

Title: The least of these, my brothers  
Text: Matthew 25.31-46  
Theme: The fruit of faith is love  
Series: Matthew #115  
Prop Stmtnt: Sheep will act like sheep

Read Text:

Pentecost was a Jewish harvest festival. Jews would traditionally gather together when they could for their national holidays and such was the case with the holiday called Pentecost. As a result, thousands of Jews from surrounding nations had gathered for the festivities which meant that they would assemble together and mill around on the vast outdoor area known as the Temple Courtyard. It was A.D. 37 and the masses of people were still talking about Jesus Christ who was crucified a few weeks before and was rumored to have risen again. A number of people claimed that they had seen him. On the holiday itself, a known disciple of Jesus named Peter, stood up in one area of the Temple courtyard and began to preach to the crowds about Jesus. He used the Old Testament to prove that Jesus was prophesied hundreds of years before and that his life, his death and his resurrection was all part of a plan that God had revealed in the past. Peter also told them that faith in Christ is the only means by which anyone can be forgiven of their sins and he challenged the people to believe that Jesus really is God who died for them and that they must put their faith in him. On that day, several thousand people did. And those people publicly identified themselves as followers of Jesus by being baptized.

Some of those people who became followers of Christ lived in the city of Jerusalem. (Acts 2.46), but many of them were just in town for the holiday, but God had other plans for them. They became followers of Christ and now, they needed to learn more about Jesus and what being a follower of Christ was all about. While this made sense, it was revolutionary. They began to realize that the OT wasn't so much about Israel as it was about Jesus. God's plan was not just for one nation, but for the world. So, they began to meet together in order to study the Scriptures, to hear the apostles of Jesus preach, to learn, to pray, to eat together and observe communion together. It became clear very quickly that something needed to be done for these people. The people from the other countries did not bring enough money to stay very long, but how could you send them home so quickly when they needed to learn? But, who was going to feed them? Who was going to house them? It's not like the Roman and Jewish authorities were going to help, right? So, guess what? The early church had an immigration problem, didn't they? So, what did the early church do? We are told at the end of chapter 4 that some of the early believers who were able to actually sold land and houses and used the proceeds to help feed and house the hundreds of people who were still in Jerusalem and had not yet returned home.

It wasn't too long after all of this that the government began to persecute the followers of Christ. By the way, that has been our story. You need to know that. When you become a follower of Christ, you can expect to be persecuted. That persecution is more intense in some parts of the world, but that has been the usual case for authentic Christians. So,

what do we do when our brothers and sisters face adversity because of their faith? Do we simply say, “Hey, good luck with that. Let me know how it works out. Keep in touch, Tell me about it something.”? If that is all that we do, it is obvious that we do not really love them. And Jesus is saying, that if you do not love them, it is because you do not really love me. Some of them were executed while others were thrown into prison. Now, let’s say that you are living back in the days of the early church and you profess to be a follower of Jesus and you have a friend who is a follower of Jesus and your friend is arrested and thrown into prison. What do you do? The prison did not have a kitchen and a chef who made meals to serve the prisoners. There were no laundry facilities or personal items for hygiene. The prisoner was completely at the mercy of friends and family to provide those items, such as coats and blankets in the winter, because prisons had no heat. Would you help your friend? Would you help your friend if you knew that when you visited your friend and brought him or her some supplies that your name would be added to a list and you would be considered an enemy of the state and your home and job would possibly be taken from you by the government. Would you visit your friend?

Many of those early believers did. Hebrews (the book written to early believers who were Jewish) says in 10.34 *“For you had compassion on those in prison, and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one.”* Did you get that? Some of these early believers joyfully accepted the plundering of their property because they knew that they had a better possession and an abiding one. I concluded the message last Sunday by saying, “You will never keep what you try to hold on to, but you will never lose what you give away for the gospel.” Their confidence in their eternal home freed them to live with a loose hold on an earthly one. Their confidence in the permanence of their relationship as brothers and sisters in Christ freed them to value their brothers and sisters above things. And I believe that the early believers lived like this because the disciples remembered what Jesus told them and they believed him and those early believers believed him as well. Adversity reveals if your faith is merely convenient or convictional.

