

One of the devotional books that I use for my daily quiet time is Billy Graham's *Unto the Hills*. I have used this devotional for several years and have notes written throughout the book. Earlier this month when I turned to the reading for June 1st, I saw that I had previously written the word "sermon" across the top of the page. But for some reason, I have never gotten around to writing a sermon on Billy's topic for that morning. The scripture text that Billy used was taken from the twenty-fifth chapter of the Gospel of Matthew, verses 31 through 46. Now this is one of my favorite passages in the Bibles, and I have preached on it numerous times focusing mainly on missions, but never on the topic Billy discussed that morning, until now. Listen to the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats from Matthew 25, verses 31-46.

Read Matthew 25:31-46

This is one of the most vivid parables that Jesus used to convey a message, and the message here is crystal clear – God will judge us according to how we react to the need of others. His judgment does not depend on how well we know the Bible, how smart we think we are, how important we think we are or how wealthy we are, but on how we have helped those in need. The surprising fact about this passage from Matthew 25 is that the criterion for dividing the two groups is not that the sheep confessed faith in Jesus Christ while the goats did not, but rather that the sheep had acted in tangible and loving ways toward the poor, the sick, the imprisoned, and the vulnerable, while the goats had not. Those whose lives are characterized by acts of love done for "the least of these" will be blessed and welcomed into the kingdom of heaven by Jesus. But those who fail to respond, whose faith finds no expression in compassion to the needy, will be banished to eternal fire.

In this parable, Jesus issues a clear and strong warning against the sin of omission. He called those who failed to do good to others "cursed" and "worthless." But He called those who helped others "blessed" and "righteous." Now there are two types of sins that we all commit: sins of commission and sins of omission. Both of these are sins in the eyes of God and unfortunately, we all have or will commit both types during our lifetime. And this is why Jesus came and died on the cross so that we can experience God's amazing grace and forgiveness when we fall short or miss the mark.

When asked to define the two sins, a little boy said: "Sins of commission are the sins we commit, and sins of omission are those we meant to commit but forgot." Now that's not quite true. Yes, sins of commission are sins that we commit **by doing something** that we should not do. Of course, this is the sin that we are most familiar with. We naturally think of sin as doing something wrong. There are many sins that fall into this category and we can all name many such as adultery, theft, abuse, murder, lying, cheating, gossip (I bet you didn't think of that

one), and many more. There was a preacher who was preaching on sin and noted that there were 545 known sins. Following the service he had over twenty requests for a copy of the list. Some people wanted to make sure that they didn't miss any.

Now sins of omission are the sins that we commit **by not doing something** we should have done. In James 4:17 it is defined as follows: "Anyone, then, who knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, commits sin." Of the two types of sin, this is the easiest one to hide from others. It is difficult to commit a sin of commission and get away with it, but it is quite easy to commit a sin of omission without others knowing about it. Thus, this is the type of sin that is perhaps the most dangerous one for us as Christians.

In his devotion, Rev. Graham pointed out something that I had never thought about before. In every one of Jesus' parables of condemnation the sin condemned is the sin of omission. Have you ever noticed that? I hadn't; so I did some research. In the Parable of the Wedding Banquet in the twenty-second chapter of Matthew, the king sends out his servants to tell those who had been invited the wedding banquet that everything was ready, but they refused to come. So he sends his servants out into the streets to invite anyone they could find, both the good and bad. When the king comes in to greet the guests, he notices that one man who is not properly dressed, and has him thrown out into the dark night. In this parable, we are the people in the streets who are invited to feast at God's table at the heavenly banquet. The invitation is extended in grace, but this grace carries some responsibility on our part. We are expected to clothe ourselves in Christ-like qualities. As Christians we are expected to grow more like Jesus each day.

In the Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids earlier in Matthew 25, there are ten bridesmaids who took their lamps to go meet the bridegroom. Five were wise and took extra oil for their lamps in case the bridegroom was delayed. However, five were foolish and took no oil. At midnight the bridegroom came and the foolish ones did not have enough oil for their lamps and had to go buy some. While they were gone, the bridal party went into the house and the door was locked. When the foolish ones knocked on the door, they were told: "We don't know you." In this parable, Jesus is the bridegroom and we are wise if we are prepared to meet Him when He comes. Like the five foolish bridesmaids, we are condemned if we are not prepared and have not accepted Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior.

In Luke 10, a lawyer asks Jesus who is considered his neighbor. In reply Jesus tells him the story of the Good Samaritan in which a man is beaten and robbed and left for dead on the side of a road. A Priest and Levite came along at separate times and each passed on the other side of the road without giving the injured man any attention or aid. In contrast, a Samaritan, who is hated by the Jews, helps the stranger. At the end of the story, Jesus asks the lawyer which of

these three was a good neighbor. To which the lawyer replied: "The one who showed mercy." Jesus tells him to go and do likewise.

