

November 20 Christ the King & Judgment Day

Toward the end of this earthly ministry, just before he went to the cross, Jesus concluded his public teaching with today's Gospel: a parable about the end. In the end, when it's all over, says Jesus, all the nations of the world will be gathered before His throne for the great judgment.

While the scene is majestic, and even a bit frightening, it is also encouraging, even comforting. Note that the criteria by which the King shall judge are, from one perspective, rather small and seemingly insignificant. Small acts of service to those in great need are acts of service to Christ himself.

It ought to be a comfort to know that, the King says that we shall be judged on the basis of deeds of mercy that are in reach of everyone. In these small deeds of generosity, given to others, we are serving Christ himself.

Jesus uses the image of separating the sheep and goats as an analogy for humankind, which is likewise sorted into two groups at the final judgment.

The ones on the right are welcomed into the kingdom of God. The ones on the left are told to depart from Christ's presence forever. The criteria have to do with whether or not one has been merciful and helpful to those in need. Those on the right, Jesus said, have actually ministered to *him* by their compassion toward those in need. Those on the left have actually ignored *him* by ignoring the needy.

In other words, our sins of *omission* can be just as serious as our sins of *commission*. The passage reminds us that what we don't do can be as great a reflection of our commitment to follow Jesus -- or lack thereof -- as what we do.

In the end, we shall be judged, not on the basis of our ability to believe certain Christian doctrines. We shall be judged on how well we reached out to those in need -- whether or not you loved your neighbor. It says nothing about whether or not you asked for forgiveness or embraced Jesus as Savior.

In discussions with non-Christians, one objection to our faith is that it is exclusive. Sometimes they'll say it's not right that you Christians say that good Buddhists or followers of Islam aren't saved. My answer "Who gets saved isn't up to me".

Jesus told this story to his followers and some other Jews -- but he began *All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another.*

All the nations -- people of many different religions and those who claimed none. But the same standard is applied to all. And when they are sorted into two groups, both are quite surprised to learn which one they've been sorted into. *Lord, when did we see you hungry?*

So what does that say about those of other religions? Maybe that they have to pass the same final exam. The difference is that we have an advantage -- the teacher has told us the questions that will be on that test, so we can be ready.

Judging from this passage alone, a nonbeliever who is compassionate to his neighbor in need seems to be on the same footing as a believer who does the same.

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But, of course, Jesus wasn't trying to give a full description of the final judgment, but rather to make a point -- *the arena of faith is daily life.* The "goats" had separated their commitment to Jesus from the doings of daily life. But in reality, the place we live our faith is in our daily lives.

In other words, this story tells us that compassion belongs in not only extraordinary circumstances, but also in our ordinary and everyday encounters -- in the smaller things -- the chance meetings, the routine places, the circumstances where, when we do a good deed, it seems to us so ordinary that we think it's hardly worth mentioning.

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For many of us, the way that we respond on a weekly basis is in our giving to the work of the church. In the light of today's scripture, perhaps we in the church ought to make more of the simple, seemingly small act of putting money into the offering plate. The giving of a small portion of our income is no small gesture, in the light of today's Gospel. We shall be judged by the King on the basis of such seemingly small acts of beneficence.

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Many churches encourage tithing as a stewardship discipline: Giving 10 percent of income to Christ's work. *Not ready for that?*

What about giving one-tenth of your time to God in ministry, thus serving the risen Lord Jesus through service to others?

If we spend eight hours a day sleeping, that leaves 16 waking hours. One-tenth of that is 1.6 hours. Multiply that figure by seven, and you get just over 11 hours a week. Just think of what we could accomplish, if we used all those hours to serve!

There are two places where the strength of a Christian's commitment is recorded in writing: the checkbook and the calendar.

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One more thing to hear from this account is that *God has provided some directions for living*. I once saw a sign that read, "This life is only a test. If it had been an actual life, you would have been given further instructions on where to go and what to do." We can perhaps identify with that, especially when we think of the unexpected circumstances that arise where we clue-less, and have to muddle through. But there is a sense in which these words of Jesus *are* instructions about what to do -- at least in circumstances where we see someone in need: We should think of what we would do if that person were Jesus, and then do that, for in helping that person, we really are helping Jesus as well.

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There's an old story about a boy living in a children's home. For grace at the dinner table, the superintendent usually prayed, "*Come, Lord Jesus, be our guest, let this food to us be blessed.*" The boy said to him, "You always ask Jesus to come, but he never does. Will he ever come?" The superintendent said, "We'll have to wait."

One evening, during supper, there was a knock on the door, and standing there was an old man, poorly clothed, cold and hungry. The superintendent invited him to join them for supper, and he pointed to the empty chair. The man sat and, and the boy gladly passed food to him.

Later the boy said, "*Jesus must not have been able to come himself, so he sent this man in his place.*"

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"*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*" (v. 40). That resonates with Jesus' previous teaching on this matter: "*Whoever welcomes you welcomes me . . . and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple -- none of these will lose their reward*" (Matthew 10:40-42; cf. Matthew 18:1-5, 19:13-15).

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One night at the dormitory Bible study, the college chaplain read this parable to the gathered students, and a Sophomore blurted out, "*I can do that!*"

What did you say? "I can do that! I thought that to please Jesus you had to volunteer to be a missionary to Africa or something, that you had to be some kind of martyr for the faith, but food to a hungry person -- or clothes for a needy guy? No problem! I can't start a church, but I sure have time to visit in someone whose sick. So that's it? I can do that!"

It was a rare moment of insight, looking at a familiar text of scripture through the eyes of a 19-year-old.

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Well, today's scripture seems clear: we shall be judged on the basis of our reaching out in mercy -- specific, concrete acts of service to those in need. And the good news is: You can do this!

Some of you here this morning are already experiencing the joy of faithful giving in your support of the work of the church. You may be giving a relatively small amount of your total income, but your gift is a great thing, seen through the eyes of the King.

Some of you may hear today's scripture as a challenging word of judgment, a word that pushes or prods you into greater adventures of faithfulness. And some of you ought to hear today's Gospel as a word of encouragement. There are lots of things that Christ commands that are, as yet, beyond your reach. But the good news today is: *You can do this!*

