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While We Are Waiting...: Live Compassionately

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TEXT: Matthew 25:31-46 (ESV)

“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left. Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who 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 drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.’ Then the righteous will answer him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?’ And the King will answer them, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.’

“Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you cursed, 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 no drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ Then they also will answer, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to you?’ Then he will answer them, saying, ‘Truly, I say to you, 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.”

Dear friends,

We are living in the midst of troubled times. Oftentimes when we are daily bombarded with threatening or tragic news or we're facing trials in life, it's easy to become uncertain and wonder where God is in all of this and what the future holds.

Hopelessness can set in. So that's why I'm thankful for a day like this: Christ the King Sunday. This day is an important time in the church's liturgical calendar in which we celebrate the fact that Jesus Christ is the king over all creation. The intention of Christ the King Sunday is to broaden our vision and strengthen and fill believers with confident hope for the future. It reminds us that time indeed does have a destiny: the King is coming. Jesus Christ, who suffered and died on a cross and rose three days later, is coming again. No one knows when, but He has promised that He will come again in glory with power and authority over everything in this world. All people will be gathered before Him and He will judge the living and the dead. He has the last word over us and history belongs to Him. That's what gives us hope for the future; our king is coming to take us to Himself.

In today's passage from Matthew, Jesus describes the arrival of the son of Man. That's a special title that Jesus used for himself. He says He will come in glory with His angels and sit on a glorious throne and all the peoples of the world will stand before him. And then He will separate the people one from another. And Jesus likens the scene to a shepherd separating the sheep from the goats at the end of the day of work. He says the sheep will go to the right, which is a place of honor back then, and goats on the left. And he describes the judgment to those on the right, He'll say, "Come, you who are blessed by my father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world, for you showed compassion and love for me. I was hungry and thirsty and a stranger and naked and sick and in prison. And you came and helped me." And then the righteous will ask Lord, "When did we see you?" The King will answer them, "As you did it to the least of these, my brothers and sisters, you did it to me." And then He'll look at those on his left and say, "Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. You ignored me when I was hungry and thirsty [and so on]. And you did nothing for me." And they'll say, "Lord, when did we see you that way?" And He'll say, "As you did not do it to the least of these, you did not do it to me. You ignored me." And then Jesus concludes His teaching: and then they will go into eternal punishment and the righteous into eternal life.

It's a graphic picture, isn't it? Some have put this vision in the category of the "hard sayings" of Jesus. We don't like hearing of judgment and eternal punishment, but here it is right there from the lips of Jesus. And there's something else that troubles people when they look at this. Someone reading this vision might immediately wonder, well, what about grace – our theology about being saved by grace, through faith in Christ, seems to be thrown out the window in this passage, doesn't it? It sounds like you're saved by doing good things. Isn't Jesus talking out of both sides of his mouth? The answer to that question is no, not really. Notice the king's words to the righteous ones, the "sheep." "Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you." This is not a throwaway line: "Come, blessed by my Father." After Peter professed his faith that Jesus is the Christ, the son of the living God, Jesus said to him, "Blessed are you Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood didn't reveal this to you, but the Father revealed that Peter saw Jesus for who He was." The blessed ones, and those who have seen a king who is not like the kings of this world. Jesus, the Christ, the messianic king who saves and they believe and follow Him. And we read here that there is an inheritance that awaits them. Folks, you do not earn an inheritance – it's a gift, something it's given to you out of a relationship. This King's statement shows us that all cause for human boasting is eliminated. Grace is reigning supreme in this vision, actually. Eternal life is not earned, it's inherited through faith in Jesus.

It's important to remember, though, the context to this story. Jesus is in the midst of teaching His disciples. There are no crowds around. He's teaching those who belong to Him. And the subject of Matthew 24-25 is how His disciples are to live while they wait for His return or until they die. In this final vision or parable, as some call it, we see that acts of compassion and kindness are important to Jesus. In the first two parables of Matthew 25, the disciples of Jesus learned that we are to live expectantly, to live responsibly; and today we're told by Christ the King, that we are to live compassionately while we wait. And living compassionately seems to be the evidence of your relationship with Christ – that God has done a work in your life and through His Holy Spirit, so that you begin doing compassionate things without even thinking about it. Not for reward, it's just what you do as one of Christ's own. Notice the ones at Christ's right hand are actually surprised as He describes their compassion to Him. They ask, "When did we see to you?" There's no calculation or reward being thought about as they did these acts of compassion to the least of these. Their helping actions towards those in need are simply the evidence that Jesus is reigning as king in their

lives. And they're walking in His footsteps, obediently, down these paths of righteousness.

All of this reminds me of an old question I heard long ago: if you were arrested for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you? How would you answer that?

And then Jesus goes on to say that the King will answer them, "When you looked into the face of those needing help and you helped them, you were actually helping me." I came across a prayer of Mother Teresa's, who served the poorest of the poor in Calcutta, India. Listen to these words: "Oh, Jesus, grant that even if you are hidden under the unattractive disguise of anger, of crime, or of madness, I may recognize you and say, 'Jesus, you who suffer, how sweet it is to serve you.'"

There's a story that's told about St. Francis of Assisi. Francis, who was wealthy and a very high-bred person, was out riding his horse one day. He came across a man disfigured by leprosy. Seeing him, Francis was moved to dismount and hugged the poor man. As he did so, the face of the leprosy sufferer changed into the face of Christ.

And we learn from the King that He wants His followers to actually help those in need. He commends those He has accepted and welcomed in grace for the acts of service they've rendered to others in need. For in serving them, He says they were unwittingly serving none other than their King.

