

“A Biblical Family”

Matthew 25:31-46

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A Biblical Family includes all the world!

Jesus isn't kidding with this story! We can attempt to ignore it. We can pass it over. We can spiritualize it so that it does not apply to us. We translate it in such a way that we are always a part of the “least of these”; therefore, we absolve ourselves of any responsibility. We can do almost anything to get away from Jesus' teaching, but the truth of his message remains. This is one of the clearest messages of Jesus in the Gospels. You will not be judged for what you know, who you know, how good you were, or how much money you gave. God will judge each of us according to how we responded to needs of our brothers and sisters in God's great family! If we observe the context of this story, we find three stories linked together assuring us that God is holding us accountable for our actions. Jesus isn't kidding with this story!

I started this three month series on the importance of knowing and loving the Bible with a challenge to take Jesus seriously in the area of conflict resolution. I conclude this series with Jesus' challenge to actually be the family of God right here and right now. We can read this Scripture passage as individuals. And, we can read it as a national mandate. Christ judges the nations as well as individuals. Hence this passage speaks to all of us as an extended family.

In America, we have a tendency to link the word family with the image of a dad, mom, and two kids living in a suburban home. The television programs “Leave It to Beaver” and “Father Knows Best” reflects the popular post-war image of family life. Actually that understanding of family only existed for a short while following World War II. Before that war there were large farm families, immigrant, city dwelling, multi-generational families, and single parent families whose father was either dead, or off trying to find work. After Vietnam, the picture of family life is even more complicated. Divorced parents, stepchildren, and complicated relationships are the actual norm. And every one of us is in God's great family of humanity!

We need to move beyond the television stereotypes and find a metaphor that helps us to understand family life from God's vision, not ours. We need to seek God's truth if we are going to live God's joy in our families. Jesus articulates God's vision in a clear and unmistakable manner. Jesus began his public ministry identifying the reasons he came to earth saying: “The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set a liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.” (Luke 4:18-19) (www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=luke+4:18-19) Now at the close of his ministry Jesus forthrightly defines God's vision of family. All members of the human race are God's children. All nations are under God's judgment as children of God's family. Some people don't know their heritage yet. Some people know it and reject it. Some people are living within their heritage. But, all human beings on planet Earth are God's children. Amazing as it is, in God's family God has favorites! God favors God's children who are rejected, hurt, victimized, ostracized, and vilified by their brothers and sisters.

As we consider God's view of God's beloved family, allow me to muse about this teaching. I invite you to unhook your mind from preconceived notions and muse with me. Maybe, just maybe, the Holy Spirit will move in our souls and deepen our commitment to helping God to grow God's Beloved Community right here and right now.

Who are the “least of these” in our world today?

For the year 2000 a study of IRS returns revealed that the top 1% of American's annual income averaged over \$550,000.00. The bottom 90% of American's annual salary averaged a little over \$23,000.00.

There is a simulation game that can give you a clear picture of what has happened in America in the past 50 years. If I place 10 chairs side by side on the stage. Then I ask for 10 people to occupy one chair each. I can tell you that those 10 chairs represented the wealth distribution in 1960. Next I will play a musical chair routine. Nine of the people will be moved to two of the chairs. One person will be asked to lay across eight of the chairs. This is a picture of the wealth distribution in America in the first decade of the 21st Century.

Looking at this reality, you can rightly say that you are among the “least of these” in America. After all, in many families both parents are working full time and falling behind each month. People are stretched to the limit! We are constantly challenged by our situation and by a media that is saturated with fear. After all, these days fear sells air time better than sex.

Up until the last several years people around the world have played the elitist successful game. Many people wanted to project to the world that they were successful. From the popular toys of children to the much more expensive toys of adults, they wanted to proclaim to the world that they were making it. Perception was more important than reality. A large house without any furniture was more important than a medium sized house filled with furniture but in less prestigious neighborhood.

