

The parable of the sheep and the goats * Matthew 25:31-46
November 19, 2023 * Langford Community Church * Graham Gladstone

I don't know if it's just me, but I feel like the number of people standing at intersections with signs like this has grown in the last few weeks. It feels like everywhere I go, there's someone with a sign, asking for help.

And it causes me, time and time again, sitting there in my car, to reflect on how my faith in Jesus should influence my response to their need. I know that helping others is important; just *how* important is it for us as followers of Jesus?

Turn with me to Matthew 25 and we'll see what Jesus has to say about it. This is our final parable for this series and it's actually Jesus' final parable in the book of Matthew as He brings His 'Olivet Discourse' on the Mount of Olives to a stirring conclusion. Matthew 25:31. The parable of the sheep and the goats. Matthew 25:31.

The last couple of weeks, we've been looking at parables that describe the second coming of Jesus in symbolic terms. The parable of the bridesmaids tells us that Jesus is coming again and that we need to be ready if we want to get into the party; the parable of the talents tells us that when Jesus returns, we'll need to account for our use of God's good gifts; here at the end of chapter 25, Jesus drops the symbolism for a minute and just says straight up 'here's what it will be like when I return.'

Verse 31 - 31 "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory.

32 All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.

Just think, this is something that we will all witness with our own eyes. Might be today, might be next week, might be in a million years. I don't know WHEN it's going to happen but I know that it WILL.

Jesus will come in all His glory, with all the angels of heaven following in procession behind Him and He will take up His throne in Heavenly glory. This passage actually have Old Testament roots; it draws heavily from Daniel 7 where Daniel saw 'someone like the son the man' 'coming on clouds with glory' 'to receive authority and power and dominion.'ⁱ Jesus looked at that passage in Daniel and said 'that's Me' and He tells us as much in the parable.

And then all the nations of the world will be gathered before Him. Canadians will be there, Americans will be there, Elizabethan England will be there, Feudal Japan will be there, the Roman Empire itself, and all its people, will be there. And we'll be there too. Each and every one of us.

And Jesus will go through the crowd and separate the people like a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. Scholars debate why we're talking sheep and goats here; the most likely explanation is that sheep and goats often grazed together and sometimes you just need to separate the two.

And that's what it will be like when Jesus comes. Jesus will come in on clouds of glory and then He's going to sort all of humanity into two groups – the sheep – who go to His right hand – and the goats on the left.

Then the King will explain why He's sorted us out in this way.

Verse 34 - 34 "Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.

And then comes the rationale, the rubric if you will. Verse 35 –

35 For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in,

36 I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.'

In short, 'You saw Me in need and you helped Me. You showed Me mercy when I was in need.'

37 "Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink?

38 When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you?

39 When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?'

'We don't recall that happening; we were just living our lives as children of God.'

40 "The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.'

'Whenever you showed mercy to someone in need, you showed mercy to Me.'

Now listen, there are a couple of ways to understand this passage. Specifically the 'least of these my brothers' part.

For much of church history, many people have understood that the 'least of these my brothers' means 'Jesus' followers' – His missionaries and people who are suffering for His name. Jesus has a pattern of calling His followers His brothers and sisters (and I've put those references into my manuscript if you want to explore this more)ⁱⁱ and so when Jesus says 'whenever you showed mercy to one of these my brothers (ie., fellow believers), you showed mercy to Me. Whenever you fed hungry Christians or visited people in prison who are in prison because of Me, you yourself are serving Me.'

And so, many of the scholars I trust and respect side with church history and say that 'the least of these my brothers' means 'fellow followers of Jesus.' And I think that that's something we need to hear. We have brothers and sisters in Christ around the world who have lost everything because of Jesus; they should be a priority for us as we think about who and how to support people in need. I've been thinking this week a lot about how could I connect with a church of hungry believers and support them directly financially. I think that it's worth exploring.

But I also think that this isn't all Jesus says. I mean, my head agrees that Jesus means 'my fellow believers' but my heart says 'it's gotta mean all people in need.'

When Jesus says 'the least of these my brothers' then, He is identifying with all of humanity and saying 'I took on flesh at Christmas and lived a poor and humble life so that I could bring mercy to even the least

of these regardless of their faith.' And frankly, when you read this verse within the whole of Scripture, I think it begs us to recognize 'the least of these my brothers' refers to anyone in need. I mean, Proverbs 19:17: 'Whoever is generous to the poor lends to the Lord, and he will repay him for his deed.' There's no distinction there – when you serve the least you serve the Lord.

