

Matthew 25:31-46
Ezekiel 34:11-24

First Presbyterian Church of Delanco, NJ
Christ the King Sunday, November 23, 2008

“The Least of These”

Bible scholars say the Gospel of Matthew has been moving toward and preparing for this dramatic parable. These verses happen to be one of my many favorite passages because, among other things, it speaks about reaching out to others on a regular and consistent basis. In Matthew, Jesus is the great teacher, and this parable is His last formal act of teaching. This is the final point, the parting lesson, the cumulative moment in Christ’s teaching ministry. The parable not only concludes Jesus’ ministry, it also sums up the major theological themes of Matthew’s Gospel by presenting a majestic picture of our triumphant Jesus reigning in glory as king and judge at the end of this earth as we know it.

This parable directs the reader’s attention to the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, and the prisoner. They become the center of the Son of Man’s presence. Yet the passage offers much more than merely a suggestion to visit the local jail occasionally or to provide a Christmas basket to the needy. The demands of this parable are more extended than that, and its promises are more binding.

It is intriguing to read these verses with an eye toward the emphasis of today being “Christ the King Sunday.” Right away, the main focus moves away from judgment to the Judge, away from what we are required to do, to what the Son of Man is doing. The chief competitor is neither the group on the right hand who are blessed, nor the group on the left hand who are cursed, nor even the neglected, needy people, but the Son of Man, who sits

on the throne. He is the Shepherd-King who separates the sheep from the goats.

Dr. Thomas Long tells us the parable begins as a victory hymn to Christ set in the future: “When the Son of Man comes in His glory...” as described in Matthew 25:31. This Jesus who in Matthew 8:20 has “no where to lay His head” is now seated on the royal throne as king. This Jesus who is accused of being an agent of Satan in Matthew 12:24 is now revealed as the holy Lord of lords. This Jesus who is rejected even by His hometown in Matthew 13:54-58 is now exalted as the judge of the entire human family. This Jesus who can resist the devil’s temptation to throw Himself down from the temple and allow God’s angels to take care of Him in Matthew 4:5-7 is now elevated in glory above all earthly temples and is in command of all the angels.

As the camera pulls back to include the entire scene, we are shown all of the nations of the earth, row after row of humans gathered before the throne of the Son of Man. Just as a shepherd in that time sometimes would divide the larger flock, separating the sheep from the less valuable goats, so the Son of Man divides the people into the “sheep” on the right hand and the “goats” on the left.

The Son of Man pronounces judgment on both the sheep and the goats. For the sheep, the news is good. They are given a divine blessing and are revealed as the true heirs of God’s kingdom mentioned in Matthew 25:34 because they provide food, drink, hospitality, clothing, and care for Christ. As for the goats, however, they are condemned “into the eternal fire”

because they supply none of these ministries, even though the Son of Man is hungry, thirsty, a stranger, naked, sick, and in prison.

If this were all there is to the parable – those who do good deeds are rewarded and those who do not are punished – it would be a fairly conventional morality tale, the sort of story which can be found frequently in the religious literature of many cultures. The parable takes a curious twist, though, when it becomes apparent the sheep have no idea whatsoever that, in their compassion toward people in need, they are providing ministry to Christ. In the same way, the goats have no clue that in their indifference, they are actually neglecting the Lord of all nations. Both the sheep and the goats are stunned and ask in Mathew 25:44, “Uh?...Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty, or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison?” The surprising answer is that whenever they act, or fail to act, compassionately “to one of the least of these who are members of my family” in Matthew 25:40, they do so to Jesus Christ.

This dramatic disclosure, that Jesus Christ is present in the world in “the least of these who are members of my family” is the focus of this parable. The world will be judged according to whether it did or did not show hospitality to Jesus Christ, the Messiah clothed not in royal robes but coming to the world hidden among “the least of these.”

The context reinforces this Christ-like perspective. Matthew 24 and 25 seem to depict the coming of the end of the earth. The preceding parables share a climax when the bridegroom and the master of the servants return home

after a delay and receive a reckoning from those who are left behind. In this passage, the Son of Man is already here.

