

"Lord, When Did We See You?"

Matthew 25:31-46

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In the book *On Looking*, Alexandra Horowitz describes walking around her block in New York. Each time, she was looking for something in particular or paying attention to certain sights. Often, she took the walk with an expert in some field who would help her see things from their perspective. On one walk she took along a wildlife expert. She wasn't expecting much wildlife in New York City, so she didn't see what the expert saw. He mentioned seeing several different birds that she had totally missed. Often we see what we expect to see. Failing to see what's right in front of us is called "inattention blindness." An example of this is a video that psychologists use to test selective attention. The video shows several people tossing around basketballs. Students are asked to count how many times the people in white shirts toss the ball. After watching the video, they are asked how many throws there were. They're also asked if they noticed the gorilla (a person in a gorilla suit) that walked through the group of players. Nearly half of the viewers missed the gorilla. They were focused on one thing and didn't expect to see something else, so they didn't see it (*On Looking: Eleven Walks with Expert Eyes* 121-23).

Where do we expect to see the Lord? Are we surprised at where God shows up? In the end, will we be surprised at all the places the Lord appeared and we didn't notice because that's not where we expected him to be?

This passage is the conclusion of the last large section of Jesus' teaching in Matthew. It includes several themes from the Gospel. And it caps off this section about being ready for Jesus' return. Sometimes it's called the parable of the sheep and the goats.

But this "parable" of Jesus' is really a vision or revelation of final judgment. Parables typically start with familiar, this-worldly scenes and then shift into a new dimension of meaning. This scene starts with an other-worldly image of the coming of the Son of Man. Then it shifts into affirming the importance of ordinary, this-worldly deeds (M. Eugene Boring, *Matthew*,

The New Interpreter's Bible online at www.ministrymatters.com/library, accessed 3/27/17).

One thing we notice about this Scripture is that it shows an ultimate and clear-cut distinction between two groups of people and their final destinations. It's similar to the ending of the Sermon on the Mount where there are those who hear and practice the words of Jesus and those who hear but do not practice the words of Jesus (7:24-27). There's also that disturbing section just before the end of the Sermon where Jesus says, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only those who do the will of my Father who is in heaven" (7:21). The question comes back on us: Which group are we part of or will we be part of?

The nations, all the people of all nations are gathered before the Son of Man when he comes in his glory. Most of the time, when Jesus refers to a king in his parables, he's speaking of God the Father. But here, the Son of Man, Jesus himself, is the King. Several times in the Gospel Jesus refers to his coming in glory with the angels. Sometimes the angels divide the wicked from the righteous. Here Jesus the King separates the people like a shepherd separates sheep from goats. On one hand are those who are called "blessed by my Father" and "righteous." On the other hand are those who are said to be "cursed." The difference seems to be how each group treated people who were in need.

There are two major interpretations of the teaching here. The more familiar and popular one sees the righteous as followers of Christ and the "least of these" as anyone in need—all the hungry and thirsty, the strangers, those without clothing, the sick and imprisoned. In this view, at the final judgment we'll discover that every time we helped someone in need we were helping Jesus. And whenever we failed to help those in need, we failed to help Jesus. Both groups are surprised and ask, "Lord, when did we see you?" They didn't expect to see Jesus in the poor and needy.

Mother Theresa of Calcutta popularized this view when she talked about serving Christ in the poorest of the poor. But she wasn't the first to hold this view. Many people in Christian history have spoken of seeing the face of Christ in the poor.

One day when Francis of Assisi was riding, he met a leper whose disease had made him look repulsive. Something moved Francis to dismount and fling his arms around this poor sufferer; and in his arms the face of the leper changed to the face of Christ.

Martin of Tours was a Roman soldier in the Fourth Century. He became a Christian and later a bishop. One cold winter day, as he was entering a city, a beggar stopped him and asked for alms. Martin had no money; but the beggar was blue and shivering with cold, and Martin gave what he had. He took off his soldier's cloak, worn and frayed as it was; he cut it in two and gave half of it to the beggar. That night Martin had a dream in which he saw the heavenly places and all the angels and Jesus in the midst of them. Jesus was wearing half of a Roman soldier's cloak. One of the angels asked, "Master, why are you wearing that battered old cloak? Who gave it to you?" And Jesus answered, "My servant Martin gave it to me" (William Barclay, *Matthew*, vol. 2: 326).

