

“You Did It To Me”

Today’s Scripture, Matthew 25:31-46, is a parable of Jesus. It’s a vivid picture of judgment day. When Jesus comes back in glory, He will sit on His throne. Before Him will be gathered all peoples, and He will separate people as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. Some will go into the kingdom of God. Others to everlasting punishment.

On what basis will this separation be made? Listen to what Jesus says to those at His right hand, to those who will get into the kingdom: “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” (Matthew 25:34b-36).

They’re surprised! When did we see *You* hungry, thirsty, stranger, naked, sick, in prison, and reached out to *You*? Remember the answer? “Just as you did it to one of the least of these, my brothers and sisters, you did it to *Me*.”

And the group condemned (the goats on the left) asked the same question: “When did we see *You* in need, and did not reach out to *You*?” The answer: When you failed to do anything to help these people in need, that’s how you treated *Me*!”

This is a parable of Jesus. Parables are stories that have one main point, one truth the story conveys. What’s the point of this parable? I think it’s pretty plain, isn’t it! It’s not difficult to grasp. *The way we respond to people in need is the way we respond to Jesus.* We will be judged by how we respond to the suffering of the most insignificant people who are hungry, or thirsty, or in need of clothes, or sick, or a stranger, or in prison. These people are *Jesus* to us.

One of the interesting things about this story is what the Son of Man does NOT ask! On judgment day He doesn’t ask: What did you believe? How often did you go to church? How religious were you? Rather, how did you respond to people in need?

This can pose a problem for any of us who believe that we are saved by grace through faith in Christ, and not by good works! Aren’t we saved by believing in Jesus? “*Believe* on the Lord Jesus and you will be saved” (Acts 16:31). “God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whoever *believes in Him* will not perish, but have everlasting life” (John 3:16). Yes, we are saved by believing in Jesus. But the word “believe” in the New Testament never just means believing certain facts about Jesus, believing what the Bible says about Him is true. It is *following Him*. It is belief that encompasses our whole being - having a relationship with Jesus so that we do what He did, live as He lived. And if I act as Jesus acted I will reach out to unlovely, marginal, hurting people, just as He did.

“Just as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you did it to me...” (Matthew 25:40). *Jesus Himself comes to us in the people in need around us.*

Did you notice some interesting things about this parable? First of all, ***both groups are surprised on judgment day.*** People sent to everlasting punishment said: “When did we see *You* in need, Lord, and do nothing to help you? When did *You* come to us?” I can imagine they are panic stricken, when it begins to dawn on them what is happening. “If we had known it was *You*, we certainly would have done something!” People like this who think that being a Christian is just about religious rituals and observances, about church attendance and piety – got a huge shock and surprise.

But the people who inherited the kingdom of God were surprised too! “When did we see *You* hungry or thirsty or naked or in prison or a stranger or sick and minister to *You*?” They didn’t even realize or think about the good they had done. They just reached out in self-forgetful way, spontaneously! The real loving deeds aren’t done in a way where we pat ourselves on the back and say how good we are, or we do good things so we will be recognized and rewarded. In fact, I would argue, if the only reason we do a good turn for someone is to get some kind of reward back – that’s not goodness. It’s selfishness (self-interest).

Both those commended and those condemned were utterly surprised at the verdict! But did you also notice in the parable that ***judgment is based on whether or not the simple, practical acts of kindness and caring were done.*** Some food. A drink of water. Some clothing. A visit. A warm welcome to a stranger. Are there any of us who can’t do that? You don’t need a college education or tons of money or extraordinary talents to pull that off! Isn’t it nice to know we *all* can do things that matter: simple acts of kindness! “Just as you did it to one of the least of these...you did it to *Me*” (Matthew 25:40).

Think about it, “I was hungry, and you gave me food...” The Food Aid Foundation tells us that 795 million people in the world do not have enough food to lead a healthy, active life. That’s about 1 out of every 9 people on the earth. 1 in 4 of the world’s children are stunted (it’s 1 out of 3 in developing countries). At the same time, we in the United States spend more than \$60 billion a year trying to lose weight.

