

This fall, I am preaching a sermon series I have entitled “Justice,” looking at what the Bible has to say about justice and how to evaluate the cultural messages on justice that are all around us. Each week, I have begun with three preliminary comments. First of all, this is not primarily a political sermon series or a social science lecture series. I will be trying to stay in my lane as a pastor, helping our church to know Jesus and to better love Him and love your neighbor. Secondly, I recognize that I will be addressing some sensitive subjects, and I do not expect everyone to agree with every word I speak. I do expect, however, that we will model speaking the truth in love. If you disagree with me on something I say, or have other insights or experience that you feel would enhance my understanding or my teaching, or if something I say does not sit well with you, please speak up. Consider this an invitation to a conversation. And thirdly, my goal in this series is not to help us wag our finger at the world for acting like the world, but to challenge the church to do better in the realm of justice.

This last point is an especially seductive temptation for many of us. We can get caught up in critiquing what is wrong with the world’s social justice movements, while conveniently ignoring the reality that the Bible speaks strongly and repeatedly about God’s heart for justice and his hatred of injustice. There is a word for people like that: Pharisees. And so this morning, I want to look at a parable Jesus taught that speaks directly and loudly to God’s heart for justice. If you’re unfamiliar with the term parable, the best definition I have found comes from Pastor John MacArthur: **A parable is an ingeniously simple word picture illuminating a profound spiritual lesson.** Jesus often taught in parables, using word pictures like “God’s kingdom is like a treasure hidden in a field” or “God is like a Father welcoming home a wayward Son.” By using everyday language that was familiar to his audience, he ensured that the stories would stay with them long after he left.

This morning, we will be looking at the parable of the sheep and the goats from Matthew 25:31-46. This parable is the third of three parables that Jesus tells in Matthew 25 about his second coming, the reality that one day he will return to judge the earth and to put a final end to evil. In Matthew 25, there is the parable of the ten virgins, which warns us to be ready for his coming; the parable of the talents, which tells us that we will be judged based on what we have done with what we has given us; and finally, the parable of the sheep and the goats. Let’s begin in Matthew 25:31.

Matthew 25:31-46 - *"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. ³² 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. ³³ He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. ³⁴ "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. ³⁵ 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, ³⁶ 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.' ³⁷ "Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you **something to drink**? ³⁸ When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? ³⁹ When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?' ⁴⁰ "The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.' ⁴¹ "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**. 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."

I can't help feeling like this parable is a work of genius when I read it. I also can't help feeling like it's the ultimate episode of that show **Undercover Boss**. The heart of this passage is this message:

Genuine faith in God will result in tangible love shown to the "least of these"

This parable is so genius. It's a simple story illustrating a profound point – **the God of the universe, the eternal, all-powerful creator, identifies with the poor, the hungry, the prisoner, the sick, and the stranger**. Most "gods" were identified with the king, with the powerful. But the true God of the universe identifies with the poor, the outcast, the suffering. I find that incredible. I mean, it's one thing to tell people to care for the poor and hungry. **But this is Jesus saying that however you treat the poor, the hungry, the marginal, is how you are treating me**. Do you want to love and worship God? Love the poor. Welcome the stranger. Feed the hungry. Care for the sick. Give water to the one who has none. Give shelter to the one who is in need. I think Mother Teresa said it best – "You only love Jesus as much as you love the person you love the least." Whoever is the least of these in

your life, be careful how you treat them, because that reveals a lot about your love for God and your understanding of His love for you.

And for those of you who have felt mistreated or oppressed, who know what it is like to be poor, hungry, the stranger: be encouraged by how Jesus identifies with you. Whatever anyone has done to you, they do to Him. Think of how Jesus spoke to Saul, who became known as the apostle Paul:

Acts 9:3-5 - As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. ⁴ He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" ⁵ "Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked. "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied.

Jesus identifies with his people who are hurting and oppressed and marginalized. And so, whenever you feed the hungry, you give to the Lord. Whenever you visit a prisoner or invite in a stranger, you do so to the Lord.

Proverbs 19:17 - He who is kind to the poor lends to the LORD, and he will reward him for what he has done.

Now, you need to know up front that there's some debate on whether Jesus meant this to refer specifically to how we treat Christians by saying "these brothers of mine." After all, when he uses the phrase "brothers" he is typically referring to his followers:

Matthew 12:48-50 - He replied to him, "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?" ⁴⁹ Pointing to his disciples, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers. ⁵⁰ For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother."

Even though that is probably most accurate, I think Galatians 6:9-10 is the best approach to take:

Galatians 6:9-10 - Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. ¹⁰ Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.

Do good to all, especially to your family in Christ. After all, I'm guessing that when you stand before the Lord, telling him that you didn't help someone in need because they weren't a Christian is probably not going to fly.

So this parable teaches us that when we stand before the Lord, part of His judgment of us will be how we have treated the least of these. It is whether or not we have been concerned with justice and injustice. Now, I want to be clear: the Bible does teach that salvation is by grace and not by works.

