

April 7, 2019

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Matthew 25: The Great Divide: Makers and Takers

Scripture: Matthew 25: 31-46

At the end of the 25th Chapter of Matthew's gospel, we have the last teaching Jesus shares before he heads to the cross. We can assume because of the timing alone, this is important. Jesus offers a parable of the Great Divide that will come for all people at the end of time. This isn't just a word to the faithful because the King is described judging all the nations of the world.

We can call it the Great Divide because the King is busy separating **the Sheep from the Goats**. One way to think of the division is between—the Goats, who represent those who are **Mercy Takers**—the ones who have been given respect and blessings in life but have kept those gifts to themselves. And the Sheep, who represent the **Mercy Makers**—the ones who have been just as blessed but who couldn't keep those gifts to themselves and shared them.

We all receive the mercy of God—in a spiritual sense—God's 'rain' falls on the just and unjust alike. The grace of God is open to all which makes us all Takers of one kind or another. It is just that some of us have had a greater opportunity to Take than others. On a material level, the vast majority of we who are here this morning have received most of what we've needed to get along rather well in this world. And there is nothing wrong with that. It's just that we are told the King is less interested in what you Take and more interested in what you Make with It—in other words, how you handle what you've been given.

Then Jesus ups the ante by saying that when we show simple, every day acts of mercy to others, we're showing mercy to Jesus himself. Jesus is present in the human need all around us. And of course, both sheep and goats are shocked at this revelation and say, "Lord, if we only knew!"

Really though, the best summary I could offer you of this parable is in song. It's **the Goat Song** and it goes through all the Takers and Non-Makers in the New Testament to illustrate Jesus' point. I'll sing the first verse through and then you can join me as we bring the house down this morning by singing Matthew 25.

Jesus says that Mercy—cutting others slack, not holding their weakness against them, forgiving and responding to those who have done nothing to deserve it—Mercy is the whole reason he came in the first place. **He says more than once that has come to show mercy to the overlooked and the undeserving—the lost and the least of God's children.**

I suppose it says something that we can use the same language we use in America about economics and class to describe the *Two States of Mercy*. There are

the **Mercy Privileged or the Mercy Affluent**: Those to whom are given the benefit of the doubt; those who are likely to be quickly forgiven; Those we are most welcome in our homes and in our lives. And then there are the **Mercy Deprived or those who are Underprivileged in the Mercy department**—those whose circumstance in life or self-defeating behavior has made it difficult for them to access God’s blessings--those who are blamed for their own short-comings and viewed with suspicion by polite society.

Jesus turns the tables on us at the last minute of the last judgment on that Great Getting Up Morning and says, **“These are the folks you should have been looking out for—these are the ones who needed the Mercy and blessings I gave you. They are not just mercy disadvantaged, in a very real sense, they are me.”**

So Jesus repeats his litany of need twice in this parable which is a pretty good sign that we ought to pay close attention to it. It goes like this:

I was hungry and you fed me,
I was thirsty and you gave me a drink,
I was homeless and you gave me a room,
I was shivering and you gave me clothes,
I was sick and you stopped to visit,
I was in prison and you came to me.’

Okay, Jesus, so far so good. I’m thinking these are exactly the folks we are trying to minister to through our mission ministries and outreach. We are doing a whole lot more than most people outside the church are doing. We’re writing checks, creating programs, hiring staff, recruiting volunteers, so that we might share the very same mercy that Jesus is describing. Right?

Alas, even good-hearted acts of compassion just don’t sound the same when we list them in the way Jesus did:

I was hungry and you gave me a gift card, dropped me off at the food pantry
I was naked you and sent me to Goodwill with some cash
I was in prison and you mailed me a tract and a Bible
I was sick and you wrote a check to St. Jude children’s hospital in my honor
I was a stranger and you sent me to your favorite hotel, introduced me to the pastor, or promised to give me a call that may never have come.

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And it’s even worse than that. In the original languages and in the original context these statements meant something much different than what they mean today. Remember, many if not most of the Jews worked sunrise to sunset, living daily denarii to denarii.

This is much closer to what Jesus actually meant:

You Gave me something to eat—you broke bread with me at your table.

Remember, there were no restaurants or food pantries or grocery stores.

