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## *Beyond These Walls: Compassion* *Matthew 25:31-46*

I cannot tell you how excited I have been for this weekend to arrive! I do not know the *Beyond These Walls* total. But I *have* been signing hundreds of thank you notes and, like you, can hardly wait to open the envelope and find out what the Lord has done.

Of course, when you process hundreds of documents, sometimes you make a few mistakes. For instance, I wonder how many of you noticed the teensy little typo in the first paragraph of my thank you note? The sentence was supposed to begin with the words, "If you...." Unfortunately, we left the "i" out of "If." Take a look at the screen. Lower case "f"...you... I'm no fund-raising expert...but I'll *bet* when you are crafting a thank you note to your donors, that's not a phrase you would ordinarily include. "As your Senior Pastor...from the bottom of my heart...\_\_\_\_\_."

As your Senior Pastor...from the bottom of my heart...THANK YOU for your enthusiastic response. This is an epic moment. We are close to putting a bow on something we started nearly thirty years ago. When we built our gymnasium—at a time when there was no other place in our community for kids to play—we set ourselves on a trajectory that would build and build and build again, each time meeting not only our needs, but those of our community.

We did this by faith, and we did so at some risk, taking out a mortgage that, at one point, amounted to \$9 million. These walls have served us and our community well over three decades. But for those of us who were here from the beginning we strained for a glimpse of a moment in our distant future, when we would make the last payment, burn the last mortgage, and free up those resources for kingdom work. Today, we find out how close that moment is. Like I said: this is epic!

But we have said all along that this is not just a fund-raising initiative; it is a disciple-making campaign. Our journey has looked at the touchstone moments Jesus used to transform raw recruits into disciples that would make history. Disciples who are Called, Conspicuous (salt and light!), and Courageous (get out of that boat!). Who are not afraid to Confront the Gates of Hell and who live by the Great Commandment of love.

Today we come to the last touchstone: Compassion. Here's the context: Jesus takes his disciples up on the Mount of Olives for one last public teaching. It is a teaching on the end times and he paints a picture of his return—a sweeping, awesome picture of final judgment.

*"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left. Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who 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 drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.' Then the righteous will answer him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you*

*hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?’ And the King will answer them, Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.’*

*“Then he will say to those on his left, Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no 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.’ Then they also will answer, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to you?’ Then he will answer them, saying, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’ And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”*

One of the first things we learn from this text is what Jesus meant when he called himself “the Son of Man.” That was Jesus’ favorite name for himself, and to some it might sound like a rather unimpressive title. But in this setting of final judgment, we see the Son of Man as we’ve never seen him before. Jesus uses a *new* word—twice—to describe himself. King! Now we see clearly what Palm Sunday hinted at: Jesus Christ is King over *all* the earth. Also, notice the references to his deity. The king will come in “glory,” sit on his “glorious” throne, surrounded by *all* the angels of heaven. “Glory” belongs only to God. The throne of judgment belongs only to God. The angels answer only to God. Jesus, the Son of Man, is *also* God, King, and Judge over all humanity. *You will never read a loftier description of Jesus Christ than you find right here.*

Before King Jesus are gathered *all* the nations of the world. Not just the “Christian” nations. Not just the “Jewish” nation. *All* humanity is gathered before him as *all* the angels of heaven look on. What a sight! Then we read of a great separating. One by one he separates the people, some to his right, the rest to his left. He announces that those on his right will inherit a kingdom prepared for them before the foundation of the world, but those on his left will enter a place of judgment prepared for the devil and his angels.

Here’s what is most interesting—and in some ways, disturbing—about this teaching. This separating, this judgment, is based, not upon what they believe, but upon what they have done. This passage can be disturbing to us evangelicals. It *seems* to say that we will be admitted into heaven on the basis of how compassionate we are. If we have fed the hungry, watered the thirsty, welcomed the stranger, clothed the naked and visited the sick and the imprisoned—if we have done those good things *then* we will be admitted into heaven. And if we have *not* done those good things, then it’s the hot box for us.

But we evangelicals will protest, “Wait a second; that sounds like works-righteousness! Like we are earning our salvation! What about grace? Aren’t we saved *only* by God’s grace through faith? Not by good works?” If we were to hear this teaching from anyone else, we might say, “This is nothing more than liberal, socialist claptrap! Do-goodism masquerading as religion.”

This emphasis on social-justice seems to fit better in liberal denominations like the one we left! We evangelicals preach that salvation comes *only* through the grace of God by faith in Jesus Christ. We will make it into heaven, not because of the good works we do for others, *but because of the good work Jesus Christ has done for us! His* saving death on the cross; *his* resurrection. All this social-justice stuff: it seems like a cheap substitute for the real salvation that comes only through Jesus. Doesn’t it?

This teaching on good works as our ticket into heaven doesn’t seem to square with what we’ve always been taught. This teaching seems...fishy. It doesn’t seem to honor the centrality of Jesus. Only one problem. Jesus is the teacher! It is *Jesus* who says that our eternal destination will be determined by how we care for the pitiful, poor, and broken people in this world. So what do we do with this conundrum?

First...we set it in context. This is one of many other teachings in Matthew in which Jesus makes it clear that salvation *is* dependent upon HIM. That HE is the savior who has come to take away our sins and fit us for heaven. It is Jesus who taught this about salvation: *“no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.”* Matthew 11:27. It is Jesus who taught that *“...the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a **ransom** for many.”* Matthew 20:28. And it is Jesus who will later say, *“This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the **forgiveness of sins**.”* Matthew 26:28. From the opening verses of the Beatitudes to the closing verses of the Great Commission, Jesus makes it clear that **he alone** is the source of our salvation; that only those who have been called by God’s grace and washed clean by the blood of Christ will enter the Kingdom of Heaven.

