live up to their standard, their lifestyle. They have the newer toys, go on the better vacations. They get the attention, the credit, the rewards. They excel in the area you excel, but do it a little more. And Jesus says we are to servants to these.

Esther Kim knows about this. For 13 years she dreamed of representing the United States in the Olympic tae kwon do squad. From the time she was eight, she spent

every available hour training for this. That is where she met her best friend, Kay Pol. The two worked hard and both qualified for the 2000 Olympic trials in Colorado Springs.

To everyone's surprise, they were placed in the same division. They never competed against each other, but as the countdown began they were in the same bracket. It was only a matter of events before they would face each other on the mat. One would win, one would lose; only one would go on.

To add drama to the moment, Kay injured her leg in an earlier match. She could hardly walk, let alone compete. Esther could easily defeat her. Esther also knew that Kay was the better fighter. If she took advantage of the situation, the better athlete would stay home. So now what?

Esther stepped on to the floor and bowed to her friend and opponent. Both knew what that meant. Esther forfeited her place. Sometimes it is painful to love the most of these. You do it because you see it as part of God's cause.

Successful Christianity, according to Jesus, isn't only loving the least and the most. It is also loving the worst of these. The worst of these have hurt you, undermined you, betrayed you, taken something precious from you. Jesus calls them our enemies.

Regina King lived in the jungle of Rwanda, running for her life when the genocide broke out. She tells the story, however, of a woman whose son was killed in the genocide. The woman was angry and bitter and could think only of vengeance. One night she had a dream. She was going down a street and saw a house, and she knew it was the house of her enemy, the one who killed her son. She heard God say, "Go into that house." She said, "I don't want to." But she went into the house and was led through many rooms to a staircase. God said, "I want you to go up the stairs." She said, "I don't want to go any further." But she did, and she opened the door at the top of the staircase to find it leads into heaven. She woke up with the insight that the path to heaven goes through the house of her enemy.

Two days later there was a knock on her door. A young man stood there, shaking. He said, "I am the man who killed your son. I place my life in your hands. Whatever you want to do with me, I accept it. I have had no peace since I did what I did. And I will accept whatever. If you want to kill me, you can kill me. If you want to turn me into the authorities, turn me into the authorities. Whatever you want – my life is in your hands."

Because of her dream and insight she said, "I won't do any of that. I do have a request. You must now become my son." She took him in and fed him at the table where her son ate. He is the same size as her son, and now he wears her son's clothes. He has moved in because heaven passes through the house of her enemy.

This woman has a national ministry in Rwanda. She travels around, helping the nation deal with the issue of reconciliation. She believes heaven passes through the house of your enemy.

And who is your enemy? Would you believe that heaven goes through their house? We can't love our enemies except that God does something in us.

Successful Christianity includes learning, studying God's Word and following it. But the real mark of success is to be the servant, doing your piece of the puzzle, serving and loving the least, the most and the worst of these. By the grace of God, He will show us the way. Amen.

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