

## **Matthew 23:1-12 “Where the Spirit Leads”**

So I titled this sermon, *Where the Spirit Leads*. Great! It's about time we had a sermon about where the Spirit leads us. “Okay, tell us. Where *does* the Spirit lead us?” Well, this is going to sound strange. “It usually does, pastor. Let's hear it.” I believe the spirit leads us downward. “What?!” Yup. Downward. “That doesn't make sense. In the Bible, isn't down bad and up good?” Well I can see why it would be easy to believe that. We live in a culture that seems obsessed with upward mobility. We're always trying to climb social ladders. We work to rise to a higher standard of living. We reach for higher positions on the corporate ladder. Some people use drugs to achieve a high that they hope will pull them up out of what they believe is dragging them down. Even our religious communities seem to spend a lot of time looking upward. “I'll fly away, O glory, I'll fly away. When I die, hallelujah by and by, I'll fly away.” But, as I said before, the Spirit leads us downward. It leads us to the bottom. It leads us to a place of humility. It leads us to a position of service. The Holy Spirit is like water. It's alive. It moves. It flows. And like water, it flows downward.

Before and after Jesus' ministry on earth, most people assumed that God lived far above us. To approach God, one had to leave this world. Remember the story of the Tower of Babel in the Old Testament? The people thought the best way to get close to God was to build a tower to reach God. That didn't work out so well. But Jesus modeled something different. Something completely opposite. In Jesus, God comes down. God meets us where we are – in our neighborhoods, in our need, at our level where we need God the most. God descends to the pit of need, suffering and abandonment. God is not distant from us. God is not aloof. God is not on the other side of some chasm. God is with us, right here, right now – Within reach.

While we're busy racing to get to the head of the table, Jesus shocks everyone and takes the role of a servant and washes his disciples' feet. While we push and shove our way into the inner circles of society, Jesus

shocks everyone and walks out to the margins to hang out with outcasts and outsiders. While we struggle to make ourselves rich (sometimes at the expense of others) Jesus shocks everyone and pours out everything he is and has. While we fight to seize power over others, Jesus empowers others by standing with them in solidarity ... by listening to them with respect, by seeking to make them successful, even at great cost to himself.

What I want to do over the next couple of weeks is explore what it means to listen to and be led by the Spirit. We spend a lot of time and energy dealing with the stories of the Bible and what sort of lessons we can learn from them, but I want to get spiritual for a while, okay? Or at least explore what “being spiritual” means. What do you think of when someone is described as spiritual? “Oh, this is a person who has this kind of, aura of spirituality.” Fine, but what does that mean? What does that look like? Someone might say, “Well they know a lot about the Bible, and they always have this calm, serene, contemplative look on their face. They say wise things. They ... stay out of trouble?” Okay, that may be the case for some folks, but is that all there is to “being spiritual?” I’m sure there are folks who can achieve this by memorizing Bible verses and practicing “calm, serene, contemplative facial expressions” in the mirror every day. But I want to discover what it means to *listen* to the Spirit. I think if we can figure that one out, we can get a handle on what it means to be more spiritual people.

So, if you listen to the Spirit, here’s what may happen to you. You’ll be at a party and you’ll notice a group of old friends on one side of the room all laughing, cutting up and having a good time. For all intents and purposes, they are the insiders. On the other side of the room, you’ll notice someone who’s alone, feeling awkward, and looking really lost. The Spirit, if you’re listening, may draw you to the person in need. You might even be the bridge that connects the outsider to the insiders and both will be better off because of that connection.

If you listen to the Spirit, here's what may happen to you. You'll be in a voting booth. People more powerful than you will appeal to you for your vote, your support, your cooperation. They'll have a lot to offer and they'll promise you that if they can count on your vote, you'll get all sorts of perks and privileges on top of the privileges you already have. But the Spirit, if you're listening, will draw you to those who aren't at the table of privilege. Folks who are sick in body or mind ... the poor ... the unemployed, those with special needs, the minority, the different, the last, the least, the lonely and the lost. The Spirit will invite you to hear their concerns, take them to heart, and join your hearts with theirs.

