

LEAST BRETHREN

Jesus is *more* than an ethical teacher. An ethical teacher of any merit will teach us principles of righteous behavior – how we ought to behave, and how we should treat other people. Presumably, an ethical teacher will also live according to the precepts being taught, insofar as opportunity and circumstance present themselves. (That is, practice what he preaches.) And of course, an ethical system of any stature has consistency enough and vision enough that if every person in the world would follow its precepts, we would have utopia – peace on earth – prosperity and good relationships everywhere.

So far, our experience on earth is that a significant number of human beings will break ethical precepts for personal advantage or for pleasure, even if they claim theoretical agreement with those same ethical precepts and even if they believe that everybody else should live by them. What is less well known, or at least admitted to, is that a significant number of human beings are *unable* to keep the precepts one hundred percent of the time. That is, sometimes our inner nature overrides the precepts we thought we believed in so firmly. Even on a relatively minor level: Sometimes we decide in the morning to be calm, caring, mature, and loving toward everyone. But by evening, we look back and see times during the day when we “lost it,” even with those we love and care about most. There is a lot underneath the surface that does not match or cooperate with calm, theoretical, ethical systems. And of course, if everybody doesn’t live by the ethical system one hundred percent of the time, it all starts to come unraveled.

Most ethical teachers and ethical systems do not give sufficient credence to evil or to Satan – to willfulness, pride, grief, fear, loneliness. That’s why, when we are judged by ethical rules or precepts, we know that they are correct but, at the same time, we know that beneath the judgment are vast realms that have not been mentioned, noticed, or taken into consideration. However right the ethical conclusion, we have not been understood. Some call it the difference between Law and Gospel.

Jesus is more than an ethical teacher. Ethical teachers do not love you after you break the ethical precepts they teach. Ethical teachers do not die for you, and they do not come back from the dead to guide, forgive, encourage, and go on loving you through all that is to come,

no matter how many times you fail or falter. Ethical teachers and their followers will often give you superficial help, even help to go on in your hopelessness and sin. But it's not because they care about you. It's because they want to look good according to their own ethical standards; they want to maintain their own righteousness in their own eyes – and hopefully in God's. I have been on both sides of that one! So have some of you.

We have other titles for Jesus, all of them inadequate, but they are clear claims that Jesus is more than an ethical teacher: He is Savior, and Lord; Messiah, and Son of God; Shepherd, Redeemer, Reconciler, Holy Spirit. To know Him does more than scold us or compliment us for our behavior. It fills the soul, changes the heart, seeks out identity and purpose we didn't even know we carried within us. The flame of love and the invitation to an Eternal Kingdom may have ethical implications, but they are as far beyond ethics as the sun is beyond a candle, as the heavens are beyond the earth, as love is beyond toleration or agreement.

Nevertheless, like any spiritually awake person, Jesus thought a lot and cared a lot about how people should treat each other. He taught and told stories about what kind of behavior would match the Kingdom He came to announce and invite us into. For that reason, while most ethical systems are reasonable, logical, and consistent, Jesus' ethics have baffled us for over two thousand years. Unless, of course, we reduce them down to the logic and precepts we are already familiar with. Jesus' teachings always carry within them a relational component – an awareness of the heavenly Kingdom, a dependence on the presence of God – that makes them quite startling if we pay attention to what Jesus is saying. (*"I do not say that you must forgive your brother seven times, but seventy times seven."* (Matthew 18:22)) While, at first blush, Jesus' teachings may seem similar to other ethical teachings, they always move beyond that to encounter with the Living God – to feeling the power and design of the Creator connecting with your own heart and mind and soul. There is a *dawning* – the beginning realization – of what the Creator really wants and intends, and it is always in the light of the Creator's presence and guidance and love *for you*, and for all others too.

Normal ethical theories and teachings might get you an "A" on a term paper, or even some approval from silly but well-meaning sentimentalists who don't want to admit that there is any evil in the world. But there are ethics that do not come out of theory or logic. They come out of encounter with a burning bush, and the shock of the Numinous One

making covenant with mere mortals on Mount Sinai. They come from Mount Carmel, and from the Valley of Elah, where Goliath waits for you. They come from Jerusalem in flames and your people slaughtered. And they come from a Cross. We are always trying desperately to turn such ethics back into mere theory and logic. Encounter with the Numinous One is, after all, severely uncomfortable for us – quite beyond what we can rationalize or control.

