

Acts of Mercy
Matthew 25:31-46

The scene is breathtaking. The pale blue sky is cloud free. A slight wind is rustling the leaves on the trees and blowing the tall, thick grass. The sun is cascading a perfect light upon the field. A shepherd boy is making his way through his herd of sheep. Even the noises are magnificent. There are no planes or cars to interrupt the slight sound of the shepherd boy's stick bumping against one of the sheep every now and then, with the sheep baahing in return. It is a beautiful day in Palestine. The beauty, however, is suddenly destroyed when a few goats come running through the shepherd's field, letting off a loud sound, deafening the distinct noises of the sheep. The goats stand in stark contrast to the sheep. Each has its own distinguishing marks.

Sheep are found throughout the Bible, often representing the righteous. Matthew mentions sheep earlier — in Chapter 18 — when he reminds the disciples of a shepherd's willingness to go after one lost sheep. The *separating* of sheep and goats is also a common theme, beginning in Genesis when Jacob speaks of passing through Laban's flock and separating every "speckled and spotted sheep and every black lamb, and the spotted and speckled among the goats."

When I read these stories, I like to think of myself as a sheep — a pure

creature without specks or spots. I like to think that I am one of the 99 obedient ones who are with the shepherd instead of the rebellious one who is the subject of a search.

I like to think I am someone who will be able to sit on Jesus' right instead of his left. Yet, after reading this account I realize becoming a "sheep" is not that easy. Sheep need distinguishing marks.

Matthew 25 offers us a glimpse of the last judgment. Jesus is entering his final days on earth when he talks about the judgment of the Gentiles. In fact, chapter 26 begins with Jesus saying, "You know that after two days the Passover is coming, and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified.'" Jesus' time is running out, and his formal lessons end with this scene.

What is the final lesson? It isn't about forgiveness, worship, praying or tithing. The final lesson is about simple, mundane **acts of mercy**. In his last lesson, Jesus informs his followers, and us, that we need to listen to the cries and pleas of the needy and offer them our help.

Jesus desires a stronger, more tangible commitment. In order to be a sheep, one must feed the hungry, give the thirsty a drink, welcome strangers, clothe the naked, visit the sick and go to the prisons; all **acts of mercy**. According to Jesus' words in this passage, judgment is based upon our distinguishing marks as disciples.

Moreover, when we feed the hungry, give the thirsty a drink and welcome

strangers, we are feeding, satisfying and welcoming Christ.

Furthermore, Jesus is clear that our failure to serve others — our omission of these simple **acts of mercy** — can lead us into “an eternal fire.” Our actions matter to God. Our actions have consequences.

In today’s world, it can be very difficult to reconcile this text. Chicagoland is filled with homeless, hungry people. Each day, hundreds of sick individuals are refused proper medical attention because of their inability to afford insurance. In states across the land, thousands of migrant workers plead for a livable wage.

When we look at the needs of many living around us, it is easy to settle upon the impossibility of the text and exclaim, “How on earth can I say ‘yes’ to everyone?” In such a world as this, a world in which thousands of children are dying from hunger and hundreds are homeless, who can possibly believe it is feasible to feed the hungry, clothe the naked and welcome all strangers? There are too many needy people, aren’t there? Jesus doesn’t answer this question. Instead, he straightforwardly calls us to serve our neighbors. And while we may not have an example of what this looks like in the modern world, scripture offers an illustration of a perfect community where everyone is taken care of.

Speaking of the church born on the day of Pentecost, Luke writes, “Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned

was held in common."

Luke continues, "There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need."

Can you imagine such a church? Can you imagine being a people who share everything and willingly relinquish any excess? Can you imagine a community where everyone lives with a roof over their heads and bellies filled with food? This must be the church Jesus is envisioning when he speaks in Matthew 25. **It is a church where people look and act like him.**

When is the last time you spent time among the poor? Have you ever slept on a cold floor? How many times has your stomach yearned for food? For many of us, these realities seem more like fantasy. Most of us have more than we need. Few of us are undernourished. Furthermore, we often resist opportunities to be with the poor. We value our comfort zone. Yet, Jesus is not in our comfort zone.

Brothers and sisters, we were all created in the image of God, and Jesus wants us to pattern our lives after his. Jesus humbled himself and took on the form of a servant.

He came to serve the poor, the downtrodden and the outcasts. Jesus is calling us to do the same. Jesus desires distinguishing marks. Jesus is asking us to give. Jesus is looking for **acts of mercy**, — the distinguishing marks of the righteous.

The King of Kings is coming. Suppose he physically walked into the room right now. What would you do? Bow down and worship him? Say thank you for dying upon a cross and for the gift of eternal life? Wrap your arms around him and tell him you love him? Whatever the case, Jesus does not have to be here on this earth for us to offer praise and thanksgiving to him. We worship Christ through our actions, through **acts of mercy**. This Thanksgiving, why don't we say thank you to our God, to our Savior Jesus, for the gifts he has given to us by giving to others. We do that every time we have a food drive, every time we sponsor Christmas in July and the shoe box project, every month we share our generosity fund with others. When we share our building with PADS. At Good Shepherd We show our love for Jesus by loving our neighbors. Look at all of the opportunities we have to feed and clothe our Savior. We are presented with occasions to serve, glorify and honor our King each and every day.

The Son of Man is coming. He is coming to separate us — one from another — the sheep from the goats. The accursed will “go away into eternal punishment.” However, those who have served the least, those who have served and loved Christ, will be brought a gift — the gift of eternal life. Jesus needs to see our **acts of mercy**, our distinguishing marks.