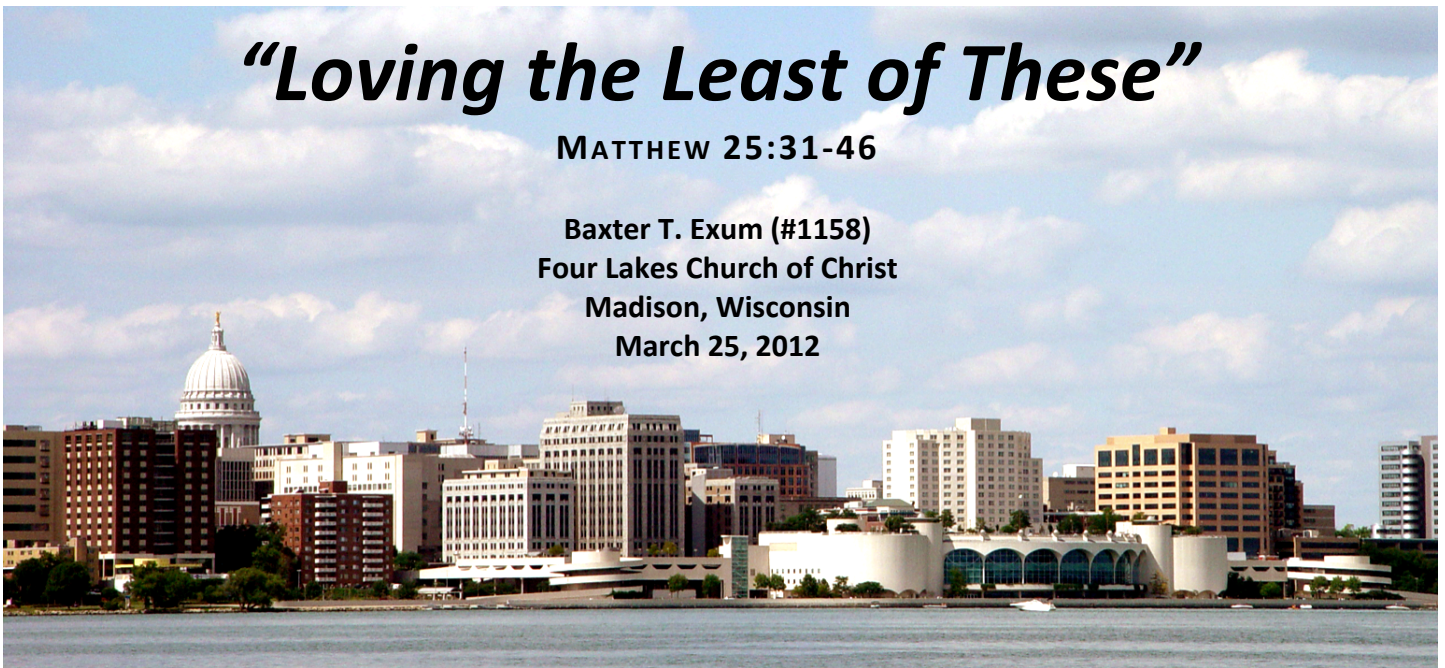


“Loving the Least of These”

MATTHEW 25:31-46

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In just a moment, I would invite you to look with me at a passage of Scripture from Matthew 25 (p. 1548). But as we make our way to that passage, I would like for us to take just a few minutes to think about the financial struggles that many of us here and many of our friends and neighbors are experiencing these days. Most of us know from personal experience that wages are not keeping up with the rate of inflation. We find ourselves spending more and more on food, and healthcare, and just the cost of living in general. We find ourselves struggling to put something away for retirement, and oftentimes our employers seem to be kicking in less and less, if anything at all. Thankfully, I guess we could say that things are better here in Wisconsin than in much of the United States. According to a fairly recent article in the Cap Times, Wisconsin currently has the fourth lowest poverty rate in the nation, falling behind only New Hampshire, Connecticut, and Wyoming. However, as comforting as that might be, it still does not change the fact that many among us are struggling to make ends meet. When we look at our state, we find that poverty is most concentrated here in Dane County and Milwaukee, and in Dane County, the rates are highest, of course, right here in Madison. According to figures released last fall by the U.S. Census Bureau, there are now 46.2 million Americans who are now living in poverty, the most in history. The poverty rate now stands at 15.1%, the highest national poverty rate since 1993, and the fourth consecutive yearly increase. By the way, the definition of poverty in the United States is an annual income of \$22,314 for a family of four, and \$11,139 for a single person.