***Ephesians 2:8-10** - For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith-- and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God-- ⁹ not by works, so that no one can boast. ¹⁰ For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.*

We will not be saved by the good works we do. But notice what this passage says: even though we are saved by grace and not by works, we are saved to do good works. True faith will express itself in good works, in a life that strives to follow God's will. And so, salvation is by grace – there is no way to be right with God except by trusting in Jesus' death for your sins – but you will be judged on the basis of what you have done, for genuine faith will result in good works. Listen to these two passages about judgment.

***2 Corinthians 5:10** - For we must all appear before the **judgment** seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.*

***1 Corinthians 3:10-15** - But each one should be careful how he builds. ¹¹ For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. ¹² If any man builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, ¹³ his work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be **revealed** with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man's work. ¹⁴ If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. ¹⁵ If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames.*

Paul says that we will be judged according to what we have done in the body. And for some people, the fire of judgment will burn up all that they have done if it was not done on the foundation of Jesus. The person may be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames.

Is this new to you? This is a new concept to some evangelicals who are used to salvation by grace. But this is the point of the book of James.

James 2:14-17 - What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? ¹⁵ Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. ¹⁶ If one of you says to him, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? ¹⁷ In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

True faith expresses itself in good works. **This is where I believe some modern evangelistic techniques get it wrong.** They'll teach that if you pray a prayer, you are saved and sealed for heaven and nothing can ever change that. What you wind up with is millions of people who have "prayed the prayer" and show no evidence of any changed life, no evidence that God actually has saved them. You really don't know if someone has truly been saved by whether or not they prayed a prayer, but by the evidence of their lives after that. **Is their supposed faith expressing itself in good works or not?** Is there fruit – love, joy, peace, goodness, kindness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control – or not?

We are saved by grace, but faith that does not result in good works is dead. Good works alone will save no one, but faith that is all in the head and doesn't show itself in action is not truly faith. Genuine faith shows itself in good works. This means just as no one will be able to stand before God on the basis of their good works, so too no one will be able to stand on a faith that is all head and does not prove itself by good works. Yes, praying the prayer of salvation may be the moment that you were saved, but assurance of salvation comes from watching your life to see if the Holy Spirit has indeed changed you and caused you to bear spiritual fruit and love as Jesus does. **Can someone tell by looking at your life that you believe?**

This is why we as believers and the church should naturally be involved in ministries of mercy and justice, ministering to the poor, the hungry, the prisoner, the alien, for our Lord identifies with them. This is why as a church we are involved with Hartford City Mission, with Street Church, with prison ministry, with Amirah, with ministry in nursing homes, and with our town social services, and with Urban Alliance.

Genuine faith will result in tangible love shown to the "least of these." How does this happen? How does genuine faith result in tangible love and acts of justice and mercy?

I think Jesus is saying in this passage that whenever you find someone in need, how you respond to them is a good measure of how clearly you get the gospel.

The more you understand the compassion that God has shown to you, that when you were helpless, He gave His life for you, the more you will be filled with a Christlike compassion towards others.

***Romans 5:6-8** - You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷ Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. ⁸ But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*

And secondly, I believe the more you understand your adoption, the more generous you will be. Consider:

***Romans 8:16-18** - The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. ¹⁷ Now if we are children, then we are heirs-- heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory. ¹⁸ I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.*

At salvation, God gives you His Holy Spirit. **And if you truly know and believe that God is your father, and that all that is His is yours, then that frees you up to be generous, because you know that He is caring for you.** That's why Jesus tells us:

***Matthew 6:31-33** - So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' ³² For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. ³³ But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.*

Over and over in the NT, we are told to be generous and that God will supply what we need. **Furthermore, you know that your present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.** You know that there is nothing you can not give up this side of heaven that He won't more than make up for in eternity.

Whatever you do to the least of these, you do to me. **You only love God as much as you love the person you love the least.** Think of the person you have the hardest time loving. Now see them as Jesus. Think of groups of people –

minorities, immigrants, gays, Catholics, rich people, poor people, stuck-up people, Pharisaic Christians, men, women, Republicans, Democrats – careful about your attitude towards them. You only love God as much as you love the person you love the least. Remember Jesus' opening words in Luke:

Luke 4:16-21 - *He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. And he stood up to read. ¹⁷ The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written: ¹⁸ "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, ¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." ²⁰ Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him, ²¹ and he began by saying to them, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."*

Do not mistake that part of the good news of the gospel is good news for the oppressed, the poor, those in prison. It should be great news for the poor and marginalized when a church moves in, because care for the oppressed is part of Jesus' gospel.

So how are you living out your faith? Is your faith expressing itself in this sort of action? What is your attitude towards the least of these? How are you living out your faith when it comes to the least of these? May we be a church that demonstrates our love for God by loving the least of these.