

Before the Covid pandemic hit, I'd been planning a series for this time where we'd explore 6 or 7 of Jesus' parables of judgment. (Some of you may recall a 2017 series on Jesus' *Parables of Grace*.) And so, as I laid out my 2020 preaching calendar, I scheduled a series called *Story-formed: Parables of Judgment* to include, among others, The Parable of the Unfaithful Slave, the Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids, and the Parable of the Wicked Tenants.

Because of the pandemic, it seemed wise to adjust the entire preaching plan for 2020 and so we're in the midst of a 7-week series called: *A More Christlike Christianity*. Our focus for this week is *A More Christlike Faith/Work*, but today we're going to look into one of Jesus' most bothersome parables of judgment, the Parable of the Sheep and Goats, from the Gospel of Matthew. I've asked Kriselle Crane to read our scripture for today: [Matthew 25:31-46]

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Before coming to St. Paul's just over 4 years ago, I'd been serving a church 90 minutes up the road in Orange County, in the city of Tustin. (90 minutes, that is, if there's no traffic!) Anyway, the home we lived in was just 10 minutes from Disneyland. As luck would have it, longtime members of that church were also members of Disneyland's "Club 33". If you've never heard of it, I also had not; that is until this couple invited our family to use their Club 33 membership to enjoy a special day at Disneyland. (Club 33 has a 14-year waiting list and when a spot opens up, the initial fee is \$33K with an annual fee of \$15K thereafter.)

The invitation included free entry into Disneyland for all 5 members of our family, as well as a lunch reservation at Club 33. After entering the park, we went on a few of our favorite rides. We then went to a discreet door just outside of the exit to The Pirates of the Caribbean. We pushed a little button near the door, and once our identity and reservation was confirmed, we were admitted and led to our table, passing an extravagant appetizer and dessert bar on the way. As I looked at the prices on the menu, I was grateful our benefactors had encouraged us to really enjoy ourselves with appetizers, main courses, and desserts. It was a lovely and memorable meal that was about to become more memorable than I'd imagined...

Following dessert, our waiter confirmed we were ready to return to the park and said, "I'll just bring you your check." My immediate thought was I needed to sign the check to confirm we'd had the meal. And so I was stunned to open the small leather folder and discover a bill totaling \$484; which was more than half of our entire monthly food budget. Jen, my wife, saw what I'm sure was a look of sheer panic on my face and said,

"Why don't you pass that over to me?" This meant Jen would calculate the tip while I tried to figure out either: A.) an escape route, B.) how not to hyperventilate, and C.) how we were going to feed our family for the rest of the month.

As I sat in silence, the waiter took and then returned the credit card to Jen. All the while I was wondering how I'd totally misconstrued what I'd understood to be an extravagantly gracious gesture on the part of the couple who'd provided our family this rare opportunity. Now, because there are unique souvenirs that can only be obtained inside of Club 33, we stopped near the exit so that Andy, Abi, and Riah could use some of their own money to get something special to remember the experience. (Jen and I would not need anything else to remember our experience!)

As we stood at the souvenir counter, our waiter rushed around the corner and, with great embarrassment, said, "I am so sorry! You were not supposed to get the bill! May I have your credit card so that I can reverse the charges?" At that point, I felt more faint than when I'd initially seen the bill! (Such relief!)

This is the first time I've told of that experience in a church setting. I did not want to share it with the couple who'd invited us to Club 33 as I feared it might lead to some discomfort for the person who'd been our waiter. (He had been clearly mortified by his mistake!) I also felt our benefactors might feel some distress that their intended act of kindness and generosity had actually caused us about 15 minutes of extreme consternation! (Those kind folks have passed away, but not before providing our family one more visit to Club 33 that was much less stressful than the first.)

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Those feelings of angst and distress are what I imagine might await those find themselves to the left of Jesus "when the Son of Man comes in his glory" and separates "people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats." Since the beginning of this series I've pointed out several times that in Matthew 7:21 Jesus says that some who call him 'Lord, Lord' may find themselves on the left side of the Son of Man by failing to do the will of the One Jesus calls his Heavenly Father. The way Jesus tells it, these folks will be surprised to discover that they've totally misunderstood how salvation is given.

