

This is a familiar parable to most of us – we’ve heard it often, we quote it, or refer to it often as motivation for why we do what we do – not only in our ministry here, but whenever we act with kindness and mercy. This is, after all, what Jesus is talking about.

This is the third of the trilogy of parables in Matthew 25: the Wise & Foolish Virgins; the Stewardship of Talents; and now the Sheep & the Goats. All are about when Christ returns in glory. And, with his return comes judgment and accountability. Are you prepared to welcome the Christ when he returns? Have you been faithful in using what God has entrusted to you? And now, have you responded to people who are vulnerable and overlooked with compassion?

This parable is the boldest of them all in its message. The Son of Man comes in glory, sits on the throne and ALL NATIONS will come before him to be judged. In many places in scripture, including Revelation, as well as here in the Ephesians text read earlier, we learn that God gave Christ power and authority over all things – to command, to judge, to save. So, let’s get down to business on this well known parable...

One thing that is very clear is that only the Son of Man is in a position to determine who the sheep are and who the goats are, and therefore who will enter the kingdom of heaven. And here, Jesus communicates that it is not profession of faith, but our actions that will make that determination. It is not so much doctrine but mercy upon which we will be judged. We will be judged not only by the good we do, but also by the good that we do NOT do.

When all people stand before the Son of Man, he will not ask:

“Do you believe I am the Son of God? (Although I am)”

“Do you profess faith in me as your Savior? (Because I am)”

The primary question will be:

“Did you show mercy to those who are vulnerable and hurting? Did you notice those who are overlooked and care for them? Did you show random, but intentional acts of kindness and mercy, *not necessarily because you thought you were doing them to me, but because it is your basic nature and desire to do so for anyone?*”

That’s what he judges us by: not just what we do, but what we do NOT do for the most vulnerable members of his family.

This is not to say that faith isn’t important – of course it’s important! It is the life blood of our existence! It gives meaning and hope and form to our lives! It is the living water that springs up to eternal life! Faith keeps us centered in Christ – open to his power and presence in our every day lives. It directs our actions and choices. It also changes our perspective and motivation for a lot of things. Because while the parable says nothing about profession of faith, those of us who HAVE professed faith, and given our lives to Christ, who have a relationship with Him which has changed our lives – ought to be motivated by that love and commitment. It is the Christ in us that helps us to see and respond to the Christ in others, and which compels us to respond to people with mercy and kindness.

We’ll get back to that in a minute!

First, you may have noticed that I have not used the language most translations use in the parable. Jesus says, “whenever you do it for the *least of these...*” And while we understand

the intention of those words, they can also create an attitude that is not helpful to how we relate to each other. When we describe or view people as "the least," that carries with it a value judgment, whether conscious or not. "The least" implies that there are people that are less than us, and we look down upon them. We still have compassion and concern, but we don't see them as equals. Which I'm sure was not Jesus intention. He isn't using "least" to describe our value or our status, but our need and how we are treated.

Because the truth is, we are all broken, and in need. And we all have gifts and something to share. Sometimes we will be in a position when we are called to give. And sometimes we might be in a position in which we are in need. You see, no one is exempt from this parable. When the Son of Man comes, EVERYONE is going to be held accountable for our action or inaction in this regard. It's not just the wealthy or powerful who will stand before him – everyone does. No matter what our circumstances are, we will all be in situations where we find someone in need and can help. This is what we share in common. So there really is no one who is least among us. The only value judgment we can make is that each of us is of extreme worth. That's why I like the language in The Message translation; it says, "Overlooked and ignored members of my family," which I think is closer to what Jesus intends.

So as those who do profess faith in Jesus as Lord and Savior, and have committed our lives to him, we are expected, and compelled to pay attention to members of Jesus' family who are overlooked or ignored. It may be the simple acts of compassion, a willingness to be inconvenienced, an interaction with someone who is alone, or a response of hospitality or kindness that allows us to become the hands and voice and heart of Jesus to one another.

I remember when I was in middle school, the custodian at our church was an older gentleman – he seemed really old to me, but I think more weathered by life than anything. He would walk close to 2 miles to and from work every day. My mother knew that he didn't like to accept rides from anyone, but one winter day, my mother saw him walking home, and noticed that he didn't have any gloves. It was a bitter cold day, and my mother immediately went to the store and bought him a pair of simple work gloves – they were the warmest ones she could find. She pulled up along side of him, offered him a ride, which he declined, so then gave him the gloves. Such a simple act of kindness left a profound impact on me, even 30 years later. My mother was motivated by her faith and love for Christ, knowing the gospel, and following its call as best she could. The Christ in her enabled her to see the reflection of Christ in Tom the custodian, and she responded.

But what if someone who doesn't have a relationship with God did same thing? Not because he saw Tom as a member of Jesus' family, or even Jesus himself, but simply because it was the right and kind thing to do? Would it have had any less value or impact? Wouldn't that also be responding to a man mostly overlooked by others? Wouldn't they also be acting with mercy and compassion toward someone who was in need?

According to this parable, the two of them – a Christian and a non-Christian would both be among the sheep. They'd both be entering the kingdom of heaven together. Both the Christian and non-Christian might be surprised by this. Perhaps we're surprised, even unsettled by this! What I know is that I hope that I am judged to be a faithful sheep! I hope to see you there! And I hope if and when we do meet on our way into the kingdom of heaven, we can celebrate together, even with those who we might have thought didn't deserve that reward.

Because after all, only the Son of Man can judge rightly between who REALLY is a sheep and who is a goat.