

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, March 16, 2014**

**WHAT GOD WANTS:
MERCY TO THE LEAST OF THESE**

Matthew 25:31-40

What Jesus describes in this passage of Scripture we have just read is a highly dramatic scene with more than just a smidgeon of suspense thrown in (if there can be such a thing as a “smidgeon of suspense”). I’m tempted to say that the sense of drama increases dramatically with the inclusion of verses 41-46, which are, you might say, “the rest of the story.” Instead, I will say that what Jesus says to those on His left brings into clearer, sharper focus the final judgment each of us will face in the courtroom of the King of Kings, on the day when our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, the heavenly Son of Man, comes again in all his glory and power, accompanied by all the angels, to take the throne that rightly belongs to Him as King of Kings, and to exercise His heavenly prerogative as the Judge of all the nations and of each and every person who has ever lived, including you and me.

We have already read that when Jesus returns, He will divide all the people of the earth into two groups. You may have heard it said that there are only two kinds of people in the world: Those who think there are only two kinds of people in the world, and those who don’t. All silliness aside, Jesus says that all of us and all the people who have ever lived or who will ever live, on the day of judgment, will be assigned to one or the other of two groups, just as a shepherd divides the sheep from the goats (25:32). The bottom line is that you’re either a sheep or a goat. There is no third option. There is no other category. It is one or the other, either sheep or goat. The blessing of King Jesus is pronounced on the sheep, whose acts of compassion, kindness, mercy, and generosity to others in need is not the means or basis of their acceptance by God, but is rather the evidence of their salvation – evidence of their love for God and their trust in Jesus alone for their salvation.

Though there is some disagreement as to whom exactly Jesus means by “the least of these brothers of mine,” what Jesus says to the sheep in verse 40 is of monumental significance, for He equates acts of compassion and kindness, and demonstrations of loving concern for the poor, needy, disadvantaged, sick, and incarcerated, with acts of mercy and loving service done for Him. In loving, serving, and caring for others, Jesus says, you are loving, serving, and caring for Him. Put another way, we love Him by loving others in His name. We serve Him by serving others. We show our love and devotion to Him by caring in simple, ordinary ways for those among us who are hungry or hurting or needy or lonely or afraid. Some biblical scholars and theologians believe that by “the least of these brothers of mine,” Jesus means primarily or perhaps even exclusively His disciples, which, by extension, includes all true disciple or followers of Christ throughout history. The majority view of theologians and biblical scholars throughout the history of the church is that “the least of these brothers of mine” is rightly understood to refer to anyone and everyone who is hungry or thirsty, in need of clothing or a place to stay, sick and suffering or in prison. Not just fellow believers, but anyone

Which view is correct? I don't know for sure. I am convinced, though, that even if "the least of these brothers of mine" specifically refers to our fellow Christians – to those who, like us, have been saved by God's grace and brought from spiritual death to life through the life, death, and resurrection of Christ on our behalf – even if the primary meaning of "the least of these ..." is our brothers and sisters in Christ, it would be a gross violation of the gospel and of our calling as followers of Christ if we were to restrict our acts of Christ-like mercy, compassion, love, and service to people who believe in Christ as we do. Do we make Christian faith a litmus test to determine if someone meets our qualifications to receive mercy or compassion or a helping hand? Do we require a person in need to give a credible profession of faith in Christ before we will help in any way?

Remember the definition of "neighbor" from the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37): Our neighbor is anyone in need. The neighbor we are to help is anyone in need whom we have the opportunity and ability to help. Being a neighbor involves showing kindness and mercy to anyone we encounter who is in need, whether a fellow believer in Christ or not.

In Galatians 6, Paul reminds us that, yes, we are to give higher priority to ministering to the needs of fellow Christians than to unbelievers, in saying, "as we have opportunity," we are to "do good to all people, especially to" – or, beginning with – "those who belong to the family of believers" (6:10). Still, as we have the opportunity, as God gives us the opportunity, King Jesus wants us to show compassion, kindness, and love by ministering to the needs of "the least of these," whether they are followers of Christ or not.

As I said at the beginning, verses 41-46 increase the intensity of the drama in Jesus' description of the final judgment. Listen to these verses, and follow along in your Bible, as I read them:

41 "Then (Jesus) will say to those on His left: 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire 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, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.'