So this rift between theory and encounter runs through every aspect and area of our lives. Human wisdom ... or the presence of the Living God. A nice theory of how you should behave ... versus a calling that has your whole life poured into it. There is a question that often – perhaps always, but at least often – tells us which side of this divide we are working on at the moment: “Are you looking for the approval or appreciation of other humans ... or are you responding to the call of God?” It is an eerie thing, indeed, to contemplate the life of Jesus in the light of that question. Especially if you think of yourself as a follower of Jesus.

Let us consider this parable of the sheep and the goats. It’s hard to do that, at least for me, because the story is so familiar, and because it is so locked down by its usual interpretation and usage. I have been hearing this ever since I was a small boy. It’s why I always tried to befriend the worst outcast in my class. It’s why I carried drunks home and tried to get them jobs, even back when I was in college (and before I had ever taken a drink myself). I do not regret all my efforts to “do good,” but I do regret the motives. And I do regret most of the results. Enabling is not the same as loving. Handouts are not the same as an invitation into a caring community and a whole new WAY of Life.

Helping people is a huge, secular industry with nearly endless manifestations in our culture. Many of these efforts are supported and approved by the church. But with unnotable exceptions, the vast majority of them are devoid of the WAY of Life our Lord calls us into, and would have us invite others into. There is no Jesus in most of our efforts to help people in our time. I am not talking about trading food or any other favors for fake conversions. I’m even glad that secular agencies and organizations have compassion for people’s needs and try to help with food, clothing, and whatever. But the Christian church is about more than “love ’em and leave ’em.” The Christian church is never a one-night stand. The Christian church is always supposed to remember that people have souls, that every individual is precious, and that we have

never done our kind of good until relationship is established – some with us, but even more with Jesus.

I have been on such themes before. Many of you get it. Some of you hate it, and that's okay. Some of you hate it because you get it but cannot stand it. I have more sympathy for that than you can imagine. But we have allowed our truth to be reduced to enabling and non-personal caring for too long. Not only does that betray the people we claim to be helping, it ruins many other people's understanding of the Christian mission and Message. Some of you wonder if I am ever going to stay off this subject. I will stop harping on it just as soon as I die – or when this church starts designing a mission that matches our Message *and* abandoning any mission that has no Jesus in it (we do *not* have resources enough to support both). Whichever comes first.

We still have the sheep on the right hand, and the goats on the left. I do not forget that, and do not want you to forget it either. I am going to make a few comments now that you might think are an attempt to disclaim the parable, but we will come right back to the sheep on the right and the goats on the left.

1.) I have already mentioned that Jesus says more than one thing. This is not His only parable or teaching. We do need to remember that. We also need to remember that this is one of His parables *and* one of His teachings. Why would we want to miss anything our Lord has to tell us? That might be okay for other people, but that would be crazy for followers.

2.) What about a person who has fed quite a few hungry people, helped many thirsty people, visited a lot of folk in prison, given a lot of clothes to people in need of them, tried to help strangers many times, visited and tried to help the sick ... but who has failed to do all of these things for so many others? Are they sheep or goats?

I have probably visited more people in hospitals, prisons, and elsewhere than anybody else in this room. However, it's part of my job, so does it still count? On the other hand, I have rarely gone to bed in the past forty-two years without feeling a twinge of guilt about the people I didn't get to. Am I a sheep or a goat?

It's never enough, is it? Be careful then, how you hear this parable. It is capable of loading more guilt on the most awakened and sensitive, and that is *not* Jesus' WAY. Lots of humans love to borrow this parable from Jesus to load guilt onto others to get them to do what they want

them to do. As always, you cannot just swallow it as a wooden rule – one size fits all. You have to take it to prayer. No one sheep can do it all. And Jesus is not asking you to get so exhausted that you will be no good to anybody. Try to discern whom Jesus is sending you to – and whom Jesus is sending TO you. And that’s not the same as trying to respond to everyone who thinks they can get something from you. Pay attention to how Jesus does it, as well as to what He says.

