

Growing up I was one of those kids who took forever to grow. When I started high school, I was about 5'6" and 95 pounds. To make matters worse, my older brother was one of those boys who shaved when he was six. He stood 6'4" as a freshman in high school. He was always known as "Big Mitch," and me, well my nickname was "Little Mitch." I hated that name. There's not a teenage boy in the world who relishes being small.

But small isn't always bad. The Houston Astros second baseman, Jose Altuve, is 5'6". Four times he's won the Silver Slugger award at second base. Two years ago, he was the American League MVP and led his team to win the World Series. In the world of sports, sometimes the smallest people make the biggest difference.

What's true of people is also true of actions. In 1972, an MIT meteorologist, Edward Lorenz, presented a scientific paper called, "Predictability: Does the flap of a butterfly's wings in Brazil Set Off a Tornado in Texas?" According to his theory, the butterfly won't directly cause a tornado, but it can start a chain reaction that leads to profound changes in worldwide weather patterns. Again, sometimes the smallest acts make the biggest difference.

In Matthew 25:31-46, Jesus made this very point as he described the scene at the end of history. This passage was Jesus' last official teaching in Matthew, and it is not found in any other gospel. Jesus had been speaking privately with his disciples. Immediately after this, the events leading to his crucifixion — his betrayal, arrest, and trial — would begin. In this his final sermon, Jesus talked mainly about the future, specifically the coming judgment on Jerusalem, as well as his long-awaited return. Over and over again he has stressed the need for his followers to be prepared, to be ready.

### **Jesus sets the scene of the coming judgment**

Here in this conclusion to a long sermon, Jesus begins,

**"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." vv. 31-33**

Notice again, this story is about the return of Jesus. He started out, "When the Son of Man comes in his glory..." Jesus' first coming was characterized by humility and obscurity, but his second coming will be in glory. And he won't come alone. He'll

come with not some but "all the angels." And he'll sit on his glorious throne.

This is an awe-inspiring picture of Jesus! He applied to himself imagery used only of God in the Old Testament. He pictures himself as the Judge at the end of history. And as the Judge, he'll both gather before him "all the nations," and he'll separate people into two groups. The separation isn't according to nations but according to individuals. He said they'll be separated "one from another," implying we'll each stand individually before his throne. Some will be placed on his right; others on his left.

Although this really isn't a parable, Jesus used a familiar metaphor. He'll be like a shepherd who separates sheep from goats. Sheep and goats were usually mixed together in Palestinian flocks. Unlike the sheep we see today, they were pretty much the same color as goats, and so it was hard to distinguish between them. But it was important to do so because sheep were more commercially valuable than goats. Not only that, each night they had to be separated because goats were more sensitive to cold than sheep. The goats had to be put in a warmer place during the cool hours of the night to survive. We also know that in the Old Testament, God's people are often referred to as sheep and God himself as their shepherd. So here the sheep were placed on his right because they're his people and that's the favored side; to be at a ruler's right side was considered a high honor.

The question is, what's the basis here for the separation? Why are some goats and others sheep?

### **The King addressed those on his right and left**

The answer to that became quite clear as Jesus continued.

**"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. 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.'" vv. 34-36.**

It's clear these sheep are being judged based on their works. Jesus made the same point back in chapter 16. He said, "For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father's glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what they have done" (16:27). And it's clear as well the works are works of

kindness, mercy, and love. Six basic human needs are mentioned that these sheep met. I don't think this is meant to be an exhaustive or comprehensive list, but it illustrates the kinds of deeds they did: They fed the hungry, gave the thirsty something to drink, welcomed the stranger into their home, provided clothing for those who needed it, cared for the sick, and visited the prisoners. It's quite interesting; these are all rather unspectacular and even non-religious deeds of mercy.

Jesus didn't say, the one who healed the sick will gain approval, but the one who cared for the sick. He didn't say the one who freed the prisoner will gain approval, but the one who just visited him. He didn't say the one who prayed or fasted or preached a great sermon will gain approval. He didn't say the person who gave a million dollars away to charitable causes will gain approval. He didn't say the one with 5,000 Twitter followers will gain approval.

No! In fact, each of these things Jesus mentions, anyone can do! I was recently in the locker room of my son-in-law's college football team. On the wall in huge painted print were these words: "Ten Things That Require Zero Talent." And it listed those ten things: Being on-time, work ethic, body language, doing extra work, energy, attitude, passion, being accountable, football junkie, and effort. Anyone can do any of those things, and pretty much anyone can do any of these six things Jesus mentioned. Anyone can feed the hungry, welcome the stranger, care for the sick, or visit a prisoner. It takes no special talent; no advanced degrees; no bulging bank account. It just takes a willingness to take the time, make the effort, reach out, and be present.

