

This summer I have been preaching through a sermon series that I have entitled Masterclass: Storyteller, in which I am looking at the parables of Jesus, the stories that He told, and what we can learn from them about what it means to know and follow God. If you're unfamiliar with the term parable, the best definition I have found comes from Pastor John MacArthur: **A parable is an ingeniously simple word picture illuminating a profound spiritual lesson.** Jesus often taught in parables, using word pictures like "God's kingdom is like a treasure hidden in a field" or "God is like a Father welcoming home a wayward Son." By using everyday language that was familiar to his audience, he ensured that the stories would stay with them long after he left. But he also used parables because the way they were told would cause the self-righteous and sophisticated to reject his teaching as basic, completely missing the deeper spiritual truth hidden in the story, while those with childlike faith would respond to Jesus and want to know Him better.

This morning, we will be looking at the parable of the sheep and the goats from Matthew 25:31-46. This parable is the third of three parables that Jesus tells in Matthew 25 about his second coming, the reality that one day he will return to judge the earth and to put a final end to evil. In Matthew 25, there is the parable of the ten virgins, which warns us to be ready for his coming; the parable of the talents, which tells us that we will be judged based on what we have done with what we have been given; and finally, the parable of the sheep and the goats. Let's begin in Matthew 25:31

Matthew 25:31-46 - *"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. ³² All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. ³³ He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. ³⁴ "Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed **by my Father**; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. ³⁵ For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, ³⁶ I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.' ³⁷ "Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you **something to drink**? ³⁸ When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? ³⁹ When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?' ⁴⁰ "The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.' ⁴¹ "Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal*

fire prepared for the devil **and his angels.** ⁴² For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, ⁴³ I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.' ⁴⁴ "They also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did **not help you?**' ⁴⁵ "He will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.' ⁴⁶ "Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life."

I can't help feeling like this parable is a work of genius when I read it. I also can't help feeling like it's the ultimate episode of that show Undercover Boss.

I want to highlight three things from this passage this morning:

1) **One day you will stand before Jesus to be judged**

Matthew 25:31-46 - "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. ³² All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.

One day, each of us will stand before the Son of Man and our lives will be judged.

Who is the Son of Man? **The Son of Man** is an image from **Daniel 7:13-14**, and is one of Jesus' favorite ways of referring to himself:

Daniel 7:13-14 - "In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. ¹⁴ He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.

Daniel 7:13-14 introduces this character known as the Son of Man, who will have all authority, glory, and power to judge the nations. He will be worshiped and his dominion will never pass away. Sometimes people think "Son of Man" is a reference to Jesus' humanity, but on the contrary this passage is all about his **divinity** – he is worthy of all worship, he is everlasting, and specifically that he has been given all authority and power to judge the world. Check out two other verses related to this:

John 5:26-27 - For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son to have life in himself. ²⁷ And he has given him authority to judge because he is the Son of Man.

2 Thessalonians 1:7-10 - This will happen when the Lord Jesus is **revealed** from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. ⁸ He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. ⁹ They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power ¹⁰ on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marveled at among all those who have believed.

He is the Son of Man, and part of the meaning of that title is that **He is the judge of all the earth**. He will be the one judging your life when you die. And according to 2 Thessalonians, Matthew 25, and the rest of the Bible, the final judgment is not going to be good news for everyone. Some will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of God.

Hebrews 9:27 ...man is destined to die once, and after that to face **judgment**

Not everything is judged in our time and space. Some bad deeds go unpunished, and some good deeds go unrewarded during our lives. But one day Jesus will return to set things right. Everything will be revealed one day. And some will experience eternal reward and some eternal punishment. Are you ready to stand before the Lord?

2) **We will be judged by our works**

There is a judgment, and the Bible talks about being judged on the basis of our works, what we have done. Listen to these two passages about judgment.

2 Corinthians 5:10 - For we must all appear before the **judgment** seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.

1 Corinthians 3:10-15 - But each one should be careful how he builds. ¹¹ For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. ¹² If any man builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, ¹³ his work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be **revealed** with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man's

work. ¹⁴ *If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. ¹⁵ If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames.*

Paul says that we will be judged according to what we have done in the body. And for some people, the fire of judgment will burn up all that they have done if it was not done on the foundation of Jesus. The person may be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames.

So is Jesus teaching salvation by works? No. After all, remember last week's parable, where the tax collector is made right with God simply on the basis of his confession, not by his good works. We have to keep all of Jesus' teachings in balance, along with the teaching of the entire Bible. For instance:

***Ephesians 2:8-10** - For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith-- and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God-- ⁹ not by works, so that no one can boast. ¹⁰ For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.*

But notice what this passage says: even though we are saved by grace and not by works, we are saved to do good works. True faith will express itself in good works, in a life that strives to follow God's will. And so, salvation is by grace – there is no way to be right with God except by trusting in Jesus' death for your sins – but you will be judged on the basis of what you have done, for genuine faith will result in good works. Is this new to you? This is a new concept to some evangelicals who are used to salvation by grace. But this is the point of the book of James.

