

Is Christ Your King? 2020
Ezekiel 34:15-16, 20-24 Matthew 25:31-46

Ezekiel 34:15-16, 20-24 (New Revised Standard Version)

I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord God. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice. Therefore, thus says the Lord God to them: I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. Because you pushed with flank and shoulder, and butted at all the weak animals with your horns until you scattered them far and wide, I will save my flock, and they shall no longer be ravaged; and I will judge between sheep and sheep. I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd. And I, the Lord, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them; I, the Lord, have spoken.

Matthew 25:31-46 (New Revised Standard Version)

“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; 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.’ Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ And the king will answer 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.’ Then he will say to those at his left hand, ‘You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; 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.’ Then they also will answer, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?’ Then he will answer them, ‘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 these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

I know of a small Presbyterian church in rural North Carolina
that makes it a practice to never lock their church front door.

Back in the early 1700’s
a stranger, a traveler seeking shelter from a terrible blizzard
froze to death alone on that church’s front doorstep ...
... and more than 2 centuries later, **they still haven’t gotten over it.**

One time, a strange man wrapped in a filthy and smelly old blanket
was muttering to himself while sitting on a church’s doorstep,
and the worshipers had to step around him to get inside.

The church members were upset, talking and complaining about him,
but no one wanted to get involved or deal with the man outside
for fear that he might be dangerous, or crazy or infected ...
... and maybe if they just ignored him, he'd go away.

But then the door suddenly opened and the strange man stepped inside.

They stared with cold eyes as he made his way toward the front,
and the congregation was uncomfortable, incensed and fearful,
as each one was hoping that he wouldn't stop at their pew.

And he went right up into the pulpit as the stunned church looked on,
and as if looking for a text, he flipped his way through the Bible.

Then he threw off his dirty blanket.

There were audible gasps

as with a disappointed look, their pastor began to read: vs. 41-46

...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.'

Then they also will answer, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?' Then he will answer them, '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 these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.'

Those words of the parable are shocking, they are stark & troubling
in that "the righteous" are welcomed "into eternal life",
and the others are condemned "to eternal punishment".

Biblical scholars are of mixed opinion whether this passage is
a parable, a teaching story and illustration to make a point,
or is it a literal description of the final judgement?

In either case, the critical question and point of the passage
is not did you believe the right church doctrines and teachings?,
or did you think, speak and organize like a Presbyterian?

This King's judgment is, **what did you do** for the least of these,
for the poor, the suffering, the lonely, the sick and broken?

All through the witness of Scripture it is repeatedly emphasized
that far more than anything that we do, say or singing in worship,
God is critically concerned
about how we live our lives out the real world-

- and in particular

our treatment of the poor, the powerless and the outcast,
for they too are God's precious and beloved family,
yet all too often we don't even notice them as such...

... and so the judgment and condemnation are harsh and final.

So what about grace we might ask, **grace alone through faith alone?**
Are we saved by those good deeds and by our charitable acts?,
or are we saved by the atoning death of Jesus on the cross?

Scripture could not be more clear,
our good works do not save us, and we cannot save ourselves.

Did you notice that the righteous **inherit** the kingdom? (vs. 34)
An inheritance is determined by the giver, not by the receiver.
An inheritance is a gift, that **is not and cannot be earned**.

Also, the word "righteous" means more than just doing the right thing.
"Righteous" refers to living within **a right relationship** with God
which is to live into the grace, will and purpose of the Lord.

Our good deeds therefore, our compassion toward those in need,
are not the **Cause** of God's grace,
but those good deeds are the **Effect** of God's grace.
Always, the gracious love of God proceeds faith and discipleship.

And so it follows that if Jesus Christ is truly our Lord and Savior,
and if by faith we have received God's grace through Christ,
then we **are** being healed and transformed by the Holy Spirit,
and our behavior becomes **reliable evidence** of God at work within us,
which means mercy and compassion will also be a part of our lives.

The authenticity of our faith is reflected by our discipleship,
good works are an expression of the content of our hearts,
and a sign of the presence and rule of God in our lives.

Our good works and deeds of charity do not earn our way into heaven,
but if God's grace has taken root in us and guides how we live,
then caring compassion will be a growing part of our nature...
**... which includes noticing and actively doing something about
the needs, the struggles, and the welfare of all our neighbors.**

As we read in the book of James: 2:15-18

If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. But someone will say, "You have faith and I have works." Show me your faith apart from your works, and I **by my works will show you my faith**.

Or as Jesus explained in John 13:34-35

I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. **By this** everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

If we really have received and accepted God's love and blessings,
then some of that grace and mercy will surely spill and overflow,
and will just have to leak out in the way we live our lives.
What we really believe is revealed by what we really do!

Jesus told this parable, of stark and frightening judgment
to teach that it's not just the evil and wrong that we do,
but there's also judgment for the mercy **that we fail to do.** vs. 40

Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did not do it to me.

