

“Are You Good or Bad?” – September 24, 2017
by Wayne J. Schneider – Soli Deo Gloria

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St. Matthew 24:31-46

In the parable of the sheep and the goats we see the authority of Jesus. St. Matthew accentuates an elevated Christology while we discover, or not, the heavenly hosts actively accompanying Jesus, while all the nations are passively gathered around Jesus. This authority of Jesus points out the people’s passivity as he divided them into sheep and goats; what was whole is divided.

What are we to think? Are we inclined to picture sheep as ‘good’ and goats as ‘bad?’ Is it our assumption that the ‘right’ is better than the ‘left?’ Might it be true that Jesus is simply separating by the difference between sheep and goats? Or, is the difference based on those who are ‘active’ and those who are ‘passive?’

Please note the invitation in verse 34 again: *“Come, you that are blessed [active] by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you [passive] from the foundation of the world.”* Some have thought that the tenses of these verbs in the parable speak of predestination, but the blessing and the preparation of the Kingdom of God are not separated, but are present simultaneous throughout time.

“For I was in need and you took care of me” (see vv. 35-36). People are now active. People are now meeting the people’s needs, perhaps not dramatically but in everyday ways. We become aware that this is not rocket science. You share some food, spend some time with someone. Our text doesn’t say, *“I was sick and you healed me,”* or *“I was in prison and you liberated me.”*

The ‘righteous’ answer Jesus. In St. Matthew’s gospel, the ‘righteous’ refers to what Gerhart Kittle calls the *“Right conduct of people who follow the will of God.”* Righteousness refers to what we do. Passiveness refers to what we don’t do. The first response of the righteous here is, “Huh?” It wasn’t that they were surprised by what they had done; they knew what they had done. They were astonished by those who had received what they had done.

Oliver and Florence were married for 58 years before she died. They had immigrated to the US from Sweden many years before. Here, they made a modest home and started a family.

A few weeks after Florence passed, Oliver decided to start putting the house in order, and began going through the years of memories that he had with his wife. He found a box buried in the attic. He opened the box to discover some dishes that he did not recognize. He called his daughter and asked her to come and take a look at the dishes. If she wanted them, she could have them, if not, he would give them away to Goodwill or some other agency.

His daughter came and looked at the dishes. She had never seen them. She was surprised by them. They were some of the most beautiful dishes she had ever seen. They were obviously expensive, with a hand painted design on each piece, and the cups had gold trim around the top.

Oliver did not know anything of the origin of the dishes, so they decided to call Florence's sister and ask about them. She told them that Florence had loved that set of dishes. She could not afford to buy a set, so she would always ask for pieces of it on gift giving occasions until she had collected a full set. She stored the set of dishes to be used on a special occasion. However, she never seemed to find such an occasion, and left them in the box, buried by other boxes in the attic. She had buried her most treasured possession.

“What you did to one of the least of these, you did to me.” This was an individual response! It was not about feeding the hungry; it is about feeding one hungry person. Because of one simple act people have been blessed and the Kingdom of God had been prepared; these verbs create the sense of happening at the same time. . . almost like the Kingdom being prepared not just FOR those who care for others, but BY those who care for others. As if when we are “Followers of Jesus,” we do prepare the Kingdom into which we are welcomed.

“You that are accursed. . .” Passivity again, but without *“by my Father.”* Is it implied? Or, is it the blessing that God gives, while being cursed is not receiving the

blessing, not responding to the blessing? *“You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels”* (v. 41). Except for your passivity there is no past action to characterize you. Go away because you were not available when I needed you.

Huh? They cannot believe it! It’s not that they misbelieve Jesus, they know what they haven’t done. They are surprised to discover who they have neglected. *“Hey, not fair!”* they yell. *“We would have acted if we’d known it was you. We wouldn’t have been so passive.”* There will come a time however, our parable tells us, when our opportunity for human initiative will end. A time when it will no longer matter what we intend to do, only what we have actually done.

Those who actively take care of others, whereby taking care of Jesus, are also taking care of the Kingdom of God, preparing it, and bringing its blessing to themselves and others. They have and are in the Kingdom. And there is a flip side, of course. Those who passively deny Jesus who, however active they may be otherwise, do not care for others, are separated from the Kingdom. If they do not change, if they do not move from passivity to action, Jesus may not recognize them as his own.

George Washington carver once said, *“How far you go in life depends on your being tender with the young, compassionate with the aged, sympathetic with the striving and tolerant of the weak and strong. Because someday in your life you will have been all of these.”* That’s good advice for a good life.

Jesus came to serve and spent the vast majority of his time with the poor, the rejected, the ill, the marginalized. His physical life displayed his commitment to God and to the full spectrum of humanity. He died that others might live. Does that get your goat? Alleluia. Amen.