

The Generous Community

November 27, 2022 Sermon by Stephen Portner

Matthew 25:32-46

³² *All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. ³³ He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.*

³⁴ *"Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. ³⁵ For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, ³⁶ I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.'*

³⁷ *"Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? ³⁸ When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? ³⁹ When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?'*

⁴⁰ *"The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'*

⁴¹ *"Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. ⁴² For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, ⁴³ I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.'*

⁴⁴ *"They also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?'*

⁴⁵ *"He will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.'*

⁴⁶ *"Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life."*

As a pastor I find myself in some interesting, if not risky, situations when it comes to helping people in need. In most places where I have been a pastor, the place where my family and I live were next door to the church building. It was not uncommon for a stranger to show up at our door looking for some kind of help with food, gas or housing. Sometimes the person has

obviously not been clean for some time or fed for some time. I once had a person show up at my door who had no teeth and it was difficult to understand what he wanted because he would insert his whole hand in his mouth while trying to communicate with me. Once we gave a needy family our grocery money for the week, only to have them yell “Sucker” as they drove away in their car. We ended up eating out of the freezer that week. From that time on, when someone asks for money, we instead go with them and buy what they are asking for instead. We want to be more assured that the person is getting what they need and not spending the money on something that they don’t need. Living generously can be tricky, because you never know when someone might be taking advantage of you. Yet living as Jesus’ disciples calls us to at times take such risks because, “it is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35).

One false narrative out of which many people live is that “God helps those who help themselves.”

Many people actually believe this is from the Bible. It is not. It is from an edition of Poor Richard’s Almanac, written by Ben Franklin in 1757. Franklin was not a Christian, but a deist. He said a lot of really brilliant things, but this was not one of them. This judgmental narrative is a bulwark against generosity, a sturdy protection against the need to help those who are in need. God, it appears, only helps those who pull themselves up, get their act together and put in hard work. If God will not help these lazy people, then I am also off the hook. Instead of feeling guilty, I can look at those who are in need and judge them. Judging makes our guilt go away.

But we can also use our well-being as a means of thinking that we have done something to deserve it. If things are going well, we can assume that somehow we have done something to deserve it. This is the flip side of our false narrative about justice—somehow our condition must be tied to our good works. While it is true that engaging in sin leads to the destruction of our souls, it may not lead to immediate catastrophe in the rest of our lives. The Scriptures remind us repeatedly not to envy those who are sinful and yet prosper. And we ought not judge those who are in dire straights. Though it may be due to sin, laziness and bad decisions, those who are in a bad situation may not always be directly responsible for it.¹

The true narrative is that while God does help those who help themselves, God also helps those who cannot help themselves. The gospels are full of stories of where Jesus is helping those who are broken, blind, lame, helpless, and despised. It would be easier to make the case that God helps the needy more than those who have plenty. Perhaps, that is because those who are in need often realize how vulnerable they are and dependent on someone else to meet their needs.

Another false narrative out of which many people live is that “if I give it away, I have less.”

This scarcity narrative is built on the idea that whatever I give away is now lost, whatever I share is gone and whatever I provide for another contributes to my own lack. In one sense this is true. If I give you some of my cookie, for example, there will be less of it for me. It is simple math: take away any amount and the original amount is reduced.²

¹ Smith, James Bryan. *The Good and Beautiful Community* (The Good and Beautiful Series) (pp. 149-150). InterVarsity Press. Kindle Edition.

² *Ibid.*, p. 150.

The truth is, if we all share we will have enough. There are people starving in this world, and there are those in this world who, like myself, are concerned all the time about weight-gain. There are those who have little to nothing for clothing and possessions, while there are others who have so much clutter that they need to rent out storage units. It is something like when God provided manna to the Israelites in the wilderness. Everybody had enough if they took their fair share. It's when we hoard that we get into trouble. It's not a provision problem. God has provided all we need. It's more of a distribution problem. How much are we willing to share?

Another false narrative out of which many people live is that “what I have is mine to use for my own pleasure.”

This entitlement narrative teaches us that the things that we possess, whether money, time or abilities, are ours to use as we see fit, which often means using them for our own gain and not the benefit of others. If I start with the notion that what I have is mine, that I somehow earned it or deserve it, then I am entitled to use it any way I want. It falls under my discretion; I get to choose when, how and how much I give.³

The true narrative is “What I have is God's, to use for His glory.”

Nothing I have is mine—it is all a gift from God. We easily get duped into thinking that the things in our possession are ours, and that we therefore get to choose how to use them. In truth, God has designed human life in such a way that makes this illusion quite easy to believe. God has given each of us a little kingdom over which to say what happens. This is God's plan. He wants us to be stewards. So he gives us bodies, talents and money so we can produce good things. But our little kingdoms are not our own. We are stewards of God's gifts; everything belongs to God. That changes everything. No longer can I say, “What is mine is mine to do with what I please.” Instead, “What is mine is not really mine, but God's,” and therefore I must ask, “How shall I use the gifts you have given me?” This fundamental shift affects all of our daily decisions.⁴

People go to extremes with money and possessions. Some preach a gospel of prosperity, based on the idea that the good life is about using money and possessions for our own happiness, which God will provide when we do the right things (for example, give to a certain ministry or say a special prayer for thirty days). On the other hand, some preach a gospel of poverty, teaching that the way to be truly spiritual is to be poor. Both extremes are dangerous. The prosperity gospel is simply greed covered in the veneer of religion. The poverty gospel is also dangerous. There is nothing spiritual about poverty, and no one is actually better for having become poor.⁵

[Share in the ways this church has been generous with God's resources, and has discovered that giving to others is truly a blessing.]

In the parable of the sheep and the goats one of the things Jesus teaches us is that we have a limited time in which we are on this earth to be good stewards over what God has provided. In the end there will be a separation between those who have given to others as if they were Jesus himself and those who did not even realize that the person in need was like Jesus: when we did

³ Ibid., p. 150.

⁴ Ibid., p. 153.

⁵ Ibid., p. 154.

not do for the least among us, we also did not do for Jesus. When our time of caring is over, we will reap what we have sown. This and other parables like it are not to be read as a form of works-righteousness. "Good works cannot save us. But our faith must find expression in our actions, and grace should inspire us to serve."⁶

⁶ Ibid., p. 163.