

Sermon #227  
Matthew 25:31-46  
November 26, 2017

## The King of the Least

If I were to use the word “king,” what images would come to your mind? What would a king do? How would he be dressed? Where would he live? (Show photos of kings and palaces.) We don’t have a king in our country, but the royalty of England would certainly come to mind. So, you would start thinking about a man dressed in royal clothing with an elegant queen by his side. He would sit on a royal throne with royal subjects surrounding him and catering to his every need. He would live in an enormous, ornate palace in all its splendor. He certainly would not have anything to do with the lowly of the earth. Yet, I can think of a king who dared to live with the downtrodden of this world.

Long ago, there ruled in Persia a wise and good king. He loved his people. He wanted to know how they lived. He wanted to know about their hardships. Often, he dressed in the clothes of a working man or a beggar, and went to the homes of the poor. No one whom he visited thought that he was their ruler. One time he visited a very poor man who lived in a cellar. He ate the coarse food the poor man ate. He spoke cheerful, kind words to him. Then he left. Later he visited the poor man again and disclosed his identity by saying, "I am your king!" The king thought the man would surely ask for some gift or favor, but he didn't. Instead he said, "You left your palace and your glory to visit me in this dark, dreary place. You ate the course food I ate. You brought gladness to my heart! To others you have given your rich gifts. To me you have given yourself!"

That story may or may not be true, but it illustrates well the king I have in mind this morning. He never lived in a palace, nor any home for that matter. He probably did not wear fine, elegant clothing. He performed the meager trade of a carpenter. He did speak with authority, but he also spent time with the poor, the lonely, the outcast, the sick, and the sinners. He himself was humble and poor. He began his life as a refugee fleeing from his homeland for safety. Later in life he was despised, rejected, and condemned to die on a cruel cross. His name is.... Jesus, a king, our King, the King of kings and Lord of lords.

Today is Christ the King Sunday. Normally when we think of a king, we think of the first type of king I mentioned. But today, I want you to think about a humble, lowly king, one who rode a small colt into Jerusalem and not a powerful, white stallion. Jesus told a story about this loving king and what would happen when he returned to earth in the last days. The story has even more to do with how his people respond. So, let’s recap the story and put it in its context.

Context:

Jesus tells this story at the end of a sermon in response to his disciples' question. In Matt. 24:3, the disciples ask about the sign of his return. Jesus goes on to tell them what the times will be like when he returns to earth. He tells them to keep watch and be ready because they know not the time of his return. Then he tells them three stories related to his return. The first story centers on ten virgins who are waiting for the bridegroom to return. Five of them are ready and go in to the banquet with the bridegroom when he returns, but the other five were not ready. The door shuts, and they are left outside. Then Jesus says again, "Keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour [of his return]." "Be prepared," is his warning to them.

His second story concerns a wealthy man going on a journey and leaving five bags of gold with one servant, two with the second, and only one with the last. When the owner returns, he is pleased to learn that the servant with five has worked hard to earn 10 bags. The second now has two more bags. Each of these first two servants were commended, but the last one hid his bag because he was afraid. The master called him a wicked and lazy servant and took the one bag from him and threw him out into the darkness. Once again, the theme of being prepared for Jesus' second coming is loud and clear. What we do today makes a big difference for the future.

The story:

Now to the third and final story, the one we read earlier. This one begins with the actual return of Jesus, the King, also described as the Son of Man. He will sit on his glorious throne and all the nations (people groups) will be gathered before him. He will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. In ancient times, the shepherds actually did separate the sheep from the goats at the end of the day. The goats were not as highly valued as the sheep. Goats were more sensitive to cold so they were placed in a warmer place. So, Jesus' listeners would have well understood the pastoral practice of separating sheep from goats. But Jesus uses the two animals here as metaphors for the types of people who will be separated on the last day.

In his story, Jesus has the shepherd king placing the sheep on his right (the positive, power side) and the goats on his left. 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." Notice how that contrasts with the group of people on his left. Instead of calling them to come, the goats are commanded to depart. The king says, "Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels." Wow, that's a severe punishment. Why is that the case? As we continue in the story, we begin to understand why. Let's go back to the sheep.

Jesus has asked this group to come and receive their inheritance. That's because when he was hungry they gave him something to eat and when he was thirsty they gave him something to drink. When he was a stranger they invited him in and took care of him. When he needed clothes, they clothed him. When he was sick they looked after him, and when he was in prison they came to visit him.

The righteous are incredulous, though. They want to know when was it that they saw him like that, and the king replies, “Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.” Now we see that Jesus, the king, is equating himself with the least of these. There is some debate among scholars as to the identity of the least of these. Some think that the least refer to Jesus’ disciples since he uses the word, “brothers.” Jesus’ disciples were lowly. So, the test would have been how people respond to Jesus’ followers, who are not known to be lofty people.

Other scholars, however, view the “least of these” as referring to all needy people in general. The test then is how we behave toward lowly people in general. It could go either way. And in either case, the test concerns how we behave with needy people whom we do not suspect of having any great importance. And how we respond makes a huge difference when Jesus returns.

The goats are also incredulous and ask the same question. “Lord, when did we see you hungry, thirsty, sick, or in prison?” And Jesus the king replies, “For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat. I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in...” And they hear these final, stark words from Jesus, “Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me” (v. 45). And on that final day, the first group, the righteous will go to eternal life, but the second group, to eternal punishment.

