

JOHNS CREEK UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

Do you really want to be like Jesus?

Sunday, June 16, 2019

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Matthew 25:31-40

On this Father's Day, I am reminded of my father and how much I wanted to make him proud. I am also reminded of my son Paul, now 2, who clearly seeks to make us proud. Whether it's the way he lines up his trucks on the floor or how he can walk down the stairs without our help, he looks for our praise and applause.

Have you ever thought about what makes Jesus proud? Today, we are going to learn what gets to the heart of Jesus more than anything else. If you really want to touch the heart of Jesus, you will want to listen carefully today.

In fact, what we are going to learn today is that what touches the heart of Jesus is so important that it is the basis of how each of us will be judged when the kingdom of God comes in all its glory. That's right. What we are going to learn today is so important to Jesus that our faith will be judged based on whether or not our lives reflected this particular characteristic.

The Bible is clear that there will be a judgment. Everyone will be judged by God. Christians will be judged. Even saints of the church will be judged. All of us will be judged. Now, this is different from *salvation*. We will address that a little later, but the Bible is clear that even those who have received Christ as Savior will be judged. The Bible is also clear that we will not be judged on *what* we believe, although what we believe is very important. We will not be judged on *how strong* our faith is, although having a strong faith is critical. We will not be judged on what denomination we were a part of, although that can be important. We will not be judged on whether we got sprinkled, dunked or poured on at our baptism.

What we are going to discover today from the lips of Jesus is that we will not be judged by our *faith*, but rather by a particular fruit of our faith. Again, this does not mean faith is not important, but for Jesus, if our faith is genuine, then this particular fruit will be evident and obvious. Therefore, Jesus is clear that we will be judged by this particular fruit.

I believe some of you just might be surprised by the fruit by which we will be judged., because so many of us have preconceived notions or misguided understandings about what is important to Jesus. In fact, those of you who don't consider yourselves Christian may be surprised as well. It may change your understanding of God.

The fruit by which we will be judged is not a creed. It is not your prayer life. It is not your opinion on same sex marriage or any other emotionally charged issue. It is not your view of the Bible or the way you interpret the Bible. It is not the way you worship or the television shows you watched or how often you attended church or how often you cussed or thought impure thoughts. Although all of those things are important issues to Jesus, and they certainly do play a critical role in our faith. But according to Jesus and the witness of all scripture, there is but one fruit of faith that will be the basis of judgment.

And this may be a game changer for you. What you discover today may change the way you approach your faith and live out your faith. What you learn today may reorient the way you see your faith and relationship with Christ. One thing I promise – today's message will draw you closer to the heart of Christ. We talk a lot about getting close to Christ and developing our relationship with Christ. Well today, you are going to find out how to get close to his heart.

In fact, this message will draw us so close to Christ that it may change the way we do church. It may change the way we approach ministry and run the business of the church. It may change the way we spend and budget our money. It may change the way you do business and the way you personally spend money. It may change the way we spend our time personally and professionally.

So, if you are someone who is concerned with how Jesus thinks you are doing in the way you follow him, listen up. If you are someone who is concerned with getting this faith thing right and making God proud, listen up. You are about to find out what touches the

heart of Jesus and the fruit of faith that Jesus believes is critical.

Let's take a look at something Jesus said in the 25th chapter of the gospel of Matthew. This whole chapter is made up of three parables Jesus told about judgment. These parables are meant to give us a heads up about being prepared for judgment and knowing the basis of judgment. We are going to look at the final parable in this chapter, which reveals the fruit of the faith that Jesus believes reveals genuine faith. Jesus' parable begins this way:

“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. –Matthew 25:31-33

Wow! This parable gives a bit of a sneak preview of what will happen when the kingdom of God fully comes on the earth! Now, again, it is a parable, so it has its limits. But one thing is clear. When the kingdom comes, Jesus will be in power and in glory, and all nations will be under him. The Bible says that “Every knee shall bow and tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord!”

According to the parable, when all the nations of the world are before Jesus, a judgment will occur. This judgment will divide folks into two camps: the sheep and the goats. Now in Palestine in Jesus' day, a shepherd could easily separate sheep and goats by their color and bodily characteristics. The sheep will be put on the right side, the side of honor and blessing. And the goats will be put on the left side, the side of dishonor. Look what happens next:

“Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.’ –Matthew 25:34

So, in the parable, Jesus said the sheep, those on the right side, those on the blessed side will be invited to enter the beautiful and glorious kingdom of heaven. They will be invited to take their inheritance and realize all the promises of eternal life.

