

# "If Christ is Our King, What Does This Mean"

Matthew 25:31-46, Christ the King Sunday

November 23, 2014

Today we are celebrating the **Feast Day of Christ the King**, the last Sunday of the Church year, known also in some circles as "**The Sunday of the Fulfillment.**" We remember today that one of the **earliest professions of faith** by many new Christians in the early church was: "**Jesus Is Lord**" which also means that "**Christ Is King!**"

In the days of that infant Church: **To call Jesus "Lord"** was to say that the Roman Emperor (Caesar) was *not* the ultimate authority over your life. The ultimate authority over your life, you professed, was the LORD God Almighty; the Heavenly Father whom Jesus came to make known to us, who following his death and resurrection kept his promise of also sending the Holy Spirit to us to: (1) Convict of our sin; (2) Convince us that Jesus Christ has fulfilled all righteousness for us; and (3) That it is now the devil, whom the LORD God who has put on a **short leash** so he can have no further dominion over our lives! (John 16:7-11)

Well I want you to know that this is **NOT AN EASY GOSPEL LESSON TO PREACH** upon this morning; for this can be one of those Gospel lessons that raises more questions for us than it answers. Some Biblical texts are much easier to preach than others; those that are **pure Gospel**. I am thinking of text like in **I Peter 5:18**, *'Cast all your cares on the Lord because he cares for you!'* And those words of Jesus in **Matthew 11:29**, *"Come unto me, all who labor and are heavy-laden and I will give you rest!"*

Then there are more difficult texts like this one; words of Jesus that are **MEANT TO DISTURB US AS MUCH AS THEY ARE MEANT TO COMFORT US**. Jesus' teaching always had a certain amount of shock value in it to keep people sitting on the end of their chairs and listening closely as he endeavors to wake us up from our spiritual complacency!

**Friends there's no way a man can be a true preacher of God's Word, if he is nothing more than a MR. MILQUETOAST always afraid of confronting other people with the hard facts of God's Word.** And yet there are times when the law of God may be very difficult for pastor like me to preach, because the pastor probably knows better than anyone else seated in the sanctuary that day, how many people there are present who are **deeply grieved over their own sin**; who even though they have repented of that sin and received forgiveness for that sin, find that the old evil foe and their consciences continue to plague them! I think the law of God is something that is not only difficult at times for a pastor to preach, but it is also something that sometimes that is very difficult for some Christians to hear, especially if they were raised in the kind of Christian tradition where the preacher always seemed to enjoy standing in the pulpit and constantly excoriating people in the congregation for their sins.

**Friends, these words of Jesus, like all of his teachings about the END TIMES that are recorded for us in Matthew 24 and 25 come to us much more in the form of a WARNING than do they come to us in the form of a THREAT;** and there is a **big deal of difference between a warning and a threat**. A warning comes in the form of a precaution, to prevent people from unnecessarily becoming the victims of some type of great injury or harm; while a threat, on the other hand, is spoken to purposefully strike fear in the hearts of those who hear it. A threat is meant to intimidate. A threat is meant to immobilize other people, so that the one who is making the threat will hopefully gain control over those who are the recipients of that threat.

Well just stop and think for a few moments about those **ominous warnings that sometimes** come across to us on the airwaves of our televisions and radios warning us about a tornado watch by the **NATIONAL WEATHER BUREAU**; especially when they are directed folks like so many of us who are living in Lexington, Richland, Newberry, Lexington County or Richland Counties, are you grateful for that announcement? Would that announcement perhaps keeping from making that unnecessary trip to the grocery that you were just about to make until the storm subsided. If a tornado warning is broadcast, indicating that there has already been a sizeable tornado sited nearby you, do you see that as a warning, or as a threat?

Look on **the label of any BOTTLE OF WINE** sold in the United States. There you will read in very small print: "The Surgeon General has determined that **pregnant women should not drink alcoholic beverages that might cause birth defects.**" Or read the Surgeon General's warning on the side of a **PACKET OF CIGARETTES**: "**Smoking causes lung cancer**, heart disease, emphysema and may complicate pregnancy!"

When we make our annual trip to our family practitioner for our **yearly physical examination**, of course, we are hoping only to hear good news, but if there is bad news that the doctor deems important to share with us so that we might seek medical treatment right away, **do we really want our doctor to withhold that information from us**, though none of us wants to hear it? There's no way!

**One of the big questions that theologians always face when they seek** to interpret the words of Jesus found in our Gospel lesson today is: "**Are these words of Jesus yet another parable he tells us here**, in what is actually the last in a long string of parables found in Matt. 24 and 25, that section of Matthew's Gospel dedicated to **Jesus' words of warning about the end times, or are these words an actual script that will actually be spoken** between the Glorified Christ on the last day with other people to be spoken verbatim?"

