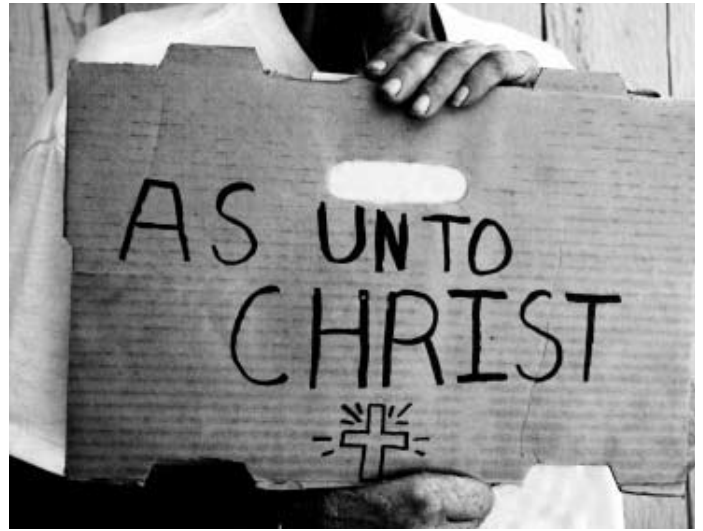


Hope—Now and Later

Purpose

To realize we serve God through helping others



The Scripture for this lesson is Matthew 25:31-46

Listen

- 31 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.
- 32 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,
- 33 and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. 34 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;
- 35 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,
- 36 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."
- 37 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?"
- 38 And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing?"
- 39 And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?"
- 40 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."
- 41 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;
- 42 for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink,
- 43 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."
- 44 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?"
- 45 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."
- 46 And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.

Key Verse: *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." (Matthew 25:40)*

Look

A former editorial colleague who did volunteer work at a local homeless shelter for families was talking with a family when the mother asked her what she did. She replied that she was an editor of religious children's resources. The woman softly said, "I once wrote Bible story papers for children." The woman explained that her family had fallen on hard times and that her husband was trying to find a job.

As my former colleague related the experience to us, it brought tears to some eyes and made all of us aware in our hearts what we already knew in our heads. Homeless persons are not invisible people who appear at a shelter only to become invisible when they depart. To be sure, they have their problems; but homeless people also have names, feelings, gifts, and skills—and they have faces!

Those faces are special because Jesus has "put a face" on them, a face that does not deny their identity but gives them a greater identity. Jesus also "put a face" on those who are hungry, those who are thirsty, those who are strangers, those who are naked, those who are sick, and those who are in prison. As we shall see, the face he puts on them is his own.

Live

The chapter and the verses that precede our Bible Lesson reflect an increasing urgency in Jesus' teaching. There was a discussion of signs of Jesus' return and the end of the present age (Matthew 24:3-8) and a warning that disciples should anticipate persecution (24:9-14). Jesus implied his identification with the apocalyptic Son of Man (24:29-31) and through the parable of the bridesmaids urged the disciples, "Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour" (25:13).

Our Bible Lesson is pivotal to the whole Gospel According to Matthew. It moves us to the end of Jesus' teaching and ministry. In this passage are Jesus' last words before his Passion began. Within these few verses Jesus claimed for himself several titles that appear throughout the Gospel: Son of Man (25:31); king (25:34); Lord (25:37, 44); and by implication, Son of God (25:34).

The passage also moves us to the end of time. These verses are sometimes referred to as a little apocalypse, sharing with the books of Daniel and Revelation the anticipation of a dramatic final judgment of this age, the victory of good over evil, and the ushering in of an age fully under the reign of God.

Separating Sheep From Goats

"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" (Matthew 25:31). Those opening words would have resounded with apocalyptic meaning for the disciples. "Son of Man" was a title used in Daniel's vision of "one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven" (Daniel 7:13, New International Version). (The New Revised Standard Version blurs the link by translating it as "one like a human being.")

"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" (Matthew 25:32). Notice it is the nations that are gathered, but it is the people who are judged. As the story progresses, the accountability of individuals will become even clearer; but we can let our minds and our consciences play with the interrelationship between persons and nations. Individuals bear responsibility for what their nations do or fail to do. At the same time, all nations have their share of "sheep" and "goats"; God's judgment will not be based on nationality but on criteria that hold the individual accountable.

Jesus declared the sheep would be on the favored right hand and the goats on the left. The first disciples must have wondered what was coming next because there was not yet a clue as to why the sheep were separated from the goats. Even those in the story did not know why they were being separated as "sheep from goats."

What images or words would you use to portray all nations and all people brought before the Son of Man and called to final accountability? If you were to include yourself in the picture, what expression would be on your face?

"The Last of These"

Those on the right hand will learn from "the king" that they are "blessed by [his] Father" and welcomed to "inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world" (Matthew 25:34). Next they will hear "why." The Son of Man, who is also king and judge, declares it is because "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" (25:35-36). That answer leads to another question: "When?" Those on the right hand, now identified as "the righteous," will ask in surprise when they cared for the Lord's needs in the ways he described. Then will come the defining answer: It was when they ministered to "the least of these" (25:40), his brothers and sisters, that they cared for him. The word Christ is not used, but we know that is who it is. In ministering to those in need, the righteous minister to Christ, who identifies with "the least of these."

