

D.J. Reed  
November 20, 2011

Sunday before Thanksgiving  
Sermon Series: "Great Expectations"  
"Expected to Minister"  
Matthew 25:31-46

Chilson Hills Church  
Howell, MI

<http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=188631188>

Let's start with the ending... because I know that's what you are all thinking about right now.

Read that last verse again. "And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

I have found that when we read The Bible there are few things that draw our attention like a mention of Hell. We can't stop thinking about it!

Hell makes us feel icky and embarrassed. Thoughts about Hell are like images from a horror movie that stick in our minds.

And the questions – oh my, the questions – never seem to end. Does Hell exist? How could a loving God allow it to exist? Who goes there? Am I going there? We may feel great about most of the Bible, but the question keeps popping up: What about Hell?

Well, those who want that answered in clean, clear-cut sermon will be disappointed, and if you're looking for a catch all passage that deals with the subject of Hell comprehensively, prepare to be disappointed. There ain't one.

But, that last verse in Matthew 25:31-46 sure gives us some interesting fodder for discussion.

For those who believe in the power and veracity of Scripture but don't believe in the existence of Hell, this is a text with which one must wrestle.

But if you are one who holds to the traditional view of Hell (i.e. – Christians who believe Jesus is the Son of God go to heaven and people who don't believe in Jesus as the Son of God go to hell), then this passage has its share of challenges as well; because, in this parable, "personal salvation" or a "personal relationship with Jesus" doesn't seem to be a factor in the final judgment.

According to this parable, the only difference between the sheep and the goats, eternal punishment

and eternal life seems to be what they did or didn't do.

This is why we shouldn't stop at this passage or any singular passage when establishing an opinion or a belief about the existence or nature of Hell.

Not that the rest of The Bible makes it any clearer. The Old Testament is practically silent on the issue (referring to a place called, "Sheol" where dead people hang out) and The New Testament spends little time on "The Underworld," and when it does, it uses dreams and stories to describe what its like – like the one we just read.

And this is important for you to know. We, as Christians, spend much more time on the issue of Hell than the Bible does. The Bible is far more concerned about present life than it is about the after life. And it's also more concerned about salvation than condemnation.

Salvation from going to Hell and eternal punishment so that we could enter heaven and everlasting bliss?

No.

Christ did not come just so that our afterlife could be comfortable and cushy. **Christ came to give us eternal life before life after death.** Christ came to save us from a life of hell and so that we could in turn make it so that others don't live a hellish existence.

How is it hellish? We heard about it when the king indicts the goats. People live a life of hell when they are ignored and dismissed. People are living in hell where they have no food, water or clothes. People experience hell when they are sick and in prison.

Edward Hays tells a story about a samurai warrior who approached a monk with two great swords hanging from his belt. The warrior said, "Tell me, holy monk, about heaven and hell."

The monk looked at him and replied, “I cannot tell you about heaven and hell because you are much too stupid and very ugly.” And the samurai warrior was filled with rage and he clenched his fists and he drew his sword.”

“That,” said the little monk, “Is hell.”

Struck by the words of the monk, the warrior dropped his sword, bowed his head and sank to his knees.

“And that,” said the monk, “Is heaven.”

Hell is far closer than we think it is (and so is heaven). It shows up in our words, when we cut people down and we dehumanize them with names. It shows up in our thoughts when we secretly hate and lust. It shows up in our actions when we lie, cheat, steal and murder.

But it also shows up when we are passive and lazy. It shows up when we stop doing things, and when we refuse to do certain things. Hell shows up when we ignore the needs around us and allow them to exist unrivaled and unchallenged.

We give life to hunger when keep food to ourselves and we consume the world’s resources as if we are preschool children who say, “It’s mine! I got to it first.”

We fan the flames of Hell here on earth when we ignore the needs of those without clean drinking water, or refuse to stand up for those with tainted drinking water.

We let eternal punishment continue when we let people remain in their naked shame.

