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"Mercy"

Ezekiel 34:11-16; 20-24 Matthew 25:31-46 Ephesians 1:15-23

INTRODUCTION TO EZEKIEL 34:11-16; 20-24

We are all familiar with Psalm 23 where David describes the Lord as his Shepherd. In our passage from Ezekiel God describes David as the one shepherd who will unite God's people.

INTRODUCTION TO MATTHEW 25:31-46

I saw a cartoon once that showed an old woman, sitting on a porch, reading the Bible. Two kids were walking by. One said to the other, "That's my grandma. She's cramming for her finals."

In this morning's passage Jesus gives us a hint as to what will be on our finals. In this well-known and often quoted parable, Jesus assumes a role we don't normally associate with him a King who is a judge. A day will come, Jesus says, when He will put on his judicial robe and take his place on the bench and everyone will have to come before the bar. Hear the word of God, the gospel of our Lord from Matthew 25:31-46

Let's pray. Dear Lord, Thank you for this your word. Help us to see ourselves through it, and respond to it in the way we live our lives. As we ponder what it means for us, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord our Rock and our Redeemer.

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Did you have a blessed Thanksgiving? Are you thanked out?

Here are some things for which to be thankful.

\*for automatic dishwashers. They make it possible to get out of the kitchen before the family comes in for their after-dinner snacks.

\* for husbands who attack small repair jobs around the house. They usually make them big enough to call in professionals.

\* for children who put away their things and clean up after themselves. They're such a joy you hate to see them go home to their own parents.

\* for gardening. It's a relief to deal with dirt outside the house for a change.

\* for teenagers. They give parents an opportunity to learn a second language.

\* for smoke alarms. They let you know when the turkey's done.

\*for mercy.... for salvation by grace through faith instead of salvation by works. and for salvation by grace through faith that inspires us to do good works and ....to give thanks.

There once was a politician who, after receiving the proofs of a portrait, was very angry with the photographer. He stormed back to the photographer and arrived with these angry words: "This picture does not do me justice!" The photographer replied, "Sir, with a face like yours, you don't need justice, you need mercy!" 1

I read a story about a man who received mercy in Turkey. He was hungry and was walking down the street in a small village. He had only a piece of bread in his hand. He came to a restaurant where some meatballs were being grilled. The cooking meat was so near and the smell so delicious the man held his piece of bread over the meat to capture some of the smell. As he started to eat the bread, the angry restaurant owner seized him and took him away to see a judge.

The owner protested, "This man was stealing the smell of my meat without asking permission. I want you to make him pay me for it." The judge thought for a moment, then held up his purse in front of the owner and shook it. "What are you doing that for?" asked the restaurant owner? The judge replied, "I am paying you. The sound of money is fair payment for the smell of food." 2

Jesus said, "Blessed are the merciful for they shall receive mercy."

Like it or not, judgment is a fact of life. That is true whether we are talking about the histories of nations or the events of our own personal life. If we break the law, then society will judge us. If we live immorally drink too much, engage in sexual promiscuity, live a lifestyle of constant stress then our bodies will judge us. We simply cannot escape judgment in life.

Jesus rarely spoke about the final judgment, but on this one occasion he did paint a picture for us in this parable that gives a strong jolt to those who are heavy on doctrine but short on ethics.

In Jesus' parable, the King culls out those who are his followers on his right hand, and those who are not to his left. The basis for determining who falls into each group is their attitudes and actions toward the needy, the poor, and the powerless—for showing them mercy. In serving these little ones, they ministered to Christ. Because they were saved by the mercy of Christ they showed mercy to others. The sentence of welcome was pronounced by the King on the basis of what they HAD done. "As you DID it to the least of my family you DID it unto me."

Their service of their king was not an affair of the head, but of the heart. They responded to the needs of those around them instinctively. It was not that compassion was a function of their genes. It was because they had been transformed from within by the love of God. Their new nature was to do good works and look out for each other. They didn't do these things to earn a place in

heaven. They did them because they had already answered God's call to follow Jesus and had been saved by grace through faith and did deeds of kindness out of gratitude.

People who have answered God's call to follow Jesus and have been adopted into God's family naturally care for others, and want to be with others like them. They depend on God to provide for them to protect them to lead and guide them. Even though they are surprised because they didn't know that as they cared for others and fed and provided shelter and visited others when they were sick and in prison they were caring for Jesus ... they did it because, "Hey that's what Jesus followers do."

Those on his left? Not so much. They didn't show mercy. They didn't respond to those in need. Some think that they can preserve their innocence by retreating from action in the world. Flip Wilson said, 'All I ever wanted to be was a Jehovah's Bystander.' George Carlin asked, "Why aren't there any guilty bystanders?"

In his book How Do You Recognize A King? Bill McDonald observed, "Grinding poverty is slowly destroying our urban youth and we just stand by and watch. Watching the world turn secular, we know that there is a spiritual side to life but it just can't crack our tightly wound schedules. We won't even pull off the road to watch a sunset for fear that we will be late to the next appointment. In trying to do everything, we are doing nothing of lasting value for our souls. 3

People who have NOT answered God's call to follow Jesus naturally care for themselves and prefer to go by their own rules. They didn't do these things because they didn't want to go to heaven. They didn't do them because they cared more about themselves than anything else. Even though they were surprised because they didn't know that when they DIDN'T care for others or feed or provide shelter or visit others when they were sick or in prison they weren't doing it to Jesus they DIDN'T do it because 'Hey, that's what those who don't follow Jesus DON'T do.'