And serve the Lord the sheep people did. They served Him by showing mercy to those who were in need and now here in Matthew 25, anticipating the end, He says: 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.'

Those are words that you want to hear!

But then, verse 41 - 41 "Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.

Those are words you DON'T want to hear!

42 For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink,
43 I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.'

44 "They also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?'

45 "He will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.'

They saw people in need and ignored them; now at the judgment seat of God, the King says 'you saw people in need and turned your back; now I will turn my back on you.'

46 "Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous [will go on] to eternal life" (Mat 25:31-46 NIV).

Jesus doesn't pull any punches, does He? At the final judgment, those who showed mercy to those in need will go on to eternal life while those who did not won't. They will be cast out in darkness with the foolish bridesmaids and the hole-in-the-ground servant.

I wish I could tell you something different, but this is what Jesus says, isn't it? Jesus is coming back and He will judge all people according to what they have done.ⁱⁱⁱ He will judge you and me according to what we have done. And what does this tell us about what we should do? I.e., how important is it to serve those in need? It is VITALLY, ETERNALLY important! As Grant Osborne says "The ethical responsibility to show mercy to the oppressed is a serious requirement for kingdom living and to be accepted by God."^{iv}

'Well hold on Graham' you're going to say. 'This sounds a lot like earning salvation. People who fed the hungry and clothed the naked go on to eternal life but those who didn't don't. By this logic, somebody could hate God all their lives but serve people in need constantly and still get into Heaven. I mean, isn't this ultimately telling us that we need to do good works to earn God's favour?' I certainly read it like that for a long time.

I remember having exactly this conversation with a pastor years ago. He was a good Reformation pastor – sola fide, sola gratis – by grace through faith; I was really concerned about this passage so I pointed him to it and said ‘what about this?’ I said ‘I know that faith is vital and yet this passage seems to say that acts of mercy are important, even necessary, too?’ I’ll tell you what he told me: ‘I’ll have to think about that some more.’ He never did get back to me on it.

So I’ll share what God’s put on my heart this week as I read this passage.

First, feeding the hungry and clothing the naked are vitally important for us as Christians. Those acts of mercy are necessary for us as followers of Jesus. If we are following Jesus, He is going to lead us into opportunities to have compassion on other people and it just makes sense for us to do that. We are serving the Lord when we serve ‘the least.’

But second, our acts of mercy are not earning for us salvation. We don’t get our loyalty card punched every time we feed a hungry person and then when we get enough the Lord says ‘ok, you can come in now.’ Again, Grant Osborne says: “Good words do not produce salvation but rather are proof that salvation has occurred. Where there is true salvation, there will be works of compassion.”^v Our acts of mercy are meant to be a response to the mercy that God has already shown us. And I think that you can actually see that in this passage.

Three quick reasons:

1. First is the context. In the Olivet Discourse, Jesus is talking TO HIS DISCIPLES. PEOPLE WHO ARE ALREADY IN THE KINGDOM. He’s explaining ‘how to get ready’ for the Kingdom that’s already theirs. He’s saying ‘God has already given you good gifts! Make use of them!’ And now here with the sheep and the goats, Jesus is saying ‘as my people, serving me my serving those who are in need.’ So I think the context shows us that this is not earning God’s favour.

2. Second, look again at verse 34: 4 "Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. (Mat 25:34 NIV).

Ok – inheritance – what’s the significance of that word? It’s an inheritance. You receive it freely. He doesn’t say ‘take your wages;’ He says ‘take what is yours as a member of my family.’ And the end of that verse actually intensifies it – it’s not just an inheritance we’re talking about; this is an inheritance that has been prepared for people like you since the creation of the world! That means that before you handed out even a single cup of water, you were welcome in the Kingdom.

3. And third, look at the way that Jesus describes the sheep and the goats. He calls them the sheep and the goats, but He calls them something else too. Do you see it? Verse 34 and verse 41: ‘you who are blessed’ and ‘you who are cursed.’ That’s OT covenant language. That’s Deuteronomy 27-28 there – in essence God says to Israel: ‘You are my people. I have already redeemed you. If you live in ways that are consistent with my blessings, you are going to be blessed. If you don’t, you are going to be cursed.’

Jesus (who is steeped in OT language) is using that covenant language to say that the sheep already HAVE God’s favour and they are living in ways that reflect it. Serving those in need is just a part of life for them. Remember, they were surprised to hear that they had fed and clothed and visited Jesus in those who were in need. He says ‘You fed me when I was hungry’ and they said ‘when did we ever feed

you when you were hungry?’ They fed Jesus without realizing it because they weren’t trying to EARN God’s favour by being merciful; they were simply acting out of their covenant relationship with God.

