

8. The Least of These (3Q 2019—The Least of These)

Biblical material: Matt. 5:2–16, 38–48; Rom. 12:20, 21; Luke 16:19–31; 12:13–21; Matt. 25:31–46.

Quotes

- As long as there is poverty in this world, no man can be totally rich even if he has a billion dollars. *Martin Luther King Jr.*
- Each time a man stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring those ripples build a current which can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance. *Robert F. Kennedy*
- Do I not destroy my enemies when I make them my friends? *Abraham Lincoln*
- The Bible tells us to love our neighbors, and also to love our enemies; probably because generally they are the same people. *G.K. Chesterton*
- Kindness is universal. Sometimes being kind allows others to see the goodness in humanity through you. Always be kinder than necessary. *Germany Kent*
- Peace does not mean an absence of conflicts; differences will always be there. Peace means solving these differences through peaceful means; through dialogue, education, knowledge; and through humane ways. *Dalai Lama XIV*

Questions

What principles are at the heart of the Sermon on the Mount? How does Jesus help us understand how to relate to him through doing good to our fellow human beings? What was the motivation for the sheep and the goats? How does all this play out in our daily experience?

Bible summary

Matt. 5:2–16 are the Beatitudes of Jesus that speak particularly to the poor in spirit, those who mourn, those who are persecuted etc. In verses 38–48 we’re called to love our enemies and to grow up to become mature Christians. In Rom. 12:20, 21 we’re called to give our enemies food and drink, and “Don’t be defeated by evil—conquer evil with good.” (Rom. 12:21 FBV). Luke 16:19–31 is Jesus’ parable of the rich man and Lazarus, while Luke 12:13–21 is his parable of the rich fool who built bigger barns but was not rich towards God. Matt. 25:31–46 is the parable of the sheep and the goats showing how we are to treat “the least of these.”

Comment

Jesus makes clear who “the least of these” really are—they are his “brothers” (Matt. 25:40). In fact in the Gospel of Matthew, this is how Jesus refers to his disciples (10:42; 18:6, 10, 14). So while Jesus surely does care for all the poor of the world, Matt. 25 is primarily speaking about those within the faith community who have fallen on hard times. How can we really call ourselves Christian if we do not care for those within our community, let alone those outside it?

He also calls us to do good to our enemies. This extends our need for compassion even further. We are to care not only for those around us, but those who are opposed to us. In this way, says Jesus, we really exemplify God's love to the world.

At the End there are only two groups of people—the sheep and the goats. The sheep have done all they could for the King without looking for any reward. They have prepared themselves for the coming King. The goats have done nothing for their King and have trusted in themselves, making no preparations. The goats, the wicked, go out into oblivion, but the sheep, the righteous who prepared, receive eternal life.

What is the essence of this story? Division, separation. Final dividing of good from bad. How many classes of people are there at this time? Just two. In what way is this a “judgment”? Look carefully. On what basis are they separated? For the way they have thought and behaved. How much does the eventual reward play in the minds of the sheep? None. What about the goats? Probably a lot. For if the goats had realized that the smelly tramp was Jesus, would they have helped him? Certainly! So what is this really saying to us?

Something about what “real religion” is all about. That if you only do things for a specific selfish motive, if you are only in church to try and work your way to heaven, you'll never make it. What motivated the sheep? Just a simple and automatic Christlike desire to help others. They had been changed by God to be like him. Their relationship to God was so close that his attitude was their attitude. Sin was not just forgiven, but the basic sinful spirit was removed too.

What of the goats? They thought they'd done pretty well. But only on the surface... Deep down they hadn't been changed. They were still thinking of themselves, only carrying out “religious acts” if they thought it would do them some good. True Pharisees! That was the difference: *the motivation behind the life*.

Ellen White Comments

The heavenly universe was amazed at God's patience and love. To save fallen humanity the Son of God took humanity upon himself, laying aside his kingly crown and royal robe. He became poor, that we through his poverty might be made rich. One with God, he alone was capable of accomplishing the work of redemption, and he consented to an actual union with man. {RH, July 17, 1900}

Pure religion and undefiled before the Father is this: “To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world.” Good deeds are the fruit that Christ requires us to bear: kind words, deeds of benevolence, of tender regard for the poor, the needy, the afflicted. When hearts sympathize with hearts burdened with discouragement and grief, when the hand dispenses to the needy, when the naked are clothed, the stranger made welcome to a seat in your parlor and a place in your heart, angels are coming very near, and an answering strain is responded to in heaven. Every act of justice, mercy, and benevolence makes melody in heaven. The Father from His throne beholds those who do these acts of mercy, and numbers them with His most precious treasures. “And they shall be Mine, saith the Lord of hosts, in that day when I make up My jewels.” Every merciful act to the needy, the suffering, is regarded as though done to Jesus. When you succor the poor, sympathize with the afflicted and oppressed, and befriend the orphan, you bring yourselves into a closer relationship to Jesus. {CSA 60.1}

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