Christ the King is the royal figure whom the Christian community anticipates and before whom nations gather. Christ is present among the outcasts and the lowly who become His designated representatives, so that in serving them, one serves the eschatological Lord in the end of the earth. But this identification is only part of the story. This royal interpretation and the interpretation of the needy cannot be cut off from the memory of Christ who is handed over to be crucified. The Judge is Himself judged by humans. Our King is mocked as the King of Jews. The one who gives a verdict is no less than the Jesus who “will save His people from their sins.” He is a Judge unlike any other. The all-embracing authority of Christ the King makes sense only in light of this interpretation of Christ’s presence.

The judgments declared by Christ and the categories describing the needy who are served or not served carry immense and even threatening power. Some of the categories indicate marginalization, even to the point of being ostracized or thrown out. Whether “the least of these” are Christians or not, the circumstances still put them on the fringe of society. To be involved with such people means to be part of their predicament and guilty by association. This passage demands something more profound than meager efforts.

Dr. Long asks the question, “Does the parable of the sheep and the goats teach that the world will be judged on the basis of how it treats the church

(as the Body of Christ), or does it teach that everybody, including Christians, will be judged by how they treat the poor and needy of the earth?”

Not long ago, some students of the parables argued persuasively that the parable actually teaches both. The phrase “the least of these who are members of my family” does actually refer to the Christian community. If so, then the main idea is the people of the world will finally be judged on how they receive those who come in the name of Christ to spread His Gospel. This is no invitation for the church to be puffed up with pride and authority. Remember the parable describes these Christians as the least, not the greatest. They come to the world not in limousines and silk, but hungry and thirsty. They are identified with the weak of the earth and are likely to be found in hospitals and prisons rather than in palaces. The big surprise is no one, not the goats or the sheep, recognized Christ because they assumed their triumphant Lord would certainly appear as a powerful presence in history. But this is not God’s way in the world. Isaiah 53:2-3 says, “He had no form or majesty that we should look at Him...He was despised and rejected by others; a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity.”

This passage, if it is a parable, is one of the most vivid of Jesus’ stories. The intent is to provide a description of the Last Judgment. Since it begins with a straight forward, statement instead of “the kingdom of heaven is like...,” it may seem to not be a parable. But it follows other parables about the Second Coming, or the Parousia, as a concluding and fitting climax. Jesus Christ, the Son of Man, is shown coming in glory, sitting on the throne of His glory in His role as Messiah and Judge.

The judgment is all-inclusive as all nations are literally “herded” before Him, sheep and goats in the same group, because in the Middle East, sheep and goats were normally tended together in Jesus’ day. The parable seems to use the sheep as symbols for good people and the goats as symbols for evil people. The statement that Christ will separate them refers to people, not nations.

Christ’s judgment appears to be interpretive and through these verses we find God’s expectations. It is important to recognize the Person we will encounter at the Last Judgment is Jesus Christ Himself. Eduoard Schweizer refers to 1 Corinthians 15:28 when he comments Jesus “will subordinate Himself totally to God so that God may be all in all and maintains the truth that in Jesus we encounter none other than God.”

This judgment may be a charge of an offense of the church for its lack of social involvement as members of the kingdom. Jesus taught that love for God is evidenced by love for our neighbor, that knowing God’s forgiveness will lead us to share mercy, and that in experiencing God’s love we will, consequently, extend that love to others. In the pronouncement on the sheep, it appears the answer of the righteous is innocent surprise, as though they have been doing things through the inner transformation of grace without feeling obligated to do so. In the judgment of those who are not so righteous, the King lists the very same things but adds the word “not” because they fail to respond to the needs of the humans around them.

The judgment identifies Christ with those in need which indicates that a deed of love to “one of the least of these of my family” is actually a deed of

love for Christ. Correspondingly, the failure of the unrighteous to serve “one of the least of these” is a failure in relation to Christ as well. The judgment seems to identify the sins of omission as more serious than sins of commission. Myron Augsberger, a Biblical scholar, says “all that needs to happen for evil to triumph is for good people to do nothing.” We see this in other recent passages. The foolish virgins neglect to bring extra oil for their lamp, the unfaithful servant is rejected for doing nothing, and those on the left hand are rejected for failing to minister to the needy around them. This passage seems to emphasize that the gospel always has social implications, even though not all social service includes the gospel. The story of the Good Samaritan is a classic illustration of Christian social action.

