

# **A Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church**

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**Matthew 25:31-46**

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How you understand, internalize, and apply a passage of scripture is often determined by your interpretive lens. Where do you see yourself in the scripture? With whom do you identify?

The gospel passage today is a well-known story. Let's find ourselves in it. It's the last parable Jesus tells in answer to the disciples' questions on the Mount of Olives just outside of Jerusalem. At the beginning of Matthew, chapter 24, they ask, "When will the day come? How will we know? What are the signs?" They sense time is running short and they are asking the big questions. Over the next two chapters, Jesus talks about fig trees, bridesmaids at a wedding, servants entrusted with talents, all using images from daily life. But now his gaze rests on the heavenly throne room and he's on the throne. Standing before the throne are all the people of the world and he separates one from another, sheep and goats, some to eternal reward, some to eternal punishment. The sheep on the right. The goats on the left. The King says to those on the right, "Come to your eternal reward; inherit the kingdom I prepared for you. You fed me, gave me water, clothed me, visited me, took care of me when you did all of these things to the least of these my brothers." The king says to those on the left, "Welcome to hell. You didn't feed me, clothe me, give me something to drink when you neglected the least of these."

Where do you find yourself in this story? When we read the story, we ask ourselves, "Am I a sheep or a goat?" Everything hangs in the balance. How do you know if you are a sheep or a goat? It's not for the sheep or the goats to designate themselves or anyone else as such; that's the task for the one on the throne. How he judges is a surprise to both sheep and goats. When you gave food to the hungry, drink to the thirsty . . . you did it for him. Welcome to your reward. When you went to the other side of the street, when you drank all the clean water, when you didn't share your winter coat, when you ignored the prisoners, when you turned your back to a stranger, you did all of that to Christ, welcome to hell.

So, where are you in the story? Are you a sheep or a goat? We take as normative that these are the only two choices. There's a third person in the story, though: the least of these. We assume we are not the least of these. And we do so for good reason. I don't know of anyone here this morning who is malnourished, who doesn't have access to clean drinking water, who is naked, or imprisoned, etc. There may be some strangers here to one another, but you are welcome here and we want you to feel welcome. Furthermore, we know what hunger looks like. We know what prison looks like. We have looked into the eyes of the homeless and hungry and we are too careful to call our desire for lunch true hunger or to confuse a temporarily dry mouth with true thirst. We are smart enough for that.

But it's interesting that when Jesus says, "the least of these," he says, "my brothers." The only time Jesus uses that language is when he's talking about his disciples, his followers. So could it be that "the least of these" means "the least of my disciples" and the judgment rests on how people treat his disciples? He and his followers have certainly experienced many of these things on their journeys. They've been hungry and thirsty; they have been unwelcome strangers.

So they already have some experience with this. And in a few days from now, Jesus himself will experience all of these things. In the very next chapter of Matthew, the plot to arrest him will begin. So in a few days Jesus will experience hunger, thirst, nakedness, imprisonment, be treated like a stranger by his own people, and will be abandoned in his moment of greatest physical distress. Has any man been less than Jesus was regarded in the hands of his tormentors?

So maybe, as Jesus prepares for his last days, this last parable serves as a prophesy for the lives his disciples will live. They will be like the least of these in the world. They will hunger and thirst, they will be imprisoned and will be in danger—all because they live as followers of Christ. These guys weren't experiencing all of this before becoming followers of Jesus. They weren't in jail or starving or strangers. They were workers; most of them were fishermen. They were just people. But now, because of Jesus, there's something about the life they will lead that will cause them to experience or at least be vulnerable to experiencing terrible hardships. As such, their lives are sufficiently peculiar that the judgment on the nations of the world in this story hinges on how the world responds to their needs. I don't know exactly what that means for the world. It seems odd to think that Jesus intended to describe us in such a privileged position that the world is judged by whether it gives us a cold cup of water. That seems backwards and I'm not sure that's the whole story of salvation. But what it means for me is that the life of a Christian should be sufficiently peculiar to give the world something to respond to. As John Yoder and others have said about the relationship between church and world, "The first task of the church is to be the church so the world will know it's the world."