So, here is the big idea of what Jesus is saying in this passage. Your daily choices and priorities are a reflection of whether or not you really believe in what Jesus says. Jesus describes his followers as his sheep. He said that my sheep hear my voice and they follow me. This has been his theme all throughout this final discourse that Matthew records in his gospel. The wise servant was the one who did what he was told because he believed the master would come back. The wise bridesmaids were the ones who were prepared for his return even though they did not know when he was going to return. The wise stewards were the ones who took what the master had given them and invested it for the master. What did each of these have in common? They believed what Christ said. They believed that he was going to return. They believed that life after his return was of greater value than life right now.

I am desperately seeking to convince you of the same thing. I want you to be absolutely convinced that Christ is going to return and is going to rule over this earth. His rule is called his kingdom. I want you to seek first his kingdom. In other words, I want the

values and priorities and the reality of his kingdom to fuel and drive every part of your life because his kingdom is THE reality that defines all other realities.

Imagine that you are standing on a bridge. The section of bridge that you are on is collapsing. You can see it coming toward you. Chunks of the roadway are giving way and falling 450 feet into the water below. Unless you move, you are going down because the road is going to collapse underneath you. You cannot outrun it because the section behind you is collapsing as well. If you stay on that bridge, it is going down. Next to you is another bridge and it is fine. Your only hope is to rappel somehow on to that bridge. You have a rope with a grappling hook on the one end and the other is tied securely around your waist. Your only hope is to throw that grappling hook so that it fastens on to the bridge next to you. When you do that, then it does not matter if the bridge that you are on collapses because you are anchored to something that will not fall. I am seeking to convince you that Christ is the unshakeable bridge and your grappling hook. When you trust in him, it does matter if someone threatens to take away your life house, your job, your stuff or your very life. In fact you see all of these things as fleeting and you are willing to use them for a greater purpose. Using your life for the kingdom of Christ is a reflection of the fact that you believe in Christ.

1. **Jesus is talking about ultimate issues.** (31-33)

A. **The Return of Christ** (31a)

So, here in the final days before he was crucified Jesus gathered his disciples around him on the Mount of Olives. And there as they overlooked the city of Jerusalem Jesus talked to them about the time when he would return. I doubt that any of them realized it then, but the entire scene was itself an incredible picture. There just over the Kidron Valley is the city of Jerusalem. Herod's Temple, one of the most magnificent structures in the entire world at that time was the focal point of the entire view. On that very spot hundreds of years before, Solomon had built the first Temple. At the dedication of the Temple, the glory of God filled the Holy of Holies. We call that the Shekinah glory of God. Those who saw it, said that it resembled a cloud and it descended from heaven and filled the inner room of the Temple. That cloud represented the presence of God. No other nation in all the earth had that. Israel was chosen at that time to be the people of God and to represent God before the entire world. However, they rebelled against God. And eventually, the glory cloud left the Temple. The OT prophet Ezekiel wrote about the day when God left the Temple because his people had rejected him. Ezekiel said that the Shekinah glory cloud left the temple, went over the Kidron Valley and up to the Mount of Olives and then went away. Do you see what is going on now? Just a few days before this event, Jesus had come into the city of Jerusalem on what we call Palm Sunday. Where did he come from? He came from the Mount of Olives. He came back to the city representing the glory of God because he was God. And where did he go? He went to the Temple. And what happened there in the temple? He was rejected. In fact, even while Christ is speaking these words to his disciples there is a plan underway to arrest him, try, convict and execute him. So, what did Christ do? He left the Temple. And where did he go? He went across the Kidron Valley and is now on the Mount of Olives. And now he is

talking to his disciples in these final days before his death about the time when he is going to return. And where is he going to return? The OT prophet Zechariah says that the King is going to return to the Mount of Olives.

Now, at this point, Jesus does not get into all of those details, but he knows what Zechariah wrote. He knows the significance of this spot. And I say that, not to simply make you go, “oh wow, that’s cool,” I say that so that you will know that there is nothing random about anything. God is absolutely sovereign over everything in this universe, which is why you had better throw the hook of your faith onto the bridge of Christ, because this one is going down. But, that’s okay. Christ is going to return.

### **B. The Judgment of the Nations (31b-32a)**

When Christ returns, he comes as the ultimate King and Judge. He will judge the nations meaning, he will judge every single person of every single nation because he has jurisdiction over the entire earth. Every single person will stand before him. “Before him will be gathered all the nations.” No one will miss that. No one will fail to show up for court. No one will be able to hide. Every single person will stand before him. Including you. And when you do, you will be told to go either to one side or the other.

