

# “The Last Word on Everything”

July 22nd, 2018  
Micah 6: 6-8 & Matthew 25:31-40

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*“When the Son of Man comes in his glory ... all the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the sheep from the goats, and he will place the sheep at his right hand, ... and say “Come ... inherit the kingdom prepared for you ... for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me a drink, I was a stranger, and you welcomed me.”*

In Matthew 25 we read, “And they said, ‘When Lord did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you a drink? When did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And the king will answer, ‘Truly I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my people, you did it to me.’”

It is a familiar passage of scripture, and a troubling one. It is troubling because, were we to stand today before the King, we have to ponder about which group we might be numbered among at the last judgment — the sheep or the goats! Have I really fed the hungry, clothed the naked, given water to the thirsty, welcomed strangers, and visited prisoners? — not very much, I think. And I admit it troubles me.

The paradox is that the great majority of Christians, certainly most of us here today, really do care and want to help when we can. But it is so difficult to know what to do, and how to do it. Not only that, but there are an endless number of demands placed upon us. And it is hard to know how legitimate all the requests for help that we keep on receiving really are. How many letters and phone solicitations do you get from charitable groups? I must get five to seven a week. I am bombarded by requests for help, and like many of you, I get worn down by them. It is called *compassion fatigue*. But before we give in to compassion fatigue, I would like us to ponder a couple of things.

First, it is worth noticing that in the Bible, Jesus very seldom spoke about judgment. One of the first things he said about it was, *“Beware of judging others, for you yourself will be judged by the judgments you make, and the measure you give will be the measure you get back. How can you point out the speck in your neighbour's eye, but fail to see the log in your own? (Matthew 7:1-5)* Those who are quick to point the finger would do well to think about that.

In one of the most quoted passages in the Bible, Jesus says “*For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.*” (John 3:17)

Jesus only told two parables with personal Judgment as the basic theme. One is found in Luke chapter 16 and the other is the one we read this morning in Matthew 25. The one in Luke 16 is about Lazarus and the rich man.

In the story, a rich man totally ignores a poor beggar who is lying just outside his front gate. This very wealthy man ends up in Hades, while the poor man goes to be with Abraham in paradise. The rich man, who in the parable can see all this, is appalled; so he asks Abraham to go and warn his brothers to care about the poor. Abraham says, “Ah, come on! They have the scriptures. They know God’s will. What more do they need?” I’ll tell you more about that wonderful parable some other time.

The point I want to make is this. For centuries, people have been figuratively, and at times very literally, dangled over the fires of hell according to what they *believed*. For centuries, if your beliefs were unorthodox, [and of course that all depends on which group to belong to!] you were very wise to keep them to yourself. Orthodoxy is straight teaching or pure doctrine. The easy way to remember the word is to think of a modern day orthodontist. An orthodontist straightens teeth. It’s very common to see people with braces on their teeth who are seeing an orthodontist. ‘*Ortho*’ is Greek for straight and ‘*dont*’ is a tooth. In the case of orthodox – ‘*ortho*’ is straight and ‘*dox*’ is Greek for teaching.

Now, the truth is that Christians have gone totally crazy over trying to achieve pure and correct teaching – I mean absolutely nuts. Do you know how many different Christian denominations there are in the world today? Nobody knows for sure, but the estimate is somewhere between 30,000 and 43,000. Many of them are small – one or two congregations, but many are larger. And it’s all about belief and doctrine. “We alone have the truth!”

Back in the 1870’s in the USA, a man by the name of Charles Taze Russell (1852-1916) originally a Presbyterian from Pittsburgh, decided that he alone understood the Bible. His teachings resulted in the Jehovah’s Witnesses, who are still knocking on our doors, convinced that they alone have all truth about the Bible. None of the rest of us do. The arrogance behind the idea that this one squirrely little group alone has all truth is truly staggering.

But this mania for purity of belief goes much deeper, and is far worse than just being annoyed by the JWs. In one of the darkest chapters of Christianity, the Roman Catholic Church established an arm of the papacy

called the “Inquisition” to enforce correct belief and doctrine. It lasted almost 700 years.

