

## A Parable of Comfort and Warning

Reign of Christ November 22, 2020 Matthew 25:31-46

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This morning's parable is a parable of judgement. Now I know when we talk about judgement lots of different things come to mind- things like guilt, anger, and punishment. But those things aren't the reason Jesus tells these stories. No, these parables, like all the stories Jesus tells, are a call for us to recognize what is important and essential in a life of faith.

And in the other two parables of judgement from Matthew 25 which we read this month, the bridesmaids two weeks ago and the talents last week, there are people who do what they are supposed to and those who don't. The ones who do what they are supposed to- the bridesmaids who are ready for the bridegroom and the servants who use the gifts the master gives to them- are meant to serve as role models. We are supposed to be ready, be active like them.

And the ones who face consequences in the parables- the foolish bridesmaids who aren't ready and get left out of the wedding feast and the servant who is lazy and wicked who gets cast out- are examples of what not to do in our lives. And this morning's parable, the parable of the sheep and the goats, follows a similar pattern.

At the end of the age everyone will be gathered in front of the king's throne and Jesus says that the people will be separated like a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. And the king will say to the people on one side 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world;'

So we know right away that these are the people we need to pay attention to- they are the role models, the ones who did it right, the example we are to follow as people of faith. And the king says. "For 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, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me."

And none of us are surprised that those acts of caring and generosity are something that Jesus would want us to do. But before we go any further I want us to notice a couple things about what the king praises. The first is that there is nothing that difficult about any of those actions. The king doesn't praise the people for doing something that took years of study to figure out or that only was possible once in their lifetime.

The fact is that anyone and everyone can feed the hungry, give to those in need, can welcome, can visit. We all have the ability to reach out to others, we all have the resources to give some of our blessing away, we all can open our hearts to help our neighbor.

The second thing to notice is that the king cares about those actions. And think about that for a second. There is nothing earth shattering about anything the blessed people have done. These are everyday, common expressions of love and care but the king is really taking all of it to heart. The king is taking it personally .

Which is why the people who get praised in the story are a bit confused. They did all of those things but they don't remember the king as being the one they helped. So they ask when did we do those things to you and the king answers them. "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."

And while it may be surprising that the king cares about what they do to other people the truth is that we get it. If someone is kind, merciful, and helps people we love we notice and appreciate that effort. So Jesus is saying that the most basic actions of loving our neighbor, when we give of our resources, when we offer our time, when we put in the effort to care for others in their need, those are all expressions of faith.

And when we feed, clothe, visit, when we do all of those things it is as if we are doing those things to God. For our generosity, our caring, our compassion toward others are seen and treated by God as an act of worship and love. And that point is important for us to keep in mind as we turn to the rest of the parable which is often ignored.

For the king says to the others before the throne 'You that are accursed, depart from me; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I 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.'

Those are hard words to hear. Because while we know that our actions are important we often overlook that our inaction is a problem. For caring is not simply a good thing but a faithful thing so if we don't care, if we ignore, then we are actually sinning against God.

And again if we think about it how do we feel about those who ignore our loved ones when they are in need? If your child is hungry or lost and someone turns their back on them or hurt and in pain and ignored by someone who can help how do you feel about that person? Well the parable tells us that is how the king feels.

But there is a bit more of the story for us to hear. The people who are being condemned are as confused as the righteous. They don't ever remember seeing the king in need in any way because they certainly would have helped the king. And the king replies. "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."

And notice the difference in the wording between what the king says to the blessed and the condemned. The ones who are praised are told that it is because they helped the king's family, loved ones, in their time of need. And now the ones who are condemned are told the king's family is anyone in need. For the surprise of the righteous is that the ones they helped are treasured by the king and the surprise of the condemned is that everyone who is in need is treasured by the king.

And like last week that leaves us with a choice to make in our lives. Because the parable is very blunt and straightforward. A life of faith has to include feeding the hungry, giving water to the thirsty, clothing the naked, caring for the sick and visiting the prisoner. Period. There is no option because this is a requirement and these actions are essential for our worship and service. If we are following Jesus we are caring for the people Jesus cares about. And if we don't we are turning away not merely from what God wants but we are turning away from God.

So are you a sheep or a goat? Do you ignore those in need, turn them away out of fear, or do you care and open your heart and your hands to help? Does the money in your pocket stay there until you want it or do you give some so that others can eat, find comfort, and know that they are loved?

For the kingdom of God is not about what we have but about what we give and it is about us seeing and knowing that we and the people around us are loved and treasured by God. And when we care, when we are compassionate, when we give of ourselves to those in need we are not only pleasing God but we are also building the kingdom of heaven here on earth.