

I Was Hungry and You Gave Me Something to Eat

Spiritual wellness for me all comes down to this basic truth – that when I'm with God, when I'm consciously aware of God's presence, everything is just fine. There may be trouble elsewhere. At work. At home. Friends may disappoint me. Politics may scare me. I may have this problem or that physically. But when I am with God, when I am conscious, when I am mindful, when I stop and look and see, when I am still and know that God is God, everything is fine. When I look up from my busyness, when I break with the things that preoccupy and distract me, when I lay my fear down and I'm with God, everything is fine.

Now we come to Jesus' Parable of the Sheep and the Goats in Matthew 25:31-46. Its setting is that of the final judgment. And in this story, Jesus is saying: There will be accountability, which simply means, you matter. Who you are and who you become matters. And what you do matters; especially how you treat others matters. Justice matters. Injustice does not stand. No one gets away with it. In the end, what Jesus says about Hell or Gehenna, though it's much abused and often misunderstood, is his assurance that no one gets away with treating others badly. Those who live angry, selfish, thoughtless, destructive, unloving and uncaring lives will experience all the consequences of what they have done and what they have not done.

There will be accountability. Accounts will be settled, although when the truth finally comes out a lot of people are going to be surprised by what happens. Some people who have no idea that they're good with God will be. And some who are quite sure they're alright – after all, they go to church, they're baptized – won't be. There will be a lot of surprised people that day. So what are we to do?

Let's consider this parable as it reads in Eugene Peterson's *The Message*:

“When he finally arrives, blazing in beauty and all his angels with him, the Son of Man will take his place on his glorious throne. Then all the nations will be arranged before him and he will sort the people out, much as a shepherd sorts out sheep and goats, putting sheep to his right and goats to his left. Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Enter, you who are blessed by my Father! Take what’s coming to you in this kingdom. It’s been ready for you since the world’s foundations. And here’s why:

I was hungry and you fed me,
I was thirsty and you gave me a drink,
I was homeless and you gave me a room,
I was shivering and you gave me clothes,
I was sick and you stopped to visit,
I was in prison and you came to me.’

Then those ‘sheep’ are going to say, ‘Master, what are you talking about? When did we ever see you hungry and feed you, thirsty and give you a drink? And when did we ever see you sick or in prison and come to you?’

Then the King will say, ‘I’m telling the solemn truth: Whenever you did one of these things to someone overlooked or ignored, that was me – you did it to me.’ Then he will turn to the ‘goats’”

So what are we to do? Pretty clear, right! God will judge us by how we respond to human need, by what we do to, for and about those who are often dismissed as insignificant, those who are often overlooked or ignored. And this is the clearest passage in Scripture that links specific actions directly and immediately to eternal destiny. If you do these things, you receive the kingdom prepared for you since the foundations of the world, eternal life. If you don’t do these things, the text goes on, you are cursed, in the words of this parable, cast into eternal fire, prepared not for you but for the devil and his angels, the point being, it doesn’t have to happen to you, it’s not meant to happen to you, it was prepared for Someone Else, but it could happen to you. But it comes down to how we respond to human need: giving the hungry something to eat, giving the thirsty something to drink, inviting strangers in, giving the homeless a room (as Peterson put it), clothing the needy, looking after the sick, visiting those in prison, what we have done for the overlooked and ignored.

So I’m on a subway one day in New York City. A guy gets on the car looking worse than even the average panhandler, a ravaged face, soiled clothes, missing teeth, a shuffling gait. As he begins his pitch, we come to my stop but his words still ring out to my ears. What he wants is, yes, any spare change, but anything, a half-drunk Coke, a half-eaten sandwich, anything. I almost gagged! He’ll settle for a half-eaten sandwich. No con this.

What Jesus is saying is all simple stuff, giving a hungry person a meal, welcoming a stranger, cheering up the sick, visiting in prison. These are all things any of us can do. We don’t have to be theologians, or ministers, or geniuses, or heroically, self-disciplined saints. God does not judge us primarily by our knowledge, fame, wealth or status but by the help we give to those who are overlooked and ignored. The key to life is not in complicated doctrine. It’s in giving with love to those who are otherwise overlooked and ignored. It’s always something any of us can do.

In fact, Jesus came to earth and opened the way to glory and deep soul contentment to everyone. That’s what this parable is saying. No one need miss out on greatness. And it’s doing these very doable things and doing them without calculation, doing them without hardly realizing you’re doing them. You’re not trying to get the inside track with God. You’re surprised he noticed. You’re just doing what’s right and humane because that’s who you are. It’s the natural, instinctive reaction of a loving, open, trusting heart.

Then, however, Jesus adds, “When you look into the face of the hungry or the thirsty, the stranger or the needy, the sick or the imprisoned, you see me.” And maybe we were wondering just where we might encounter the presence of God!

– Dale Pauls