Why do the sheep on the right get an invitation into the kingdom of heaven? What did they do that the goats did not do? Was it because they were holy? Was it

because they were Methodists? Was it because they worshipped in a contemporary service or had the correct doctrine? Was it because they had read tons of books on theology and acquired vast knowledge? No. Then what was it? You ready for this?

“For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.” –Matthew 25:35-36

Jesus said that the sheep, the righteous, those with genuine faith, are those who fed the hungry, gave water to the thirsty, were hospitable to strangers, clothed the naked, took care of the sick, and visited prisoners. Let me say that again. In the parable, Jesus said that those who inherited the kingdom were those who took care of the stranger, the sick, the thirsty, the hungry, the naked, and the prisoner.

So, according to this parable, when the kingdom of God comes, each of us will be singled out, and Christ will not ask us about our creed, denomination, or doctrine. He will not ask us how many Bible studies or worship services we attended. No. He will ask us, “What did you do about the homeless in your community? Did you take care of your neighbors and enemies who were sick? Did you ever visit the local jail? Did you ever invite someone into your home who wasn't welcome anywhere else?”

So we can conclude that **Christ judges our faith based on how we respond to human need.** Christ judges us to see if our faith has led to true self-denial and sympathy for the beaten, broken, and bruised. Christ judges us to see if our faith in him moves us to love as he loves.

Now, I remember when I was younger and read this parable – it messed up my good Protestant theology. I always believed, and I still believe, that we are saved by the grace of God through faith. I always thought, “It's not based on works! It doesn't matter how good you are or how much good you have done, but it is whether or not you have repented and received Christ as Lord and Savior. It's about whether or not Christ lives in your heart. It's about faith and not works.”

And then I read this parable and thought, “That seems to go against everything I have been taught! Jesus, my savior, seems to be saying that it is based on how good I have been!” Well, don't let this parable mess up your theology. I still believe and will always believe that we are saved by grace through faith. In fact, we can't do

anything we are called by God to do without the grace of God. What's very important to keep in mind is that this is not a salvation parable, but rather a judgment parable. All people, including those who have been saved, will be judged on the fruit of their faith. The Bible is clear that we are *saved* by grace, but the Bible is also clear we will be *judged* on how well we responded to that grace by helping those who suffer and those in need.

So, you want to know how Christ will be able to tell if our faith in him is genuine, if he really lives in our hearts, and if his love is alive in us? He will be able to tell by one distinguishing characteristic: *how we have responded to human need*. Period. So it does matter what we believe, because if our faith in Christ as Savior is real, we will love and care for those in need. Period.

So you really want to touch the heart of Jesus? You really want to warm his heart? You really want to pull on his heart strings? You really want to impress the heck out of him? Care for those in need.

Now, I know what some of you may be thinking. "Really? This is what impresses Jesus the most? This is what touches him the most? Charity? Being kind to those who are less fortunate than us? I mean, don't get me wrong. I think it is important too, but why does the parable make it the only criteria? I mean, we know we are supposed to be nice to people, and kind and generous, but aren't a lot of people like that? Why is responding to those in need this important to Jesus?"

Well Jesus tells us why in the parable, because the sheep in the parable were just as surprised and bewildered as some of you may be. They didn't understand how Jesus was connected to how they responded to those in need. Take a look:

"Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?'" –Matthew 25:37-39

And then, Jesus responded with some of the most profound, convicting, and moving words he ever spoke:

"The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'" –Matthew 25:40

Why does Christ judge our faith based on how we respond to human need? Because Christ is so intimately connected to every human being that he feels every wound, every tear, and every pain we feel. He loves the world so much that he can't stand the suffering. And so when we touch, heal, love, serve, feed,

clothe, visit, and listen, Christ feels it just as if we were doing it to him. Mother Theresa said it best: "What you do for them, you also do for him."

It's like when someone does something nice for a child. How does the parent feel? The parent feels it just as much as the child. My mom used to say, "Having a child is like having your heart come out of your body and walk around in the world." Imagine how much more Christ feels our wounds and pain!

