

Matthew 25:31-46
The Least of These
WRCoB 4.07.19

If you're tired of sermons on "The Lord's Return"
I give you permission to sleep.

If you're up for one more, here you go!

The passage before us contains verses Brethren love.

Our heart for service beats warmly when we hear the words
"Just as you've done to the least of these my brethren
You have done unto me!"

It was also Mother Teresa's favorite passage
And the basis for her ministry to the poor in Calcutta.

What is often overlook, however
Is the larger context of the parable.

It is the day of reckoning!

It is the wellknown Parable of the Sheep and the Goats.

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Speaking of goats, a couple from church
Invited their rather elderly pastor for Sunday dinner.

While they were in the kitchen preparing the meal
The pastor and the couple's son visited in the living room.

The pastor asked their son what they were having for supper.

"Goat," the boy replied.

"Goat?" the pastor asks. "You sure about that?"

"Yep," said the little boy.

"I heard Daddy say to Momma
 "Today is just as good as any
 To have that old goat for dinner.""

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Speaking of which
 I'm sure animal rights activists have issues
 With the way Jesus used goats in the Bible.

But if anyone has ever kept goats you know why.

Three things come to mind when I think about goats.

They're hard-headed.
 They'll eat anything.
 And a fence won't keep them in?

Actually, goats are a lot like us church folks . . .
 Hardheaded, will eat anything, and prone to wander!

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A visitor visited a church one time.

A friendly member of the church
 Invited him to sit down next to him saying

"Sit here, this is the side where all the goats sit
 Sheep sit over there!"

Jesus uses goats and sheep,
To depict the final judgment of humankind.

This parable closes Jesus' teaching ministry.

In Matthew, following this passage
We move into the events leading up to his death.

Jesus began his ministry with the Sermon on the Mount.

He ends his ministry in much the same way
Drawing our attention to the needs of the suffering.

The Sermon on the Mount
And the Parable of the Sheep and Goats
Are fitting bookends to Jesus' life and ministry.

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In our parable today
Jesus states that when the Son of Man returns

He will be surrounded by an army of angels
And he will take his rightful place
On a throne in heavenly glory.

All nations, tribes, and peoples will be gathered before him;

Believers and unbelievers, Catholics, and Jews
Mormons, Baptists, and Brethren
Atheists, agnostics, and the "nones"
Every religion and philosophy represented.

No one escapes the final judgment.

The Son of Man will separate them into two groups
The sheep and the goats.

There is no graduated classification system here
You're either in or you're out.

And the Son of Man will say to the sheep
Quoting from Eugene Peterson's The Message:

**Enter you who are blessed by my Father!
Take what's coming to you in this kingdom.**

And here's why:

**I was hungry and you fed me
I was thirsty and you gave me a drink**

**I was homeless and you gave me a room
I was shivering and you gave me clothes
I was sick and you stopped to visit**

I was in prison and you came to me.

And the sheep will ask him
Master, what are you talking about?

**When did we see you hungry, or thirsty,
Homeless, sick or in prison?**

And the Son of Man will answer the sheep:

I'm telling the solemn truth:

**Whenever you did one of these things,
To someone overlooked or ignored,
That was me—you did it to me.**

And then he turned to the goats and said:

Get out, worthless goats!

You're good for nothing but the fires of hell.

And why? Because—

I was hungry and you gave me no meal,

I was thirsty and you gave me no drink,

I was homeless and you gave me no bed.

I was shivering and you gave me no clothes,

Sick and in prison and you never visited.

And the goats, they too ask the Son of Man

What are you talking about?

When did we ever [see you like that]?

And he said to them:

I'm telling the solemn truth,

Whenever you failed to do one of these things

To someone overlooked or ignored

You failed to do it to me.

Now someone might accuse this parable
Of teaching “salvation by works!”

Meaning that we enter the heavenly kingdom
Through our own effort and good works!

We know elsewhere that the Bible teaches
That salvation is by grace alone
A gift from God to those who believe.

How do we come to terms with the apparent contradiction?

Ok, so here’s my take.

According to our parable
Neither the sheep nor goats
Knew that they were serving the Lord
By serving the needs of the least of these.

Right?

When you stop to help someone
Whose car has broken down on the side of the road

You don’t say to yourself
“Wow! There’s Jesus! Let me stop and help!”

You say, “There’s someone who needs help!”

Or the aged woman in the nursing home
You don’t say,
“Jesus is lonely and needs a visit.”

You say, “This woman is lonely and a visit will do her good.”

Our response to the least of these
Comes out of a heart that’s in the right place.

Those in the story who took in the stranger
Fed the hungry, clothed the naked
Visited the imprisoned

Did it, simply out of a concern for their neighbor.

The sheep served the needs of the least of these
Out of a heart filled with love and concern!

The goats, frankly, didn’t care enough to reach out at all.

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This lesson, as in the other last two parables
Addressing the final judgment
Clearly, tells me one thing

That entry into kingdom living is not based solely on
Belief in Christ as Savior.

Faith must manifest in neighbor love.

Nor is salvation based only on
One’s personal piety and holy living.

True salvation, according to this lesson
Is based on embodying the Greatest Commandment!

Love your God and neighbor with all your heart.

Jesus says this commandment supersedes all others!

It is the essence of everything Jesus seeks to teach us!

James 2:14-17 (MSG)

¹⁴⁻¹⁷ Dear friends, do you think you'll get anywhere in this if you learn all the right words but never do anything? Does merely talking about faith indicate that a person really has it? For instance, you come upon an old friend dressed in rags and half-starved and say, "Good morning, friend! Be clothed in Christ! Be filled with the Holy Spirit!" and walk off without providing so much as a coat or a cup of soup—where does that get you? Isn't it obvious that God-talk without God-acts is outrageous nonsense?

This is one of the rare places in the Bible

Where people are punished

Not by what they **did**

But by what they **didn't** do!

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And again from James,

James 4:17 So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin.

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Jesus closes his ministry with this teaching

Asking hearers, then, now

And right up to Judgment Day

One ultimate question.

The question might surprise you.

It is not the question Jesus asked his disciples

“Who do you say I am?”

Nor the question Paul asks

“Do you believe that Jesus is Lord?”

“And do you accept him as your personal Savior?”

Absolutely important questions for sure . . .

But Jesus doesn't ask them.

In the final scenario Jesus will ask one question

Which becomes the final exam.

“How did YOU respond to human need?”

(Fred Craddock)

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I am alone

My spouse has passed

I have no one left . . .

Did you come visit me?

I am hunkered down with my family

Hungry and cold and scared

Alongside your border with no place to go . . .

Did you welcome me?

I am gay

I am black

I am a Jew

I live in the violence-torn neighborhood of your city
I am a homeless veteran with PTSD

I am addicted to opioids
I live with schizophrenia

And the question on the final exam . . .
Did you do anything to help?

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The bitter irony in all of this . . .
The bitter, tragic irony . . .

Is that directly following the teaching of this passage

Jesus, in fact, does become “one of the least of these.”

Isaiah 53:3-6 (CEV)

**3 He was hated and rejected;
his life was filled with sorrow
and terrible suffering.**

No one wanted to look at him.

**We despised him and said,
“He is a nobody!”**

**4 He suffered and endured
great pain for us,
but we thought his suffering
was punishment from God.**

**5 He was wounded and crushed
because of our sins;
by taking our punishment,
he made us completely well**

So in the final analysis, brothers and sisters

One question is asked of you . . .

How did you respond to human need?

According to our parable today

The answer has eternal consequences.