44 "They also will answer; 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?'

45 "He will reply: 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.'

46 "Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life."

These are really strong words, aren't they? They are not pleasant either to read or to hear. But these are the words of Jesus our Lord. These words are true. These words have eternal significance. These words speak of eternal consequences. Just as there are finally only two kinds of people, described by Jesus in this passage as sheep and goats, there are also only two ultimate destinations: the kingdom of God prepared for God's people since the creation of the world (25:34) and the fires of hell prepared for the devil and his angels (25:41). It is either heaven or hell. Either blessing or condemnation. Whenever we speak or even think of the

reality of hell and the fate of those who will be there, we should always do so with tears in our eyes.

Only two kinds of people and two destinations. And, if we take the words of Jesus at face value, the final judgment we will all face when the Lord Jesus returns will be a judgment based on works. A judgment based on what we have done or failed to do. But how can this be? How can this be if, since the Bible teaches clearly and definitively that salvation is by grace alone through faith alone, and not by works of any kind on our part, so that no one can boast of having done anything to earn it? How can it be that Jesus says we will be judged by our works, by our record of compassion and kindness and mercy and loving acts of service to others in need?

Here is the answer: Jesus is *not* saying that any of us *will* be or even *can* be saved by our good works. You and I will not be saved by our acts of mercy and kindness to others, no matter how extraordinary our record may be. Jesus does not mean that we will be saved or not saved on the basis of our works. Salvation, as I reminded you last week, and as I try to remind you every week, is a gift from God from beginning to end. It is not about anything we have done or could ever do to earn or achieve it. It is all about what Jesus has done for us. It is all by grace, which, as Philip Yancey has written and as you have heard me say over and over again, comes free of charge to people who don't deserve it, and never will. People like me. And you.

The good works Jesus commends in this picture of the final judgment are not the basis of your salvation or mine. Instead, they are evidence that the faith we profess in Jesus Christ is real. If our faith in Him and love for Him are real, Jesus is saying, then it will show in the way we live. It will show not only in the things we no longer do – in the sins we no longer commit, but in the things we do as an expression of our love for God and our devotion to Him. It will show in the love, mercy, kindness, compassion, and generosity we show to others. If your faith in Christ is real, it will show in the way you live. If your love for Christ is real, it will show in the way you treat others. It will show in the way you treat people in need. It will show in how you respond to “the least of these.” If it doesn't show in what you do, how you live, and how you treat others, it probably isn't real. If we say we love God, if we say we believe in Jesus, it has got to show in the way we live.

If all this sounds overwhelming and you think there is some great thing you must do to prove that your faith in Christ is the real deal, notice that the kinds of things Jesus points to as evidences of saving faith are not what you would consider to be great or monumental things. They are not the spiritual equivalent of climbing Mount Everest. They are, generally speaking, little things. Ordinary things. Things like feeding someone who is hungry, giving a drink of water to someone who is thirsty, showing Christian hospitality to a visitor or providing a hotel room for a traveler in need, giving clothes or a coat or a pair of shoes to someone in need, caring for someone who is sick, taking time to visit someone in prison, whether it is a literal prison or perhaps a prison of loneliness. These are things that just about all of us can do. And, if you're in a season of life where you are not physically able to do some or any of these things, you can still pray for people in need, including – or especially – “the least of these” who are so often overlooked or just ignored.

What does God want? How does God want His people to live in this world? He wants us, as Micah 6:8 reminds us, to do justice, to live and act justly, to do all we can to pursue justice whenever and wherever injustice seems to rule. He wants us to walk humbly with Him, to remember that He is God and we are not, to submit willingly and gladly to his sovereign and gracious rule in our lives. He wants us to love mercy. He wants us to show mercy and kindness to one another, to our brothers and sisters in Christ everywhere, and to our neighbors in need. He wants us to do good works in our everyday life that demonstrate the authenticity of our faith. If we don't, it calls into question whether our faith is really real. Real faith – saving faith – produces the fruit of mercy, kindness, compassion, love, and service to others in real life.

