

Matthew 25:31-46

THE FINAL EXAM

“You will have exactly two hours for this test,” said the college professor as he handed out the final exam to the 500 students seated in the large lecture hall. “Under no circumstances will I accept a paper given to me after the deadline has passed.” Two hours later the professor said, “Time’s up.” All of the students, except one, got up from their desks, walked down the steps, and placed their exams on the professor’s desk at the front of the large lecture hall. The professor began to grade the first paper on top of the stack.

About fifteen minutes later, the last student finished his final exam question, came down the steps and tried to turn in his exam. But the professor was true to his word; he refused to accept the late paper. The student pleaded with him but to no avail. Finally, the student drew himself up, put his hands on his hips and said with great authority, “Sir, do you know who I am? Do you have any idea at all as to my identity?” The professor replied, “There are five hundred students in this class; I don’t have the slightest clue as to who you are!” “Terrific!” shouted the student as he shoved his exam into the middle of the stack and ran out the door.

As that story suggests, there are times when it can be very beneficial to be anonymous. However, at the end of time, when the Son of Man comes in his glory to judge everyone, we will be anything but anonymous to Christ the King. As we pass before him, Jesus will know us. He will recognize us by face and name. And, he will know us by our choices and our actions – by what we did or didn’t do for the least of these, who are also members of Jesus’ family.

When that time comes, whether it’s at the end of our physical life here on earth or at the very end of human history, this will be the final exam: did we reach out in loving compassion to feed the hungry, give a cup of water to the thirsty, welcome a stranger, clothe the naked, and visit

the sick and imprisoned? We either did or we didn't. If we performed these simple acts of kindness, whether we realized it or not, we also ministered to Jesus. Or, if we failed to meet a human need, we not only neglected the needy, we also failed Jesus and the final exam.

I can't speak for you but I will admit to myself that I am uneasy about this final exam and the distinct possibility of receiving a failing grade that will necessitate my being led off to the left instead of the right hand of the king.

I could make a case that there have certainly been times when I have reached out to the least of these. I pledge and give to special offerings and the United Way. I work every year at Christmas Cheer, and deliver gifts and food to Angel Tree and Butterfly Tree families. I visit the sick and the shut-ins. I once helped to start a night shelter for homeless folks. I have participated in numerous CROP walks for the hungry and St. Jude Bike-a-thons for children with cancer. And, our family of five once shared our small home for four months with a woman and her four children, who were escaping an abusive and alcoholic husband and father. I've tried; I've really tried to minister to the least of these.

However, I am also aware that I have failed. It's hard to balance eating too much or spending too much at the grocery store when there are so many, who are not only hungry but who are starving in the world or even across town. I sleep in a warm bed at night while others bed down under a bridge, on a park bench or in a cardboard box. Due to a busy schedule, I'm quite certain I have neglected to follow up with someone in need with a visit, a phone call or a note to let them know I am thinking of them. I don't mean to withhold from the poor but sometimes I can't tell if the person, who calls the church office looking for help, is really in need or is running a scam. I just don't know so, sometimes, I don't give help. Sadly, the list goes on.

So, here's my problem with Jesus' parable about the judgment. For me, it's not totally one way or the other. I readily confess that I don't always serve those in need; and yet, at the same time, I don't always neglect to help serve those who suffer. I know that King Jesus will come in his glory and he will judge us and divide us up – the righteous, who served others, will go to the right, and all the rest, who bombed the final exam, will go to the left. I wonder if Jesus has given any thought to forming a third line, right down the middle, for those like me, who win some, lose some; who hit and miss; who are a mixture of saint and sinner. I know I am not made of 100% wool – as in sheep. But, let me be quick to add that I am not a full-blooded goat! I have my good days and I have my bad days. There are times when I really do give myself away in service to others; and, I admit, there are those times when I can be caught up in my own “stuff” and not see (or, I don't want to see) the vast number of needs that clamor for my attention. I wonder what Jesus will do with the likes of me, and, quite possibly, you?

Perhaps, as John Claypool has suggested, the best way to understand the parable of the last judgment is this: “Jesus is giving us the final exam well in advance, precisely because he wants us to pass it with flying colors! Its purpose isn't to condemn us, but to give us a sense of where we are in our own development and the direction in which we need to grow.” He says the purpose of this parable isn't to scare the Hell out of us, but rather to inspire us to grow in the direction of heavenly joy! (*Stories Jesus Still Tells*, pg. 66)

That suggestion is plausible and it helps in so far as it goes. Jesus is telling us ahead of time what will be on the test so we will know, in advance, how best to prepare in order to pass. That's helpful knowledge, to be sure. However, I know myself pretty well, and, knowing isn't always doing. In other words, even with the exam given out ahead of time, I know for certain that I won't score a perfect 100, and I may not even score a 70, which is barely passing by my

count. If I have any chance at all of passing, the King will have to grade my final exam on the curve or supplement my test results with a heaping serving of grace! So, I find myself wondering, “What is King Jesus going to do with me and with you, who sometimes act more like goats than like the sheep of God’s pasture?”

