

## Matthew 25:31-46

<sup>31-33</sup> “When he finally arrives, blazing in beauty and all his angels with him, the Son of Man will take his place on his glorious throne. Then all the nations will be arranged before him and he will sort the people out, much as a shepherd sorts out sheep and goats, putting sheep to his right and goats to his left.

<sup>34-36</sup> “Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Enter, you who are blessed by my Father! Take what’s coming to you in this kingdom. It’s been ready for you since the world’s foundation. And here’s why:

I was hungry and you fed me,  
I was thirsty and you gave me a drink,  
I was homeless and you gave me a room,  
I was shivering and you gave me clothes,  
I was sick and you stopped to visit,  
I was in prison and you came to me.’

<sup>37-40</sup> “Then those ‘sheep’ are going to say, ‘Master, what are you talking about? When did we ever see you hungry and feed you, thirsty and give you a drink? And when did we ever see you sick or in prison and come to you?’ Then the King will say, ‘I’m telling the solemn truth: Whenever you did one of these things to someone overlooked or ignored, that was me—you did it to me.’

<sup>41-43</sup> “Then he will turn to the ‘goats,’ the ones on his left, and say, ‘Get out, worthless goats! You’re good for nothing but the fires of hell. And why? Because—

I was hungry and you gave me no meal,  
I was thirsty and you gave me no drink,  
I was homeless and you gave me no bed,  
I was shivering and you gave me no clothes,  
Sick and in prison, and you never visited.’

<sup>44</sup> “Then those ‘goats’ are going to say, ‘Master, what are you talking about? When did we ever see you hungry or thirsty or homeless or shivering or sick or in prison and didn’t help?’

<sup>45</sup> “He will answer them, ‘I’m telling the solemn truth: Whenever you failed to do one of these things to someone who was being overlooked or ignored, that was me—you failed to do it to me.’

<sup>46</sup> “Then those ‘goats’ will be herded to their eternal doom, but the ‘sheep’ to their eternal reward.”

## Love for the Sake of Love

Fritz Wendt is a pastor, psychotherapist, and musician who ministers in New York City. He wrote a great article for a publication called *Political Theology Today* entitled “The Politics of Love Beyond Dualism (<http://www.politicaltheology.com/blog/the-politics-of-a-love-beyond-dualism-matthew-2531-46-fritz-wendt/>) in which he starts by relating a Peanuts comic strip to us. In the comic strip, Linus Van Pelt is reading a book, and his sister Lucy snatches from him and says, “This is MY book!” at which point Linus goes off to watch television. Lucy follows him in and says, “I don’t want to watch THAT program. I want to watch MY program.” Linus says, “Alright. I’ll go upstairs and listen to the radio.” Lucy comes in and says, “I don’t want to listen to THAT station. I want to

listen to MY station.” So Linus says, “Alright, I’ll go listen to some records.” A little while later Lucy comes in and says, “I don’t want to listen to those records; I want to listen to MY records.” Linus says, “Alright. I’ll go outside and look at the stars for awhile.” A short while later Lucy comes out and declares, “I don’t want to look at THOSE stars; I want to look at MY...” At this point Lucy stops, looks at Linus, sighs loudly, and walks away.

Fritz Wendt goes on to explain that this comic strip illustrates a difference in the kind of faith that many people have; Lucy’s faith is a weak faith that centers on the self and what belongs to me. Linus on the other hand has a strong faith that is able to see beyond the self at the things that the self cannot own and enjoy them without having to own them. The stars belong to God alone and cannot be “owned” by anybody. Had Lucy finished her sentence, “I want to look at MY stars,” she would have sounded ridiculous.

The issue of being self-focused is one that goes back to the Garden of Eden when we humans, in our desire to raise ourselves to God’s level, believed the lie that we could be like God in every way. And our decision to “be like God” caused not only our alienation from God but our alienation from one another; once man and woman transgress they attempt to hide from God, and when God confronts the man about his transgression, he casts blame on his wife, and when she’s confronted she casts blame on the serpent. We had become independent of God, we had stood up to God, but now we lived in tension with God and with one another – I can imagine Adam and Eve’s first argument as Eve asks her husband, “What’s the big idea of blaming me? You chose to eat the fruit!” Our selves became our main focus, and we started to see the world as a duality – as two distinct realms; there’s me and there’s everything else. And everything else exists to satisfy me! And unless we have some moral compass to guides us, some laws to restrict us, we would prey on the weak in order to enhance our own level of comfort and satisfaction. Lucy can assert her authority over her little brother in order to reclaim her book and watch her television program and listen to her radio station and play her records. She sees the world as consisting of her and the things that serve her.