Now it is important to note that Jesus is not giving a full treatment of the concept of salvation here. He is not telling us in this story that doing good works will get us to heaven. There are plenty of scripture passages and plenty of times where Jesus himself refers to salvation by faith in him alone. Matthew tells us in 1:21, that Jesus himself came to save his people from their sins. Paul said in Romans that we all have sinned and are saved by his grace (Rom. 3:23). Thus, we cannot save ourselves. It is only by faith in him. However, good works, like caring for the needy, are part of the result of our salvation and our faith in Christ. They are not the cause, but the fruit, the evidence of what God has done in our lives. That’s why James said that “faith by itself, if not accompanied by action, is dead. Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do” (James 2:17, 18). So here in this story, Jesus wants us to know the importance of putting our faith into action.

Now let’s return to our focus on the king himself. In summary, what do we learn about the king in this story, and what do we learn about ourselves?

1. Jesus, as returning King, identifies with the least of these.

He identifies with them so much that he takes on their identity or they his. In fact, he identifies with them even before his return. He identifies with them now. And whatever we do to the least of these, we are doing it or not doing it to him now. Jesus himself knows what it is like to be poor and needy. As we said, he was an outcast from his birth on as there was no place for him in the inn. He fled his homeland because of a plot to take his life at an early age, and so became a fugitive or refugee. As an adult, he

had no place to call home or no place to lay his head. He depended on others and was rejected by his own. Yes, Jesus identifies with the least of these.

2. Jesus, as returning King, has compassion on the least of these.

In this story, Jesus has great empathy for the least of these. Earlier in Matthew 9, Jesus sees the crowds who are helpless and harassed like sheep without a shepherd. And the text says that he had compassion on them. So, he did something about it by turning to his disciples and calling them to pray for more workers, because the harvest is plentiful but the workers few. Compassion for people is Jesus MO. It is the heart of what he was about. From the least to the greatest, Jesus was concerned about people. And that was the problem with the goats in his story. They were concerned only about themselves. They lived for themselves and not for others, especially the “least of these.” But Jesus shows the way and calls all his followers to the way of identification and compassion for the lowly and for all people.

3. Jesus, as returning King, invites his people to a life of compassion.

The overall point of the parable is to be people of compassion, because Jesus is that way, and his kingdom operates that way. If Jesus has compassion on all people, focusing especially on the “least of these,” then so should we. The evidence of our salvation is found in the way we care for others. We can show others our faith by what we do.

Question: Who might “the least of these” be to us? Who are the people around us who need compassion? We can start with our own families, our friends and neighbors – the people we come into contact with the most. We dare not forget them. We must also include our church family, our neighborhood, guests and new comers. I am thankful for all the good comments I’ve heard from new people about how friendly our church is and how we care. That also is a good start.

But let’s look a little closer at Jesus’ statement here. He says that he, as the least of these, was hungry and thirsty. He was a stranger in need of clothes; sick and also in prison. In those days, there wasn’t the health care that we have today and the sick often depended on the help of Christian people. Prisons were a horrible place to be with much suffering. Christians did visit prisoners then and encouraged them greatly. That was the only encouragement they received.

Who are the hungry and thirsty around us? Yes, thankfully we have the food pantry and many receive help their weekly. We also have our Wednesday evening meal. But what about orphans, widows, the homeless, immigrants (legal or not), panhandlers, prisoners? Yes, there are many people with problems all around us. Could it be that Jesus is in each one of them? It would be easy for us to treat them as simply a nuisance. They are annoying, smelly, dirty, uncultured people. Just get them off our streets so we don’t have to see them anymore. I confess that sometimes I’ve had the same feelings even if I haven’t expressed them. Or I’ve just gone right by

people without even considering their needs. This story hits me right between the eyes, as I realize how easy it is to slip into the category of the goats. Lord, forgive me, forgive us, when we are tempted to side with the goats and not the sheep. The evidence of our salvation needs to show it.

So, what do we do when we see someone homeless or a panhandler on the streets? There is always something we can do.

- First, it might mean a change in our attitudes toward them. Instead of anger or frustration, we need to turn to the example of our loving King, who treated everyone with compassion. How deep is our compassion level?
- Second, we can pray for them. As you pass by someone on the street or see someone who may be homeless, prayer does go a long way.
- Third, we can help them. No, it might not be appropriate to give them money. We don't know what they will do with that and we do need to be discerning. But one thing that Rachel and I do is to have socks with basic supplies in them (show them). We hand these out whenever we can. So far everyone has taken them and everyone has said, "Thank you."
- Fourth, be willing to listen to their story. Have you every just stopped and talked to someone about their story? Why did they get there? Did they lose a job, lose a loved one? How badly are they hurting? Sometimes people just need a listening ear. That especially goes a long way to encourage a prisoner.

John Sargent Cram was a millionaire who had been educated at Princeton and Oxford and came from a wealthy family. But he did not live like a wealthy person. Instead he chose to live among the homeless. He rented a small apartment in a lowly area of New York where many drug addicts and homeless people hung out. He gave them food, shelter, and clothing. His door was open to all. The Spanish speaking population of the area called him Papa Dio for Father God. When the police raided his apartment looking for drug dealers, they arrested him too. Later he told a reporter, "I'm quite happy, you know. I'm anything but a despondent person. Call me eccentric. Call it my reason for being. I have no other."

## Conclusion

Our king has showed us the way. He's the millionaire who identifies with and shows deep compassion on lonely, hopeless people and all people everywhere. He is the King of the least. Let his compassion fill your heart today.