By the grace of God, Jesus has provided the answer to my question and my ongoing concern about that final exam. First of all, it helps to remember WHO is telling this parable. Our Lord Jesus tells this story to his disciples in every age so that we can know what is expected of us, who are called to follow him and go and do likewise in our dealings with others.

Then, notice what Jesus says next in Matthew’s gospel. When Jesus had finished saying all these things, he said to his disciples, “You know that after two days the Passover is coming, and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified.” After spelling out the dire circumstances of our sinful, neglectful behavior before God’s judgment throne, our Lord and Savior talks of the cross where he will soon die for all of us who stand condemned on account of our sins. Yes, we will be judged, but it will be tempered with and transformed by God’s love, grace, and mercy. The Judgment Day is coming, but the good news is that the Judge has already come and acted decisively on our behalf. The one who sits on the throne of judgment, the one whose searching eyes will inspect what we did and didn’t do for others in need, is the very same Jesus who died for us, rose again for us, and even now intercedes on our behalf.

By the grace of God in Jesus Christ, and nothing less, we can confidently expect to pass that final exam. However, that doesn’t let us off the hook in the here and now. In grateful response to the grace of God, we seek to give to others. We don’t do so in the hope of earning points with God. No, we give because God gives, and we are created in God’s image. We give for the sake of others because Jesus Christ gave himself away for us. We give because the needs

are there before us and we can do something about them in our own way. As we read through the various ways people ministered to the least of these in Jesus' family – a cup of water, some food, clothing, a visit, a small show of human concern and compassion for another – we realize, “Hey, I can do that!” Most of all, we give to others in the knowledge that we are giving ourselves to Jesus. That alone is more than enough incentive for us to serve the least of God's family.

As we gather with family and friends in this week ahead there are so many things for which we are thankful. We have truly been blessed with God's rich bounty in our lives. But, let us be sure to be thankful for... God and for all that God has done for us through Jesus Christ the Son, our Lord and Savior. It's been said that stewardship is what we do after we have said that Jesus is Lord. Out of gratitude for Jesus Christ, we give to other members within the family. And, as we give, we are blessed once again – not only because we helped another person in need but, by doing so, we were able to see and serve Jesus.

Nancy Leman writes in a daily devotional about a man named Floyd. According to the standards of the world Floyd was nobody. Floyd traveled around the country looking for work at harvest time. He had no home and no place to go. A couple invited him into their home and gave him a home-cooked meal. Floyd said very little as they ate. The wife, Nancy, offered to wash his clothes for him but Floyd declined the offer. He picked cherries in the orchard next to their home that day and slept under the trees. Early the next morning, while Floyd was finishing one last project in the orchard, Nancy, on an impulse, wrote him a letter telling of God's love. Then she tucked it with a little cash into a New Testament. She found his backpack in the yard and stuck the packet inside. She imagined him traveling that day looking for work and at the end of the day bedding down somewhere under the stars, weary and all alone. She was warmed by

the thought of Floyd's surprise when he discovered her note, the New Testament, and the cash she had planted in his backpack.

This Christian couple never saw Floyd again. Four years later Floyd's sister wrote to them, telling them of his death. As Floyd's sister was going through his few belongings she found the New Testament and the letter Nancy wrote to Floyd telling him of God's love. "The must have been very dear to his heart," Floyd's sister concluded, "for he carried them with him until he died." ("Traveling Friend," *The Upper Room*, March/April 1993, p. 66)

It was such a small and simple gesture – a note, a Bible, and a little cash – but a little counts for a lot in the kingdom of God. The Judgment Day will come at the end. In the meantime, Jesus is coming to us, each and every day, in the guise of the poor and needy and defenseless ones. Let us go to him and to the least of these who are family to us because we share the same Heavenly Father, and let us give of ourselves. As we live out our faith by giving to others in gratitude to God, we help fulfill the Lord's Prayer: "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven," and we give glory, honor and praise to God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Randall C. Stevens
First Presbyterian Church/Martinsville, VA
November 20, 2011