Here's what will happen if you listen to the Spirit: You'll realize that someone is angry at you or resentful toward you. You'll hear that someone has spread false information about you. You'll hear that someone has incorrectly assumed your intentions or feeling about something. You'll find out that someone has been working behind your back to discredit you or harm you. Everything in you will want to write them off or get back at them. But the Spirit will draw you toward them in humility. "I have a problem, and I need your help," you'll say. "I feel there might be a tension or a distance between us, and I want to make this right." This person may be too angry or insecure to respond well, but whatever happens, you know that because the Spirit has led you, because the Spirit is working in you, you are doing the right thing.

Here's what will happen if you listen to the Spirit. You'll make a mistake and you'll be tempted to hide it, minimize it, cover it up, or make an excuse for it. But the Spirit will draw you to admit it, first to yourself and to God, and then to those who deserve to know. You'll say, "Here's what I did. I was wrong. Will you forgive me?" In that acknowledgement, God will be real. In your humility, God will be present. Why? Because the Spirit moves downward. Like living water.

Here's what will happen if you listen to the Spirit. You'll see a person in a group being vilified or scapegoated. Everyone is blaming them and shaming them, gossiping about them, talking about how superior they

are to them, venting their anxieties on them. If you join in, you'll feel a part of the group. If you're silent, they'll assume you're with them. But the Spirit will draw you to be courageous and speak up. "I'm sorry, but that's not the way I experience this person. I know this person. She's my friend. She's a good person. She's human just like all of us." It may be that you'll risk your reputation by defending this person being scapegoated. But in that risk, both you and they will know that God's Spirit is alive and at work in your midst.

Here's what will happen if you listen to the Spirit. It will be late at night. You've been at work all day. You'll be tired. There will be dishes to do, clothes to take off the line and fold, trash to take out. And you'll think, "Why do I have to always do this? Someone else should have done all of this." And you'll start a little rehearsal session in your mind. You'll rehearse the speech that you're going to give your husband or kid or roommate or whoever it is you expected to get these tasks done. But then you'll think, "I wonder what kind of a day that person had? Maybe they're just as tired and overworked as I am. So maybe I can help out." You don't do this out of a sense of manipulation or to shame the other person. Yeah, you might sit down and have a talk with them about dividing up tasks and getting the day-to-day things done, but you'll do that when you're less tired. Less grumpy. Either way, as you serve, you'll know that God is real and alive in you.

Here's what will happen to you if you listen to the Spirit. You'll be in a public place. You'll see a person who, by their dress or language, or mannerisms, is clearly from another religion or culture or social class. That person will be uncomfortable or in need. And you'll feel the Spirit inspiring a question within you – "If I were in their shoes – in an unfamiliar or uncomfortable environment, what would I want someone to do for me?" And you'll do whatever it is that God calls you to do to help this person feel like they aren't alone. That's when you'll know that God's Spirit is alive in you.

There's a prison nearby where you live. Or a hospital. Or a park or a bridge or an alley where homeless people sleep. Or a playground or a mall where teenagers hang out and get into trouble. Or there's a country in great need or a social problem that few notice. If you listen to the Spirit, you will be drawn toward opportunities to serve. At first, the thought will frighten you, but when you let the Spirit guide you, it will be a source of great joy – one of the richest blessings in your life.

One more thing – There will be times in your life when you'll need to be the one being served rather than the one who's doing the serving. But even then, you'll have the opportunity to appreciate, bless, and thank those who serve you, and in doing so, you and they will experience mutual service, which is one of life's greatest joys.

The Spirit of God leads downward. Like water. It leads downward in humility, in service, in solidarity, in risk and grace. You used to work so hard to be “cool” but the Spirit makes you warm. Some people might start saying that you're a spiritual person. You used to work so hard to climb over others to make sure you stayed on top, but the Spirit leads you to wash their feet. You used to work so hard to fit in among all the “inner circles,” but the Spirit dares you to be different on behalf of the outcasts and outsiders. You don't find God at the top of the ladder. Instead, you find God through descent. There is a trap-door at the bottom, and when you fall through it, you'll fall to God. It happened to Jesus and it will happen to you too. *If you follow the Spirit's lead.*