Mr. Augsberger continues by telling a story about when he and his wife spent some sabbatical time in Besel, Switzerland. They visited St. Martin’s Church and were impressed by a sculpture on a front wall depicting Martin of Tours, a Roman soldier with Christian faith. One cold, winter day, entering a city, Martin was stopped by a beggar asking for alms. Having no money, Martin took off his coat, cut it in two, and gave half to the beggar. That night he had a dream of heaven, and Jesus was wearing half of a Roman soldier’s coat. An angel asked Him, “Master, why are you wearing that battered old cloak?” And Jesus answered, “My servant Martin gave it to me.”

The Old Testament saints are saved by faith; the New Testament saints are saved by faith in Jesus Christ. People today are saved the same way. The gospel of “do good” is not a Scriptural message. It is right for believers to do good, but this is not the way unbelievers can be saved.

This judgment is interesting in that the sheep individuals are surprised at what they hear. They do not remember seeing Christ and ministering to His needs. They do not recognize that by lovingly ministering to those around them, they do it to Christ. Their motive is sacrificial love, not reward.

The goats are judged because they do not trust Jesus Christ and give evidence of it and do not care for those around them. They are believers but have no time for others who suffer. There are sins of omission as well as commission which are mentioned in James 4:17. Not doing good is the moral equivalent of doing evil.

When we compare the two judicial sentences, we find some interesting truths. First, the sheep are blessed of the Father in heaven; but it does not say the goats are cursed by the Father. Also, the sheep inherit the kingdom, and inheritance is based on birth. Because the sheep are born through faith, they inherit the kingdom.

Warren Wiersbe, a Biblical writer, says the kingdom is prepared for these saved individuals, but Matthew 15:41 does not state the everlasting fire is prepared for the goats. It is prepared for the devil and his angels as suggested in Revelation 20:10. God never prepared Hades for people. There is no evidence from Scripture indicating God predestines people to go to Hades. If sinners listen to Satan and follow Satan's ways, they will end up where Satan is. There are only two eternal destinations: everlasting punishment for those who reject Christ or eternal life for those who love and trust in Christ.

Mr. Wiersbe also says the sheep will be ushered into the kingdom to share in Christ's glory. The church will be reigning with Christ, and believers will enjoy the fulfillment of promises made through the prophets. All of creation will share in the glorious liberty of God's children.

No matter what view of prophecy we take, we know Jesus is coming again. As Christians we are to be alert and ready. We are not to waste our opportunities. We may or may not have a great deal of ability or a great many gifts. But we can still be faithful in the calling Christ gives us.

So, Dr. Long says, the Christian church is sent out to the world on an important mission which is to bear witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Matthew 24:14 says, "the good news of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the world, as a testimony to all the nations." However, the gospel is more than simply words, and the church proclaims the gospel by living in the world as Jesus lived. The disciple is to be like the teacher; the church is to become humble like a child and show hospitality to those in need. In Matthew's Gospel, if you want to find Jesus,...look among those who are harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. The church which is faithful will be found in precisely the same place.

Today, in many parts of the world, the Christian church is looking to meet human need "in the name of Christ." In 1974 the United Nations reported more than 460 million people as permanently hungry. In 1980 the World Bank estimated more than 1 billion people, or 1/4 of the world's population, suffered from malnutrition. Over 900 million people subsist on annual incomes of less than \$200 per year. The way the economy is today, these

figures are multiplied many, many times over. The reality of hunger and the social needs of the Third World, especially, call the Christian church to the deeds of love which care and share. A ministry of relief of food and clothing, of education and medicine, or agricultural development, and of social enrichment is an authentic witness of the gospel. So is our participation in Interfaith Hospitality Network, giving to the food pantries, and giving money, clothing and other necessities to the various charities we support. We can hardly expect people to hear words about salvation unless they see the saving deeds of love, because empty stomachs lead to emptying thoughts. Throughout Matthew's Gospel, the ministry of Jesus relates time for the deeds of love with time given to teaching. We are called to blend deeds and words in our mission.

We can reach out to others through what we are already doing. But we can increase our efforts by living out Christ's great commandments of loving God with all our hearts, minds, and souls and loving our neighbors as ourselves. We are blessed, and we are able to bless. On this Christ the King Sunday, may we continue to reach out to our neighbors, share the Gospel message, and become like the sheep who minister to the least of these who are members of Christ's family while recognizing we are ministering to Christ Himself and to bring glory and honor to His holy name. Amen!