The most infamous branch of it, the Spanish Inquisition, began under Ferdinand and Isabella. Do you recall the old rhyme – “in 1492 Columbus sailed the ocean blue”?? Well, that is when the inquisition began in Spain and, believe it or not, it did not end until the 19th century. The last recorded execution was in 1826, when a schoolteacher from Valencia, (Cayetano Ripoll) was hanged for teaching Deist principles. The Church Officials actually wanted him burned at the stake, but the civil authorities refused and had the man hanged instead. I have to tell you, that when you study the history of Christianity (and I have) at times it is so appalling that it leaves me with a deep sense of shame to even call myself a Christian.

Now here is the point of all this. If you actually read the gospels, you will discover that in Jesus’ only two parables about Judgement, neither was about correct beliefs. The truth is Jesus was anything but orthodox in his own day. It’s why the Scribes and Pharisees didn’t like him. No, his two parables about judgement were about what you do, not about what you believe. They were both about the importance of caring for others. *“When did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you a drink? When did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And the king will answer, ‘Truly I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my people, you did it to me.’”*

Why do Christians not focus on the things Jesus actually taught? Let me tell you about an old lawsuit that I first read about years ago now. It was back in 1928 in Massachusetts. A man was walking on a dock in a marina when he tripped and fell into deep water. His friends were too far off to help. They saw him surface a couple of times and heard him gasp, “Help! I can’t swim!” His cry was directed at a man who was sun bathing on a nearby yacht. The sunbather, who it turned out was an excellent swimmer, did absolutely nothing. He merely watched as the man drowned. The family of the man who drowned was so upset by the callous sunbather that they sued him. The case they made before the court was that he didn’t have to dive in, but surely every person has some responsibility to do something. He could have thrown a rope, or a life buoy to the drowning man – anything. In the end the family lost their case. The court ruled that the yacht owner had no legal responsibility to try to save another person’s life.

The press dubbed the story, “My Brother’s Keeper?” Do you remember in the book of Genesis, when Cain is asked by God, “Where is your brother?” Cain knew very well where his brother was. He had just killed him. But Cain replied, “How should I know? Am I my brother’s

keeper? In other words, do I have any moral obligation to look after my brother?" It is a good question — one of the big questions for all human kind. What responsibility do we have to care for and to help others — our brothers and sisters all over the world?

Does it matter that there are 65 million refugees in the world today? Do we have any responsibility to care about desperate people? In 1928 a court in Massachusetts ruled that there is no legal responsibility to care. But two thousand years earlier, a very different judge made it clear that we have a huge moral responsibility. *"And the king will answer, 'Truly I say to you, just as you did it to one of the least of these my people, you did it to me.'"*

Let me close with a story I heard on the radio. A Canadian woman was part of Amnesty International. Amnesty International is a group that writes letters to governments on behalf of prisoners of conscience – men and women imprisoned mostly for criticizing their own governments. Mostly they never get replies to these letters. Over time, it can get discouraging, and it is easy to give up. One of the people she wrote on behalf of was a Vietnamese man imprisoned because of his poetry. She was a poet herself, and this appealed to her. Somehow she got the address of the man's wife and wrote to her as well. The wife wrote back. She was just thrilled that someone in the outside world actually knew and cared about their plight.

Well, fast forward many years later — the woman who wrote all those letters was in Calgary giving a poetry reading. Afterwards, a beautiful thing happened. An oriental couple who spoke rather poor English came forward and introduced themselves. Their English was so limited that it took a bit of time before she realized who they were. Finally it got through to her that this was the Vietnamese man and his wife on whose behalf for years she had just bombarded the Vietnamese government with her letters. The man in time had been released and had managed to immigrate to Canada. The three of them literally wept in each other's arms. All the lonely and seemingly futile hours of unanswered letters paid off wondrously in one joyous meeting.

That is what I call a God moment. Somehow Jesus was present in that. When you read the passage in Matthew 25 carefully, you understand that it's the little things that make a difference. Jesus didn't ask us to irrigate the desert. He asked us to give a cup of water. He didn't say that we have to totally reform the prison system. He asked us to remember those who are there. He asked us to welcome that stranger we met, to

share bread with the hungry, and clothing with the needy. And we can all do this. It is not a big thing to do.

The point is not how much we can or cannot do. The point is to care. If everyone did, the impact on our world would be enormous. Practicing kindness in our world today is more important than it has ever been.

Back in the 1960's a wonderful Christian song came out of the freedom movement led by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. I loved it the first time I heard it.

*"We are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord, and we pray that all unity may one day be restored, And they'll know we are Christians by our Love, by our Love... Yes, they'll know we are Christians by our love!"*

I invite you to join with the band as we close by singing this beautiful song.

Amen.