Which brings me to my big idea – saving faith means serving those in need. Saving faith means serving those in need.

I think it’s a mistake for us to read this and think that we can earn God’s favour by doing good works. The pastor I mentioned before was right; nobody gets into the kingdom of Heaven strictly by showing mercy to those in need. Salvation IS by grace; when we believe in Jesus and turn from sin to God, we receive God’s favour and we become His children.

It’s also a mistake though to think that when we’re God’s children, it doesn’t matter how we act. You sometimes hear ‘faith is all you need.’ That couldn’t be farther from the truth! Jesus is reminding us here that ‘yes, saving faith makes us right with God, but if we’ve been made right with God, then it logically follows that we would extend that same mercy to others in need through concrete acts of service.’

The old Spider-Man movies were really big on this idea ‘with great power comes great responsibility;’ ‘with great salvation comes great responsibility.’ Saving faith means serving those in need.

I guess what I’m trying to say is this: make mercy a part of your faith.

When I first came to follow Jesus, I remember very clearly having to intentionally make Bible reading a part of my life. My mom taught me prayer well, so that was good, but I realized that if I was truly going to follow Jesus, I needed to make reading God’s Word a part of my life. At first, it was just a series of fits and starts but now reading God’s Word to hear from God is just a part of the everyday fabric of my life. I think that this passage calls us to do the same thing with acts of mercy. Make gracious acts to those in need an integral part of life and faith.

It’s neat, a number of authors that I read this week point to one simple truth: it’s not hard; anyone can do it. You don’t have to have a doctorate to give someone a glass of water. Douglass O’Donnell writes: “These lowly, unspectacular, seemingly nonreligious works of love are thus democratic. That is, most people—unless there is a major physical or mental impairment—can feed the hungry, welcome the stranger, or visit the sick. The rich can; the poor can; the learned can; the unlearned can; men can; women can; Jews can; Gentiles can. It takes no special talent. It only takes willingness. It only takes a Spirit-wrought new heart.”^{vi}

Make mercy a part your faith. Maybe that means giving to the person at the intersection; that can be a helpful gift in an emergency situation. Frankly though I think that intentionally supporting organizations and Christian missions that deal in the long-term with empowering people and alleviating poverty altogether is a better investment.

And I can see you doing that as a church. I can’t tell you how delighted I was to read in our Board reports a conversation that happened at the LCW – “The ladies discussed how we can do more for Friendship House as they do so much for others. They supply lunches to twelve local schools, serve over a thousand meals per month from their kitchen, etc. The need is great.” That’s this. Not big flashy things, but acts of mercy done out of love for Jesus.

Make mercy a part of your faith.

Now if you'll remember, a couple of weeks back, the parable of the bridesmaids begged us to ask – how do we get ready for Jesus' return? Last week's parable and this week's parable answer that question. Jesus is coming back. There will be a party to end all parties that stretches into eternity. Those who are ready get into the party. How do we get ready? 1. We make good use of God's good gifts. And 2. We use those gifts to help those in need.

In a couple of weeks we launch into Advent when we remember Jesus' first coming at Christmas; these parables remind us that He is coming again and we need to get ready. Get ready to get into the party. Make good use of God's good gifts. And make mercy a part of your faith.

ⁱ 13 "In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence.

14 He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed (Dan 7:13-14 NIV).

ⁱⁱ 40 "*He who receives you receives me*, and he who receives me receives the one who sent me.

41 Anyone who receives a prophet because he is a prophet will receive a prophet's reward, and anyone who receives a righteous man because he is a righteous man will receive a righteous man's reward.

42 *And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones because he is my disciple*, I tell you the truth, he will certainly not lose his reward" (Mat 10:40-42 NIV).

47 Someone told him, "Your mother and brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you."

48 He replied to him, "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?"

49 Pointing to his disciples, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers.

50 *For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother*" (Mat 12:47-50 NIV).

5 "And whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me.

6 But if anyone causes one of these *little ones who believe* in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea" (Mat 18:6 NIV).

10 Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid. Go and tell *my brothers* to go to Galilee; there they will see me." (Mat 28:10 NIV).

ⁱⁱⁱ "For the Son of Man is going to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay each person according to what he has done" (Matthew 16:27); "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad (2 Corinthians 5:10).

^{iv} Grant Osborne, *Matthew* (ZECNT), 937.

^v Osborne, 936.

^{vi} Douglas O'Donnell, *Matthew* (PTW), 'Jesus' last sermon,' 'A lightbulb,' point 14. Olive Tree Digital.