This judgment sounds a lot like another scene that the apostle John describes in Revelation 20.11-15 (read). It is possible that these are two different judgments, or they are both describing the same one. Either way, here is the point. In a courtroom, evidence is presented in order to determine the verdict because the Judge and/or jury have to determine guilt or innocence. But, here is the difference, and it is a big one. The Judge already knows the status of the person standing before him. The Judge already knows if the person is a sheep or a goat. He already knows the true nature and the true identify of the person. He already knows who it is that is truly a follower of his or not. He calls his followers sheep and he calls those who are not, goats. What the Judge is doing is presenting evidence to them that validates what he knows about them. Jesus is not saying that because you do charitable deeds to homeless people that you can earn your way into heaven. No! And while we should be merciful to needy people in general, that is not the point of this text. Christ is saying that the way you treat my brothers and sisters (his followers) is evidence of how you really treat him. When you persecute his followers, you are persecuting him. He said that to Saul in Acts 9.4. “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” Saul was attacking the followers of Christ and Christ said that he was attacking him.

This is a huge issue. Keep in mind that the genuine followers of Christ are historically persecuted. They are not the only ones persecuted, but historically they have been singled out for persecution more than any other. One of the evidences of genuine faith in Christ is seen in the love that you have for the followers of Christ. That is one of the major themes of the book of 1 John. If you love Jesus, you will love the followers of Jesus. If you love Jesus, you will take care of the followers of Jesus. Obviously, people like Hitler, Stalin, Pol Pot, Kim Il Jong, and leaders of ISIS and Al-Qaeda will be trembling before Christ. But, there is more. This is not only a judgment of the nations with the evidence that

condemns them being their treatment of the followers of Christ, but I think there is a warning for everyone. Being a follower of Christ means more than just using the right words to answer the questions. Being a follower of Christ means that your heart has been changed. It means that you really love Christ and if you love Christ, you will love the followers of Christ and your life will demonstrate that. From a distance, sheep and goats all look alike. But Jesus is the judge and he knows the difference. The Father has given to the Son this responsibility because it is the job of the King to rule over his kingdom. And Christ does. His decision is final and it is forever. There is no higher court. There is no appeals process. The verdict that is rendered on that day is final. That means that...

2. **There are ultimate consequences at stake.** (34, 41, 46)

A. **The pronouncement and reason of blessing.** (34)

At the beginning of this discourse, the disciples were asking Jesus about his return. He has been answering that question and here he does it by referring to himself as both the Son of Man and the King. This is who Christ is. He is the King. This is what he loves to say. "Come, you who are blessed by my Father..." As the Son, Jesus knows how incredibly glorious and good and loving and delightful and faithful and true and encouraging and joyful his/the Father is. When Jesus says you are blessed by his Father, he knows how amazing that is, we don't. All we can do is imagine. Imagine away, because no matter how great you imagine what it is like to be blessed by the Father, you will not imagine that high or that wide or that deep or that long. But that blessing by the Father takes place as we inherit the kingdom.

Wait a minute! We inherit the Kingdom? We are not the King, Jesus is. Exactly. But this King is the bridegroom and his people are the bride. He is the King and we are the Queen. He is the husband and we are the wife. He loved us so much that he died for us so that we could live with him and reign with him. This has been the plan from the very beginning. This is the very end for which God created the world. He made the world to be kingdom for his Son and he made a people to be the bride for his Son. But, who are the people who inherit the kingdom? Who are the people that are the bride of Christ? They are the people who love Christ. They are the people who trust Christ. They are the people who truly live for Christ because they truly believe in Christ because they truly love Christ. The evidence of their love for Christ is seen in how they treat people that the world considers to be insignificant. To these people Christ says, "Come!" Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. In other words, this is the moment that creation has been made for and is waiting for. This is it! Living with, ruling with, delighting with, and witnessing and to some degree experiencing the incredible joy and love that God enjoys as God

B. **The result of being cursed** (41)

Just as the blessing of inheriting the kingdom cannot be fully grasped, neither can the curse of being damned by Christ be fully grasped. But, here it is. Christ explicitly says that he, the Son of Man, the King will separate the true believers from the pretenders and

will tell the pretenders to “*depart from him, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.*” These people will then be separated from the gracious presence of God forever and will suffer in the eternal fire that is the home of Satan and his demons. There is nothing more terrifying for you to imagine because it is a reality that will never end. There is no suicide in hell. The soul is eternal.