As we think about these figures, as we think about our friends and neighbors, and as we think about our own financial situation, I would like for us to take a few minutes this morning to consider what our response should be to the people around us who find themselves in need in one way or another. And to do this, I would like for us to focus in on one paragraph of Scripture. It is a passage that is often associated with the Day of Judgment. And yes, the passage has quite a bit to say about what will happen on the last Great Day – that is the way we usually study it, and that is okay, that is great. But the passage also has a lot to say about how we interact with those we meet on a daily basis who are even more in need of help than we are. I am referring, of course, to Matthew 25:31-46. In this passage, the Lord is painting a picture of the Judgment Day. We have the throne of God, we have all of creation assembled before the throne for judgment, and then we have the Lord, the Good Shepherd, separating the crowd like sheep and goats. The sheep are placed on the Lord’s right and are welcomed into God’s eternal kingdom, but the goats are placed on the left and are sent away into eternal punishment. Again, there are many lessons here about the judgment itself, but for the purpose of our study this morning, I would like for us to focus in on what the sheep did during their lives, what the sheep did while

they were living that identified them as sheep in the eyes of the Lord. What made them good? Or more accurately: What was the evidence brought up in their favor on the Day of Judgment? If you will then, let us please look together at Matthew 25:31-46,

³¹ ***“But when the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him, then He will sit on His glorious throne. ³² All the nations will be gathered before Him; and He will separate them from one another, as the shepherd separates the sheep from the goats; ³³ and He will put the sheep on His right, and the goats on the left.***

³⁴ ***“Then the King will say to those on His right, ‘Come, you who are blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. ³⁵ 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; ³⁶ naked, and you clothed Me; I was sick, and you visited Me; I was in prison, and you came to Me.’ ³⁷ Then the righteous will answer Him, ‘Lord, when did we see You hungry, and feed You, or thirsty, and give You something to drink? ³⁸ And when did we see You a stranger, and invite You in, or naked, and clothe You? ³⁹ When did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?’ ⁴⁰ The King will answer and say to them, ‘Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me.’***

⁴¹ ***“Then He will also say to those on His left, ‘Depart from Me, accursed ones, into the eternal fire which has been prepared for the devil and his angels; ⁴² for I was hungry, and you gave Me nothing to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me nothing to drink; ⁴³ I was a stranger, and you did not invite Me in; naked, and you did not clothe Me; sick, and in prison, and you did not visit Me.’ ⁴⁴ Then they themselves also will answer, ‘Lord, when did we see You hungry, or thirsty, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not take care of You?’ ⁴⁵ Then He will answer them, ‘Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me.’ ⁴⁶ These will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”***

- I. **As we take a few minutes to look at this passage in detail, and as we think about the Lord talking about “*the least of these*,” I would like for us to start by noticing WHO “THE LEAST OF THESE” REALLY ARE.**

The word “*least*” (as it is used in verse 40) is the superlative of a word referring to something small. And so we’re not just talking about something small, we are not just talking about something that is smaller than something else, but we are talking about the “smallest” of something. And in this context, it seems that we are talking about the smallest or the least significant members of society. And in verse 35, the Lord gives several examples as he talks about those who are hungry and thirsty, the strangers, those in need of clothing, the sick, and those in prison. And with several of these examples, we are talking about the poor, those who cannot afford food and clothing. We are talking about those on the fringe of society, those who are left out because of their financial situation. When the Lord talks about “*strangers*,” He is talking about those who are different, those who are ignored or overlooked. In other passages, the same word is used to refer to foreigners, to those from other countries, to those of a different race, to those who are in the minority, and really to any person who is not known to us or not familiar to us for whatever reason. The least of these, then, refers to those who do not amount to very much in the eyes of the world, to those who are often viewed as not being worth the time and the effort – perhaps the teenager who doesn’t dress like we do, perhaps the senior woman who

always seems to be grouchy and every conversation we have seems to be a drain on us, perhaps the new neighbors down the street who do not speak English very well, perhaps the guy we run into who has whole different view of hygiene than we do, perhaps the friend from work who has had a series of unfortunate events to the point where she no longer knows where she will come up with the \$46 to pay this month's gas bill.

