

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.” *

The Upside-Down Kingdom - November 22, 2020

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Just about every activity in life has a standard list of procedures and expectations we more or less should follow in order to succeed at that activity. For parenting, for example, good parents at the minimum should insure that their children are well fed, have clothes on their backs, a comfortable place to sleep, access to medical care, and the opportunity to go to school. Homelife should be stable, with children being able to count on a routine and expect certain behaviors from the adults responsible for them. It should be a place where they feel welcomed, respected, and loved. For various reasons, some families are not able to give their children a stable, consistent, nurturing home life and when that happens, we know the children suffer.

At our workplaces, we all have jobs which are tied to a job description — a list of responsibilities and required interactions with employers and co-workers. Our performances as employees are evaluated on how closely we fulfill those responsibilities. When we exceed them, we expect to be rewarded. When we fail, we should not be surprised if our employment ends.

Organized sports is all about following rules and regulations. When watching a football game, I get annoyed if there are too many penalties — too much rule breaking, in other words. Every player is supposed to know what to do and what not to do.

I suspect that in our lives, well conditioned by multiple rules and expectations, we may tend to think the same way about our faith and our relationship to God. To many people of all faiths, practicing religion, from Buddhism to Christianity, is predicated on praying at the right time, attending worship services, listening to sacred writings, and treating other people in accordance with the teachings of the religious leadership. Basically, we may get the message in church that God wants certain behaviors from us. We in turn believe that when we behave in accordance with God's expectations, we will be rewarded in this life and the next.

The phrase, "Quid pro quo," comes to mind in most of life's situations: I do something good for you, you do something equally good for me. If I'm a good parent to my children, then they will take care of me when I am older. If I do a good job at work, I will get pay raises and promotions. Likewise, if I do what God wants me to, then I will go to heaven.

Today is the Sunday we celebrate the "Reign of Christ" — Christ's rule over the earth. It is also called "Christ the King" Sunday because we acknowledge the risen Lord as the true ruler of our lives. Next week, the Christian year starts again with Advent as we anticipate the coming of Jesus into our world on Christmas Day.

But today is a day of reflection. Since you are tuning in today, I will assume that you think of yourself as a follower of Jesus Christ or at least someone who is interested in his life and teachings. The question for today is what does all this Jesus and God stuff we do over the year really mean?

Who is Jesus and what's so special about him? Now this may be a surprising question coming from the mouth of a Christian pastor, but I'm serious. Because clearly, if we are to be completely honest with ourselves, fewer and fewer people around the world don't think Jesus matters very much — at least in terms of committing themselves to following his teachings. I've told you this statistic before: over 80% of Americans consider themselves to be spiritual — they believe in some kind of “higher power” but only about 40% choose to affiliate with a church or other formal religious community.

A basic teaching of the Christian religion is that it is impossible to have a relationship with Jesus Christ without also having Christian relationship with other people. I mean, it's perfectly fine to read the Bible and attempt to follow Jesus all by yourself. However, without the ongoing, regular support of a community of fellow believers, I don't know how long you would be able to follow Jesus without eventually giving up. Jesus was always about people. He began his ministry by gathering a group of disciples to walk with him on his journey of explaining God to people. He ended his ministry by ordering his followers to spread the good news to the entire world.

That's why, when I conduct the funerals of people who were not members of a church, I am generally silent when friends and family say, “Well, Reverend, I know he didn't go to church, but she was a ‘good person’” — whatever that means. It is, sadly, a prime example of quid pro quo thinking: She was a good person, therefore God will take care of her in the end. Everything's going to be OK. People who tell me about the supposedly “good person” I'm about to bury are missing the point of following Jesus entirely.

Friends, following Jesus Christ is not about buying a heavenly insurance policy. Going to church does not earn us points in St. Peter's book so he's open up the pearly gates for us. God does not look at what we did in our lives when we die in order to give us the celestial thumbs up or thumbs down sending us to paradise or hell.

The truth is that if you're here today to score points with God, it's not going to work. I'm not saying the God doesn't care if you in worship today as opposed to going shopping or sleeping in. Of course God cares that you're here and God is overjoyed that you're here today. God is certainly glad that here we are trying to hang on to our sense of community using this strange technology. As inadequate as Zoom is in keeping us together, can you imagine not being able to get together at all?

Indeed, scoring points with God is the last thing you should be worried about because none of us, not one of us, not the goodest, nicest, kindest, lovingest person you know can come close to being good enough, nice enough, kind enough, and loving enough to somehow earn their way into heaven.