I'd always understood this Scripture this way. So I felt good when I gave to someone in need or helped them in some way—I'm serving Jesus—and felt guilty when I didn't help—I missed a chance to serve Jesus.

The other major interpretation of this passage, and one that most of the commentaries follow, is that "nations" here refers to pagans, outsiders, all the nations or peoples to which the disciples would go to make disciples. The "least of these" are then the followers of Jesus. He says as much earlier in the Gospel. Disciples are Jesus' brothers and sisters (12:50; 28:10). Sometimes he calls disciples "the least" or "the little ones" (11:11; 18:3-6, 10-14). How someone treats representatives of Jesus is how they treat him—showing hospitality, giving a cup of cold water (10:40-42).

The judgment, then, is based on how the people receive the messengers of Jesus. "The nations will be judged according to how they respond to the gospel and its messengers" (Keener, *Matthew*, IVP NT Commentary Series). Disciples are those who bring the gospel and represent the gospel. Treating them with kindness is to treat Jesus with kindness. Failing to receive and to meet the needs of Christian missionaries is to fail to meet the needs of Jesus. This emphasizes the strong bond between Jesus and his followers.

I was surprised when I first heard this interpretation. I thought maybe it was cooked up to excuse Christians from doing the work of caring for the poor and needy. But even interpreting Matthew 25 this way, there's enough in the rest of the Bible about helping and caring for poor people, loving neighbors, being the neighbor to those in need, or loving enemies that we can't get around it. Paul sums it up this way: "Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers" (Galatians 6:10).

Really, neither approach to this passage lets us off the hook. In one view, we serve or fail to serve Christ in his "distressing disguise" of the poor. Or, in the other view, we go as messengers of Christ, representing him, and risk poverty, mistreatment, even imprisonment. In that case, we know that Jesus identifies with us. He's in us and with us through all that. Jesus identifies with his followers. He's present in those who go in his name as they suffer. Remember what he said to Paul on the road to Damascus: Not, "Why do you persecute my followers?" but, "Why do you persecute *me*?" (Acts 9:4). Jesus is in and with all our fellow servants. How we treat each other is how we treat him. Is he also present in some sense in all who are in need so that serving them is serving him?

The worry in either interpretation is that it teaches salvation by works. But the passage fits with the gospel of the kingdom as God's gift. All through Matthew's Gospel, he stresses the importance of righteousness as good deeds. But they're always part of a larger context where God acts graciously for the salvation of his people. The deeds of mercy in the present passage are symbolic of a deeper reality (Donald Hagner, *Matthew, Word Biblical Commentary*). They demonstrate a response to the message of God's kingdom, a response to Jesus the King, and character shaped by him. That response is vital; it makes all the difference.

The Bible declares—and it's clear in this scene—that not all people are saved, not all will enter into God's eternal glory. Some will be excluded from the new creation and will suffer the pain and isolation of being separated from God. As Jesus says, some will go into eternal fire that was prepared for the devil and his angels (that is, demons). Hell wasn't prepared for people. John Wesley said, "It is not originally for you; you are intruders

into everlasting fire.” We’re made for the eternal kingdom of God, to live in right relationship with God and each other forever in God’s new creation. Part of the tragedy of hell is that it contradicts our reason for being. Hell is close to *non-being*. C. S. Lewis describes the inhabitants of hell as those who have given up most of their humanity through being self-centered and shutting themselves off from God’s love. One of Lewis’ most memorable lines about hell is that the doors of hell are locked on the *inside* (*The Problem of Pain* 125-27; see also Lewis’ *The Great Divorce*).

Let’s be on the lookout for the Lord in all the places he appears and reveals himself—including us, including all the places we go as his witnesses and servants, among all the people who need to know him.

Have you received the message of God’s kingdom? Have you received the King, Jesus? Do you have faith in him? Are we living that faith through works of mercy? Do we continue to respond to and serve our Lord as we serve his people, as we serve all people who are in need? Are we going as representatives of Jesus to give more people the opportunity to respond to him?