

THE UNEXPECTED APPEARANCE OF JESUS

Scriptures: Matthew 25:31-46, Luke 18:9-14

To me this is a scary parable. It is scary because of the way it implies that our salvation depends on works, not just the bad things we should not have done, for which we can be forgiven, but it depends on the good things we should have done and didn't.

I think many people picture the last judgment as a courtroom where a judge reads off a list of our offenses, pounds the gavel, and says, "Guilty." But that is not how I picture the last judgment. I picture the last judgment as a giant auditorium where thousands of people are seated before two large screens. On one screen there is a picture of a swollen bellied child in Haiti sitting in the rubble of her collapsed home. On the other screen is me reclining on my sofa eating caramel corn and watching the NCAA tournament. Then the pictures change, and on one screen is a Central American peasant picking coffee under a blistering sun. On the other is me sitting in my air conditioned office sipping a latte. Then the pictures change again, and I see a teenager with a hooded sweatshirt curled up in the doorway of an alley in downtown Spokane. And on the other screen is me tucked into a warm bed reading email on my I Phone.

You see what I am talking about? When Jesus says, "I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me"—when Jesus says that, I figure he is talking to me. Because I can think of people in all those categories whom I have ignored.

I much prefer Bible passages about grace. I would much rather preach on Ephesians 2:8-9 which says, "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast." That is one of my all time favorite Bible verses. I would much rather preach on that than on Matthew 25.

But wait a minute. Is grace really opposed to works? Is Matthew 25 incompatible with Ephesians 2? There is a very important element in Matthew chapter 25 that is frequently overlooked. In fact in all of the commentaries I read this week on Matthew 25, not one of them gave full attention to this element of the story. It is the element of *surprise*.

At the beginning the King, who of course is Jesus, says to those on his right,

Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.

Do you remember how they responded? They were shocked. They said in effect, "You're kidding. We never saw you hungry or thirsty or naked or sick and did anything for you." Isn't that interesting? The righteous who are supposedly saved by the good works for Jesus did not know they had done any.

There is a fascinating parallel to this story in an ancient Egyptian writing called the Book of the Dead. I think we can learn a lot by comparing the writings of other religions to the Bible, and here is a good example. In the Egyptian Book of the Dead a man dies and appears before God saying these words:

I have given satisfaction to God by doing that in which he delights: I have given bread to the hungry, water to the thirsty, and clothes to the naked.

Do you see how similar this is to Matthew 25, and yet how different? Because the righteous in Matthew 25 never dreamed of boasting before God of their good works. Why? Because they did not know they had done any! The righteous in Jesus' parable are saved by surprise.

In contrast, those on the king's left are surprised by their condemnation. They protest, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?" You get the impression that these people thought they had lived pretty good lives. I can imagine all the good things said at their memorial services. They remind me of the Pharisee in our first scripture reading who prays, "God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income." He sounds like the guy in the Egyptian Book of the Dead. He is confident that his good works will make him acceptable to God. He pledges, for heaven's sake!

In contrast the tax collector does not even look at God. Instead he beats his breast and says, "God, be merciful to me a sinner." According to Jesus, the tax collector, not the Pharisee, is accounted righteous before God.

Here is the deal: if you think your good works, your character, your service to the community, or even your pledges to the church budget will get you in good with God, you are in for a surprise. Jesus says, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it not to one of the least of these, you did it not to me." As long as one person goes hungry, as long as one person sleeps in an alley, as long as one person is made homeless by war or greed, as long as one person suffers alone, we have still not fulfilled God's purpose for our lives. If you think you can earn a place in God's kingdom by your works, you will always fall short.

But to those who trust not in their own works but in the mercy of God, that same word "one" becomes a word of hope. For the king says, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one [even one!] of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."

That is the surprise. We are not saved by all the good things we have done; we are saved by God's grace, just like the tax collector. But in that grace God takes even our smallest effort to help one suffering person and gives it eternal significance. When you show compassion to someone who is sick, when you befriend someone at school who is outcast, when you give food to the hungry or better yet when you use any leverage, skill or resources you have to help the hungry provide food for themselves—when you do that, the consequences ripple through eternity and come back in the end to surprise you with a significance you never knew they had.

- Ken Onstot
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