

Christ the King Sunday
Grace Church of West Feliciana
Saint Francisville, LA
11/20/11

Matthew 25:31-46

Today, Jesus finishes his last speech in the Gospel of Matthew before he is arrested and crucified. He tells his disciples a parable about the end of Days, "When the Son of Man comes in glory." Christ will be seated at the throne of his glory and from that throne he will judge people of every tribe, tongue, and nation. He will separate the sheep from the goats and will offer rewards to those on his right and punishment to those on his left. Some will be invited into his Kingdom to be with him for eternity, while others will be sent away into eternal fire.

The passage makes it very clear that the criteria used by Christ to allow some into his Kingdom, and to expel others into utter darkness, is the care or lack of care they took of "the least of my people". God will judge us according to whether or not we cared for the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, and the imprisoned. There is no mention here about being accepted into the Kingdom of God because we accepted Christ as our Lord and Savior, because we had faith in Christ, or even because of what Christ did for us on the cross. It is almost telling us that Salvation is about us and our good works. We will be judged by the good deeds we do or we fail to do.

This is very difficult to accept. If salvation is up to me and my good works then the more good works I do the better. The most points I accumulate in some invisible score card, the more chances I have of being admitted. And since good works are so important, I want to make sure that I get all the credit I deserve for the good I do. So, I will make sure that others and God, especially, know what I have done. I will remind them of how good I have been. I will make sure they notice my good works. I will pray in public and do charity in public. I will set myself apart from the unrighteous and selfish people who do nothing for anyone. I will get the recognition I know I deserve. Like the Pharisees of old, I will practice my faith in public. I will wait until there is a crowd around me before I throw my heavy coins into the collection plate. I will beat my chest loudly and say, "Thank you God that I am not like these miserable people out there." I will wear my "Jesus Cross" everywhere I go and I will wear religious clothing to show the world how good I am. May be I will even get a big billboard on the roof of my house to proclaim to the world that "Here lives a good Christian!"

I believe this is not really the proper interpretation of this text. This passage is talking about the “Nations” or the Gentiles. We hear this in the first sentence, “All the nations will be gathered before him.” The word used here for “Nations” is most often translated as “Gentiles.” We also know that this parable is not about the Church or the believers of the day because they are neither the goats or the sheep but the beneficiaries of their actions. In both cases the king tells the goats and the sheep, “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.” So, the nations in general and the Gentiles in particular will be judged in accordance with how they treat the persecuted church of Matthew’s day. This text is not telling us that we earn our salvation through good works. Rather, it is giving comfort to a persecuted community that God cares about them and will hold the nations accountable for how they are treating them. For those Gentiles who have cared for, fed, protected, and defended the “Members of Jesus’ family” there will be forgiveness, acceptance, and inclusion into the heavenly dwelling places. For those Gentiles who have abused, mistreated, persecuted, and the Church there will be judgement and punishment at the last day.

Let’s think for a moment about the reaction of the sheep and the goats when the Son of Man passes judgement on them. The Sheep, those who are invited in, are absolutely unaware that they have done anything good. They are astounded by what the judge says. In fact they ask, “When was it?” When did we do all these things you mentioned? They have treated the Church with kindness because they have naturally lived good lives that care for others, without letting their right hand know what the left hand is doing (Matthew 6:3). They have done this without keeping score, without selfish motives, without a need for recognition or pedestals. They have cared for others because they love their neighbors as they love themselves. Yet, without knowing it, every time they took care of their brothers and sisters in need that took care of Christ himself, even if many of them did not know about Christ. Christ’s face is often seen best (most clearly) on the face of those who belong to him, the desperate, the persecuted, the lonely. These sheep loved others, including the Church, because they knew that producing good fruit comes naturally, it is not something we do, but who we are. We are fruit bearers! Although the parable is speaking about Gentiles, this applies to us as well. For us who are Christians producing good fruits comes naturally and without extreme effort. We, who know we have been saved by the Savior of humanity, love as we are loved and care as we are cared for, naturally, quietly, faithfully, and joyfully. This is not just something we do. This is who we are as Christians!

Now, let us look at the reaction of the goats. They are absolutely unaware that they had done anything wrong. They believed up to the last minute that their entrance was assured because they had lived successful lives. They had all the character references they needed. By the time they walked in they knew that the judge would have no choice but to gladly let them in. They had a reputation for righteousness within their cultures and within their faith systems. What they failed to realize is that their treatment of the disciples of Jesus would ultimately determine their fate. They were on the cover of magazines. They were invited to many functions and were offered the choice seats because everyone wanted to associate with them. They were the righteous, the wise, the select few, the right kind of people. They may have even have been charitable within their community, but their persecution of the Church or their failure to help those who were being persecuted placed them in a category of judgement.

My friends, the message is very clear. God himself is the shepherd, he himself will seek us out and will rescue us. He himself will give up his life for us in his Son, Jesus Christ. He himself will open the gates of heaven for us. Our only responsibility is to accept his grace and his love and then to go and love others as God loves us and as we are called to love ourselves. Quietly. Faithfully. Joyfully. Without regards for gratitude. Without regards for recognition. Without regards for keeping score. Without fear of judgement or condemnation.

I pray today that your whole life will find meaning and purpose in the serving of others, not out of fear, but out of love for God, love for yourself, and love for humanity. Amen!