

November 26, 2017
Matthew 25:31-46
The King's Six Standards
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‘When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left.

Then the king will say to those at his right hand, “Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.”

Then the righteous will answer him, “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?”

And the king will answer them, “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.”

Then he will say to those at his left hand, “You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.”

Then they also will answer, “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?”

Then he will answer them, “Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.” And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.’

The words of God for the people of God. Let us pray. Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight O Lord, Our Rock and Our Redeemer, Amen.

There is great debate these days about *standards*. From educating our children to choosing a president, we struggle with standards. What should they be? Who decides on them? From where do we get them?

The international *standard* of measurements is the metric system. It gets its name from the fundamental *standard* measure of *length*, the meter. But do you know where we got *it*?

- From a calculation made in 1799 of one 10-millionth of the distance between the North Pole and the equator at the longitude of Paris. It was a little difficult to go out and measure that distance every time a new 1-meter measuring stick had to be made, so the International Prototype Meter was constructed out of a bar of pure platinum. The bar was kept at the Pavillon de Breteuil near Paris, which was the headquarters of the then newly formed International Bureau of Weights and Measures.

However, in 1889 scientists discovered that the International Prototype Meter was itself a little off – by less than 1 millimeter, but enough to require the construction of a fresh prototype. The *new* 1-meter bar was made of 10 percent iridium and 90 percent platinum, an alloy stronger and more durable than pure platinum. Up until 1960, representatives of various countries were required to travel to Paris to calibrate their own prototype 1-meter bars against the original.

But, in 1960 the *standard* for the meter changed once again, based on the size of a wavelength in a spectral analysis of the element, Krypton. Finally, in 1989, the exact standard for 1 meter was redefined for the last time based on a fraction of the speed of light. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Metric_system

Now, many would think this approach takes the precise calculation of a meter to absurd lengths; but it just goes to show: in science, we need agreed upon standards. But what about elsewhere?

When I was a child in the 60's, my parents built a house in what seemed then an idyllic setting: a developing neighborhood deep in the woods off the fifth hole of a brand new golf course, Forest Oaks, in Greensboro, NC. Through the back yard, between my house and the golf course, there was a very large, rolling field. Our house was the only house at the end of a gravel road. Off the front of the house was a grassy cull de sac surrounded by nothing but woods. Beyond the miles of forestland were cattle and tobacco farms some of which we kids knew how to reach about as fast *through* those woods as our parents could on the road by car.

My house was the central hub of the neighborhood – the woods in the front being large enough to get lost *in*; the sage brush field between our house and the golf course being large enough to play baseball *on*.

However, my brothers and I would beg my dad to wait until the late spring to mow the sage brush; it was just too much fun to hide in. With such a combination of open fields and thick woods, we kids would play games like hide and seek, and kick the can, or better yet, we would make up games – games we would play well into the night.

And it was a funny thing about those made up games. For them to be worth playing in the first place there had to be agreed upon standards – rules that included boundaries. Too many rules and all you did was argue. Too few rules and it either gave some who were playing the game unfair advantages, or it was so difficult to understand what the real goal of the game was, that playing seemed pointless.

It was the same with the boundaries. If the boundaries were too wide and the space too large – particularly in games where running and chasing was involved, then the task of catching someone or finding someone became impossible. If the boundaries were too tight and the space

too small, the game was too easy; the result then being that we all became bored with the game very quickly. What we didn't know then was that we were deciding on standards based on two things:

- The ultimate goal was that everyone playing the game would derive equal joy from the game.
- If there were some, because of their physical skill at running, gave them too much of an advantage, so that they won every time, rules had to be made to level the playing field.

That's it. But getting those standards just right meant that time seemed to stand still. We hit that sweet spot of deep and eternal childhood joy.