It's not a matter of being a liberal or conservative, for **there are many conservative commentators that suggest these words are also a parable**; commentaries written by such conservative theologians as James Montgomery Boyce, and I was somewhat shocked when I first read in one of the footnotes of our own **LUTHERAN STUDY BIBLE**, published in 2009 by CPH, on Page 1639: "**Sheep and goats are not being described here as being judged on this day, but rather separated. Accordingly, this parable is not primarily about judgment but about the revelation and public vindication of true believers!**"

Though sheep and goats often intermingled with each other during the daylight hours out on the open fields, when the day was drawing to a close and nightfall was at hand, then the shepherd would call out to his sheep to have them enter into the sheep pen where they would be much more safe during the night, under the shepherd's own divine rules of protection. The goats, however, would never have responded to the shepherd's voice. **That salvation from start to finish is God's doing and not ours becomes apparent in the first words that the Son of Man in all his glory speaks to those on his right hand: 'Come you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you since the foundation of the world was laid!'**"

Sometimes when approaching a Biblical text like this one is it wise to seek to discern the **question behind the text**, much like the contestants on that popular television game show **JEOPARDY** are given the answers to questions, and then asked to supply the question. So what is the question? Is this passage primarily answering the question: "**How can I go to heaven when I die?**" Or is it primarily: "**As a disciple of Jesus Christ what am I supposed to be doing right now?**"

**How can the question behind this text be: "How can I go to heaven when I die?" when Jesus himself repeatedly tells us that going to heaven is a gift to us of God's grace to be**

**received by faith?** You know what our Lord and our Savior says to us in **Luke 12:32**, ***“Fear not little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom!”*** How can this parable be primarily about answering the question: “How can I go to heaven when I die?” when the Lord Jesus tells us on another occasion: ***“For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day!”*** (**John 6:40**)

**So what is the question?** At the end of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus laments the fact that so many people are willing to call him “Lord” but are not willing to be obedient to his ethical demands. Listen to Jesus’ own words: ***“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. For everyone who hears these words and does them, will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house upon the sand. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell and great was the fall of it!”*** (**Matthew 7:21, 24-27**)

In his **Great Commission** which Jesus sets before us as his disciples in one of his post-resurrection appearances as the living Lord, many of us today are very good and hearing the first half of Jesus’ pronouncement: ***“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit!”*** But they can easily allow the second-half of his Great Commission to go in one ear and out the other: ***“And teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you!”*** (**Matthew 28:19-20**) This means that we are not only to read Jesus’ Word and inwardly digest it, but we are to let that word empower us to show a concern for others. So maybe the question rightly asked is **not what happens at the end of things**, but more like **what am I supposed to be doing right now? What does Jesus want me to do, or to be? How will my life be different if Christ is truly my King?**

**In asking ourselves these questions we are acknowledging the fact that the conflict that is always going on inside of us as to who or what is truly the lord over our lives. The world still wants us to worship all that is Not-God, and the culture promises to reward us when we do.**

**But Life in God’s Kingdom is not about self-aggrandizement**, it’s about renunciation. It’s not about big words, it’s about powerful actions. Life in God’s Kingdom is not about what you have or who you are, it’s about what you do. It’s not about what the world values, but what God values.

**Martin Luther had great respect for St. Augustine, the 4<sup>th</sup> Century Church father who really did not become a Christian until he was 40 years old, who always reminded people that his mother Monica had faithfully prayed for him to become a Christian throughout the first 40 years of his life.** He was given a second birth into the kingdom of God through the Gospel and was baptized. When someone asked Augustine one day, ***“How can you discern of God for your life,”*** this is how he responded. He said, ***“Love God and do as you please!”*** In other words, those people who by the grace of God come to love God, only because he first loved us in the gift of his Son come to be our Savior, will also live lives that are not simply dedicated now to their own self-aggrandizement, but instead a life that is to a large degree focused on meeting the needs of others.

**Is it possible that there are some who claim to believe in Jesus, but would also go through their whole lives never taking time to do even one kind and generous thing for another person at all?** And Jesus teaches us that **nothing is too insignificant at all.** Jesus says in **Matthew 10:42**, ***“And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones who is my disciple, truly I tell you, that person will certainly not lose his reward!”***

**The real application from Jesus’ pronouncements** in our Gospel lesson today is absolutely **not: “Believe in me, and act like a goat.”** **Instead, the message is this: if you love God, if your values are God-values instead of the world’s values**, if Christ actually is King, then you will love as God loves, give as God gives, forgive as God forgives. If your values are God-values, you can’t help but live as Christ taught.