There is one more truth I want you to see in this picture of the final judgment. Just as there are two kinds of people (sheep and goats) and two destinations (heaven and hell), the Bible teaches that there are two kinds of sin: sins of *commission* and sins of *omission*. Sins of *commission* are any and all acts of evil and wrong-doing we *commit*. They are, as it says in the traditional Anglican prayer of confession, those things we have done that we ought not to have done. A sin of *commission* is a transgression of God's moral law, an over-stepping of the moral and spiritual boundaries God has established for our well-being and for His glory. Sins of *omission*, on the other hand, are the things we have left undone that we ought to have done. A sin of *omission* is something we should have done but failed to do, or neglected to do, or refused to do. When we confess our sins to God, whether privately or in a corporate prayer of confession, it is always proper to confess both sins of *commission* and sins of *omission*, seeking the Lord's forgiveness for the things we have done that we ought not to have done, and for those things we have left undone that we ought to have done.

Notice in the parable of the sheep and the goats that it is not for active wrong-doing, not for sins of *commission* that our goats receive the condemnation of King Jesus. It is not so much what they have done as what they have not done. It is their sins of *omission*. It is their neglect of the needy and their failure to do good or show kindness when they had the opportunity.

In the letter of James in the New Testament, James 4, verse 17 says: "Anyone who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins." To know the good you ought to do and fail to do it, neglect to do it, refuse to do it, is sin. Whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for that person, sins. Now I came across this section in a commentary by a British New Testament scholar who talks about the seriousness of sins of omission. He says that the teaching of James in James 4:17 is very much in keeping with the teaching of Jesus contained in many of His parables, where the emphasis is laid on the sinfulness not so much of active wrong-doing as a failure to do right. Often the severity of the censure of Jesus seems to fall upon these sins of omission. He talks about how you can see this in the Parable of the Talent, because who is it that receives condemnation there? It is the one who failed to do anything with the talent, with the resources that were entrusted to him.

In the Parable of the Good Samaritan we can see it as well in that both the priest and the Levite who passed by the man by the side of the road passed by on the other side, did not actively do evil, but by their failure, their neglect, their unwillingness to do good, they sinned

greatly. He speaks of the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, in Luke chapter 16, where the rich man is in torment after his death, not because he was rich. He's not being punished because he was wealthy but because, in the words of R. G. V. Tasker, "Because he had yielded to the temptation which especially besets the wealthy to use his wealth to screen himself from any personal contact with those he found uncongenial, or who lived in circumstances beneath his own. As a result he failed to recognize and use opportunities of service which lay at his very doorstep. He created the gulf between himself and Lazarus and that gulf remained fixed after they were parted in death."

Then he goes on to talk about the Parable of the Last Judgment, the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats that we've been focusing on and notes how the great Judge divides all people into these two groups in the same way the shepherd divides the sheep from the goats. This is what he says: "A dividing line is drawn not between those who have committed certain sinful acts to which a definite name could be given and those who have avoided so doing, but between those who have shown charity, those who have demonstrated love to their fellow man and in that service have almost unconsciously been serving their Lord and those who fail to do so." No reference is made here to sins of commission, only sins of omission. Which is not to say that sins of commission are of no significance or consequence. Please don't misunderstand. But Jesus is suggesting in the Parable of the Last Judgment that the question to be asked each one of us when we stand before Him on the Judgment Day is, "Did you in the course of your life, your pilgrimage on earth, show love and kindness and compassion to the least of these whom I love? Or were you so self-centered, so self-engrossed, so wrapped up in your own concerns and the pursuit of your own ambitions, so blind to the needs of people around you that you never noticed the opportunities of doing good that were given to you? It will be no use, Jesus implies, pleading as excuses for failure to love, a narrow sphere of work or circumstances that were less than ideal, for there are always in our midst brothers and sisters of Christ and Jesus says, "What you did for others you did also for Me, but what you failed to do for others, for the least of these, you did not do for Me." Which perhaps serves as a wakeup call for us, for each of us, and an opportunity to examine our lives, our hearts, our attitudes and our awareness of the needs and people in need who perhaps cross our paths on a daily or at least a regular basis.

What does God want? He wants us to love mercy. He wants us to show mercy, to love others by showing mercy. Not so we can check it off our to-do list and feel like we've done our duty, but as an expression of our love for Him, our gratitude to Him, and our desire to be used by Him, to help the hurting, the hungry, the needy, the lonely, the stranger, the sick all around us.

Lord, let it be so to the glory and honor and praise of Your name, now and forever. Amen.