In our society, unless we are poor ourselves, we have the ability to pretty much avoid even looking at poverty – we can stay away from certain neighborhoods, we can choose to only shop in certain places – but the Lord is telling us here that we are to open our eyes to the least of these. And that is the first idea here: We are to start by being aware. The least of these are those who bring us our food when we go out to eat and spend \$40 to eat with our family. The least of these would include Daniel (down at Culver's), the young man who does such an awesome job cleaning up around the drink machines. The least of these are those who clean our offices. The least of these are the mothers who struggle to raise their children as their father is locked up in prison. The least of these are the middle-aged couples who struggle to take care of an aging parent. The least of these are young families who are in over their heads with bad mortgages. Sometimes the least of these sit with us here in this room every Sunday, trying not to think about how they will be able to afford lunch after the worship service. The Lord, then, is telling us (first of all) that we are to be aware of the least of these among us.

II. Now that we have thought a little bit about the least of these and who these people are, I would like for us to move on and notice that THE SHEEP (THE GOOD PEOPLE) IN THIS SCENARIO REACTED WITH A VERY SIMPLE RESPONSE.

In each case, notice what the sheep did – they provided food, they gave a cup of water, they welcomed someone in, they provided clothing, they made a visit to the sick, and they came to those in prison. Think about how simple those responses are! These things are not complicated. These things do not require a huge sacrifice of time. These things do not even require a huge sacrifice of money. We do not even need to be extraordinarily intelligent to do these things. We are not required to solve all of the world's problems, but the examples deal with one person at a time.

I know sometimes we might think that we need some kind of a program, some kind of a committee, some kind of structure, some kind of organization, some kind of huge government bureaucracy, before we can really do any good, but that is not the case, is it? Instead, we are talking here about some very simple things that we do as individuals. We will never solve the problem of world hunger, but we can provide a meal for a neighbor, we can take a co-worker out for lunch, we can bring a can of beans to the church pantry – that's something even the children here can do. We may never travel to Africa to help dig a well for a village, but we can provide a cup of cold water to the young woman selling magazines door-to-door. We may never develop a cure for cancer, but we can provide a ride to the clinic for an elderly neighbor who needs to get to his chemotherapy. We may never solve the immigration issue, but we can show some respect for the young men who replace the roof on our home. We may never fill a shipping container full of clothing to be sent to India after some huge natural disaster, but we may be able to donate some hats and gloves to our members who work in our public schools, so that those things can then be passed on to kids without those things. Some of you may never have the privilege of being searched on your way into a maximum-security prison, but we can certainly write a note to one of the inmates currently taking our Bible study courses through the mail (a card with an address has been posted on the bulletin board in the entryway).

The point here is that the things the righteous did were simple – simple and inexpensive! Yes, there might have been a little bit of time and effort involved, but the sheep in this story were those who kept their eyes opened to the least of these, and then they did at least something about it. They did not turn away, they did not get overwhelmed with the scope of the problem, but they used what resources they had and did something. That is what the Lord is looking for!

III. **There is something else I would like for us to notice here, and that is: WHEN BOTH GROUPS OF PEOPLE STOOD BEFORE CHRIST AT THE JUDGMENT, ALL OF THEM WERE SURPRISED BY THE SIGNIFICANCE OF WHAT THEY HAD DONE (OR NOT DONE).**

On one hand, although they had helped many people through the years, the sheep could not recall having ever seen the King in need. And then on the other hand, the goats were also shocked in that they could not recall having ever ignored the King in his distress. As the goats were living their lives here on this earth, all they saw were the poor, perhaps as more of a distraction, as trivial little annoyances that needed to be brushed aside, bumps in the road, people in the way, somebody else’s problem. But on the Day of Judgment, both groups were surprised. And what this tells me is that the true motives of the righteous and the wicked are exposed here. On one hand, as the righteous were feeding the hungry and visiting the sick, they were not doing it for some kind of praise, they were not doing it for some kind of reward, they were not doing it thinking that that poor person is actually the Lord – they were not thinking that at all. They were doing good not to be noticed by men, but instead, they were doing good because it was the right thing to do. And on the other hand, those who ignored the poor also had their motives exposed. As far as we know from this passage, they never committed any big sins, they never kicked a poor person, they never took someone’s food by force, but they failed to do what they should have done. They neglected their duty. They might have been decent people, but they failed to see their fellow human beings as people created in God’s image, and so with arrogance, they failed to help, as they should have done. And that is where the surprise comes in. If they HAD identified the King as one of the least of these, if they HAD recognized the King as hungry, thirsty, or sick, they might have helped, but then the motive would have been in doubt. Both sides, then, were surprised at the Judgment.