Sin is like the speed limit laws. You can break the law by going over the posted speed, but you can also break it by going under the minimum limit. You can be going too slow, and not reaching the level that is expected. So it is in life. You can be living below what is expected by doing nothing, or being too slow to do what is right and good, and by doing so you sin. The person going 30 mph on the Interstate is just as dangerous as the person doing 90 mph. You must stay within certain boundaries to avoid sinning. Not doing good when you can is being below the minimum. The Priest and Levite were not speeding or breaking the law by going too fast, but they were not going the minimum speed, and so by not helping, they were just as guilty as the thieves who beat and robbed the stranger.

Now there are other parables where Jesus condemns the person for doing nothing such as the man with the one talent who buried it in the ground and did not invest it. Or the rich man who does not provide for the poor man, Lazarus, who was lying at his gate each day. And then there's the unmerciful servant who was forgiven by his master of a very large debt but would not forgive his fellow servant of a much smaller debt.

In our text this morning, the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats teaches us certain things about the help we are called to give. First we must help in simple things, the routine things of life. The things which Jesus highlights – giving food to the hungry, providing a cool drink of water to the thirsty, welcoming a stranger, cheering the sick, or visiting the prisoner – are things that anyone can do. It is not a question of giving thousands of dollars or donating truckloads of food; it is a case of doing simple things for the people we meet every day.

Also the help we give must be uncalculating; that is, given without expecting or desiring any praise or recognition for our act of kindness. When we offer assistance we should not be thinking about piling up merit points with God; remember we cannot earn our salvation, it is freely given because of what Jesus did for us on the cross. We should practice agape love, always seeking the best for the other person no matter what. This desire to help others should be part of who we are; agape love should flow naturally from our heart.

Whereas, on the other hand, the attitude of those who failed to help in this parable was: "If we had known it was You, Jesus, we would have gladly helped; but we thought it was just some common person who was not worth helping." This is the attitude of those who will help only when it benefits themselves with praise and public recognition; you know, when others are watching. Such help is not generosity, it is disguised selfishness. The help which wins the approval of God is that which is given for nothing but the sake of helping, out of love.

In this parable, Jesus confronts us with the truth that when we help the least of these, we are helping Him, but when we don't help them, we are really withholding love from Him. Now who does Jesus mean by the "least of these?" I think that we can all identify people who could fit into this group, such as the homeless, those who are ignored by society, and even us old folks. But I think it also includes anybody who needs a helping hand. We have opportunities each and every day to help someone, such as carrying their groceries to the car; checking on someone who we have not seen lately; praying for our neighbors and those who are facing rough times; cutting the neighbor's grass; and many other routine tasks of life. Then there are the outreach ministries of this church that you can get involved in such as the Pantry, Feed New Mexico Kids, Community of Hope, MorningStar worship, music ministry to the nursing homes, and many more. The point is to look for simple ways in which you can make a difference in the life of somebody.

In his commentary, William Barclay, the great Scottish Theologian, notes that this parable influenced the lives of two men. One was Francis of Assisi who while he was wealthy, was not happy; he felt that his life was incomplete. Then one day as he was out riding, he met a leper. Something moved Francis to dismount and fling his arms around this outcast of society, and in his arms the face of the leper changed to the face of Jesus Christ. We are called to see Jesus in each person we encounter.

The other man was Martin of Tours. He was Roman soldier and a Christian. One cold winter day, as he was entering a city, a beggar stopped him and asked for money. Martin didn't have any money, but he saw that the beggar was cold and shivering. So he gave him what he had; he took off his soldier's coat, worn and frayed as it was and cut it in two; giving one half to the beggar. That night Martin had a dream. In it he saw all the angels in heaven gathered around Jesus and Jesus was wearing half of a Roman soldier's cloak. One of the angels asked Jesus: "Master, why are you wearing that old battered coat? Who gave it to you?" Jesus replied: "My servant Martin gave it to me." Martin had helped the "least of these." By responding to the opportunities God gives us each day, we never know when we may be helping Jesus!

In the account of the last judgment in Matthew 25, the people were not asked questions on theology or what their beliefs were. Neither were they asked what sins they had committed. Instead, their failure to show mercy and provide help to others was noted. Their sins of omission were serious enough to send them to everlasting punishment.

The point that Jesus is making here is that there must be a practical expression of our faith in the present world, or it will never endure in the world to come. We need fewer words and more charitable works. In his book *The Hole in Our Gospel*, Richard Sterns noted that being a Christian requires much more than a personal relationship with the Lord. It is also a public relationship with the world. If your personal faith in Jesus Christ has no positive outward

expression, then your faith has a hole in it. This is what James meant in his letter when he said: "Faith without works is dead."

The chorus of our closing hymn states: "Here I am, Lord. Is it I, Lord? I have heard you calling in the night. I will go, Lord, if you lead me. I will hold your people in my heart." Be aware of what's going on around you; look for the opportunities that God gives you each day to make a difference in the lives of others, to help the least of these; and then do something about it; follow your heart and don't let the opportunity pass. Action speaks louder than words. One day may we all hear Jesus say: "Well done, my good and faithful servant." Amen