

Some people have described this particular parable as one of the more terrifying stories Jesus ever told; and the truths contained in it are by no means comfortable or easy. This parable falls especially harshly upon the ears of us modern readers – because we live in a world of inclusivity and tolerance and we find it difficult to deal with those texts in which Jesus quite clearly says that some will be excluded.

But this is also perhaps one of the easiest of Jesus' parables to grasp; we get the picture. Matthew makes it clear that there will be a judgment. There will be a time when the Son of Man will come to judge. But what makes it difficult is precisely because we understand it so clearly. It induces what you might call a sort of "separation anxiety," because Jesus is talking about Judgment Day, and eternity is on the line—where are we going?!

On the one hand, it sounds as if Jesus is offering a formula for salvation: "Do THIS in order to be saved. Do THIS in order to be a sheep. Do THIS in order to be judged righteous." But we also know we're saved by grace and not our good works. Unconditional, undeserved, unlimited, overflowing grace. Complete and total forgiveness of sin. Absolute welcome into the kingdom. Not based on what we have done but totally and completely because of what Jesus has done: he died on the cross for our sins and rose again to give us victory over death. We know we can do nothing to save ourselves, but He still calls us to do something. Yes, we are saved by grace and not works, but we are saved to do good works. If we are saved, then we have the Holy Spirit dwelling in us. We are enabled to do good works because we are saved.

What does this parable teach us about what our service to the King through others should look like? Two things are worth noting:

[a] It must be service in simple things. The things which Jesus picks out – giving a hungry man a meal, or a thirsty man a drink, welcoming a stranger, comforting the sick and visiting the prisoner – are things which anyone can do. No great intellect is required, no theology degree demanded, no great act of piety, just a simple response demonstrating God's love to others. All of these ministries are given the highest honours by Jesus. It's not a question of giving away all we own, or of writing our names in the annals of history; it's a case of giving simple help to the people we meet every day. These ministries are within the reach of every one of us. We can do this.

You'll notice the parable says whenever you helped one of the least of these. Surely one needy person isn't all that important in a world of needy persons! Jesus says, think again. We can't help everyone, but everyone can help someone. We do what we can.

[b] It must be service which is uncalculating. Those who served in this parable did not think that they were serving the King and thus piling up eternal merit; they served because they could not stop themselves. It was the most natural, instinctive, quite uncalculating reaction for those who truly knew the King. Contrast that with the attitude of those who failed to serve; it was as though they were saying "Well, if we had known it was you we would gladly have served; but we thought it was only some ordinary guy."

The righteous made no calculation as to who to help or not, that was simply what they did. "When was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing?" Matthew is not saying, "pretend Jesus is in people and that will help you to love them". It is more important that people see Jesus in us rather than us seeing Jesus in others. We simply care for people in need because they are people. The sheep loved people because of who they were as people. The loving was real, it was not meant to enhance their relationship with Jesus. There were no calculations.

The parable makes it clear, if there is someone in need of love, we are given the opportunity to love. We love because we know what it is to be loved. We love because that is simply what children of God do, what Christians do. We love, because He first loved us.

The fact that these acts are done even to “the least of these” stresses even more that they are acts of godly love and not something done out of selfish gain, for the “least of these” have nothing to offer in return for the kindness shown to them except gratitude

When Jesus refers to ‘the least of these’ he does not mean these are lesser people, as if they are not as important as others. Whatever we do for someone in need, we do it for him. It’s not up to us to judge people who are “the least of these.” Our task is simply to reach out and show Jesus’ love.

We are saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ, not by the measure of good works that we can add up. Genuine faith will produce good deeds, but only faith in Christ saves.