**Two weeks before his martyrdom, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. preached a powerful sermon at the Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta.** Certainly by this time he understood completely that his life was very much on the line as one who responded wholeheartedly to Christ's words as found in **Matthew 16:24-25**, *"If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for your sake will find it!"*

**Dr. King talked about how he wanted to be remembered, after his death.** In doing so he really zeroed in on that ultimate question: **"If Christ is my King, what does that mean?"** Then Dr. King went on to answer his own question: "If Christ is ruler over our lives, then my Nobel Peace Prize is far less important than my trying to feed the hungry. If Christ is my King, then my invitations to the White House are less important than the fact that I have often visited many prisoners in prison. If Christ is truly my King, then my being named TIME magazine's "Man of the Year" is less important than that I tried to love extravagantly, dangerously, with all my being. (*I Have a Dream*, 191)

Are these words of Jesus **the exact script that he says we will speak to him on the great and last day, or are they, even the LUTHERAN STUDY BIBLE, published by CPH in 2009 suggests,** more likely a parable; not primarily about judgment, but about how the Good Lord will vindicate his true believers on the last day. These good works are the basis for our being welcomed into heaven, but sure signs that our faith has produced good works in our lives to the glory of God; as we are called upon to manifest Christ's love to others day.

**Brothers and sisters, you and I know that there are three words that we love to say whenever we feel we have just completed and finished a task** that was both difficult and important. These three words are: **"I DID IT!"**

These three words are the very words that **Donny Osmond** said when it was announced that he was the celebrity winner of the ninth competition **"DANCING WITH THE STARS"** in 2009. **But those three little words "I DID IT" were not easy to come by. For the final weeks of the ten-week competition Donny danced on a broken toe. It took a physical toll on Donny as he related, "I don't think I've worked harder for any accolade than I have this one.**

**When you record an album and it goes platinum, yeah, you're in the studio and you work hard for months, but it's not like your whole body hurts!"** The competition was emotionally draining. He noted on his blog that the "culmination of nine weeks filled with blood, sweat and tears comes down to this—the finals." So disturbing were the finals that his professional dance partner, Kym Johnson, had to encourage Donny to continue.

On the Sunday night before Tuesday's final performance, Donny was lying down and lamenting that he could not continue, only to have Kym revitalize him by saying, **"WE have to do it one more time!"** And one more time they did do it, and at the age of 51 Donny Osmond became the oldest winner ever as a contestant on **DANCING WITH THE STARS.**

**You know, if you were to greatly misunderstand the message Jesus is speaking to us in our Gospel lesson today, you might come to same false conclusion: "I did it!"**

**For after all when the redeemed ask the question: "When, Lord, when? When did we ever see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we ever see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you, or sick and visited you? When did we ever see you in prison and come to visit you?"**

**And Jesus responds, “For as much as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me!”**

**Have these disciples so taken to heart the commands of Jesus, that what they do while they are on earth is not being done for their own benefit at all, but for the sheer glory and praise of God?**

*You remember what he says, “Beware of practicing your piety before men in order to be seen by them; for then you will have no reward from your Father, who is in heaven! Thus when you give alms, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by men. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be in secret!*

*And when you pray, you must not like the hypocrites, for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by men. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you!*

*And when you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by men. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face that your fasting may not be seen by men but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you!” (Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18)*

**But we know what St. Paul says in 2 Corinthians 3 and we agree: “We are not sufficient to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God, who has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.” And again, St. Paul reminds the Philippians and us: “For it is God at work in you, both to will and to do of his good pleasure” (Phil. 2:13)!**

The scene of the judgment of the sheep and goats brings these parables and the discourse to a dramatic conclusion with the pronouncement that we will all be accountable for what we do in this life, while awaiting the return of the King. And the powerful twist to the scene is that our service to Jesus is demonstrated best by how we serve the least of Jesus’ brothers. The preceding parables also reveal a person’s heart—preparedness, responsibility, readiness, productivity—but caring for the most need among Jesus’ disciples is the clinching evidence of kingdom life.

Yes, St. Paul says: “Do good to all people especially to those who are of the household of God!” And any humble ministry that we might exhibit towards the lowliness of others demonstrates Jesus’ own humility in leaving the glories of heaven to bring salvation’s story to the weak and the downtrodden, the tax collector and sinner, the sick and dying. We cannot serve these people solely out of a motivation that this is our religious obligation, for then we do so out of our own prideful strength. We serve because we have been served. We love because we have been loved. We lift up because we have been lifted up—and we never forget it. Religious duty and public ministry can easily be turned around to the kind of hypocrisy that Jesus consistently condemned—serving out of a desire to receive community and professional commendation (Matthew 6:1-17). But a heart that has been truly transformed by the righteousness of the kingdom of God will serve out of humility. Amen