The consumer disease that pushed more and more has infected us all and left us sick unto death. More toys, more tools, more clothes, more and better cars, more and better furniture, more and better vacations, more, more, and more. We rarely, if ever asked the question, “How much is enough?” We really do want to keep up with and exceed if possible what everybody else has and does. The consumer disease is deadly. We have learned a hard and difficult lesson in the past few months that consumerism is greed run wild. The Biblical commandment not to covet anything our neighbor has is actually God’s truth! (Exodus 20:17) (www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=exodus+20:17) Consumerism moves our vision away from a loving response to needs of the least of these and places us on a greed-oriented road to destruction.

A middle-aged woman had a heart attack and was taken to the hospital. On the operating table, she had a near death experience and had a conversation with God. She asked God if it was the end for her. God said no, explaining she would recover and live for another 30 to 40 years. Upon her recovery, the woman decided, seeing as though she was going to live so long, that she might as well stay in the hospital and have a facelift, liposuction, tummy tuck, and breast augmentation. She left the hospital determined to spend time in the nearest shopping mall buying a new wardrobe and getting her hair and nails done up in a new way. Finally, on the way home she was struck and killed by a semi-truck. In heaven, she asked God: “I thought you said I was to live another 30 to 40 years?” God replied, “Sorry, but I didn’t recognize you.”

More stuff, more things, more experiences, more of everything leads to less of God, less of God’s love, and less of life itself. At this point in our history God is calling us to understand the truth that a successful life is a generous life! In Jesus’ challenging vision of the last judgment, the major evaluative criteria is generosity.

During the depression my grandmother was a marked woman. Both my grandparents worked in a hosiery mill in North Carolina. During the depression they could go for weeks at a time without work. They had three daughters to raise, a mortgage to pay, and other expenses that every family must pay to stay warm and alive. My grandmother was marked because she always had a meal for anyone who came to her back door. My Mom remembers day after day people coming to the door and asking for food. They were never turned away. And, God provided for my grandmothers family! She lived a successful life in the middle of the great depression. She lived Jesus’ generous mandate to share with the least of these brothers and sisters.

We must renew our commitment to generously respond to the world in a Christ like way. To be true to Christ we must hear his directive to let go of our consumerism disease and focus on sharing God’s love in a tangible and real manner. Christ demands that we see every person on the planet as a brother or sister in God’s family. And, the successful life according to Jesus’ standards is the generous life.

There are six categories in Jesus’ definition of “the least of these.

Jesus tells us that our lifestyle must be so filled with God’s love that we naturally, without any thought, respond to our family members who are outcast and downcast. He gives us six categories of persons in direct need of our help. Jesus tells us to share love with:

1. The hungry
2. The thirsty,
3. The homeless,
4. The persons who have no clothing,
5. The sick and injured, and
6. The imprisoned.

It is possible to understand these needs in a broader context than just the physical as long as we do not diminish the real needs of real people in our family. Our extended global family is greatly in need in all six categories. There are members of our extended families right here in southeastern Michigan who are hungry and thirsty as well. God is calling us to action. Loving, unconditional, no strings attached extravagant action to meet the needs of our brothers and sisters.

Please do not hear me giving you a “try harder” message. None of us need more guilt, more shame, more things to do, or more burdens to carry. I am not encouraging you to a spiritual disease of more and more and more. Rather, I am sharing what I believe is God’s vision of the family we will know in heaven. All God’s children will be present. Those who will be judged unworthy of entering into heaven will be the ones who refused to help their brothers and sisters and lived in a self centered, consumer mind set, only for them.

What I am urging you to do is grow in your love awareness. Grow in your commitment to generosity. Pray for Christ’s love to be so much a part of your living that you just naturally share love where you see a need. Let go of the drive for more and let Christ fill you up with the desire to love the least loveable people you meet. Let go of the “more and more” disease and celebrate God’s power in your life when you encounter Christ in someone else. Grasp today the truth that every person you meet is a beloved brother or sister in Christ!

God’s love when it is real just happens naturally. Let me share with you a story that challenges us where we live and work to share Christ’s love. You can know the God’s blessings every day as you allow God’s love to flow within your life. You can celebrate Christ’s coming long before you stand before God in judgment.