### C. **The duration of both** (46)

I do not enjoy talking about the reality of hell. But Jesus did talk about it. I don't think he enjoyed talking about it either, but he actually spoke more about hell than he did about heaven. And in the final verse of chapter 25, Jesus says that the punishment for the pretenders is eternal, just as the life is eternal for those who are genuine believers. Do not miss this. Jesus says that both heaven and hell are real and are forever.

Now you can see why Jesus takes all this time in the final hours of his life to address this to his disciples. There is nothing that is more important. So, what determines whether you are in the group on his left who go to hell, or in the group on his right who inherit the kingdom? Is Jesus saying that in order to go to heaven that you need to start a food pantry, soup kitchen and clothing closet for the poor? Is he saying that you need to do these things in order to earn the favor of God? No, he really isn't. He is saying that...

### 3. **Your daily choices reveal the genuine condition of your heart.** (35-40, 42-45)

When Jesus sentences the group on his left to hell, he tells them why. He says, you treated me like dirt. You treated me as one that you didn't care a thing about. When I was hungry, you didn't bother to give me food. When I was thirsty, you didn't even care to give me a bottle of water. I was a stranger and you ignored me. You didn't even bother to say “hi.” You did not welcome me. You saw my need for clothes and you didn't help me. You saw how sick I was and you didn't tend to me and when I was in prison you did not visit me. And the people are puzzled. They said, “we don't remember ever seeing you like that.” And Jesus says, that the way you treat my people is how you treat me. We tend to treat people differently, don't we? People that we think are important are people that we need. We tend to be nice to them. Is that because we are nice? No. It is because we want to be thought of as being nice. But, the way that you treat people whom you don't think you need reveals the true condition of your heart.

I read the story the other day of a guy who was on his way to a job interview and was running late. He was in a panic trying to find a parking spot in a parking deck and spotted one and raced for it, only to get beaten out by someone else. He exploded and cussed the guy out, and used a few hand signals to emphasize his irritation, but there was nothing he could do. Eventually he found one and ran to his appointment only to discover that the guy conducting the interview was the same guy that he just cussed out and threatened in the parking deck. While the world would say, “Hey idiot, don't cuss out the guy that is going to do your job interview” Jesus says something radically different. You don't treat people nice just because they can do something for you, you treat people nice because you realize that God has been exceedingly gracious to you. In fact, if you have truly been

changed by Christ, then you will treat people differently, especially people whom you are tempted to think do not really matter.

Do you see it now? You are pretty insignificant. You really are not all that important. But God has chosen the insignificant people, who know they are insignificant to be part of his glorious Kingdom. In order to be part of his kingdom, we have to admit that we really aren't anything special. In fact, we have to admit that we are sinners, and just like everybody else we deserve the righteous wrath of God. We have to admit that in our hearts we are rebels who want to make up our own rules, live our lives and do whatever we want to do. What does God do for people who repent of their sin and trust Christ? He takes away their sin by forgiving them and makes them his children. He changes our status because he changes our hearts. We become a new person. The evidence of being a new person is seen in a variety of ways, but one of the ways we demonstrate whether or not we are genuine followers of Christ is seen in how we treat people whom we are tempted to think do not really matter.

Who was Jesus talking to here? He was talking to his 12 disciples. One of those was Judas Iscariot who was going to betray him. Judas was a pretender. He looked like a follower of Jesus but in reality he was a pretender because he was following Jesus for the wrong reasons. He was following Jesus because he thought that Jesus was the ticket to him getting the kind of life that he wanted right now. In other words, Judas Iscariot wanted to be in charge of his life and he wanted to use Jesus as means to get what he wanted. But Jesus is not a ticket. Jesus is the King. Adversity against Christ was building. And that adversity revealed that Judas was not a genuine follower of Christ. He cared about Christ only because of what he thought Christ would do for him. He did not really care about Christ. And what Judas did, revealed that he really didn't care about the other disciples either. Judas was in it for himself. Look at your life. Are you just in it for yourself? If so, you are not a genuine follower of Christ. People who are genuine followers of Christ smell like Jesus, know what I mean? A person who has truly been changed by the gospel has truly been changed. Our daily choices in life reveal the genuine condition of our heart. Genuine followers of Christ love Christ and therefore, they love the followers of Christ and are willing to be more than inconvenienced for one another, they are willing to sacrifice for one another.