If we take a careful look at "the righteous" who will be welcomed into the Kingdom, we may be surprised. First, there is no mention of any test of doctrine or of any formula of "right words." The second subtle "surprise" is that the righteous will be surprised. The story anticipates that the caring acts of mercy will have been performed from the heart, not calculated to obtain a reward. That is important, for whether we recognize it or not, the faces of those in need bear the face of Christ.

What instances can you recall when someone performed an act of mercy in a way that seemed to flow naturally from the heart? What were the outcomes?

Sins of Omission

Jesus continued the story with what will happen to those on the left hand. Instead of being welcomed into Christ's eternal kingdom, they will be condemned "into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels" (Matthew 25:41). Those on the left, as had those on the right, will ask, "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?" (25:44). Again, the response will be that the Lord identifies with those in need: "Just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me" (25:45).

Again there is surprise, for there is no mention of any wrongful acts or of failing to affirm a statement of doctrine. The source of their eternal alienation from the Kingdom is not what they did but what they failed to do. The righteous are surprised because their acts were performed out of uncalculated caring; their counterparts on the left are surprised because of their heartless indifference—their sins of omission.

Sins of indifference pose problems for us because when we are indifferent, we are unaware. Notice how prominently confession of sins of omission is incorporated into each of our various prayers of confession:

We have not done your will, we have broken your law,
we have rebelled against your love,
we have not loved our neighbors,
and we have not heard the cry of
the needy.¹

Most merciful God, we confess that we have sinned
against you in thought, word, and deed,
by what we have done, and by what we have left undone.
We have not loved you with our
whole heart; we have not loved our neighbors
as ourselves.²

We have followed too much
the devices and desires of
our own hearts.
We have offended against thy
holy laws. We have left undone
those things which we ought
to have done, and we have done
those things which we ought
not to have done.³

What sins of omission do you need to confess to God in prayer?

Good Works or God's Grace?

John Wesley firmly believed that our salvation is by God's grace and not by our good works. Having said that, however, Wesley also emphasized the importance of good works, both in his theology and in his life. He was certain that our good works are the proof of God's sanctifying grace at work in our lives. We do not do good works to earn God's salvation; we do good works because we are saved. Good works are how we express God's love to others.

Wesley said God's grace not only prepares us for a relationship with God, it offers us that relationship freely. Prevenient grace is God at work in our lives even before we are aware of it, preparing us to respond to God. Justifying grace, "salvation by grace through faith," is God's gift of a restored relationship when we in faith respond to it. Nor does it stop there. As it continues God's work in us, it actually makes us holy. This restored relationship, in which our faith bears fruit, is the result of God's sanctifying grace. We see it in our Bible Lesson in the response of the righteous sheep whose acts of

mercy came from the heart.

In what ways have you felt God enabling and empowering you when you have ministered to others?

Little Apocalypse

Our Bible Lesson has been described as a little apocalypse with its setting of a final judgment of good and evil. Even secular movies and dramas play on the theme of an apocalypse because of the emotions it can evoke of destruction and doom. Yet the little apocalypse is contained within a Gospel; it is “good news.” From the perspective of faith, this story offers us hope, not doom.

There is, of course, hope for those who hunger, those who thirst, and all the others considered “the least of these.” Jesus has identified with them and their needs. They are not forgotten; they will not be left without God’s comfort. They are not faceless; they bear the face of Christ.

There is hope for the righteous who from the heart selflessly minister to those in need. They have seen the face of Christ, and they will see it even more fully.

There is even hope for those who have yet to minister to those in need. The purpose of this story is to alert us to Christ’s expectations. We now know where to see the face of Christ and what to expect if we ignore those who bear it. But here it gets tricky. Remember, “the righteous” do acts of mercy from the heart without any thought of reward. With Wesley, we recognize we cannot instantly transform ourselves into having that selfless caring concern for others. It is when we recognize that spiritually we, too, are “the least of these” that we are able to receive God’s sanctifying grace. Only then can we grow in holiness and see the face of Christ and serve with acts of mercy those who bear it.

There is also hope for the present. The apocalyptic story deals with the Final Judgment, but it also takes seriously the present. It is in the present that we minister to those in need, and it is in the present that we see the face of Christ.

Finally, there is hope as we consider the apocalyptic end of time. Our ultimate hope rests in the assurance that God not only created history but also entered human history to live as one of us. In living as one of us, Jesus Christ suffered as one of us and continues to suffer whenever and wherever our brothers and sisters suffer.

Where do you find your greatest hope in the little apocalypse in the Gospel of Matthew? What is the “good news” you hear in this story?

Gracious and loving God, forgive us for the times we turn our backs on you by turning our backs on those who suffer and are in need. By your grace grant us a caring spirit that comes from the heart, and give us eyes to see the face of Christ in the faces of those who are “the least of these.” In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

1 From “We have not done your will...” prayer from A Service of Word and Table I © 1972, 1980, 1985, 1989 United Methodist Publishing House. Used by permission.

2 From The United Methodist Hymnal © 1989 United Methodist Publishing House. Used by permission. 890.

3 From The United Methodist Hymnal © 1989 United Methodist Publishing House. Used by permission. 891. See also 892 and 893.