And when Jesus got around to what the King would say to the goats on his left, it was precisely because they didn't do these things that they were judged as guilty. Look what he said to them.

**"Then he 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. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, 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.'" vv. 41-43**

So, the goats were condemned in this story not because of some great act evil they did but because of their simple neglect to those who were in need. These were not sins of commission but sins of omission. Still, they had no excuse. The goats had every opportunity the sheep had. The people described here were not the great sinners of the world, like Ted Bundy, but they could even be the most respectable people; people you might even meet in church some Sunday morning. My hunch is they were very busy people, and perhaps they just didn't have time to do any of these things.

The question you might be asking is, does this mean we're saved by works of righteousness? Do we somehow earn our way into

the kingdom of heaven? No! We know Scripture teaches salvation comes by grace through faith alone, apart from works. Ephesians states,

**"For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast." Eph. 2:8-9**

But if that's true, why were these sheep and goats judged based on their works? The answer, of course, is that these works are the demonstrable evidence that saving faith exists. In other words, these deeds of mercy are proof of genuine faith. When you get a bad cold, how do you know? You have all the symptoms of a cold, right? Well, how do you know you're a Christian? You have all the symptoms! That's why in the very next verse in Ephesians we read,

**"For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do" (Eph. 2:10).**

That's what Jesus was saying here about these sheep: their faith, which saved them, also transformed them into people who did good works, and those good works were here defined as deeds of kindness and mercy. Receiving grace leads to extending grace; tasting mercy leads to giving mercy to others.

There are a few more hints of this. Notice what the King said to the sheep,

**"Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world" (v. 34).**

An inheritance, by its very nature, is not something you earn. It's a gift. Furthermore, this inheritance was "prepared for you since the creation of the world." That, too, sounds like a gift — wrapped up and ready for you long ago — before you could do anything to earn it!

### **The ones on his right and left respond to the King**

But the most telling thing in all of this is how the sheep will react to the King when he commends them and invites them to come and take their inheritance.

**"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?' "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.'" vv. 37-40.**

I mean if they were trying to earn eternal life by their good deeds of mercy, they wouldn't have been surprised when Jesus commended them for doing such things. They'd have said, "Of course I'm a sheep, Lord, I knew all along I needed to do these things

to gain entrance into your kingdom. That's why I did them." But, no, they're surprised. They aren't even aware they did these things. And what they're really surprised about is that they did these deeds of kindness and mercy to him — to the King himself! "Lord, when did we feed you? When did we visit you? When did we welcome you? When we're you sick? When did we care for you?"

And Jesus answered, "Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers or sisters of mine, you did for me." It's important we understand who Jesus is talking about here. Who are "the least of these brothers or sisters (literally "brethren") of mine?" It's quite clear Jesus is talking about his followers. The words Jesus used here, translated as, "the least of these brothers or sisters of mine," are used throughout the New Testament to speak of followers of Jesus (believers). In Matthew 23:8 Jesus said to his disciples, "You have one Teacher, and you are all brothers." In Matthew 28:10 Jesus told the women at the tomb, "Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me." And that word "least" is the same word translated as "little" in Matthew 10:42. Where Jesus said, "And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones who is my disciple, truly I tell you, that person will certainly not lose their reward." Isn't that's precisely what Jesus said here? He said, "It's about how you treat the least of these brothers, sisters, and disciples of mine." Listen to how D.A Carson, a very fine New Testament scholar, put it:

**"By far the best interpretation is that Jesus' "brothers" are his disciples... The fate of the nations will be determined by how they respond to Jesus' followers, who, "missionaries" or not, are charged with spreading the gospel and do so in the face of hunger, thirst, illness, and imprisonment. Good deeds done to Jesus' followers, even the least of them, are not only works of compassion and morality but reflect where people stand in relation to the kingdom and to Jesus himself. Jesus identifies himself with the fate of his followers and makes compassion for them equivalent to compassion for himself."**

It's interesting many Jews of Jesus' day believed the nations would be judged based on how they treated Israel, but here Jesus is saying they'll be judged instead by how they treated his followers, his disciples, the church, which sometimes is called "the new Israel" (Galatians 6:16).

Now, let me be clear — the point here is not that we shouldn't help other people who aren't believers. Certainly, we should help them. The Bible says a lot about that. I think of the parable of the Good Samaritan, which teaches us to love our neighbor, and our neighbor is anyone you see who has a need you can meet. That's why followers of Jesus have so often been on the front lines of social justice and helping those in need. That's why we

have organizations like the YMCA, World Vision, Compassion International, Food for the Hungry, Prison Fellowship, and Samaritan's Purse. By all means, we should be willing to help anyone in need.