We let our world become hell when we let Veterans lie alone on their hospital beds and prisoners unloved behind bars rotting in their cells – considered worthless and hopeless.

But they’re not worthless and hopeless. These people that Jesus calls “the least of these” – are the “Son of Man,” “The King of Glory,” – Jesus in disguise.

Many of you know my mother is Puerto Rican. And if you talk to my mom you can’t help but hear the light accent that betrays her heritage.

Well, my mom sits on the board of directors of a local hospital and one of her fellow board members gave her – as a gift – a raccoon fur coat (pretty nice).

Well, the fur coat didn’t fit quite right and so the woman who gave her the coat told her to take it back to the store to have it altered and she would take care of the bill.

So, my mother went to the store and took the coat to the person behind the counter. She told the man that she had received the coat as a gift and wanted it tailored to fit her better.

“Uh huh,” the man said with a disbelieving tone to his voice.

“Soooo, I was wondering when I could pick it up,” my mom said.

“Where are you from,” the man asked.

“I’m from Puerto Rico,” my mom responded.

And then the man said, “You know the more you talk the more unbelievable your story sounds.”

Let me tell you my mom walked out of that store, dialed up her friend who had given the coat to her as a gift, and told her about the exchange with prejudiced attendant.

Suffice to say the store attendant received a call in a matter of minutes and was deeply sorry he had disrespected my mom that way.

It says in The Bible, that we should continue to love one another, giving hospitality to strangers because by doing so we “entertain angels unaware.”<sup>1</sup> The people that are most worthy of our disdain, disgust and disapproval are the ones Jesus identifies with. The most overlooked and underappreciated members of our society are actually little Jesuses in disguise.

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<sup>1</sup> Hebrews 13:1 <http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=188631214>

The first part of Andrew Glaze's poem, "Alleluia" goes like this,  
"As I walk mornings down Bleecker Street,  
I meet ten saints with filthy demands.  
The tenements shout with holiness,  
God reels by or sleeps on the curb,  
At home everywhere in the wrecks and bars,  
In the stale tobacco and business,  
And everything that's wild and absurd,  
Like madness with madness and holding hands."

God waits in those places; not so that we can revel in it or notice it, but so that we can recognize our role in helping those "saints with filthy demands," in loving God who "reels by or sleeps on the curb."

Ask yourself: What am I doing for "the least of these?" How am I ministering to them? If I ignore them, does that really mean that I am essentially ignoring... God? The possibility that you could be spurning our Savior should make you pause and shudder.

But then there are the sheep – thank God for the sheep - the ones who served the stranger, the poor, the naked, the hungry, the sick and incarcerated. They are the blessed ones, the righteous ones, the ones worthy of eternal life.

They did what they were expected to do and yet they did it unaware of the reward they would receive or the one they were serving. They were clueless they were doing anything special. They were ignorant in their service.

There's a story about the great Joe DiMaggio who was a notoriously hard worker who demanded nothing but perfection from himself. A reporter asked him why he worked so hard. "Because there might be somebody who hasn't seen me play before," Joe said.

If Joe had said, "I play hard because I want Marilyn to like me," well that would have been pitiful. But the fact that he played hard because there was a mysterious "somebody" out there makes the quote more pure and Joe DiMaggio even more admirable.

He played hard: period.

We serve hard not because we know Jesus is watching, we serve hard because it's who we are. Serving should be like breathing to Christians. It should flow from us without any motivation to impress or gain favors. It should be an instinct, an impulse.

We serve: period. And they serve humbly.

And because the sheep served without any knowledge of who they were serving, they are deemed righteous and they are invited into the kingdom that God has been preparing for us.

And that kingdom, again, isn't a kingdom doesn't begin when we die. That kingdom isn't coming in the afterlife. That kingdom began when Christ came to earth and is going on right now. It's up to us to act according to the laws of that kingdom – to love Christ by loving others. It's up to us to make that kingdom visible and tangible.

