

Matthew 25:31-46 The Receiver
November 26, 2023

The last few Sundays the gospel readings have featured parables from the 25th chapter of the Gospel of Matthew. In the chronology of the life of Jesus, as presented in Matthew, Jesus is in the final week of his life, sometime after the Palm Sunday arrival into the city of Jerusalem and before the Passover meal that he shared with his disciples on the night of his arrest.

There had been several contentious encounters between Jesus and various collections of religious leaders; Scribes and Pharisees and Sadducees. There has been a series of instructions about the end of things, and, of course, these parables.

The final parable in the series is known as the parable of the Sheep and the Goats, which is up for consideration this morning.

The story presents the final judgment, at which everyone, and one must assume that everyone includes the religious and the not so religious, and all the different kinds of religious people, all the people, each having lived in their own time and place, gathered together for the final judgement, or revealing.

There is a great separation, those on the right and those on the left; the sheep and the goats. They are separated solely on the basis of the way they have lived their lives; how they have treated other people, namely, “the least of these, my brothers and sisters.”

The language is familiar, it refers to the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the sick and imprisoned. The judgment is made based on how these people are treated. To treat them well and to help them; to provide food and drink, clothing, and comfort, is rewarded. To fail is condemned.

It can be very inspirational, and there are many Christians throughout the centuries that have been driven by this text towards these kinds of ministries, sometimes heroically.

It can also be very challenging. Sometimes the parables of Jesus can seem at odds with cherished doctrines. In this case, it is the doctrine of Justification by Faith that appears in the crosshairs. We hear the words of blessing given to the sheep and of cursing to the goats, and cannot escape the tension, the way the whole conversation sounds like it is advocating a kind of works righteousness;

“Whatever you did for the least of these . . . you did for me.”

“Whatever you did not do for the least of these . . . you did not do for me.”

Faith is not mentioned, but actions, which may seem like works. If you are like me you are torn by the tension in this story, between its sharp judgment and its beautiful promise.

In my own case, the challenge is that sometimes and in some ways I *have* helped the least of these, at other times and in other ways, *most* of the other times most of the other ways, not so much. If it were my case under consideration, what would be a fair verdict? Am I a sheep or a goat?

Part of the beautiful promise is that God cares for the least, and in some way embodies them, and those who help them are treated as if they are among those who have served the Son of Man himself, the Receiver of our help.

One of the features of the parable is that neither the sheep nor the goats know, as they are living out their lives, that their service, or lack of service, was given such significance. The sheep were unaware. “*When* did we help” . . . ? The goats were unaware . . . “*When* did we *not* help” . . . ?

There is something revealing about the idea of people living out of the center of their selves without any sense whatsoever of *trying* to earn a heavenly reward or to avoid an eternal punishment. And even more, the idea is that it is their faith, which has shaped the substance of their character, and precedes this behavior, so that it just seems natural to them. It is the faith that moves, or lack of faith that hinders them. Maybe this parable *is* about Justification by Faith after all.

Sometimes we are forced to make conclusions. In this case, one of the conclusions to which we are forced is

that there is an unbreakable connection between faith and action, faith and behavior, we might even say faith and beliefs. As in the Letter of James which tells us that, “faith without works is dead.”

Other observations are helpful. First, it is the *faith* that is the response to grace, that has spiritual value. The actions, beliefs, and religious life that flow out from it, are less important. Our actions bear witness to our convictions. The way we live our lives is a reflection of what we believe; the actions themselves are secondary.

Second, once we become aware of ourselves giving effort to believe, *trying* to believe, or act, so that we can achieve the reward of salvation, we have already proven that we lack faith, we are at odds with grace, because faith is the acceptance of God’s grace; no more, no less. One cannot achieve what can only be given and received. Faith is acceptance, not a work of mental, intellectual, emotional or motivational effort.

Once God’s grace has combined with the faithful response in whatever mysterious way that it happens, grace begins to work in us, to chip away at the faithlessness of the old life. Before all is said and done, it produces a concern for others that results in these kinds of service, referred to in this story, as well as much, much more.

As well as in relation to people who have great need, in our relationships with people who are *not* in such need, we will come also to be concerned for their well-

being. This concern will result in lives of integrity, of compassion and generosity, honesty and truthfulness, willingness to help, that is, it will result in lives of service, and often it will lead to service to people outside, as they say, our comfort zones.

Over time this faith will produce in us an undying hope, an abiding peace, a persistent joy, and a selfless love. And the life of faith is not lived perfectly, and there should be no anxiety about that, because it is grace that saves us. Maybe we should speak of the doctrine of Justification *by Grace*, through Faith.

It is, however, lived in community. Together, with each other, and our neighbors, we move closer to the goal of our faith, which is the salvation of our souls. The Parable of the Sheep and the Goats reminds us, as well, that the people who suffer in the ways that are uncomfortable, like the ones mentioned in the story, are also a part of the salvation community. We must be mindful of them. We will not forget them.

In the meantime we are challenged and cheered. The promise of the parable that the good we do that flows out of our faith in response to grace, even when we are, especially when we are unaware, does not go unnoticed by God, stirs in us a great hope because it reveals *that* part of the divine mystery, that in each other we meet God, who is the Receiver, as well as the Giver, of our good will.

The Baptists in the 20th Century

Matthew 6:10 - your kingdom come,
your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Micah 6:8 - He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you?
To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.

Isaiah 1:17 - Learn to do right; seek justice.
Defend the oppressed.

Take up the cause of the fatherless;
plead the case of the widow.

John 3:16 - 16 For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

Philippians 2:13 - 12 Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, 13 for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose.

Romans 3:21-25 - But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. 22 This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, 23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, 24 and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.

25 God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, [b] through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith. He did this to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished—

My desire to look at Baptist things is not to decide whose right and wrong in the various cultural divides, or even to point out the diversity in the movement:

Education
Missions
Social Gospel
Evangelism

Social Gospel, evangelism, United Giving, and politics

Rauschenbusch - Social Gospel
Fosdick - Modernism
Rockefeller - Riverside
Graham - Evangelism
King - Equality, Social Justice

Carter - Peace
Clinton
Gore - Environment

Robertson - TV, Politics
Falwell - Moral Majority

Warren - Saddleback
Harris - VP
Johnson - House Speaker

But to emphasize the distinctive Baptist witness for all Christians, which is that faith is voluntary, it involves an adult decision, and is the only factor (After Grace) determining the authentic life. Only after a faith decision is made, is religion and morality meaningful.

This conviction is reflected in the act of believer's baptism, which is a witness to all Christians.

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