

A Storytelling Commentary on Matthew 25:31-46

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“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him,
then he will sit on the throne of his glory.
All the nations will be gathered before him,
and he will separate people one from another
as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats,
and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left.

Then the king will say to those at his right hand,
‘Come, you that 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 something to drink,
I was a stranger and you welcomed me,
I was naked and you gave me clothing,
I was sick and you took care of me,
I was in prison and you visited me.’

Then the righteous will answer him,
‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food,
or thirsty and gave you something to drink?
And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you,
or naked and gave you clothing?’

And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’
And the king will answer them,
‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these
who are members of my family,
you did it to me.’

Then he will say to those at his left hand, ‘You that are accursed, depart from me
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
nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and
you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’

Then they also will answer, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty
or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison,
and did not take care of you?’

Then he will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you,
just 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.”

This is a very memorable parable that has had been a major influence on the ongoing engagement of the Church in ministries of social justice and charity. Many who have devoted their lives to caring for the sick, the hungry, the imprisoned, and the poor have experienced this parable as a call to service.

The structure of the parable is simple: the setup at the last judgment, the blessing of those on his right and their response, the condemnation of those on his left and their response, and a concluding comment. The key to remembering the parable is to master the order of those in need: hungry, thirsty, stranger, naked, sick, in prison. One way of thinking about it is this: beggars = hungry and thirsty; those who come to the door or are in the marketplace = stranger and naked; those who need to be visited = sick and in prison. Another possible memory hook is HoT SNow SaP (imagine a maple syrup operation in late spring: “hot snow sap”): hungry/thirsty, stranger/naked, sick/prison. Use whatever works for you as a way of remembering these categories. This is the key to remembering this parable.

A translation note: the NRSV adds unnecessary words in the responses of those on the right and the left: “When was it that we saw you ...” The Greek is simply “when did we see you....” When repeated many times as in this parable, these extra words make the parable wordy and less direct. It is a small matter but the NIV is a better translation in this case.

In biblical compositions the purpose of repetitions is usually to create a contrast. I have often heard this parable read in a kind of sing-song manner in which the four-fold repetition of those in need becomes a mere repeating of the words with no differentiation. In this parable, each of the recitals of the needy has a distinctive tone. The first is by the Son of Man. His tone is gratitude and thanksgiving for the care he has received. The second repetition is by the blessed on his right hand. Their tone is surprise and joy. It is the delight of someone discovering that they had done a good thing when they were not aware they had done it. The third repetition is to the accursed on the Son of Man’s left. His tone is anger and disappointment. It is the tone of those who have been ignored and forgotten. The fourth is by those on his left. Their tone is shock and grief. This is the most emotionally intense of the four and is the climax of the parable. It is also the most sympathetic. Its function in the parable is to invite every listener to reflect on when they have either knowingly or unknowingly failed to care for someone in need. Every listener can find those in their past whom they have ignored and not helped. The contrast between these four lists of those in need creates the impact of the parable.

As in the parables of the ten virgins and the talents, this parable is designed to focus attention on those who are condemned, i.e. thrown into the outer darkness or into the eternal fire. The structure of the parable leads up to the dilemma of those who have messed up, that is, all of us. One way of making that possible in your telling of the parable is to give a little time for people to think about when they saw somebody hungry or thirsty, or a stranger or naked, or sick or in prison and did nothing about it. The

abbreviation of the list contributes to the tone of panic and despair in their question. Let the words serve as a prod to memory. This parable virtually requires people to reflect on what they are doing or not doing in relation to these primary values of the kingdom of God.

The overall impact of this parable is the shock of condemnation at the realization that we are liable to judgment because of the way we have responded to those who are in need. This parable creates a strong incentive for people to respond positively to them. This parable has probably had more positive impact on charity than any other single teaching in the history of the human race and it has generated charity organizations throughout the world over the last two thousand years since Jesus told it. So don't hesitate to make it frightening. Jesus understood that one of the reasons that people are motivated to change their behavior is fear.