When Jesus truly comes into our hearts and into our lives,

he always brings the rest of humanity in along with him...
... for us to actively engage, to make it better, to make a difference.
We respond to God's grace through discipleship – serving others.

If we go back and look in the Old Testament,
God's intention in choosing to give Israel the Promised Land
was to set an example, a light shining before the nations to show
how to live peacefully together within Creation's abundance
by caring for widows & orphans, those in need & struggling.

The leaders of Israel were to be God's shepherds to the people,
with authority given to serve, not to be **self-serving parasites**.
But the leaders of Israel did not live up to God's plan and purpose.

The leaders, both political and religious were corrupt and selfish,
and took advantage of the weak, the poor, defenseless & powerless.
God sent prophets such as Amos, Micah, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel,
who were especially harsh in condemning those faithless leaders,
who focused more on themselves than their mission as shepherds...

**... failed shepherd-leaders who abused those they were to protect
who got it backward and who didn't get the point.** (vs. 21, 16)

Because you pushed with flank and shoulder, and butted at all the weak animals with your horns ... the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice.

It reminds me of my biochemistry professor when I was in college
who would frequently complain about having to teach classes,
and try to explain biochemistry to insignificant students.

To him, we were a total waste of his time, talent and effort
that interfered with his real and important work of doing research.

But his job as a professor and even the purpose of university itself
was primarily for the benefit of the students, to educate them-
-- not to provide space and resources for his research.

To my thinking, he totally missed the point **and had it backwards**.

In Ezekiel, since the leaders of Israel had failed so badly,
through the prophet the Lord makes a wonderful promise, vs. 15~23

I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord God.

I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak,
but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice.

... I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd.

God will seek out those whose lives have been damaged, lost & broken.

We see that same theme clearly demonstrated and fulfilled
in the life, the ministry and teaching of Jesus Christ.

In clear fulfillment of that prophecy and the promises of the Lord,
the outcasts, those damaged & deemed unacceptable by Pharisees

are the same ones sought out, welcomed and restored by Jesus.

Over and over we see Jesus ministering to people with messed up lives,
forgiving their guilt and sin, healing their wounds & brokenness.

Regardless of their past or even their present circumstance,
Jesus offered reason for hope, redemptive restoration,
and the miraculous & wonderful possibility of a new beginning,
God's promise & desire to find & heal the lost, wounded & undeserving...
... exactly as it was described through the prophet Ezekiel.

Today, our task and mission as Church and individual church members,
since Jesus Christ is our King, and we his disciples,
we are to continue his ministries of mercy and compassion.

We are to respond to God's grace & call, to our healing & salvation,
by serving those who are struggling or in need of our community...

... and to think carefully about what we are called to do and doing,
lest we fail to recognize Jesus in those we're called to serve vs. 40
... just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.

Jesus is teaching about grace, faith & discipleship in this parable.
It's not about motivation by a fear of hell or the hope of heaven,
but a life driven by an authentic faith in response to grace,
by the healing and transformation through the Holy Spirit,
through which flows the love and compassion of the Lord.

These are precarious times of unknown change and need all around us,
so we need to constantly consider what we could & should be doing,
being open to new opportunities, not just as problems to be solved
but lives we can touch with God's truth and loving mercy.

When in response to God's blessings and our relationship in Christ,
and we usefully reflect God's love, mercy and compassion,
then God is present in that relationship of kindness.

God is most present with us when we are most faithful and obedient
in reflecting God's own love, care, goodness & grace toward others.

Therefore, as we think about our Thanksgiving feast this week,
more than just gratitude for abundance and blessings,
as important and wonderful as those gifts truly are,
let us also put some work-boots on our gratitude and faith
with worthy and caring deeds of love that helps support others.

We are invited to be a part of healing and transforming this world,
by living a life defined by God's grace, purpose and intention,
by serving God in all the opportunities of life we encounter.

We are, each one of us, exactly when, where & what God wants for us,
and intends for us, as his own precious, blessed & beloved ones,

to live meaningful and useful lives that serve to accomplish
good that will last far beyond the limits of our mortal life.

Our call is to embrace the present as the place where God has put us,
as the place where God intends to work in us and through us,
a life that reveals the love, goodness and mercy of the Lord,
a life through which the grace and healing of God can flow.

Jesus said, vs. 40 (*The Message*)

... 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.**
... I tell you the solemn truth: Whenever you did one of these things to someone overlooked or ignored,
that was me— you did it to me.

God calls all of us, and equips all of us to do good toward others,
and all of us are entrusted to serve others for their benefit,
for there is always some way that we can live out our faith.

You don't have to be very strong or vigorous to pray well,
or to send a hopeful and encouraging note or email,
or the brighten someone's day with a phone call,
or write a check to help feed those who struggle.
We can do all or any of that even during a Covid lockdown.

Because Jesus Christ is our King,
like a tennis player trying to improve,
we must continuously be working on our serve ...

... as Jesus explains in this parable,
the King cares very much **in an eternal sort of way.**