Tony Campolo tells this story. The organization he founded works with desperately poor people in Haiti. He tells of visiting a village on the border of Haiti, waiting at the edge of a grass landing strip for a Piper Cub plane to come and fly him back to the capital city. A woman came up carrying a baby boy obviously dying of starvation. The mother begged: “Don’t let my baby die. Please don’t let him die. Take him back to your country. Please mister – take my baby.” Tony turned away, knowing if he took one, he would have hundreds of babies to take – but she kept coming after him, grabbing his clothes. The small airplane arrived and taxied up. Tony ran to the plane, but the woman followed, screaming hysterically, “Don’t let my baby die!” Even as Tony hopped in, closed the plexiglass door, and the plane taxied, the woman ran beside the plane, banging on the fuselage. As it took off and circled, he could see her standing alone on the field, holding her baby. It was only about halfway back to the capital city, as Tony sat stunned, that he realized who the baby was: it was *Jesus*.

On one of my mission trips to Kenya, a mother asked one of the young ladies in our group, if our

team member could take her baby back to the United States with her.

Probably none of us, if face to face with a starving person, would withhold food. But these individual acts of kindness can hardly cure world hunger. In the kind of interdependent world we live in, people can be made hungry or deprived of the necessities of life by unfair economic policies, unjust laws, corrupt governments. But if the peoples of the world: government leaders, world economists, churches and relief agencies, can work together, we can feed more of the hungry Jesus' in the world!

I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. A man named Don Harp tells of some little girls near his home, setting up a Kool-Aid stand where Don bought a cup of cold Kool-Aid. As he sat there sipping his Kool-Aid, one girl asked, "Are you done yet?" He wasn't, and said, "No, I'm not done yet. Why?" "Cause that's our only cup!" she said.

Maybe we've only got *one cup* to give, but we can give that cup of water to those who are thirsty. Michael Cordle was appointed to St. Mark's United Methodist Church in downtown Atlanta. Going there, he found it to be a struggling inner-city congregation with an attendance hovering around 100 people. A few Sundays after arriving, Michael and his family stepped out of church after services and were stunned to see a steady stream of exuberant marchers parading down their street. This was Atlanta's "Gay Pride Parade."

As the pastor stood there watching the people streaming by, fighting his own mixed feelings about the event, it struck him that these people were part of his church's neighborhood. The other nearby church that bordered the parade sent out its message loud and clear: it had erected barricades, strung up temporary fencing, hired mounted policemen to guard their property and posted "no trespassing" signs all over church grounds.

But a year later, when the parade participants reached the front of St. Mark's church, they were greeted with an unexpected surprise: On that hot, steamy June afternoon, the church had set up a small oasis, offering cups of cold water to all the marchers who felt hot and thirsty and tired. People received the water gratefully, and St. Mark's image in the neighborhood was transformed. The cups of cold water St. Mark's offers have brought neighbors inside the doors of the church once more. Membership climbed to over 400 in the next two years, and the neighborhood feels like it has a spiritual presence in its midst again.

I remember a time visiting a parishioner in the hospital who was dying. He was trying to reach for a cup of ice cubes for his dry throat. I gave him cubes on a spoon. Then some more. And some more. He wouldn't let me go. He couldn't thank me enough. In a halting whisper, he kept saying, "Thank you, thank you so much." As I was driving home, it slowly dawned on me that I had just spent about 20 minutes with Jesus.

I was a stranger and you welcomed me. Ever been in a strange place? You're the new person at work, or school. And others huddled around in their little friendly groups, ignoring you. Remember how alone you felt? Or you were new to a community, and neighbors were friendly

with one another, but ignored you? Churches have a way of treating guests, strangers that way. That first time guest who comes through the doors – may be Jesus!

I was naked and you gave me clothing. What's so hard to understand about that? There is a store in Lititz that sells used clothing and other items at very little cost. The name of that store? "Matthew 25".

I was sick and you took care of me. Do we need a lengthy explanation from Jesus to explain what He means?

I was in prison and you visited me. I have visited church members who got into trouble and wound up in jail. I have a close pastor friend who's been in state prison for 8 years. I've visited him some, but probably not enough. Chuck Colson served a prison sentence as a result of his involvement with Nixon and the Watergate break-in. He was converted to Christ while in jail. When he was released, he founded Prison Fellowship, a ministry to prisoners. Maybe God is laying this ministry on your heart. The church Nancy and I attended when we lived in South Carolina was just starting to get involved in a prison ministry during our time there.

"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...truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you did it to me" (Matthew 25:35-36, 40).

This parable packs a wallop doesn't it! It's bad news, for any who think the extent of our Christian commitment is just going to church, praying, observing religious rites and rituals. But it's good news for many, because it shows us that in the simple, uncomplicated responses to people around us in need, we are actually reaching out to Jesus!

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