***James 2:14-17** - What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? ¹⁵ Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. ¹⁶ If one of you says to him, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? ¹⁷ In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.*

True faith expresses itself in good works. **This is where I believe some modern evangelistic techniques get it wrong.** They'll teach that if you pray a prayer, you are saved and sealed for heaven and nothing can ever change that. What you wind up with is millions of people who have "prayed the prayer" and show no evidence of any changed life, no evidence that God actually has saved them. You really don't know if someone has truly been saved by whether or not they prayed a prayer, but by the evidence of their lives after that. **Is their supposed faith**

expressing itself in good works or not? Is there fruit – love, joy, peace, goodness, kindness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control – or not?

We are saved by grace, but faith that does not result in good works is dead. Good works alone will save no one, but faith that is all in the head and doesn't show itself in action is not truly faith. Genuine faith shows itself in good works. This means just as no one will be able to stand before God on the basis of their good works, so too no one will be able to stand on a faith that is all head and does not prove itself by good works. Yes, praying the prayer of salvation may be the moment that you were saved, but assurance of salvation comes from watching your life to see if the Holy Spirit has indeed changed you and caused you to bear spiritual fruit and love as Jesus does. **Can someone tell by looking at your life that you believe?**

3) **Genuine faith in God will result in love shown to the least of these**

This parable is so genius. It's a simple story illustrating a profound point – the God of the universe, the eternal, all-powerful creator, identifies with the poor, the hungry, the prisoner, the sick, the stranger. You see, it's one thing to tell people to care for the poor and hungry. I think some of Jesus' parables have gotten us thinking about the importance of loving and welcoming those on the margins. But this parable takes that concept to a whole other level. **This is Jesus saying that however you treat the poor, the hungry, the marginal, is how you are treating me.** Do you want to love and worship God? Love the poor. I think Mother Teresa said it this way – *"You only love Jesus as much as you love the person you love the least."* Whoever is the least of these in your life, be careful how you treat them, because that reveals a lot about your love for God.

And for those of you who have felt mistreated, be encouraged by how Jesus identifies with you. Whatever anyone has done to you, they do to Him. Think of how Jesus spoke to Saul, who became known as the apostle Paul:

*Acts 9:3-5 - As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. ⁴ He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "**Saul, Saul**, why do you **persecute** me?" ⁵ "Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked. "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied.*

Jesus identifies with his people who are hurting and oppressed and marginalized. Listen again to what Jesus says that the king will say to the sheep:

'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. ³⁵ For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, ³⁶ I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.' ³⁷ *"Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? ³⁸ When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? ³⁹ When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?' ⁴⁰ "The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.'*

Now, there's some debate on whether Jesus meant this to refer to how we treat Christians by saying "these brothers of mine."

Matthew 12:48-50 - *He replied to him, "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?" ⁴⁹ Pointing to his disciples, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers. ⁵⁰ For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother."*

Even though that is probably most accurate, I think it's wise to live as if he meant everyone.

Galatians 6:9-10 - *Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. ¹⁰ Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.*

One aspect of how we will be judged will clearly be how we have treated the poor, the sick, the hungry, the prisoner, the forgotten and marginalized. **I think Jesus is saying in this passage that whenever you find someone in need, how you respond to them is a good measure of how clearly you get the gospel.** The more you understand the compassion that God has shown to you, that when you were helpless, He gave His life for you, the more you will be filled with a Christlike compassion towards others.

Romans 5:6-8 - *You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷ Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. ⁸ But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*

So the sheep love God simply by loving the least of these. And, of course, the opposite is true for the goats. Those who did not respond in love and compassion to the needy and marginalized are told by the King that they did not do it for Him. And he concludes by saying *"Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life."* Certainly a very strong consequence. I'd say that with consequences like that, we had better listen carefully to what Jesus is saying.

This is why we as believers and the church should naturally be involved in ministries of mercy and justice, ministering to the poor, the hungry, the prisoner, the alien, for our Lord identifies with them. This is why as a church we are involved with Hartford City Mission, with Street Church, with prison ministry, with ministry in nursing homes, and with our town social services.

Proverbs 19:17 - He who is kind to **the poor** lends to **the LORD**, and he will reward him for what he has done.

But even so, this kind of outreach is a weakness of ours. We need to worship and love God by loving the least of these. Sometimes we confuse worship with singing songs to God. It's more than that – it's justice, mercy, righteousness – that is worship to God.

Amos 5:21-24 - "I hate, I despise your **religious** feasts; I cannot stand your **assemblies**.²² Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. Though you bring choice fellowship offerings, I will have no regard for them.²³ Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps.²⁴ But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!"

Whatever you do to the least of these, you do to me. **You only love God as much as you love the person you love the least.** Think of the person you have the hardest time loving. Now see them as Jesus. Think of groups of people – minorities, immigrants, gays, Catholics, rich people, poor people, stuck-up people, Pharisaic Christians, men, women, Republicans, Democrats – careful about your attitude towards them. You only love God as much as you love the person you love the least. Remember Jesus' opening words in Luke:

Luke 4:16-21 - He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. And he stood up to read.¹⁷ The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found

the place where it is written: ¹⁸ "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, ¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." ²⁰ Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him, ²¹ and he began by saying to them, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

Do not mistake that part of the good news of the gospel is good news for the oppressed, the poor, those in prison. It should be great news for the poor and marginalized when a church moves in, because care for the oppressed is part of Jesus' gospel.

So how are you living out your faith? Is your faith expressing itself in this sort of action? What is your attitude towards the least of these? How are you living out your faith when it comes to the least of these? May we be a church that demonstrates our love for God by loving the least of these.