Little did we know the valuable lessons we were learning that we would take with us for the rest of our lives – lessons, I would argue were similar to those of Christ in our morning text

Today, we are invited to ask ourselves, “Does Christ (whom *we* acknowledge has a claim on our lives) have specific *standards* that earn God's joy, or conversely, earn God's contempt? Our morning text would answer that question with an unequivocal, “Yes!” In fact, Jesus suggests that there are six such standards:

- 1) how we treat the hungry,
- 2) how we treat the thirsty,
- 3) how we welcome the stranger,
- 4) how we clothe the needy,
- 5) how we take care of the sick and
- 6) how we visit the prisoner.

Now, the Scriptures may elsewhere emphasize God's Grace offered to us through Christ – that we are all God's children, no matter what we do – that we are infinitely valued and loved by the creator of the universe simply because we are alive. But here, Jesus seems to be talking about a standard way of responding *to* that grace – one that has the potential of increasing the joy of everyone.

And there is no ambiguity. Those who faithfully follow the standard of active concern for those who are in the most dire need are the ones who demonstrate their love of God. They will thus be invited to “go away” into “eternal life.” Those who don't, won't. And the reason? Real joy is not possible when there are some playing the game of life who are suffering because they are at such a disadvantage. (pause)

On this Christ the King Sunday, at the end of the church year, and on the cusp of a new year which begins with Advent, we may ask ourselves how we can be faithful to the Standards that King Jesus himself has set forth. But the answer is rather blunt: *Do these things and live. Don't do them, and perish.*

Preacher and theologian, Barbara Brown Taylor says that somewhere along the line we bought – or were sold – the idea that God is chiefly interested in religion and religious doctrine. We came to believe that God's real eternal home was the Church, that God's people knew exactly who they were, and that the world was a barren place full of lost souls in need of saving via simply

professing the right words about God. Barbara Brown Taylor, *An Altar in the World: A Geography of Faith* (Harper Collins, 2009), 7.

But what if our doctrines *about* God are now in danger of severing us from God? What if our focus on issues rather than on Christ's equalizing standards is in danger of turning a lot of us into goats? What if the truth is that many of the people in need of saving are those of us in the church, and at least part of what we need saving *from* is the idea that God sees the world in exactly the same way that we and *our* people do.

I didn't grow up Presbyterian. I grew up an evangelical Methodist. I attended revivals and lay witness mission week-ends with altar calls, followed by teachings on the fundamentals of the faith. Looking back, although much of the theology of that upbringing was guilt based and potentially harmful, today I can honestly say I am grateful for that early exposure.

I am a feeling type and experiencing spirituality genuinely via my feelings was very positive for me as a child – so much so that it eventually led me to an understanding as an adult and as a pastor of the primacy of experience – not only in shaping faith, but in helping to determine standards of the faith. My conviction to this day is that it is extremely important that we not just let our ideas *about* God shape our experience but that we also allow our *experience* to shape our ideas about God.

I therefore find it ironic today that the evangelical movement which originally grounded my own faith in religious experience has morphed into something that completely eschews experience in favor of acquiescence to a set of absolutes postulates. Some-where along the line, evangelical Christianity left its roots in making room for an experience of the Holy Spirit and, in essence, out of fear, emphasized the fundamentals of the faith to the exclusion of any experience that might challenge those fundamentals.

My favorite evangelical speaker - from the 1970's on - has been Tony Campolo. Campolo is everything that I remember from my youth as being appealing about the evangelical movement. His is a living faith that addresses the deep needs and yearnings of those who are in the most pain and are looking for Good news.

Today, Campolo is a retired university professor and author of multiple books. At 82, he continues to self-identify as an evangelical. However, he has become one of evangelicalism's greatest critics. He says that Protestant Christianity as a whole began to be redefined in the mid-70s by positions of being "pro-life" and opposing gay marriage. "Suddenly," says Campolo, "*God* fell to the background." Christ's love was replaced with absolute adherence to conservative stances on social issues, such that stances on issues rather than love of the unloved became central, producing a battle throughout Christianity on *issues* rather than being true proclaimers of God's radical love.

And somewhere in the middle of all the change, says Campolo, what was (and still is) known as popular Evangelical Christianity, crossed the line of faith and belief into hatred and abuse of those standing outside the acknowledged "fundamentals" of the faith.