We choose whether or not we want to live in that kingdom. If we don't; if we choose to ignore the laws of that kingdom by ignoring the least of these then we have chosen a life that is inhuman, unheavenly, and dare I say, hellish. The text says that "these will go away to eternal punishment." No, pronouncement or condemnation. They just go away; like a person who moves away from a community they don't like. They slowly fade away to live in a world of punishment – a place of self-inflicted punishment that exists because let it, because we chose it.

But it doesn't have to be that way.

The kingdom of heaven is moving and expanding now my friends. We can choose to be a part of that kingdom that is alive and well today. We choose to participate and be a citizen in that kingdom when we serve the least of these and live out the life of Christ.

But how do we find the poor here in Livingston County where poor people are often tucked away and needy people sometimes keep to themselves?

I admit. Sometimes, it is hard to find "the least of these." So we must put ourselves in places where "the least of these" live.

We need to pay attention to guys like Gary Sumner who say, "Here's your chance to serve Jesus."

This is why we need to join people like Barb Butchko when she leads a crew of CROP Walkers. This is why we should not let the food cart for Gleaners Food Bank be empty. We should be first in line to help with the REACH program this February and March, and The Wellness Initiative should be of great interest to all of us.

Why? Because these people and these programs point out the "least of these" and put us in a position to serve Jesus.

Years ago, Sam Walter Foss wrote a poem called, "House by the Side of The Road." It goes like this:

There are hermit souls that live withdrawn  
In the place of their self-content;  
There are souls like stars, that dwell apart,  
In a fellowless firmament;  
There are pioneer souls that blaze the paths  
Where highways never ran-  
But let me live by the side of the road  
And be a friend to man....

I see from my house by the side of the road  
By the side of the highway of life,  
The men who press with the ardor of hope,  
The men who are faint with the strife,  
But I turn not away from their smiles and tears,  
Both parts of an infinite plan-  
Let me live in a house by the side of the road  
And be a friend to man....

Let me live in my house by the side of the road,  
Where the race of men go by-  
They are good, they are bad, they are weak, they are strong,  
Wise, foolish - so am I.  
Then why should I sit in the scorner's seat,  
Or hurl the cynic's ban?  
Let me live in my house by the side of the road  
And be a friend to man.

To live in the kingdom of heaven is not to live away from it all so that we can ignore or forget the human need. It's living in the traffic of humanity, so that

we can have the opportunities to serve people and make this hellish life more heavenly.

So, what about Hell? Who goes there? Who doesn't?

I don't know.

No one knows. Including you.

Hopefully, you can see how little that last verse should matter and that we should be focusing on is the here and now, the present-tense rather than the after-life.

Hopefully you can see, that what really matters is that Christ has come to give us life, and that we are to spend that life welcoming poor people, visiting prisoners and sick people.

Ask yourself, is your life revealing the kingdom of God, a present heaven, or is it letting hell continue to exist?

I pray that you choose the kingdom.

**LIFE APPLICATION QUESTIONS**  
**For Sunday, November 20, 2011's Sermon**  
**Foundational Scripture: Matthew 25:31-46**

<http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=188631264>

**Featured Scripture Reflection:** “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” – **Matthew 25:40** <http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=188631295>

**Opening Questions:** Share about a positive experience when you served the poor? Share a negative experience?

**Scripture Questions**

**What is the scripture saying?**

- Read **Hebrews 13:1-3**. <http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=188631318> What stands out to you about this passage? What questions do you have?
- Read **Matthew 25:31-46**. <http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=188631264> What words or phrases stand out to you when you read this passage? How does this passage compliment the previous passage?
- Read **James 2:14-17**. <http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=188631344> Think about what you've just read. How does it relate to the previous passages?

**How is God speaking through Scripture?**

- What is the “Good News” in these passages of Scripture?
- After discussing and pondering these passages, how do these passages affect me?

**God's word**

- What is God's invitation to you?

**A prayer**

God, help us to not only see the poor, but to know the poor. Help us to be persistent in visiting those who are sick and in prison. Help us to care for “the least of these.” Amen.