

## Journeying With Christ

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Matthew 25: 31-46

Eternal life and eternal punishment. Well, so Jesus is finally going to talk about where you go when you die, heaven or hell, right? Wrong. You know, the Gospel of John says that this is eternal life: to know God, to know Christ. That's right now... a present reality. By deduction, hell would be the opposite of that, to be living your life not really knowing the God we know in Jesus Christ. A present reality. And it would seem that that's how Jesus wants to talk about those realities, in today's lesson. Because, you know, way back at the beginning of chapter 24 in Matthew, (today's lesson ends chapter 25) the disciples had asked Jesus to tell them about when he was coming and what would be the sign.

And now, he finally gets around to answering them. He begins by saying, "When the Son of Man comes in his glory..." And then he tells this story, the point of which seems to be to say: when does Christ come? Every day, in whomever you would make your victims. "That's me," says Jesus. Jesus doesn't seem at all concerned about idle speculation about some "end time" or "final" judgment out in the future somewhere. But, he seems very concerned with how we live our lives right now on God's earth with each other. Because there's a big difference between believing in Jesus and knowing him, isn't there?

If someone asked us, we might say we believe in God. We believe God created the world. We believe Christ died on the cross for our sins. But, there's a difference between that and knowing God, that is, living right now all of our life in relation to everyone and everything as somehow a response to who this Jesus is, that you know. Jesus locates that difference in this picture he paints of the sheep and the goats. He locates that difference in the feeling of "righteousness." You remember, at the heart of this story is this curious twist that those who have been truly righteous are completely unaware that they have been. They didn't feel like they were righteous. And on the other hand, those who had not been truly righteous are completely unaware that they had *not* been! Meaning, of course, that they had obviously *felt* righteous.

You sense their surprise and perhaps indignation in their response. "Lord, *when* was it we saw *you* hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?" It seems that they thought they had taken good care of their *Lord!* You know, they'd sung his praises out with enthusiasm and worshiped him and professed his name. And I guess it seems that they'd *felt* pretty righteous about all that. And yet, says this story they are the ones living in hell, and the others are the ones living the true life, eternal life. They are the ones who really know this God we know in Jesus. And the difference is tied up with the feeling of righteousness. Simply put, whenever we are feeling righteous, it's a sure sign we are not righteous.

When I was in high school, Mark Youngren was one of those kids we all made fun of. You know, his clothes didn't quite fit him right, or he didn't wear them right. His pants were always pulled up crooked and up a little too high. And the waist was gathered a little too much by his belt. And he had a terrible case of acne, and wasn't very good looking anyway. And his hair was always greasy. And to top it all off, he had all that going on, and at the same time he was smug. He acted like he was smarter than all of the rest of us. And, truth be told, he probably was. And we probably resented him for that, too.

So, we laughed at him behind his back, mimicked him and made fun of him. And it made us feel superior; we weren't like *him*. You know, we felt righteous. And all the while, you know I'd been raised in the church. I'd gone through confirmation, and professed Jesus Christ as Lord

and Savior. I'd even gone to the altar one night. And my friends and I would attend Young Life meetings fairly regularly. But, somewhere inside me, I knew that when I was laughing and making fun of Mark Youngren, I didn't know God. If only I could have seen myself in Mark Youngren, seen the Mark Youngren in me.

When I was in seminary, Bruce and Suzanne Laughon and their two daughters lived in the next town up. I went over and had dinner with them one night, and we all caught up with each other. See, I'd known Bruce and Suzanne ever since high school. They were my youth group counselors. Bruce had meant a whole lot to me. He'd even come to see me once when I was in college and he was down in Norfolk for a business trip. He'd come over and taken me out to dinner. That means a lot when you're eating college cafeteria food! But, it meant a lot to me, anyway, because he meant a lot to me.

So, it came as quite a shock when I got a call that day in Seminary from my dad and he told me that Bruce had just up and left Suzanne and the girls. It seems he'd called from the grocery store to see if there was something else for him to pick up, and then he just never came home. He'd run off with a woman he worked with. And you know, the thing was, I felt betrayed by him. That's not who I'd always thought he was. And suffice it to say that if I felt betrayed by him, then I was also in some sense feeling a little morally superior to him, righteous. And then that day came when I saw him pull into the parking space right ahead of me at the bank in town. He was with her. And I did nothing. I waited behind the glass doors of the bank for them to pull away... my friend. I didn't feel righteous then, but it was too late. If only I could have seen that part of Bruce that I didn't know what to do with, in me. Because, when we are feeling righteous, we are blind to our victims, and we are blind to our own sin; we are blind to that in us that makes *us* among the least and the last.

Listen to Jesus again. "Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me." Our relationship with those we would make our victims, for whatever reasons, good or bad; our relationship with those we would make our victims, those we feel morally superior to, as individuals, as a church, as a culture; that relationship *is* the measure of where we are spiritually. That is the measure of whether at that moment we are living in hell, or we are living a life that truly knows God. Are we people capable of caring for and loving *them*? That's the question.

Friends, today is Christ the King Sunday. And this is what it means to declare that *Christ is King*. It means that we have undertaken a great journey of spiritual self-awareness in regard to our relationships with our victims. Because that's at the heart of what it means to truly be a *disciple*, to truly *follow* Jesus, not just believe in him. And to declare that *Christ is King*, also means that we can bear to undertake this journey, because Christ is King. Christ, who we made our victim. That is the meaning of the cross and resurrection. Rest assured that the Jewish high priests, the Sadducees and Pharisees, and Pontius Pilate and the Roman soldiers, and all the people who wanted a military messiah and felt betrayed by Jesus — rest assured that they all felt righteous in pronouncing their judgment on him and crucifying him.

But, even so, God raised him up! Anyone we make our victim, as individuals, or as a culture, is Christ! We crucify him again and again. But, God raises him up. God overcomes the very worst that we do, forgives us and calls us on again and again to ever new beginnings. We can bear to take this journey, because God never gives up on us. God knows we are all just like our victims. And God keeps giving us life and love to be shared together. Christ is King! Alleluia. Let us journey on in hope.

Amen.