So then...what do we do with this teaching of Jesus that seems to make acts of compassion the key that opens heaven’s doors? How do we reconcile grace and works? Well, we view this teaching as a mirror, not a menu. If we view acts of compassion as a menu for cooking up our own salvation, we are in trouble. If we imagine that by doing enough good things, we can earn God’s favor and score a seat on the heaven train, we have missed the rest of Matthew’s gospel. In fact, Jesus reserved his harshest comments for religious people. He scorched the guy who prayed flamboyantly in public and flashed a wad of cash as he dropped it in the plate. He even described a horrible moment of judgment in the future when religious people who had prophesied and cast out demons and done miracles heard these words: *“Depart from me for I never knew you!”* Jesus had *no time* for ostentatious religion, for people who thought that by *doing* righteous things they would earn God’s favor.

But that’s not what happens in this story. “The righteous ones” don’t even know they are righteous. **They are astonished to discover that when they offered simple acts of compassion to those in need, they were actually blessing Jesus.** They aren’t trying to stock up on spiritual frequent flyer miles. These actions are simply the outflow of hearts that belong to Jesus...hearts being transformed by him. It is like the **reflection** in a mirror that allows us to see that bit by bit we *are* being transformed into the likeness of compassionate Christ, the greatest champion for social justice who ever lived!

In other words, when we perform acts of compassion for the sake of those who can never reward us—never benefit us, maybe never even adequately thank us—it is nothing more than a reflection, a mirror if you will, of Jesus who offered his life as a sacrifice for the sake of us who could never reward him and never benefit him, never adequately thank him for HIS supreme acts of compassion. This passage is a mirror...it’s not a menu!

There’s something else. This teaching honors the Mundane, not the Miraculous. There are many things about the disciples that intimidate us. They performed miracles, cast out evil spirits, raised people from the dead. How intimidating would it have been if Jesus taught that we must miraculously heal the sick as the disciples did or miraculously liberate the prisoners? But he doesn’t ask for the miraculous. He asks for the mundane. Visit the sick. Call on the prisoner. Share food and water and clothing. Be hospitable to the stranger. Buy someone a cup of coffee at Starbucks. Remember Curtis’s story? How much more mundane can you get than a free cup of coffee?

Every follower of Jesus can do these things. Not just those who have spiritual gifts of healing or miracles. All who have been transformed by Jesus can meet simple, mundane needs and show love to a neighbor. This won’t save us; only Jesus saves us. But if we have no pity, no interest, no inclination whatsoever to meet the mundane needs of those struggling in life, this teaching about sheep and goats ought to make us very queasy. It ought to make us wonder just how much of our lives Jesus really does possess, or if we are simply Christian pretenders?

One of the things I love about Beyond These Walls is that it is simple—mundane, even. In previous campaigns we built a gymnasium and a sanctuary and a youth center and a Gathering Place. At the end of this initiative, we won't have a new building to show for it. Won't have a ribbon to cut. But we will have freed up resources to do mundane things that seem to matter to Jesus: feeding and clothing and housing the poor and caring for newborns and visiting the lonely and trapped. More importantly...we will have trained and deployed LifeGroups and leaders to actually *do* this work of compassion for the sake of Jesus rather than paying someone else to do it for them!

Of course, *Beyond These Walls* is just ONE way to love our neighbor. There are thousands of ways that **you all love your** neighbors every day that have nothing to do with Chapel Hill. I understand that. But *Beyond These Walls* is one good way...and in a moment, we will find out how captivating this vision has been for you. This vision to eliminate \$ 5 million of debt and free up resources that will allow us to multiply LifeGroups, release leaders, and love Gig Harbor as never before. So...before we hear the final number, let me say once more, "Thank you!" for being a humble, sacrificial reflection of Jesus Christ. I think this delights him!

OK...ready? Our number one goal was 100% participation. As of this moment, we have commitments from about two-thirds of our families. I realize 100% was a lofty goal and we aren't there yet. **But this is the beginning of our race, not the end of it.** We will have many other opportunities over the next three years for others to join in, and I hope and pray and expect that many more of you will.

Here's something exciting. We were told that this kind of initiative rarely produces new giving; it normally comes from existing givers who give more. But there is something about this initiative that has captured the hearts of visitors and non-givers. I can report that **39 families** who have never given to Chapel Hill before have made pledges to Beyond These Walls. Our consultant tells us that is almost unheard of! So, will you join me in thanking 39 families who have begun their journey of generosity with us?

Now...the moment we've been waiting for. Again, our goal was \$ 5 million over three years. The envelope please.

Result: \$5,428,137

This is my fifth capital initiative. We have *never* hit our target before. I was told repeatedly that debt-retirement campaigns are the *hardest* to do; they aren't "sexy" enough, because in the end, you have "nothing to show for it!" No new building; no ribbon-cutting. How amazing is it, then, that ...for the first time ever...we hit our campaign goal **and** we received more in pledges than any other campaign **and** we did it without a million dollar gift or a three-quarter million dollar gift or a half million dollar gift.

Somehow this idea that we "have enough" has captured the hearts of a broad swath of our congregation, from across the economic spectrum, who, through shared sacrifice, are going to us free to serve Christ as never before. Our mission is "**working together to present everyone mature in Christ.**" We *have* worked together on this, haven't we? And this feels like a moment of deep spiritual maturity for us. I am so grateful, so humbled, and so excited to see what God is going to do. So, once more, from the bottom of my heart, thank you, my Sweetheart Church, for this epic moment! Hallelujah!