But she can’t own the stars, though she would if she could. We can’t exercise authority over God, but we would if we could. In fact some people in the realm of religion present an image of God that serves their own needs – they do try to own God. Yes, they can look at the stars and oceans and everything and confess that God is greater than them, but then they try to shape God into a god that thinks like they do and acts as they would want him to act, to reward their friends and punish their enemies. We may go through the motions of worshiping God, of singing and praying and reading scripture, but in the end we re-cast God into an image that allows us to pursue our selfish endeavors. On Friday some Muslim extremists killed over 200 people in a worship service in the name of God, their God, because their god is a god who wants the world to be just the way that they want it to be. Their world consists of themselves and the people who think like them, and everyone else must either come to think like they do or die.

But lest we get too complacent we should recognize that the same frame of mind exists in many Christians, though we don’t actually kill those who don’t think like us; we

figuratively kill them by convincing ourselves that at a final judgment God will send them away to face their punishment for not thinking like they should. It's the way the selfish mind works; if you can't assert your power over them in this life, you convince yourself that God will rid you of them in the afterlife.

And so today's parable – and I do consider it a parable; it has the same puzzling and disturbing traits as other parables – is a direct challenge to our spiritual smugness as it was to the original audience, the early Christian community. Today's parable concerns final judgment, and Jesus' audience would have had some preconceptions about judgment. The world was divided into two categories; the chosen and the non-chosen. The chosen people escape judgment simply by being God's chosen people while everyone else is judged. That's the duality that the early Christians and most Jews would have embraced; chosen and non-chosen, and if you were not chosen your prospects were pretty bleak.

So when Jesus speaks of “all the nations” gathering before him at this final judgment, his audience would understand that to mean the non-chosen only. The audience would identify themselves as “the least of these” because they *were* the hungry, the thirsty, the sick, the imprisoned, the persecuted. And the first surprise that Jesus gives his audience is the nations are judged not according to the god or gods they worship but the way they treat “the least of these.” Heaven suddenly became a lot bigger to a lot of people as the good sheep among the gentile nations are welcomed into God's kingdom.

And if the criteria for the salvation of “the nations” has something to do with how they treat “the least of these,” that notion might cause Jesus' audience to ask themselves how they treat others. Suddenly “the nations” aren't all bad folks; there are sheep mixed in with the goats. And if there are sheep mixed in with the goats, maybe I need to be more careful about how I classify people. Are all Romans tyrants? Are all communists ruthless? Are all Muslims terrorists? Jesus is forcing us to take a closer look at those neat, clean categories that we create to separate friend from foe; Jesus prompts us to examine this whole “me and the other” distinction that we too often make. A Jew might have tended to the needs of a fellow Jew, giving him food if he was hungry and water if he was thirsty, but what of their enemies? Now there may be sheep among the enemies, and how can they distinguish who is the sheep and who is the goat? The answer is of course that you *can't*.

And Jesus is saying that you shouldn't even try to make the distinction, that the whole duality mindset needs to be scrapped. It's not me as distinct from everything else, but rather me *in communion with* everything else, including God. Jesus commends the sheep because in tending to “the least of these” they are tending God himself, and he condemns the goats because in *not* tending to “the least of these” they are *not* tending to God. But the sheep are not tending to the needs of others because they are trying to please God or curry God's favor or secure a place in heaven; the sheep are completely ignorant of the fact that they are tending to the needs of God as they tend to the needs of “the least of these.” The goats are the dualists. They are the ones that make a distinction between God and other people because the goats are surprised by the

judgment levied against them. In essence they're saying, "Lord, if we knew that that person was really you we would have tended to his needs. But we thought that guy was just a bum, just a low life, just a nobody. That's why we didn't feed him. That's why we didn't clothe him. That's why we didn't give him a place to sleep."

So this is not a mandate to take care of "the least of these" because that's what God commands us to do. *This is a mandate to love!* Sure, some people are criminal, and all people sin, but we should not fail to love them and to tend to their needs regardless of who they are, because everyone can change for the better, and when we treat them with kindness, with compassion they can be transformed just as we have been transformed by the kindness and compassion that God has shown us.