

Psalm 95: 1-7a

Matthew 25:31-46

A wee story. One night a woman dreamed that she was having a conversation with God. She was angry about all the suffering and evil she saw around her, so she complained to the Lord. "God, why don't You do something about all this?" God gently replied: "I did. I created you."

In this parable, Jesus is telling His followers that He wanted them to be a sermon. He wanted them to be walking, talking, living, breathing sermons. This of course, is one of the hallmarks of Jesus ministry. Jesus said in Matthew 11:28: "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest." And Luke tells us Jesus taught His followers: "when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind." Luke 14:13

Jesus taught this. He lived this. He modelled this. And He conducted His ministry in this way because that was what God had always said He wanted of His people: Being kind to the poor and downtrodden was central to what God had always asked of His people. In fact, this was so expected by God that He condemned those who failed to it.

One person, I'm not sure who, observed how prevalent this truth was in Scripture, and so he rewrote Matthew 25 in this way:

I was hungry and you formed a humanities club and discussed my hunger.

I was imprisoned and you crept off quietly to your chapel and prayed for my release. I was naked and, in your mind, you debated the morality of my appearance. I was sick and you knelt and thanked God for your health.

I was homeless and you preached to me of the spiritual shelter of the love of

God. I was lonely and you left me alone to pray for me. You seem so close to God; but I am still very hungry, and lonely, and cold.

The person who wrote that, realized that if we only talk about doing good for Christ - the result is an empty and powerless faith.

Before we go any further, there's one issue about this passage that is open to misinterpretation. It could leave you with the impression Jesus was teaching that good works can buy your salvation. Jesus tells one group that because they...

- fed the hungry
 - gave drink to the thirsty
 - gave a bed to strangers
 - clothed the naked
 - looked after the sick
 - visited those in prison
- ... they were going to heaven.

Then He tells the others that because THEY DIDN'T practice those kinds of things they were going to hell.

Now it doesn't take a brain surgeon to connect the dots and think that "If I do enough good deeds, I can get into heaven! In fact, this is the teaching of every world religion - except for Christianity. By contrast: Christianity has always taught that:

Ephesians 2:8-9 says "... it is by grace you have been saved, through faith— and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God — not by works so that no one can boast." In other words, you can't buy your way into heaven by doing good deeds - which is a good thing, because it would drive us nuts trying to figure out if we'd ever done enough to be acceptable.

So, if that's true (if we can't buy our way into heaven) what is Jesus telling us here? Could it be that he's telling us that if we are His children, we will be known by our good deeds?

In today's passage Jesus is telling us what Christians will look like.

He said they will...

- feed the hungry
- give drink to the thirsty
- give a bed to strangers
- clothe the naked
- look after the sick
- visit those in prison

This is how you'll recognize the followers of Christ.

But there will be those who will claim to be Christians - but they won't do things like that. So, Jesus is essentially saying: "if you're not bearing My fruit, you're not really wearing My name." It's the difference between fake Christianity - and real Christianity. That was the difference between the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25.

If you didn't know a lot about sheep and goats, you might believe that there wasn't much difference between the two. Perhaps the goats looked like the sheep. - But they were a mere imitation of the real thing. They didn't have God's kind of life in them, the kind of life that produced selflessness and sacrifice for others. Do any of you grow plants and flowers? I'm sure many of you do.

Tell me, if a plant doesn't have flowers on it – is it still a rose or a rhododendron? Of course, it is.

That's because the flower is the fruit of a plant... it's not the root. Even if there were no visible flower on the plant, it would still be a rose/dandelion or a rhododendron.

The point is this:

Good deeds are the fruit of your salvation

They are not the root of your salvation

Good deeds don't make you a Christian.

But if you're a real Christian...they'll be the flower or fruit of your faith.

We could be excused for asking: "What if I'm not doing enough good deeds to please God?" Now, it's possible to ask the wrong questions in this life. And that is one of them.

The question should be: "Since good deeds please God... how can I do more of them?"

The first question is born of fear and apprehension.

The second is born of love and expectation.

That's because God's kind of good deeds are those which are a reflection of our love for God.

Shortly after Jesus rose from the dead, Peter was undergoing a crisis of faith. He had denied Jesus 3 times he had failed the master that he had said he loved and would die to protect. Maybe in his humiliation, Peter actually thought it would be better to return to fishing than to risk disappointing Jesus ever again. I think that's why Jesus sat down beside Peter when he was cooking fish and He said, "Simon son of John, do you truly love me more than these?"

"Yes, Lord," he said, "you know that I love you."

Jesus said, "Feed my lambs."

Again Jesus said, "Simon son of John, do you truly love me?"

He answered, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you."

Jesus said, "Take care of my sheep."

The third time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?"

Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, "Do you love me?" He said, "Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you."

Jesus said, "Feed my sheep."

Peter do you love Me? Then do the things you know will please Me.

Do you love God? Well, then you'll do things that you know will please Him.

During World War II, a church building in Strasbourg was destroyed. After the bombing, the members surveyed the area to see what damage was done. They were pleased that a statue of Christ with outstretched hands was still standing. It had been sculpted centuries before by a great artist. Taking a closer look, the people discovered both hands of Christ had been sheared off by a falling beam. Later, a sculptor in the town offered to replace the broken hands as a gift to the church. The church leaders met to consider the offer and decided not to accept it. They felt the statue without hands spoke to them of the fact that Jesus had called them to be His hands and to minister to others.

It is the same for us today whether we are young or old.

Amen.