

SERMON: “SHEEP AND GOATS—KEEP TO THE RIGHT”

(Matthew 25:31-46 Preached at MPC on December 26, 2017)

In his book “Living Above the Level of Mediocrity” by Pastor and author Chuck Swindoll, one of my favorite all-time preachers and writers says, “The greatest waste of our natural resources is the number of people who never achieve their potential. If you think you can’t, you won’t. If you think you can, there’s a good chance you will. Even making the effort will make you feel like a new person. Reputations are made by searching for things that can’t be done and then just doing them.”

Where does this kind of thinking begin? It starts in your Mind, Chuck says. “For as he thinks within himself, so he is.” Prov. 23:7. The secret of living a life of excellence is merely a matter of thinking thoughts of excellence. Really, it’s a matter of programming our minds with the kind of information that will set us free—that information is available to us in God’s Word the Bible!

Years ago, when I worked at IBM in RTP, Research Triangle Park in Raleigh, NC, my supervisor would call each one of us on the different server teams for a chat to see how things were going in the fast-paced stressful world of IT. He would always end our discussion with the following phrase—the same phrase he signed his official email signature to. He said Ron, if you want to be my friend, “Be where you are supposed to be, do what you are supposed to be doing, and do it with excellence!” Those words have stayed with me till this day—that phrase has helped program my brain to think of the impact of God’s word on my thoughts from Prov. 23:7—so as he thinks within himself or herself, so he or she is!

When our thoughts seem to be under attack from the Evil One, we are prompted to go back to our carnal habits when under pressure—specifically when undergoing a test, when doing without something we think we really need, when feeling persecuted, maligned, criticized or wronged for no good reason. Friends, God's ultimate goal is to take “every thought captive.” In that process, we destroy every argument and proud obstacle raised up against the knowledge of God—in essence we are *taking every thought captive* to the obedience of Christ mentioned in 2 Corinthians 10:3-5.

God’s plan for us is to transform old thoughts that defeat us into new thoughts that encourage and transform us. There is hope beyond such *mediocre mindsets* as battling lust, or envy, or pride, or jealousy, or extreme perfectionism, or a negative, critical spirit. In our Gospel lesson this Sunday, we have a picture of a great judgment. Jesus paints an impressive picture: “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the holy angels

with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. Before him all the nations will be gathered" (vv. 31-32). And Jesus says that the king will separate the sheep from the goats! Can you imagine watching while the king says to this one, "Go to the right" and to that one, "Go to the left." Assuming that all the people who have ever lived will be gathered there, it will take a while. I am sure when that judgment day comes, it will seem like it's taking forever. We will all be stand there watching Jesus direct people to the right and to the left and wondering which way Jesus will direct us to go.

The direction we will hope to go is to the right—with the sheep. The direction we will definitely hope NOT to go is to the left—with the goats. I'm sure that I'll be **thinking** of all the reasons why I should be a sheep, but in the back of my mind I know all the reasons why I am really a goat.

I have been an active Christian for part of my life and I do believe in God's gift of grace for eternal life in Christ Jesus—so I have reason to hope that the Lord will put me among the sheep. And yet, I must confess that the whole idea still makes me nervous. The reason, of course, is that the stakes are so high. Walk to the right, and inherit the kingdom. Walk to the left, and be consigned to eternal punishment. Forever! End of story!

If that's true, and I believe it is because the Bible says it, then it behooves us to examine our Gospel lesson and our Biblical **thinking**—to search for clues so that we might end up with the sheep rather than the goats. We've all heard the greatly misunderstood phrase, "the wrath of God" before—yet many still believe that invariably it means some kind of cosmic, terrible tempered Mr. Bang who indulges in violent uncontrolled displays of temper when humans do not behave in the way they ought to.

Pastor Swindoll says in his book mentioned above, the Bible never deals with the concept of the wrath of God that way. According to scripture, the wrath of God is God's moral integrity. When man or woman refuses to yield to God, he or she creates certain conditions or "consequences" not only for oneself but for others, which God has ordained for harm. It is God who makes evil result in sorrow, heartache, injustice, and despair. It's God's way of saying, "Now look you must face the truth. You were made for me and if you decide you don't want me then you will bear the consequences." The **absence** of God is destructive to all human life—the **absence** of God is God's wrath.

God cannot withhold it—in his moral integrity as a holy God, He sets man's sins and His wrath in the same frame!

Jesus will say on that judgment day to the sheep, "Come, blessed of my Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you, from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry, and you gave me food to eat. I was thirsty, and you gave me drink. I was a stranger, and you took me in. I was naked, and you clothed me. I was sick, and you visited me. I was in prison, and you came to me" (v. 34-36).

And the sheep will be astonished. They will search their memories, but will not recall when they had done any of these things for the Lord. But the Lord will say: "Most certainly I tell you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me". The sheep, then, will be saved because they showed mercy to "the least of these." And of course, the goats will find themselves in the opposite position—cursed banished, punished, because they failed to show mercy to "the least of these."