Now, what about those goats? The goats are treated just the opposite, aren't they? They have obviously failed to see to the needs of the disadvantaged and have acted as if they have never seen Jesus for who He is. They have not followed Him in the way of righteousness. It surpasses the righteousness of the Pharisees and scribes that Jesus describes in the Sermon on the Mount. And so the King condemns those who maybe claimed to know Him, and even called Him Lord, but they have done nothing to demonstrate it as a truth in their lives. There is a lack of evidence there, and oral confession of Jesus does not always indicate a repentant heart. There are no fruits of repentance with these people, and a good tree bears good fruit.

So here's the big idea from Jesus today, for those of us who are waiting for Him: the King is coming. And while His followers are waiting for Him to return, they are to live

compassionately, helping the least of these. Dr. Stanley Hauerwas, in his commentary on Matthew writes, "The difference between followers of Jesus and those who do not know Jesus is that those who have seen Jesus no longer have any excuse to avoid the least of these." How true.

Now, one final thought before I close. Let's keep in mind as we wait and think about the judgment as Jesus has just described, let's keep in mind that Jesus Himself is on His way to a lonely crucifixion in just three more days. Immediately after giving this vision of the coming of the Son of Man, the King who judges the peoples, chapter 26 begins in Matthew. And we are told when Jesus had finished all these things, he said to his disciples, "You know, that after two days the Passover is coming, and the Son of Man will be delivered up to be crucified." Think about that: the One who will one day come to judge is the same one who came to be judged for you and me. He will allow Himself to be nailed to a cross. His death on that cross has a purpose, though: to rescue helpless sinners like me and like you from God's wrath and judgment, from eternal punishment. God will affirm that sacrificial death and raise Jesus from the dead on the third day; exalt Him as the king of all the world and give Him all power and authority over us. He'll have the final word over this broken world of ours.

And that, my dear friends, is our Christian hope. It's all under control. Nothing can separate us from the love of God and Jesus Christ. And He will come again to bring His own to Himself; those of us with our troubled hearts, just as He promised. So permit me to ask you: do you belong to the king, to Jesus? He came into this world to save you. He wants you, knocks on the door of your heart, asks to come in. Place your trust your whole life in His hands. Follow Him. Surrender to Him, receive Him as your Savior and Lord. There is a rich inheritance He has prepared for you through His death and resurrection: this forgiveness and eternal life and a restored relationship with God, which goes forever. And now is not the time to procrastinate and push this aside, saying, "Well, maybe another time." You're missing out on eternal life in the here and now, and time is running out. And while those of us who belong to the Lord wait for His reappearing, let us live compassionate lives, always keeping in mind our king's words as we wait: "As you did it to the least of these, my brethren, you did it to me."

Now, I'd like to finish this message with a story that touched my heart. It's entitled "The Letter."

Ruth went to her mailbox and there was only one letter in it. She picked it up and looked at it before opening, but she noticed that the envelope had no stamp, no postmark. It was only her name and address. She opened and read the letter. "Dear Ruth, I'm going to be in your neighborhood Saturday afternoon, and I would like to stop by for a visit. Love always, Jesus." Her hands are shaking as she placed the letter on the table. Why would the Lord want to visit me? I'm nobody special. I don't have anything to offer. With that thought, Ruth remembered her empty kitchen cabinets. "Oh, my goodness. I really don't have anything to offer. I'll have to run down to the store and buy something for dinner." She reached for her purse and counted out its contents. There was five dollars and forty cents. "Well, I can get some bread and cold cuts at least." She threw on her coat, hurried out the door. A loaf of French bread, a half a pound of turkey, and a carton of milk were bought, leaving Ruth with a grand total of 12 cents to last her until Monday. Nevertheless, she felt good as she headed home, her meager offerings tucked under her arm.

Suddenly, "Hey lady, can you help us?" Ruth had been so absorbed in her dinner plans she hadn't even noticed the two people huddled in the alleyway: a man and a woman, both of them dressed in little more than rags. "Look, lady, I ain't got no job, you know. And my wife and I have been living out in the street. And well, it's getting cold and we're getting kind of hungry and well, if you could help us, we'd really appreciate it."

Ruth looked at them both. They were dirty and they smelled bad. And frankly, she was certain they could get some kind of work if they really want to do. "Sir, I'd like to help you, but I'm poor myself. All I have is a few cold cuts and some bread and I'm having an important guest for dinner tonight and I was planning on serving it to him."

"Yeah, okay, lady, I understand. Thanks anyway." And then put his arm around the woman's shoulders, turned and headed back into the alleyway.

As she watched them leave, Ruth felt a familiar twinge in her heart. "Sir, wait." The couple stopped and turned as she ran down the alley toward them. "Look, why don't you take this food? I'll figure out something else to serve my guests." And she handed the man her grocery bag.

"Thank you. Thank you very much," the man said.

"Yes, thank you," the man's wife said. Ruth could see she was shivering.

Ruth said, "You know, I've got another coat at home. Here, why don't you take this one?" So she unbuttoned her jacket and slipped it over the woman's

shoulders, and then smiling, she turned and walked back to the street without her coat and with nothing to serve her guest.

"Thank you, ma'am. Thank you very much," she heard.

Ruth was chilled by the time she reached the front door, and she was worried about it, too. The Lord was coming to visit, and she didn't have anything to offer Him. She fumbled through her purse for the door key. But as she did, she noticed another envelope in her mailbox. "That's odd. The mailman doesn't usually come twice in one day."

She took the envelope out of the box and she opened it. "Dear Ruth," it read. "It was good to see you again. Thank you for the lovely meal and for the beautiful coat. Love always, Jesus."

Amen.