You Gave me something to drink—you shared your cup with me

Drinking required a well, a bucket, and a cup—there was no bottled water or travel mugs or vending machines.

You Invited me in—literally translated, “you welcomed me into your home”

Where else would I invite you in? There were few synagogue buildings, few actual inns, travelers relied on family and clan connections when away from home.

You Clothed me—you went into your closet and brought back your clothes.

Again, No Target, Good Will, or one day Amazon delivery.

You Looked after me when I was sick—you brought me comfort

No hospitals, few if any of what we would call doctors, most treatment was palliative—making people comfortable

You Came to visit me in prison—you gave me hope

They did not have jails or prisons as we do today. They locked you up, but you had to round up your own food and clean clothes and so on. The idea that the city or Emperor should pay to keep you fed and clothed was completely foreign to them back then.

Now what do you notice about these declarations Jesus makes when you look at them in context? You ate *with me*, drank *with me*, you looked after me, you visited me. We can't help but join with Bible commentator Matt Woodley, who concluded:

“Here’s the crux of this passage: mercy [for Jesus] requires personal presence”

Being there for those in need requires ‘being there’ at a basic physical level. We cannot be merciful without showing up.

Now I’ve had a chance to chew on that a bit this week. And as I did it made me want to rethink what we want to do as a church when we want to make a difference in this world by helping others. I don’t think it’s any great revelation to realize that there is a difference between doing good **for** someone and doing good **with** and **alongside** someone. Instead of just giving to those in need we’ve started to ask, how can we partner with you to make the biggest impact in helping you meet your need?

Sure, we still can support ministries that share the good news of Jesus on our behalf. Of course, we can do more together to alleviate the suffering of God’s children than we might alone. **But maybe what we need is to do is also go back to a simpler, more organic approach: friends and families coming together to pitch in and get involved in the lives of our neighbors by putting our time and presence at their disposal when they need it most.** Sharing our abundance of mercy with the mercy-depleted isn’t done by committee it’s done one relationship at a time.

But I also need to be clear about what this parable is *not* saying. Jesus isn't saying that the only thing that matters for women and men of faith is what we do for those in need. I like the way one Commentary put it:

“Based on Jesus' call, we might conclude that we're accepted by God based on our good deeds of mercy. But that's not consistent with the rest of Matthew's teaching.

- First of all, the believers who receive the Father's blessing of eternal joy gasp with surprise when they hear Jesus' words of approval. After offering thousands of cups of cold water, they hardly give it a thought.

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- Second, Jesus already gave us the one doorway to enter and receive the kingdom with all its blessings. “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven”. “Poor in spirit” people don't buy their way into God's grace; they receive it as a gift.”

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It goes on:

“So from the flow of Matthew's entire story, we could summarize mercy in this way:

- (1) We receive mercy from God the Father;
- (2) We display mercy because of God the Father.

In other words, as we engage in acts of mercy, even tiny deeds of love for little people, the world changes. The kingdom comes. Our light shines and our Father in heaven receives glory.”

We are who we are because of the mercy of our heavenly Father. We live as we live by sharing that mercy, especially with the ones the world has decided don't deserve it. And when we do that, we imitate the One who looked at the likes of his disciples and the likes of you and me and—in spite of what he saw around that table—said to them: **“This is my body and it is given for you...”**

Sending Out

Few people know that *Horton Hears A Who* comes from the 25th Chapter of Matthew. Few people know that it is the Jesus story in a nutshell.

Jesus hears the cries of the Whos, but no one else can. They were either too small, too insignificant. In fact, no one really tried all that hard. And when Jesus made a stand to protect the Whos—to insist that they were people, no matter how small or how different, Jesus is rejected, imprisoned, and threatened within an inch of his life. And then the tiniest Who in Whoville joined the other

voices saying, “We’re here, we’re here,” and the people finally understood that they were in fact, here, and in need of care and protection.

Jesus says to us this morning, look around you and pause. If you open your ears to listen and tune your hearts to me—you will discover a whole group of people that everyone else has overlooked. They are my people, no matter how small or seemingly insignificant. And if they are my people then it means that they are your people. In fact, they might as well be me.

Now that you have heard them, now that you know who they are, respond accordingly.

So may we all. Amen.