3.) I knew a man who constantly visited in both hospitals and prisons. And when he did, he told those he visited about the Wrath of God, how they were going to Hell, how Jesus was now at the right hand of God and hated all sinners and unrighteousness, and that He was coming soon in power to settle all accounts. Was this man a sheep or a goat? Jesus cannot cover everything in one parable. He does not mention hyenas or cobras or the nether-end of horses. He *does* talk about this fellow in another passage however. “*Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you traverse sea and land to make a single proselyte, and when he becomes a proselyte, you make him twice as much a child of hell as you are yourselves.*” (Ah, gentle Jesus, meek and mild.) (Matthew 23:15)

4.) One thing the parable makes very clear: The goats will be surprised that they did not do enough, and the sheep will be surprised that they did better than they thought. I take from this that when we think we have done enough and stop trying to help, clearly we have moved to the goat side.

5.) Finally, even a great teaching can be ruined if we get stale to it. Jesus, for instance, talks about taking the lowest seat at a banquet so you will be asked to move up to a more honored place. He is trying to teach about humility. But the teaching became so familiar that, in the Middle Ages, it became a game for the prideful to vie with one another over who could get the lowest seat, so that the host would have to honor them by moving them up. Many did exactly what Jesus said, but totally missed what He was trying to teach them. Oh yes, it is possible to do exactly what Jesus says in a specific teaching, and entirely miss who He is, why He came, and what He is really trying to teach us.

Let me suggest that, for the most part, we have ruined this parable. Jesus tries (many times, in many ways) to expand and ignite our awareness of what God wants from us, and the joy that is in store for us if we see it and claim it and move into it.

In this parable, Jesus tries to expand our awareness of how we should be treating one another. And, as we have come to expect of Him – indeed, one of the things we love Him for – He includes people we all tend to neglect and ignore. Instead of saying, “Wonderful! That’s right! The Kingdom is bigger than we thought!” – what has been the reaction and response? In many places, the response has been: “Well, if we have to include the ‘least brothers,’ then to get even with Jesus, we will *subtract* everybody else.” Now *only* the least brother counts. Never mind your own children, your own wife or husband, the person next door, the people you work with. Only the least brother counts. Only the least brother gets you brownie points or keeps you out of Hell. Never mind the quality of my work; the level of my commitment to my vocation; the way I treat customers, pay my taxes, or read, study, and pray. If I come to church and give a few bucks to some program called “Neighbors In Need” that I don’t really even know anything about, then I’m a sheep and not a goat.

Jesus died on a Cross for that? For Thanksgiving baskets and special offerings off on the fringe of where we really live and love and care? Jesus has tried to fix it so that nobody who wants Him – nobody who wants the Kingdom He announces and the Life He offers – will be turned away, ignored, or considered unimportant by His followers. But the way we do most of our “charity” today will not make a single convert – among them, or among us.

We are supposed to do everything we do “*as unto the Lord*” – in awareness of Whom we trust and believe in, in awareness of Whom we love and try to serve. Is a rich man never a least brother? Is a middle-class woman to be ignored because we only care about least brethren? Do we actually now think we get more approval from Jesus for helping a homeless person, than for loving our own spouses and children? Do we actually think that Jesus cares more about a special offering we take up for five minutes, than about the way we do our work fifty or sixty hours every week? This parable is supposed to expand consciousness, not reduce it.

Our aim is to treat every person we meet as if Jesus were standing right there, and as if we could sense/know His love for that person *and* our own love and allegiance for Jesus at the same time. And that includes remembering that Jesus is sometimes kind, sometimes challenging, sometimes scathing, sometimes healing, sometimes enormously compassionate. Every day is exciting. Every day we get to try over again. Every day is more than worth it. But that does not mean we get it right.

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It means we keep trying with those we think have been sent to us, and with those we have been sent to. But no matter whom you have married, cared about, teamed up with, tried to help, or committed yourself to, there is always a host of “least brethren” you have not yet paid any attention to. If somebody tries to make you feel guilty about that, get back to your prayers. It is not your job to please humans or to get all of them to agree that you are one of the sheep. One of the main points of this parable is that humans never really know who the sheep are and who the goats are.

Jesus knows the difference. But to most humans, they sound pretty much alike. Baaaah!