

“Promise that’s Accountable”

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Christ the King

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Matthew 25:31-46

“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’

And the king will answer them, ‘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.’ Then he will say to those at his left hand, ‘You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ Then they also will answer, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?’ Then he will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’ And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

Prayer.

War torn and ragged; we’ve seen the blank stares before on the news, of families, mostly women and children, fleeing violence, torture, or oppression.

Names like Darfur, Cambodia, and Mozambique come to mind.

Today, it would be politically incorrect for one to preach or pronounce judgment upon a group of moneyless, broken, homeless war refugees.

“They’ve been through enough,” or “Don’t blame the victim,” we would hear in protest.

Yet, this is exactly the prophecy to which Ezekiel was called.

In the years 593 to 571 BC God speaks through his prophet Ezekiel to pronounce judgment upon the Jews, who had been beaten in battle, and the survivors had been shipped en-mass into exile.

They had the look; they were the refugees.

Using scathing words and nearly out-of-control emotions, Ezekiel continues the terrifying prophecies of doom, just as his pre-exilic predecessors had done before him: this is what you get when you worship idols and live in moral corruption. This is what you get coming to you.

Ezekiel has a vested interest: he believes he will be personally held accountable for Israel's sin.

This gives the words of Ezekiel a feeling of forward leaning urgency.

Shake! Shake up the people. Wake them up!

Ezekiel is on a roll.

He spreads the pain; spreads the blame, from the general, to the specific.

Ezekiel calls all Israel's leaders filthy thieves, lining their pockets at the expense of the people. He lets loose, and fires every cannon available to him.

Just as he does, something unique begins to happen: perhaps the Spirit comes over him: he brings the throttle of his prophecy under control.

Promise begins to spill forth: God will seek his lost, gather them in, heal their wounds, feed them, and lay them down.

Then the shepherd will separate the fat, powerful, and the head strong from the weak, skinny, vulnerable picked-upon sheep.

Justice means that God holds bullies accountable.

Though complacent like sheep, God will still judge.

God will judge between sheep and sheep, those who were butting abusive leaders, and those who were the victimized, complacent victims.

Though beloved of God, there is no cause for smugness.¹

Allow me to prepare the set for the gospel:

Fast forward nearly 600 years.

Shepherds watching over both sheep and goats, as was common.

In the time and culture where Jesus lived, sheep were held in higher regard.

Sheep suffered in silence, and this came to be thought of as characteristics of a real man.

Rams – male sheep – are generally monogamous, unlike goats, causing goats to be thought of with disgust.

Rams were associated with honorable Roman and Greek gods like Zeus, Apollo, and Poseidon.

Goats were associated with the shameful and unrestrained behavior of gods like Pan, Bacchus, and Aphrodite.²

The shepherd metaphor works because shepherds hold the interest of their flock first; therefore, God is the perfect Good Shepherd of both sheep and goats.

The flock is composed of sheep, those from a traditional Jewish background and those who came into discipleship from a Gentile background.

¹ With thanks to Carolyn J. Sharp, Associate Professor of Hebrew Scriptures, Yale Divinity School, New Haven, CT

² With thanks to John J. Pilch of Georgetown University, as found at: http://liturgy.slu.edu/ChristKingA112308/theword_cultural.html

The former Jews were the promised people, living under God's covenant, and according to God's law.

The former Gentiles had come to Christ from the margins of life: Matthew had been a tax collector, Zaccheus, and others.

When it comes to Jesus, the flock metaphor works because it is also composed of those from the outside, goats, the religious authorities, those who had pillaged the people, looted the treasury, and conspired with their occupiers.

This metaphor works because goats were also the Roman authorities, who, in a mere thirty years would repel the Jews, raze the city and caste them in Diaspora to the four corners of the globe.

The goats on the left would persecute Christians for sport, crucify them by the dozens, and drive them into hiding.

They had seen the naked and turned a cold shoulder.

They had heard the cry of the hungry and tried to blame the victim.

The goats squeal foul!

They try to put the blame on the Son of Man: you didn't reveal yourself; how could we see you?³

They don't know joy.

They don't know mercy; as if they never heard the beatitudes.

And away they will be banished, into eternal punishment.

Yes, even those who were tended by the Good Shepherd, the goats, separated from the sheep, would be banished out into eternal punishment.

I had dinner with a friend the other day who complained to me that the problem with organized religion now days is that everyone is forgiven and nobody takes responsibility for their actions.

This environment of grace isn't how I grew up, he said.

You don't treat others wrong, just because you believe in the end all will be forgiven.

Ouch! He stung.

He was right. But apparently he had never read this ominous warning from Matthew 25 before.

When the time comes, yes, there will be a time of judgment. Sheep, on the right, and goats on the left will be divided, Jesus tells us.

I don't know about you but it leaves me wondering, "what side do I find myself? Am I a sheep on the right, or a goat on the left?"

Boy, I've seen a lot of suffering in this world, and done nothing about it.

I could have gone downtown and volunteered every evening at the Open Door Mission, but I didn't.

On the other hand, yes, there have been times when I've clothed the naked – when I helped the Clothing Closet.

I helped feed the hungry when I brought forward my gifts for the Food Pantry.

³ With thanks to Dirk G. Lange, Associate Professor of Worship, Luther Seminary, St. Paul, MN

What about me? Where will I find myself?

Bonhoeffer, the Lutheran theologian hung by the Nazis, points out this is simply an excuse for doing nothing, of continuing our same old ways.

Whereas the left side starts the finger pointing blame game, the right side has its holy ignorance exposed. Some will enter the joy of their master without ever knowing why, or how, or for what reason.

'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?'

Yet, they acted out of mercy, which, of course, is the way of the cross.

You see, this is a parable more about mercy than works.

The sheep on the right have lived mercy by risking dying and rising with Jesus, not waiting for some other future world or life.

Mercy is a core characteristic of discipleship: as in the Sermon on the Mount, here is a call to an obedience that is not prescription, law, or sacrifice but joyful living in mercy without calculation.⁴

The very next passage from Matthew takes the reader into the Passion narrative.

One begins to walk the way of the cross.

There is no greater symbol of mercy than the crucifixion.

Jesus died for you and me;

Took mercy on you and me.

Jesus extended that mercy to people who would be his disciples, long after he ascended into heaven.

This is what crowns him King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

Beloved members and friends of Zion, stop worrying about which side you'll be divided into, the right or the left, the sheep or the goats.

Yes, there is judgment, divine judgment.

And yes, there is an accounting. Each of us will be held responsible.

But worry only about this: where is the heart?

Is my heart filled with mercy?

Do I extend mercy?

Am I known for mercy?

What can I do to be more merciful?

Become the mercy;

Become the mercy that was shown for you,

And leave the rest up to God.

Amen.

⁴ Again, with thanks to Dirk G. Lange, Associate Professor of Worship, Luther Seminary, St. Paul, MN