

Meeting Jesus in “One of the Least of These”

Covenant Church

Pastor Zack Phillips

Sunday, December 9, 2018

1. Scripture for today

Matt. 25:31-46 (NRSV)

“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 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 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 to 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.”

2. Also...

Prov 19:17: Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the LORD, and will be repaid in full.

Isa 58:6-8: Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard.

Ezek 18:5-9: If a man is righteous and does what is lawful and right—if he... gives his bread to the hungry and covers the naked with a garment,... —such a one is righteous; he shall surely live, says the Lord GOD.

Job 31:16-22: “If I have withheld anything that the poor desired, or have caused the eyes of the widow to fail, or have eaten my morsel alone, and the orphan has not eaten from it—for from my youth I reared the orphan like a father, and from my mother’s womb I guided the widow—if I have seen anyone perish for lack of clothing, or a poor person without covering,...then let my shoulder blade fall from my shoulder, and let my arm be broken from its socket.

Matt 22:36-39: “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” He said to him, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’”

3. “Reception History”

Gregory of Nyssa: [W]e do not even give those in distress a single thought, nor do we have any effective concern for those in need. Implacable hardness! A man sees another wanting bread and without nourishment. Instead of promptly carrying and reaching out to rescue him, he ignores him as he might a nourishing plant pitifully wilting from lack of water under a parching sun, while that at this man’s home there is great abundance with the power to relieve many....

...[S]hare with the poor, who are the favorites of God. All belongs to God, our common father. And we are all brothers of the same race.¹

Gregory of Nyssa: Is one not sinning against the natural law by reducing this person’s suffering to theatrical phrases, treating the disease with a speech and remembering it with a ballad? Is it not necessary rather to let our compassion and love for one another shine forth radiantly in action? There is a difference between words and action as great as the difference between a painting and the reality. The Lord affirms that we will be saved, not by our words but by our actions.

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Are we not willing to shelter... dogs under our roof? And will we disparage our own kin and race as baser than the animals? Let these things not be—no, my brothers! Resolve that this inhumanity will not triumph.²

Martin Luther: There are many who...think, if they had been there [at the inn], they would have shown the Lord and his mother a more becoming service and would not have permitted them to be treated so miserably. But they do not look by their side to see how many of their fellow men need their help, in which they let go on in their misery unaided. Who is there upon earth that has no poor, miserable, sick, erring ones, or sinful people around him? Why does he not exercise his love to those? Why does he not do to them as Christ has done to him?³

Martin Luther: For the Turks do more works of this kind and boast more of them than we who are called Christians. Among them each one regards his neighbor as his brother and shares with him whatever he has. Nay, they regard it as the greatest unfaithfulness and most shameful vice not to share bread with a neighbor in times of hunger... It seems as though [Jesus] meant hereby to show that many Christians, after receiving the preaching of the Gospel... become even worse than the heathen.⁴

¹ Gregory of Nyssa, “On the Love of the Poor 1,” in Susan R. Holman, *The Hungry Are Dying: Beggars and Bishops in Roman Cappadocia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001): p. 197.

² Gregory of Nyssa, “On the Love of the Poor 2,” in Susan R. Holman, *The Hungry Are Dying: Beggars and Bishops in Roman Cappadocia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001): p. 203.

³ Martin Luther, Christmas sermon, in *Sermons of Martin Luther* (vol. 1; edited and translated by John Nicholas Lenker; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1983): p. 155.

⁴ Martin Luther, Sermon on the Twenty-Sixth Sunday After Trinity, in *Sermons of Martin Luther* (vol. 5; edited and translated by John Nicholas Lenker; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1983): p. 383-84.