So as those who follow Jesus, our first question is not, "Am I a sheep or a goat in how I treat the nameless 'poor'"; but the question is, "What is normative for the life of a disciple?" In this way of understanding the parable, normative for the life of a disciple is not primarily being nice to poor people. What is normative, expected of someone who is faithful to the way of Christ in our world, is hunger, thirst, pain, suffering, imprisonment. This sounds harsh and strange to our ears, but the first disciples I think understood. In Jesus' first sermon, he began to reveal the great upside-down reversal that he came to make happen. "Blessed are the poor in spirit. Blessed are those who mourn. Blessed are the meek. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness . . . blessed are you when others revile and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account." (Matthew 5). Later (Matthew 10), Jesus warns, "Behold I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves." And now here at the end of his teaching ministry and life he tells this parable and in short order he will complete the great upside-down reversal himself by wearing a crown of thorns. These guys understood what kind of life was in store for disciples of Jesus. No wonder they ran away and hid in a locked room after Jesus died.

We might say, "That's their experience; it's not ours. (Thank goodness.)" That's largely true. But what does that mean then? Are we just to count our blessings that we don't experience these things? Well I do. But I also wonder, what does it mean that my life is insulated from this kind of suffering when, the way Jesus describes it, the way of following him necessarily involves hardship and sacrifice. Either Jesus was wrong, or my easy discipleship needs some reevaluation.

I'm not suggesting this morning that we should all go to a strange place without any clothes on until we get sick, and be hungry and thirsty and get ourselves arrested, all to recreate a

parable. What I think Jesus is implying is that faithful discipleship necessarily means that a faithful disciple's experience in the world will be raw.

The one characteristic each of these "least of these" has is vulnerability. This is also where Christ put himself on the day of his arrest and crucifixion. Though, as the King of Kings, he had legions of angels at his command, he became vulnerable to whatever humans would do to him. In anticipation of that, in this his last teaching, he said that he, the King of Kings, is so identified with those who are most vulnerable, most powerless in the world, that to be vulnerable and powerless is to be close to Christ, and that to love and care for someone who is vulnerable to you is to minister to Christ.

Concerned, socially minded Christians might worry that this way of reading the passage is just a clever means to avoid a necessary, benevolent response to serve those who are hungry, thirsty, in prison, sick, and strangers—the least of these. But quite the contrary, it is in fact the only way to really minister to someone at all in the name of Christ. In Philippians, we are reminded that Christ had power equal to God, but in obedience he lowered himself and humbled himself to become human, to become a servant, to the cross. This is called his *kenosis*, his emptying, being poured out like water out of a pitcher. To follow Christ will require from each of us at some point in life a pouring out, a willingness to be emptied, to be made vulnerable, to experience the rawness of life that so many people experience every single day.

In Dietrich Bonhoeffer's words, "In Christ the form of humanity was created anew. What was at stake was not a matter of place, time, climate, race, individual, society, religion, or taste but nothing less than the life of humanity, which recognized here its image and hope. What happened to Christ happened to humanity. There is no explaining the mystery that only a part of humanity recognizes the form of its savior. The desire of the one who has become human to take form in all human beings remains to this hour unsatisfied. He who bore the form of *the* human being can only take form in a small flock; this is Christ's church."

In a few moments, as Christ's church, when we take communion, we will in a small way act out our own vulnerability and our own responsibility. We come forward with empty hands to someone else who holds all the bread, as if we are beggars. The one with the bread extends it to you as a gift of abundant grace. After you pinch a piece and dip the bread in the cup and take it into yourself, thus being reminded of the sacrifice of body and blood from Christ to you, stay where you are and you will be handed the loaf and asked to turn and share it with the next person, the next beggar who comes down the aisle toward you. We are recipients of this gift and we turn around and offer it to someone else. May God use these simple acts here in this place to shape our hearts into the image of Christ in the world and sharpen our interpretative lens of the world.