Having said that, there is something here about the uniqueness and significance of helping followers of Jesus who are in need. I think of Galatians 6:10, "Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers." We should do good to everyone, but especially those in the family of faith. Why? Because Jesus uniquely identifies himself with them. Remember what Jesus said to Saul when he was on his way to Damascus to persecute Christians? He said, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me." You see, Jesus identifies with his followers. That's why Jesus said: "when you did for one of the least of these brothers or sisters of mine, you did for me." What a profound thought: the glorious Son of man, the judge of all the nations, identifies with the smallest, neediest, and lowliest people.

That is what the goats didn't seem to understand. They were just as surprised as the sheep.

**"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?' 'He will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.'" vv. 44-45.**

Just as the sheep will be surprised by what they did do, the goats will be surprised by what they didn't do.

### **Jesus reveals the eternal fate of both groups**

It's true — the smallest acts make the biggest difference. Jesus ended his sermon this way.

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

It's quite clear in this story there are eternal ramifications for how the sheep and the goats responded to his followers in need. The goats go away to eternal punishment; the sheep to eternal life. There's a finality to this judgment. "Eternal" means eternal — the same word is used for both eternal life and eternal punishment or fire. And both are described as places which God has prepared. As we saw, he prepared a kingdom for his sheep since the creation of the world. Hell is described a bit differently. Hell was prepared for the devil and his angels (v. 41). It wasn't prepared for people. But people will end up there by virtue of their own choice to reject Jesus, the One sent by the Father, the One and only Savior who was betrayed, arrested, put on trial and crucified.

### **The smallest acts make the biggest difference**

The smallest acts, acts of and mercy and kindness, make the biggest difference; an eternal difference. These acts are so seemingly

insignificant that the goats don't think to do them, and the sheep don't remember doing them. Sometimes we think our "great" accomplishments matter most. I thought about that. I tried to picture the judgment, and I tried to picture myself as I stood before the King:

The King: "Mark, did you bring your phone? Can you look at your Google Calendar?"

Me: "Well, yes, Lord. I know they said I couldn't take anything with me, but I really wanted to get my phone through. I can't really live without it. It's right here."

The King: "Look up June 3, 1982."

Me: "Oh yes, I remember that, Lord. That's when I was ordained at Valley Community Church. Did you know Ray Stedman spoke at my ordination?"

The King: "Well, I never go to those things. You know how many preachers have been ordained that have nothing to do with me?"

The King: "But do you remember later that same day? You wanted to get home, but there was a boy standing in the lobby of the church all by himself. He just stood there when everyone was leaving, and you stopped and talked to him. He said his father was dying of cancer and his mother was an alcoholic. And you stayed and talked to him, and prayed for him right there. Do you remember that?"

Me: "I think I kinda remember it, Lord."

The King: "Well, I remember it. When you stopped to talk to that boy, you were talking to me."

The King: "Look up May 25, 2003."

Me: "Oh yes. I remember that day, Lord. That's when I received my doctorate in preaching from Gordon-Conwell. That was a great day for me."

The King: "Well, I did not attend many of those graduations. I found them too formal and stuffy. No, I was thinking how that morning you heard about a couple that just lost their job? They didn't think they could stay in their house, and you put some cash in an envelope and sent it off to them?"

Me: "Lord, I don't know if I remember that."

The King: "I remember it. What you gave to that couple you gave to me, and I've never forgotten it."

The King "Now look this one up: February 27, 2015. What's it say?"

Me: "I don't even have to look for that, Lord. That's the day I became the Chaplain for the San Francisco Giants."

The King: "Well, I don't watch much baseball — kinda boring. Besides the Giants only made the playoffs once in the four years you were their Chaplain. What's with that? But do you remember Ronald? He sat in a wheelchair in front of the stadium. Do you remember how you and your wife started putting a little cash in his cup when you walked by? Do you remember how you introduced yourself to him, prayed for him, and visited his new apartment? I've never forgotten that. When you reached out to Ronald, you were reaching out to me."

You see, when we come to the last judgment, there are going to be all kinds of surprises, and the smallest things will make the biggest difference.

There will be goats there who are absolutely certain they're sheep. They'll saunter over to the King's right side, bringing all their great accomplishments before him, and they'll say, "Look at all the great things I've done." And the King will say, "You are goats in sheep's clothing. I never knew you."

And then there will be others who've are quite aware of their own sinfulness, who'll know the only chance they have of getting into that kingdom is the grace and mercy of God through Jesus Christ. But the King knows them, and the King remembers things they've forgotten. He remembers the small acts of kindness and mercy they showed to one of the least of his brothers and sisters. And those small things will make the biggest difference.