I've been familiar with this scripture most of my life, and I've always assumed that it primarily meant that I should be kind to the down-and-out folk, give money for earthquake relief, buy lunch for a hungry person, take my old clothes to the thrift shop or donate them to ROL, hand an occasional dollar to a homeless person, visit a friend in the hospital. I've even had the occasion to visit friends and strangers in jail. Now that was a sobering experience. But my study of this text opened my eyes to a new and fuller understanding. I know that Jesus calls us to give money for earthquake relief and all the rest, but my study of this text leads me to believe that Matthew the gospel writer had something more in mind as well.

At the time that Matthew was writing this Gospel, toward the end of the First Century, the church was being persecuted by the Jews, who considered Christians to be apostates. Scholars today think that Matthew who was a Jew, writing in the midst of that persecution, intended this story to encourage people—particularly non-Christians—to show mercy to Christians in need. There were so many Christians in need in those days, because so many breadwinners were sitting in prison—or being whipped within an inch of their lives—or even killed. It was a terrible time for Christians, and yet they hung in there for Christ's sake.

So, Matthew gives us this story of Jesus pronouncing a blessing on those who show mercy to "the least of these." In the original Greek, it says, "the least of these, adelphon

mou—my brothers." "Brothers" was a code word among Christians. It meant fellow-Christians. So, Jesus is really pronouncing a blessing on those who show mercy to "the least of these, my Christian brothers and sisters." So, we have at least two groups to whom we should show mercy—needy people in general and needy Christians in particular—especially Christians who are in need because they are still suffering persecution for their faith even today. And then there's a third group where earlier in this Gospel, Jesus sent out the Twelve to preach to.

He told them to leave their money at home and to rely on local hospitality for their keep. Then he said: "He who receives you receives me, and he who receives me receives him who sent me. He who receives a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet's reward. He who receives a righteous man in the name of a righteous man will receive a righteous man's reward. Whoever gives one of these "little ones" just a cup of cold water to drink in the name of a disciple, most certainly I tell you he will in no way lose his reward."

Friends, there's what I believe to be an obvious correlation between these verses from chapter 10 and our Gospel lesson in chapter 25. So, we now have three groups to whom Christ calls us to show mercy: The needy of the world, Christians who are needy, and particularly those who are being persecuted or Christians engaged in evangelizing the Gospel.

After studying this text, I don't believe that we must choose to be merciful to only one of these three groups. I believe that Christ calls us to help all three groups. But while I believe that we should help all three groups, I would like to lift up one of the groups for consideration today. It's a group that especially needs help and deserves our support and is a group that we have largely ignored.

The church of Jesus Christ worldwide and our own PCUSA denomination through funds like Presbyterian Disaster Assistance, have been pretty responsive about showing mercies such as earthquake relief and homeless shelters—and it's good that "we" the church has responded that way. But the group that has largely escaped our attention is Christians around the world who are in great need because they are being persecuted. This is a group that we are inclined to ignore because they are nearly invisible to us. You won't see much on the evening news about Christians being persecuted around the world—The press largely ignores that type of persecution unless there is mass murder of

Christians. Even then, the press coverage stops quickly once the worst of it is over. It seems to be politically correct NOT to report the persecution of Christians. That's unfortunate, because Christians are suffering and dying for their faith around the world at an alarming rate, and we ought to care.

I believe in our Gospel lesson today, Christ calls us to care for and show mercy to this group of persecuted brothers and sisters— I believe that Christ promises us great blessings if we help our brethren and warns us of terrible judgment if we don't.

Many of us grew up in a time knowing that Christians were being persecuted in Communist countries, such as the Soviet Union, North Korea, and China. While that is still true, the most terrible persecution of Christians is taking place today in countries where radical Islam reigns—Iran, Syria, Pakistan, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, and many others.

Last year 2016, CNN reported that 2015 "was the most violent for Christians in modern history, rising to 'a level akin to ethnic cleansing.'" Christians in large numbers are being imprisoned, tortured, beheaded, and raped. Their homes are being taken away and their jobs. You can google persecution of Christians current incidents or go to: <https://www.opendoorsusa.org/>

What can we do for these Christian brothers and sisters? They live so far away. Their needs are so great. Their governments are so unresponsive. Our voices are so small. The first thing that we must do for them is to pray for them. By scanning the Internet for news of persecuted Christians, we can also support financially through a Christian group like "Open doors" the plight of our brothers and sisters in Christ— we can pray for them on a regular basis. We can make them a part of our church prayer life and our personal prayer life. We can let our nation's leaders know that we are concerned— we can speak up to our government to stand strongly against persecution of Christians, or persecution of anyone, for that matter.

One of the five goals for all believers to personalize in the context of the purpose driven church is that God wants us to be a messenger of His love—the personalized goal of evangelism. We are to plead with unbelievers to receive His love He offers through Jesus Christ. There are only two things we can't do in heaven we can do on earth: we can't sin—we can't witness to unbelievers—it will be too late! Sheep and goats—we hope to keep to the right! As Pastor Swindoll titled his book, we can and we should live above

the line of mediocrity by changing our thought processes—we should strive to let God take captive of every thought in obedience to Christ. As my supervisor from IBM said and I edit that phrase: Let us all be where we are supposed to be—in God’s family through Jesus Christ—let us be doing what Christ has called us to do—and let us do it all with excellence! Amen!