Why? Because at the end of the day, the goodness, the niceness, the kindness, the loving, is offset by the evil we actively do and the good we fail to do. Now I know I'm sounding like a "hellfire and brimstone" preacher, but Jesus made it clear that his realm is not filled with perfect people — quite the opposite. Jesus is about taking imperfect, highly flawed people, and empowering them through faith to make a difference in this world here and now by embracing the least, the last, and the lost.

As the Church of Jesus Christ, we should freely admit that we all sin and we all fall short of God's plan for us. We are hardly perfect and we have all done tons of things we would like to forget about. We can look at our lives and remember all the woulda, coulda, shoulda moments, that might have made a significant difference in another person's life.

I pray that if we are pressed, really pressed, we can admit to ourselves and to God that we are not entitled to go to heaven by virtue of how we have lived our lives. Following Jesus is not about fulfilling the job requirements for being a Christian. It simply cannot be perfectly done.

Therefore, instead of carrying around a mental checklist with our self-proclaimed goodness, a checklist of accomplishments that we can present as our entry tickets to heaven, let us instead look upon our faith not as a set of actions, but of attitudes.

Unlike being a parent, unlike working a job, unlike playing a sport, the Christian life is about living in community with each other and treating each other as Jesus treated us — exclusively and totally with love and nothing else. The only things Jesus wants from us is that we love God and love our neighbors as ourselves. That's it.

The parable of the sheep and goats Jesus tells us at the end of his earthly ministry is a perfect metaphor for how two groups of people see life and living. The righteous, my friends, are the scorekeepers. They are the list-makers. They are the ones who weigh their actions in terms of what they may get for themselves. That's why the righteous were so shocked when the king expelled them. The righteous scorekeepers thought they had it all figured out: say the right things, help the right people and voila, you're in.

What they failed to understand is that words spoken and actions performed in expectation of a reward on earth or heaven are useless in terms of impressing God. Jesus wants us to have an attitude of unconditionally giving and accepting others whomever they may be — and the more we struggle internally about giving to and helping those whom we find difficult and disagreeable the better it actually is for us. It's better because we often find Christ personally living in the least, the last, and the lost. Jesus came into the world to reach out to the sinners and when we possess that attitude of giving without counting the cost, we will reach out to them not grudgingly but joyfully.

You see, even as the righteous, the goats, were skilled at congratulating themselves on their supposed goodness, the sheep are completely oblivious to the good they do in the world because they do not act from their heads like the goats do. Instead, the sheep act from their hearts.

Jesus gives without counting the cost. Jesus loves without expecting love in return. Jesus, Son of God, emptied himself and humbled himself, throughout his time on earth. He was poor. He had no material possessions. He was constantly challenged by the political and religious authorities. He stood up for the oppressed, the sick, the foreigners, women and children. And when he died, his crime was for loving humanity and opposing those who hate humanity.

The problem, friends, with the good news is that it's too good. Jesus proclaimed a way of living that runs completely opposite of the way we are taught and trained the world should work. Our world worships power. Our world worships conformity. Our world worships rules and regulations and established procedures.

If you worship Jesus Christ, you only worship love. And real love, genuine love, unconditional love is so upside-down, so contrary to the ways of the world, so impossible to live out on a day-to-day basis that we can see at best only occasional flickers here and there.

But can you imagine a world without Jesus? I asked at the beginning of this sermon the question what does the Jesus and God stuff really mean?

Friends, I cannot look around the world, especially now, without feeling despondent over the hatred gripping our nation. I fear for our future when it is guided by people who embrace lies as truth and deny the deaths of thousands and the illness of millions. I wonder if we have any hope when the planet is literally melting and burning up all around us. Earth seems to be becoming a literal hell.

But then I think, where would we be without Jesus? Things may be bad now, but without Jesus, they would be infinitely worse. We must be reminded, friends, we must be reminded, again and again and again that there is a force that is greater and stronger and more wonderful than all the horror around us and that force is love.

And love, and only love, is the end all and be all of the Kingdom of God focussed on Jesus Christ.

It is Christ who offers the only real alternative to the mess we find ourselves in. It is Christ who gives us the strength to endure the hard times and the hope for better times. It is Christ who has the patience and understanding to bear with us in the good and bad times, gently nurturing us to follow him and walk in his path.

Time and again, we humans try and fail to establish our own misguided rules and regulations. Only Christ's way and Christ's love and Christ's reign will sustain us and save us. Come, Lord Jesus!

I say these words in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.