

## **Judgment For All (Not Just For Some)**

Matthew 25:31-46

November 23, 2008

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 the 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 the 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 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."

The word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

Have you ever spent any time with people who are strange? I mean, really strange.

While I was a pastor in Richmond, I supervised a feeding program that served about 200 people lunch on Monday morning. One of our guests was a man named Rodney. Rodney had been coming to eat lunch at the church for about twenty years; most of the time he refused to live in a group home, preferring to sleep on the street. He was the son of a Baptist preacher, and even made it through a couple of years of college before he got a little too into the sixties. Rodney was brilliant; schizophrenic; and usually off his medicine. He would come visit me on occasion to talk theology. Let me tell you: you don't know strange until you talk theology with an ex-Baptist schizophrenic homeless man who is off his medication. Strange, indeed.

Then, of course, there is my family of origin. There are always strange people in families. I don't think it is just mine. My mom's side of the family is relatively normal, but my dad's side is beyond strange. You should have seen the look on Lindsey's face the first time she came to a Peery family reunion. Priceless. One of my dad's cousins sends a Christmas card on occasion. She is married to a man who has two wives. In the Christmas card the husband is in the middle with one wife and her kids on one side and my dad's cousin and her kids on the other. All smiles. Strange.

When you are a pastor of a church you meet some pretty strange people in your congregation. The exception, of course, being this church. There are no strange people here. But in my last church there were some strange people. I remember one couple who seemed to be oblivious to any social norms whatsoever. They would invite you over for dinner, and when you showed up they were still cooking the food, the house was a complete disaster, one of their kids would be trying to ride the dog, and they would ask you to help set the table. Strange.

As we get ready for Thanksgiving and Christmas – we are going to be bombarded with something else that is strange. Images of perfect people. People whose houses are perfectly decorated; whose tables are overflowing with perfectly prepared food; whose waistlines are

perfectly proportioned; whose families are perfectly nuclear. Don't you just love those people?

Artists have always had fun with the myth that there are perfect people out there. Many of Flannery O'Connor's short stories center around this myth. So too do the movies of Tim Burton. In a favorite Tim Burton film, *Big Fish* – a movie about the relationship between a father and his son – the story gets its energy from the intersection of the son's "completely normal" life and the father's incredibly bizarre world – full of outlandish and strange people. The movie ends with the son at his father's funeral – meeting all the strange people in his Dad's life that the son never thought existed.

The truth is – we are all strange. None of us is "normal." Indeed, if we were really honest about our fears, our desires, our particularities...all those things that make us unique and human...no one would believe it! And so it is with the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God is not a normal place. It is not a perfect place – if your definition of perfect is somewhere where "all the women are strong, all the men are good looking, and all the children are above average."

But the Kingdom of God is a perfect expression of the strange goodness of God – who creates us uniquely and then calls each of us to love our neighbors as ourselves.

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When our text for today opens up – we are all standing before Jesus, the Son of Man, on the threshold of the Kingdom of God. And I mean all. All of us. Every strange and wonderful creature of God's good creation is standing before the Son of Man and seated in his throne of glory. "All the nations will be gathered before him..." Matthew says. All the nations.

In this vision of what is to come – the Greek word for it is *parousia*, we are gathered for a purpose – and that purpose is judgment. Judgment. It is not a word with a whole lot of positive connotation. At the same time, it is often a word associate with the church.

Whether we like it or not, judgment is a church word; it is theological.

This is a parable of judgment – and notice who is judged: all people. All the nations. And judgment goes both ways. There are sheep and there are goats. Those on the right and those on the left. It could be a bumper sticker: Judgment Happens.

Also notice who is the judge. The same one who in a few weeks will be wrapped in swaddling cloths and laid in a manger. The same one who spent his life paying attention to the real-world needs of the poor and the downtrodden. The same one who hung upon the cross; who was raised. This is the One will sit in the throne of glory.

Today is Christ the King Sunday – the day when we are reminded that the one we call Lord will stand at the end of our history as he stood at its beginning. Today’s text from Matthew is the only scene in the New Testament with any details picturing the last judgment.<sup>1</sup> Remarkably, in this description of judgment there is no mention of grace, or forgiveness, or confession of faith. All of that may rightly be assumed – but in this text what is mentioned is the criteria for judgment: how we have treated “the least of these.”

Upon hearing the word judgment, so often our first emotion is fear; and fear is a powerful motivator. The pull of cause and effect is strong: if we do not tend to the least of these, then we will not inherit the Kingdom of God. Our children have taught us this lesson: there is something lost if you only study to the test. Knowing by what criteria we will be judged creates the temptation live a life of faith that is but a means to an end.

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Our son Wells is just at the age where he notices and responds to our approval. Don’t get me wrong – Wells is almost two, and seeking our approval is not a consistent state being. In fact, what is most consistent right now for Wells are the words “No” and “Mine.”

But there are times when Lindsey and I notice that if we voice our approval – when Wells eats his dinner, or puts away his toys, or

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<sup>1</sup> Boring, Eugene (*The New Interpreter’s Bible: Matthew*, Abingdon, Nashville, 1995) p. 455.

shares with his friends – then he is more likely to repeat the behavior in order to hear us tell him what a good job he is doing.

Positive reinforcement is a good thing – but the reason for Wells to eat his dinner, or put away his toys, or share with his friends is not because it makes his parents proud. We hope that Wells will do those things because they are important and right and true.

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What is interesting to note about this parable is how surprised both the sheep and the goats are when their judgment is pronounced. “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, thirsty and gave you something to drink? When was it that saw you a stranger and welcomed you...?”

And Jesus answers: “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”

The challenge for us – who hear this parable of judgment with the benefit of knowing the criteria for how we will be judged – is to not read this as a moralistic admonition to “see Jesus” in the faces of the poor.<sup>2</sup>

Those sheep were not judged as righteous because they saw Jesus and behaved as they had been told. They were judged as righteous because they helped another human being who was in need – and their motivation was not salvation or the approval of Christ the King; but instead the truer, holier, more real motivation to love their neighbors just as they had been loved by their Creator.

The challenge for us – and particularly most of us who, because of our class and race and status in this community, are more susceptible to fall prey to the myth that we must try to be perfect – the challenge for us is not to see ourselves as better than the least of these; where acts of kindness can easily be turned into acts of paternalism. The challenge for us is to serve “the least of these” without the temptation to ignore the real-world difficulties that we miss when we our care for

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<sup>2</sup> With the helpful aid of the Rev. Jarrett McLaughlin and his Portable Snack (2008) paper on this text.

others becomes a means to an end. It is the difference between charity and justice. And unless there is any doubt, God prefers justice.

In spite of what we tell ourselves we are not perfect. Each of us is strange. Each of us is broken. Each of us is needy, hungry, thirsty, lonely, and naked. And the King whose is seated on the throne of glory is not disappointed in that, nor is he surprised. What the king desires is that we serve one another. Not to get a feather in our cap or to earn our way to his right hand – but because that is what neighbors do. Indeed, that is what God created us to do – to love one another just as God first loved us.

For such is the Kingdom of God – that strange Kingdom where the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.<sup>3</sup>

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To God alone be the glory. Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> Mark 10:45