

The Ultimate Marker of Genuine Spirituality

1. Warm up: Tell us something about yourself that most others in the group don't know.
2. When in your life have you felt really vulnerable – a time when you desperately needed help? What happened? How did you feel? Did someone help you? If so, how do you feel about that person? A billion years from now in heaven, do you think you'll still be grateful to that person?
3. On Sunday we continued our sermon series called “By Their Fruits You Will Know Them: 8 Core Characteristics of Authentic Followers of Jesus” by looking at the sixth core characteristic: **Authentic followers of Jesus are passionate about helping, defending, and advocating for those who are most vulnerable.** We drew this principle from the example and teachings of Jesus. Everywhere we look in the Gospels, we see Jesus giving priority to helping those who were marginalized. Take a look at examples of people in need that Jesus helped and defended, as listed on p. 3.
 - a. How do you imagine people in those categories felt when someone like Jesus stood up for them and with them?
 - b. Look back through the categories on p. 3 and identify how many of those categories you would have fit into if you'd been alive back then? How does it make you feel to know that Jesus stood up for people like you?
4. One of Jesus' most comprehensive teachings about how we should respond to people in great need is found in Matthew 25:31-46, as printed on p 3. Let's read it again.
 - a. When do you think the judgment described in our passage will occur?
 - b. Imagine yourself standing there on judgment day, waiting for it to get underway. How do you think you'll feel in that moment?
 - c. In verse 40, Jesus says, “Just as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers or sisters, you did it to me.” What do you think he meant? And what does this tell us about Jesus?
 - d. Tell us about a time when you helped someone in great need. How does it make you feel to realize that, to Jesus, it's as if you did it to him?
 - e. Tell us about a time when you could have helped someone in great need but didn't. How does it make you feel to realize that, to Jesus, it's as if you didn't help him?
 - f. The Bible teaches that we are “saved by grace through faith” and not by good works. Ephesians 2:1-10. How do we reconcile that with what Jesus teaches in Matthew 25?

5. On Sunday Jeff told how, when he was babysitting his pastor's dog Sophie, she watched him digging with a shovel and then began imitating him by vigorously digging too. That's what discipleship looks like – imitating the master. Jesus said, "A disciple . . . who is fully qualified will be like the Teacher." Luke 6:40.
 - a. When we overlay Luke 6:40 with the list of people Jesus helped on p. 3, what does that mean for each of us and how we're supposed to live?
 - b. Hebrews 13:12 says, "Jesus suffered outside the city gate. . . . Let us then go to him outside the camp." What does that verse mean?
 - c. Sometimes the people in great need we encounter aren't folks who belong to some large category of marginalized people (e.g., poor people or immigrants, etc.), but rather individuals in our personal life (family, friends, coworkers, etc.). Who's someone in your personal life in great need? What are the implications of Jesus' words in Matthew 25 for how you should respond in that situation?
 - d. Nobody can do everything, so how much helping of others is enough?

6. Jesus' brother James said, "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world." James 1:27. There it is again – the idea that the ultimate marker of authentic spirituality is a passion for helping the vulnerable. Jeff challenged us to think about why that is. Why is how we respond to people in need the thing Jesus will be most concerned about on judgment day? The answer, he suggested, is found in I John 4:8, "God is love." The Greek word for love there is *agape*, which means unconditional sacrificial love.
 - a. If the ultimate core characteristic of God is *agape* love, and if Ephesians 5:1 says, "Be ye imitators of God, as dear children," what does that mean for us?
 - b. Out of curiosity, Jeff asked AI, "What's the ultimate expression of authentic spirituality?" AI's answer was, "The ultimate expression of spirituality is generally considered to be the attainment of unconditional sacrificial love, total self-transcendence, and the direct experience of oneness with all existence." We've already talked about "unconditional sacrificial love," but what does "self-transcendence" mean – and why's it so important?
 - c. What does "the experience of oneness" mean – and why's it so important?
 - d. Our calling is not just to help hurting people on an individual basis, but also to endeavor to stop the hurting before it even happens by advocating for changes that will stop the hurting. Brainstorm a list of the categories of marginalized people you think Jesus would be standing with in our world today. What are some specific things we can do to be good advocates standing with marginalized folks today? What group of marginalized people most tug on your heartstrings right now?

Jesus was passionate about helping and defending marginalized people. For example, Jesus . . .

Healed the sick – Mark 1:32-34

Fed the hungry – Matthew 14:13-21

Defended the poor – Luke 6:20-26

Befriended spiritual outcasts – Matthew 9:10-11

Advocated for prisoners – Luke 4:18-19

Challenged racism – Luke 10:25-37

Broke down barriers that marginalized women – John 20:11-18

Elevated children – Matthew 19:14

Defended outsiders (*i.e.*, strangers, immigrants) – Matthew 25:35

Perform a miracle of healing that preserved a gay relationship – Matthew 8:5-13

Matthew 25:31-46

³¹When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. ³²All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, ³³and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left.

³⁴Then the king will say to those at his right hand, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; ³⁵for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." ³⁷Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? ³⁸And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? ³⁹And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?" ⁴⁰And the king will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers or sisters, you did it to me."

⁴¹Then he will say to those at his left hand, "You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; ⁴²for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, ⁴³I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me." ⁴⁴Then they also will answer, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?" ⁴⁵Then he will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me." ⁴⁶And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.'