Living Christ’s love: Doing Christ’s work!

An anonymous man writes: Twenty years ago, I drove a cab for a living. It was a cowboy’s life, a life for someone who wanted no boss. What I didn’t realize was that it was also a ministry.

Because I drove the night shift, my cab became a moving confessional. Passengers climbed in, sat behind me in total anonymity, and told me about their lives. I encountered people whose lives amazed me, ennobled me, made me laugh and weep. But none touched me more than a woman I picked up late one August night.

I was responding to a call from a small brick four-plex in a quiet part of town. I assumed I was being sent to pick up some partiers, or someone who had just had a fight with a lover, or a worker heading to an early shift at some factory in the industrial part of town.

When I arrived at 2:30 a.m., the building was dark except for a single light in a ground floor window. Under these circumstances, many drivers would just honk once or twice, wait a minute, then drive away. But I had seen too many impoverished people who depended on taxis as their only means of transportation. Unless a situation smelled of danger, I always went to the door. This passenger might be someone who needs my assistance, I reasoned to myself. So I walked to the door and knocked.

“Just a minute,” answered a frail, elderly voice. I could hear something being dragged across the floor. After a long pause, the door opened. A small woman in her 80’s stood before me. She was wearing a print dress and a pillbox hat with a veil pinned on it, like somebody out of a 1940’s movie. By her side was a small nylon suitcase. The apartment looked as if no one had lived in it for years. All the furniture was covered with sheets. There were no clocks on the walls, no knickknacks or utensils on the counters. In the corner was a cardboard box filled with photos and glassware. “Would you carry my bag out to the car?” she said. I took the suitcase to the cab, then returned to assist the woman. She took my arm and we walked slowly toward the curb. She kept thanking me for my kindness. “It’s nothing,” I told her. “I just try to treat my passengers the way I would want my mother treated.” “Oh, you’re such a good boy,” she said.

When we got in the cab, she gave me an address, then asked, “Could you drive through downtown?” “It’s not the shortest way,” I answered quickly.

“Oh, I don’t mind,” she said. I’m in no hurry. I’m on my way to a hospice.”

I looked in the rearview mirror. Her eyes were glistening. “I don’t have any family left,” she continued. “The doctor says I don’t have very long.”

I quietly reached over and shut off the meter. "What route would you like me to take?" I asked.

For the next two hours, we drove through the city. She showed me the building where she had once worked as an elevator operator. We drove through the neighborhood where she and her husband had lived when they were newlyweds.

She had me pull up in front of a furniture warehouse that had once been a ballroom where she had gone dancing as a girl. Sometimes she'd ask me to slow down in front of a particular building or corner and would sit staring into the darkness, saying nothing.

As the first hint of sun was creasing the horizon, she suddenly said, "I'm tired. Let's go now."

We drove in silence to the address she had given me. It was a low building like a small convalescent home, with a driveway that passed under a portico. Two orderlies came out to the cab as soon as we pulled up. They were solicitous and intent, watching her every move. They must have been expecting her.

I opened the trunk and took the small suitcase to the door. The woman was already seated in a wheelchair.

"How much do I owe you?" she asked, reaching into her purse.

"Nothing," I said.

"You have to make a living," she answered.

"There are other passengers," I responded.

Almost without thinking, I bent and gave her a hug. She held onto me tightly. "You gave an old woman a little moment of joy," she said. "Thank you."

I squeezed her hand, then walked into the dim morning light. Behind me, a door shut. It was the sound of the closing of a life. I didn't pick up any more passengers that shift. I drove aimlessly, lost in thought. For the rest of that day, I could hardly talk. What if that woman had gotten an angry driver, or one who was impatient to end his shift? What if I had refused to take the run, or had honked once, then driven away? On a quick review, I don't think that I have done anything more important in my life. We're conditioned to think that our lives revolve around great moments. But great moments often catch us unaware – beautifully wrapped in what others may consider a small one.

Remember Jesus' criteria for God's judgment is how well you love your brothers and sisters in God's family! When you love and care for the least of these, you meet Jesus face to face.