Let us never forget, then, that the Lord identifies with the least of these. As far as I know, all of us here this morning have a place that we call home – maybe a house, maybe an apartment – and yet did you know that the Lord was homeless? In Luke 9, someone came up to the Lord and said, ***“Lord, I will follow You wherever You go,”*** and Jesus said to him, ***“The foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head.”*** My favorite verse in the whole Bible reminds us that the Lord gave up heaven to come to this earth to live as a poor man – 2 Corinthians 8:9, ***“For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, so that you through His poverty might become rich.”*** Financially speaking, Jesus had very little in common with any of us here this morning. Those who were condemned, then, were shocked. They were surprised that by ignoring the poor they were actually ignoring the King. The righteous saw a number of basic needs among the most insignificant members of society, and they actually did something about it. But those who were truly evil expressed their arrogance by ignoring the needs of the poor. Both groups were then surprised on the Day of Judgment.

Conclusion:

As we step back a bit and ask ourselves why this passage is in the Bible, it seems pretty obvious: God cares about the least of these, and we prepare ourselves for eternity by loving and caring for the people God cares about. Let’s not get overwhelmed, though. Let’s not get discouraged; but rather, let us use our time together

this morning to refocus on what God thinks is important. Our world is constantly pressuring us to fill our time with this or that. Our world is constantly pressuring us to spend our money on ourselves. But our passage this morning reminds us that God has something better in mind for us. God wants people with Him for eternity, and He wants people who are truly concerned about the needs of others. Can you imagine spending eternity with a bunch of people who are always looking out for the interests of others? On the other hand, can you imagine spending eternity with people who are only concerned about themselves? We are talking, this morning, about two very different places.

Over the next week, then, let us recommit ourselves to paying attention to the least of these – to the people who prepare and deliver our food, to the people we know who may be struggling financially, to the people we know who are sick, to the people we know who are the **“least,”** the smallest, from the world’s point of view. And then, let us do something with pure motives – something simple, something needed.

This past Tuesday morning as the various teams were making their way back to this building, one of the groups came back short – several guys were missing. When those guys returned from going door-to-door, they were dripping with sweat, they were muddy, they were filthy, and I thought, “What in the world happened to these guys?” They explained that as they were going through the neighborhood, an elderly gentleman was out there raking his front yard. They offered to help, and he took them up on it! As they were about to leave, they asked if there was anything else they could do, and he said, “Sure, I need a few holes dug in the back yard.” Well, they got a little concerned about that, but it turns out that this guy needed some stumps removed, and it was just a little beyond his ability. So, those Freed-Hardeman students stayed and for the next hour or so they removed those stumps from that old man’s back yard. **“Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these My brothers, you did it to Me.”** It may involve leaving a large tip for a small meal, it may involve treating our server at the restaurant with the utmost of respect – as if she were the queen of the world, or it may involve digging up stumps in a stranger’s back yard, but I’m hoping we will keep this passage in mind as we live our lives over this coming week.

As we think about what the Lord has done for us, I also hope we realize that when it comes to salvation, we are the **“least of these,”** and that God has offered us the greatest possible gift, the gift of salvation. Spiritually speaking, we are the poor, the hungry, the thirsty, we are the ones who are prisoners to sin, and when the Lord saw this, He did something about it. He allowed His only Son to take our place on the cross. We respond to that gift with thanks. We turn away from sin, and we allow ourselves to be immersed in water for the forgiveness of sins. At that point, we are born into God’s family. If you would like to discuss it further, let us know. If there is something you would like us to pray about, we would invite you to write it down and bring it to the front. But if you are ready to obey the good news right now, you can let us know as we sing this next song. Let’s stand and sing...

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