There are lots of problems with this but the main one is that American Evangelical Biblical Standards are just not the standards of Jesus himself. The standards of Jesus would have us wrap our arms around those, that I am ashamed to say, most evangelicals would just as soon throw on the trash heap. On the contrary, the standards of Jesus tell us that the concrete sidewalks on Mint Julep Dr. (where the last person in Columbia was shot this week) may actually look more promising to God than the tile floors of our Sunday School rooms, and a soul seemingly lost to alcohol or drugs may strike God as more receptive to God's love than a lifelong believer.

In fact, our morning text is shockingly clear: whether one *says* the words, "I believe in Christ" is actually irrelevant to Jesus. What marks one of Christ's own is how much active compassion one has for the outcast, the hungry, the thirsty, the refugee, the stranger, the one whose ways, whose sexual identity, whose racial make-up seems foreign, the one who is without adequate clothing, housing, or medical care – the one who is in prison, regardless of what he or she may have done. (Pause)

There is a stirring conversation in Alan Paton's book, *Ah, But Your Land Is Beautiful*. It's between a black person and a white person both of whom are about to put themselves in great danger fighting for racial justice in South Africa and risking their lives. One of them says to the other that they may end up bearing a lot of scars for their efforts. The other responds: "Well, I look at it this way. When I get up to heaven, the great judge will say, 'Where are your scars?' And if I haven't any, he will ask, 'Were there no people worthy of getting scars for?'" David Wolpe, "The scars to prove it," *New York Jewish Week*, January 19, 2016. blogs.timesofisrael.com. Retrieved June 11, 2017.

A good question to ponder – but not for long – for it is one that was intended quickly to be put into action. (Pause)

So, this passage makes three things clear:

- God is good but that goodness is to be found chiefly among those who suffer.
- God is not neutral about how we behave and how we behave toward one another.
- God is no absentee deity. No action grounded in the relief of the suffering of another is too small for God to miss, and no action not grounded in said relief is so large that it can cover up the deception that is beneath it. God *will* judge whether we have tended to the things of God by taking care of those in need – or not.

Harold A. Bosley, a noted preacher of the last century finally adds this: "Two strange and, in a sense, troubling insights are to be found in this parable: 1) some people discover that, although they have not known it, they have been on God's side doing God's work, keeping faith with God's will all the time while 2) others discover that in waiting around for some striking moment, some great way in which to demonstrate their loyalty to Christ, they have missed the only chance they would ever have to serve him."

The point is this: the standards of being a Christian *are* important; but for many of us they may not be what we thought they were.

Maybe today we might do well to remember that the word "standards" also describes certain jazz melodies that serve as frequent starting-points for improvisation. Aspiring jazz musicians are expected to learn these standards. Although those melodies undergo many and varied alterations,

they remain recognizably themselves.

Sometimes it can be difficult to determine precisely where a jazz standard ends and where improvisation begins. No analysis of individual notes, no matter how meticulous, can reveal that borderline. The standard is undoubtedly present, but in jazz its edges are indistinct, its essence malleable.

The same can be said of Christ's standards. The way we are called on to care *for*, give love and grace *to* God is indisputable: care for those most in need. That's the standard. But where that *religious* standard ends and genuine *loving* begins (just as who is really God's own and who really isn't) is hard to determine.

Christ's standards are important – not because if we don't follow them we will be punished; but because if we *do* follow them, we will discover love and grace coming and going in directions we didn't think was possible; like kids playing the perfect game together, a piece of eternal joy breaks through the cracks of time.

This congregation has a history of practicing Christ's standards. But like a good Jazz musician we all need to continue to find ways to practice those standards as often as we get a chance wherever we may be. Let us pray.

Jesus thank you for meeting us in our most dire need. Help us to remember that whenever we meet those needs in others we are demonstrating our love for you. And now bless these gifts that we give that a portion may be used to minister in your name.
Amen.