In Matthew 7 Jesus then adds the following: "Everyone then who hears these words of mine and *acts* upon them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and *does not act* on them will be

like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell – and great was its fall.” (Matthew. 7:24-27)

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As throughout this series, these words from Matthew 7 and Matthew 25, which reports these to be the very words of Jesus, might leave us, I think, more than a little distressed; asking ourselves, if we, and our Protestant forbearers in faith, have missed something important by articulating the doctrine that salvation comes only by grace through faith, and without regard to any works of righteousness?

Before saying anything else, let me mention that many biblical scholars do not consider Matt. 25:31-46 to be a parable. Though there is highly symbolic language, goats, sheep, eternal punishment, etc., Jesus’ parables normally begin with phrases such as, “The Kingdom of God is like...” or “The Kingdom of God can be compared to...” or “It is as if...” Jesus uses none of these phrases as an entry point here, and so Jesus seems to be saying how things will actually be when the Son of Man comes in glory. If that’s the case, and I think it is, Jesus’ words might seem even more important for us to hear and heed because this is God incarnate describing how judgment will be dispensed.

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So let me point out 3 features of the ‘final judgment’ Jesus describes in his teaching. First, it is clear that saying with our mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord’, is not the basis of reward for the sheep nor is it an incantation whereby goats can avoid eternal punishment. Right? This coheres with what I said last week, that our tidy summations of ‘the gospel’ simply cannot contain the fullness of the gospel... (And remember, in this particular series, each week we’re building upon what we’ve explored in prior weeks!)

Notice also that those who are judged as righteous have no knowledge or awareness that they were caring for the Son of Man, nor it seems, any underlying motive for their actions. Indeed they seem surprised to be singled out as sheep! As Daniel Ott points out, “They simply cared for the strangers that came among them with no awareness of potential reward or punishment. They merely did what was right. Likewise, the goats are judged harshly, not due to any lack of faith, but as a result of their moral failure.”

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What does that moral failure consist of? This leads to the second feature of Jesus’ teaching. Those who are judged as having acted rightly – the sheep who are righteous – do not simply show up at the end of time. They have been living the type of life Jesus is describing up to the point the Son of Man comes in his

glory: feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, providing welcome to the stranger, visiting those who are imprisoned, etc.,

And please note, Jesus gives no indication that these pictures of righteousness are metaphors. So, for example, this is actually about feeding people who are hungry with food. It’s not about not feeding them with the word of God, or slaking their spiritual thirst, or clothing them with the gospel.

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Thirdly, I’d point out that the purpose of this story is not to incite fear of eternal punishment. The parable which precedes our passage today is the Parable of the Talents. I am not going to go into great detail, but in that parable the servant who is deemed unworthy is the one who refuses to act faithfully based upon his ‘fear’ of displeasing his master. (That’s in Matthew 25:25.) So fear paralyzes us. What Jesus does in this teaching about the sheep and goats, and throughout his ministry, is to get us moving; to shift our focus “from a prospect of damnation to the possibility of participation in the coming kingdom of heaven and eternal life.”

One pastor writes, “Food, water, clothing, hospitality, companionship; these are not only the most necessary elements for communal life; they are the most readily available gifts [we have] to give. The lesson of the sheep and the goats is good news, because it asks each [of us] to share precisely what each [of us] has.”

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So what are we to say about salvation by grace through faith without regard to works of righteousness? I would offer this: I believe in salvation by grace through faith, and I believe what Jesus says, that those who hear his words but do not act upon them are building upon a sandy foundation. According to scripture, these seemingly paradoxical ideas go hand-in-hand. This is how it’s expressed in James 2:14-18: “What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill, and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works is dead. But someone will say, ‘You have faith and I have works.’ Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith.”

Here is how I might sum it up: in a Christlike church, faith and works are not at all opposed to each other. Indeed a Christlike faith is always ready to do works of righteousness that reflect glory and compassion of the one we call our Lord. Amen.