Paul Wadell writes in his book Toward a Welcoming Congregation, "Anxiety's central message is that we cannot afford to share because we can never have enough. Put more strongly, in a culture marked by anxiety and fear, the very things we have traditionally called sins or vices (hoarding, greed, suspicion) become wise and prudent virtues. Fear, rather than love, governs our lives. But such fear is a kind of idolatry because it suggests we are giving more attention to our own security than we are giving to God.

The way out of the despair of our age is through hospitality because a person well practiced in Christian hospitality chooses love over fear, trust over suspicion and even risk over security.<sup>4</sup>

Sometimes we go beyond inaction to actual action that does more harm than good.

There once was a Sunday School teacher that was known for his elaborate object lessons. Sally knew they were in for a fun day where she arrived in his classroom and tacked on the bulletin board was a big target. Bunches of darts lay on a nearby table. The teacher told the students to draw a picture of someone they disliked or someone who had made them angry, and he would allow them to throw darts at the person's picture. Sally drew a picture of a former friend, putting great detail into the drawing right down to the dimples on her false friend's face. The pictures were tacked over the target, the class lined up and each person took turns throwing darts with much laughter and hilarity. Some of the class threw their darts with such force that their targets were ripping apart. Sally looked forward to her chance but was disappointed when they ran out of time before her turn. As she sat there fuming because she hadn't got to throw her darts, the teacher began removing the tattered pictures and target from the board. Underneath the target was a picture of Jesus. The room fell silent as each student viewed the mangled picture of Jesus, holes and jagged rips covering his face, piercing his eyes. The teacher said only these words, "In as much as you have done it to the least of these my brethren, you have done it unto me." .5

God's family is about people helping people. It's about being more than a Jehovah's Bystander. It is bringing healing and harmony where there is hurt and discord. It is simple but not easy. It's not easy because there are many forces around us that make it difficult. Greed makes it difficult. Cultural and economic values make it difficult. Structural systems and accepted traditions make it difficult. Misguided theology and false teaching make it difficult. Idols of worship and misdirected allegiances, ignorance, misinformation, lust for power, status and control make it difficult.

It may sound simple to feed hungry people, welcome strangers. But it is not easy. This week members of a California church say local government officials asked them to stop serving food to the homeless because they were attracting too many homeless people. Since 2014, a United Methodist Church in Malibu has served home-cooked meals to anywhere from 70-100 homeless people every Wednesday.

The fact is the rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer. Tax laws continue to put a heavier burden on the poor. Women and children suffer the most from injustices. If it is so simple, why is it so difficult? The cross is a constant reminder that to love one's neighbor is not always easy or well received.

What God wants from us is essential kindness, love of neighbor, helping people who are in need. The church's mission is to reorder relationships and resources so that the forgotten ones are included in the blessings of creation.

On what will our final outcome rest? Will there be a grading curve, and if so, how generous will it be? Will there be a tallying of our financial gifts to the church, a

list of all the offices we've held in the church, a lifetime report of our worship attendance?

"No," Jesus says, "It's everything you've done in my name." It will be every little act of kindness we've ever done - the visit to the shut-in, the get-well card to the ailing relative, every Thank You note. It will be every bit of food taken to the home where a family member is ill or has died, every Food Drive to which you have donated or staffed, every bag of food handed out like the 30 families that received bags of groceries for Thanksgiving in our Fellowship Hall last week. It will be the little everyday acts of care and compassion that often go unrecognized. Every little deed we do, every kindness we show to others will count.

The fact is, some day everyone who has ever lived will be surprised. Some will be surprised. "We didn't know it was you!" Others will be surprised. "If we'd a known it was you, we might have done something." We were just bystanders.

My prayer is that when it comes to our final exam that we will be in the group with the grandma on the porch who crammed for her finals and with her we will hear, "Well done my good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy that has been prepared for you because of the mercy of Jesus, the Son of David, the Good shepherd the ultimate judge. Because, like the politician who felt his picture didn't do him justice....we too need ... mercy

Jesus said, "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive...mercy

Let's pray.

O Lord; how thankful we are that you are our Lord. Give us the ears to hear your voice and to follow your lead, to trust in your provision, to rely on your protection, to obey your commands. Place in our hearts a love for our brothers and sisters in this fold, and in the other folds you have in the world.

Lord, it seems like Sunday after Sunday we pray for tragedy after tragedy. This morning we pray for Egypt as they mourn the deaths of over 305 worshippers with 27 children among the dead and another 128 people injured in an attack on a Sufi mosque in northern Sinai.

Lord, you sent us your Son, the beloved one who was rejected, the Savior who appeared defeated. Yet the mystery of his kingship illumines our lives. Show us in HIS death the victory that crowns the ages and in his broken body the love that unites heaven and earth.

Hear us now as we pray for the concerns from our hearts.

1 **1500 Illustrations for Biblical Preaching**, by Michael P. Green

- 2 **Heaven's Audit of One's Soul**, by B. Wiley Stephens
- 3 **How Do You Recognize a King?**, by Bill McDonald
- 4 **Toward a Welcoming Congregation**, by Paul J. Wadell
- 5 **How Do You Recognize a King?**, by Bill McDonald