I remember when I was in seminary at Emory, I had the privilege of serving communion in chapel when two dignitaries who were in worship, former President Jimmy Carter and Archbishop Desmond Tutu, the great champion of peace in South Africa. In fact, I helped Archbishop Tutu serve communion. As I stood next to him, holding the elements, I remember his hands. They were not the soft hands of a church dignitary, but rather they were the hands of a servant of Christ. They were rough, callused, and scarred, hands not afraid to serve Christ, who also possessed wounded hands.

Later, Archbishop Tutu preached a sermon. And he said something in his message that I have never forgotten. He talked about the saving love of Christ and how it can transform all of us – a love that truly died for our sins. But, he said that if you really want to get close to Jesus, you will not stay at the foot of the cross, but you will climb up on the cross to see what Jesus sees and to feel what Jesus feels.

And if you have the courage to do that, you will understand why caring for those in need is so important to Jesus. Because right now, someone here today is suffering from loneliness. Right now, someone thinks they are nobody to nobody. Right now someone is suffering from abuse and misuse. Right now, someone is suffering from depression. Right now, someone is suffering with a debilitating illness. Right now, someone is suffering from an unforgiven past.

I find that people are always trying to get closer to Jesus. They brag about all the Bible studies they do and the conferences they will be going to and all they are going to do to improve their prayer life. And all of that is good and useful, but you want to know the quickest way to get close to Jesus? Go get a sandwich for a homeless person and look him in the eyes. Hold the hand of someone suffering in the hospital. Visit someone in prison. Help build a habitat house. If you do that, I promise you will feel close to Christ. It is the quickest and easiest way to Jesus' heart.

The church spends too much time majoring in the minors. If the church spent as much time caring and loving those in need as it does debating doctrine and passing judgment, the world would be a different place. If you read the rest of the parable, you will find that the goats are discarded. Now, don't panic! This does not

denote finality, but it is definitely a warning and a time for pruning. It's as if we are being told through the parable to keep our eye on the ball and what is most important to Jesus.

I saw a story this week at Conference that will inspire you to keep your eye on the ball. Here is the story told by Stephen Hartman, the host of "On the Road":

You can see why someone might hate being a school bus driver — the early hours when the weather sours — the abundance of responsibility combined with the absence of eyes in the back of your head.

Nevertheless, Curtis Jenkins loves delivering these little ones to Lake Highlands Elementary in Dallas, Texas.

He goes way beyond the outline responsibilities and duties of a bus driver. I mean, that bus is like a family," said principal Emily Gruninger.

"These are my children," Curtis said. "These are my community. I love 'em all."

To establish community, he starts by giving everyone responsibility.

Curtis gave some examples. "This is one of the police officers," he said.

It's an elaborate flowchart.

"She's an administrative assistant to the president," he pointed out.

She's administrative assistant to the president? "Yea," he said.

Everyone working together to build a yellow bus utopia.

We're going to care about each other and we're going to love everybody, right?" Curtis asked the children.

"I put time, effort, love, and care — understanding each and every one of those kids," he said.

To show his love and understanding, Curtis gives presents throughout the year — each one personally selected with that child in mind. He gave this girl a T-shirt with a picture from a book she made.

"I'm hoping this T-shirt inspires her to keep on writing books," he said.

Over the year, he has bought these kids bikes, backpacks, handed out cards on birthdays, and even turkeys at Thanksgiving. He has spent thousands out of his own pocket. And yet, if you ask the kids what they like most about Curtis — the gifts don't even come up.

The kids said stuff like "He really cares about us" and "he's really kind." "And he helps anyone in need," said Ethan Ingle, a fifth grader. He said the bus ride is often the best part of his day.

"My mom got divorced when I was only 4. He's the father that I always wanted. In some ways, I wish my dad could have been like that," Ethan said.

We make the mistake sometimes of thinking certain jobs are more important than others. But Curtis Jenkins made his job important — and, in doing so, even created his own salary.

"That's the paycheck right there. If I can get that, you can keep the money," Curtis said. (Source: CBSnews.com)

So, this week, I don't think you will have to work very hard finding ways to apply today's message. You don't have to find the cure to cancer or the solution to world peace. You don't have to solve world hunger. All you have to do is reach out to one person in need. Just find one person this week who is in need and reach out and help them. Maybe it will be a homeless person you give a hamburger to. Maybe it will be a child who needs mentoring or a friend in the hospital who needs a visit. Maybe it will be someone who is lonely who needs someone to listen to them. Whatever it is, just pick one person to help. And if you look closely, you just may see Jesus in disguise.