

November 22, 2020  
Matthew 25:31-46

Christ the King  
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

### **“Habits of Mercy”**

“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.”

*“Don’t spoil your appetite!”*

Those words echoed behind me practically every afternoon as I went out the back door to play with my friends after school. It was my mother warning me to stay away from all the temptations that would take away my appetite for the dinner she was preparing. They were not easy words to follow, because my hometown was filled with all sorts of tempting treats that practically called to me as I walked by. On the way to and from school was the Peanut Shop, where the smell of fresh-roasted peanuts drew me in like a magnet to steel into the store where I could get big bags of those delicious peanuts along with all sorts of snack treats. A few blocks in the other direction was Grigsby’s Nut Kitchen, which made the most wonderful chocolate chip cookies; their oven was positioned so that the freshly-baked cookies came out on a conveyer belt in the front window, and of course the aroma was pumped out into parking lot so that resisting the urge to enter the bakery was impossible. If I chose to take the long way home from school, I would pass Chubby’s candy store, which had the best selection of candy bars, gum, and bags of snacks in town. Down Route 22 was Helen Elliot’s, our version of Rheo Thompson’s, where not only was the smell of chocolate indescribably wonderful but where they gave free samples of their homemade candies. Resisting the temptation to “spoil my appetite” was no easy task! At the time, I did not understand what my mother meant by spoiling my appetite, because my appetite was drawing me to all these forbidden treats. But as I grew older, I understood what my mother meant as she yelled after me on those weekday afternoons; she was preparing a nutritious meal that would be far healthier than all of those empty calories that surrounded us. It was one of many what in which my parents strived to instill healthy habits in me so that not only would I grow into a healthy adult but also that these habits would become a regular part of a balanced lifestyle when I became an adult. Along with healthy eating habits, I was taught to get into the habit of a regular bedtime and adequate sleep, making my bed and keeping my bedroom clean, clearing the dinner table and helping with the dishes, pitching in on household chores both inside and outside, and being kind and courteous to every person I met. Along with my teachers, they worked to instill good study habits in me, making sure that I did my homework on time, practiced my

clarinet and saxophone, and fulfilled my extracurricular obligations. In fulfillment of the promises they made when I was baptized, they faithfully brought me to worship and Sunday school every week and made certain that I learned what it means to be a Christian so that the habits of faith might become a central part of my life. They worked to make certain that the habits I developed were good habits that would be healthy and beneficial to me and to those in my life.

Working to instill healthy habits is the goal of all parents, teachers, mentors, and person who work with young people as they grow and develop. We know how important good habits are for every person's life, and conversely how destructive bad habits can be both for an individual and everyone in their life. Once a good habit is established, it can become a regular part of a person's life that is often done almost automatically; once a bad habit is established it is very hard to break, and it can have devastating consequences for that person as well as everyone in their lives.

Throughout his life and ministry, Jesus strove to instill healthy habits in his disciples so that they might be the vessels through which the good news of life and salvation in Christ might be shared to the ends of the earth. In his teachings, Jesus emphasized how his followers were to love one another, be faithful to the Lord, look not to their own interests but to the needs of others, and place the love of God at the center of their lives. He offered his life as an example of health and wholeness; Jesus' life was balanced between times of prayer and times of engaging with and serving others. In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus teaches that those who are his followers are "*the light of the world,*" called by God to "*let your light shine before others so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven*" (Matthew 5:14-16). He teaches them the importance of living in accordance with the Lord's teachings, that his disciples should "*strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.*" (6:33). Living as a follower of Jesus means centering one's life in prayer in the assurance that they will "*ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you*" (7:7), and that "*in everything do to others as your would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.*" (7:12).

- “[Jesus’] words are directed not to the wayward but to would-be disciples, to those who have heard the Sermon on the Mount, acknowledge its demands, and wish to enter into eternal life. They are being called to flee complacency and to view all except entrance into the kingdom as dangerous divertissement. Guided by the words and presence of Jesus, the faithful reader is to put

shoulder to the wheel and forsake every obstacle in the way of obtaining the one true good.” – Dale C. Allison.

The importance of incorporating these faithful habits into a life of faithful discipleship is at the heart of today’s Gospel lesson, an apocalyptic drama that begins with an other-worldly depiction of the coming of the Son of Man with his angels and the gathering of all nations before his throne, modulating into affirmations of the ultimate importance of ordinary, this-worldly deeds. In a scene reminiscent of visions found in such apocalyptic books as Daniel and Revelation, Jesus speaks of the time “*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*” (25:31), the time confessed in the Nicene Creed when Christ will “*come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.*” On this “Day of the Lord” (1 Thessalonians 5:2), the Lord will separate the nations gathered before him “*as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at his left*” (25:32-33). In ancient cultures the right represented the good, fortunate, and honourable place (“*The LORD said to my lord, ‘Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool.’*” – Psalm 110:1), while the left represented the bad, unfortunate, and dishonourable. The scene of Jesus as the Son of Man who sits on his glorious throne and who admits the righteous to the final kingdom of God is the triumph of this heavenly kingdom represented by Jesus as an alternative to the this-worldly demonic kingdom represented by his opponents:

- “Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste, and no city or house divided against itself will stand. If Satan casts out Satan, he is divided against himself; then how will his kingdom stand? ... But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come to you.” – 12:25-26, 28.

Jesus is presented as the messianic shepherd who cares for the sheep (“*When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd*” – 9:36) and the judge who makes the final separation between the “sheep” and the “goats.” It is a separation that is envisioned in Daniel (“*Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt.*” – Daniel 12:2) and in Jesus’ kingdom parable in which at the end of the age “*the angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth*” (13:49-50).

What is striking about the criterion of judgment is that it is not based on one's confession of faith in Christ, but whether one has acted with loving care for needy people, by whether or not one has developed the habits of mercy. Jesus had taught that self-giving care for others is the heart of the revealed will of God in the Torah and is the key to understanding God's Will for God's people. When Jesus is challenged to name "*which commandment of the law is the greatest,*" he responds by pointing to both the *shema* in Deuteronomy and the law to love one's neighbour in Leviticus:

- "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And the second is like it: You shall love your neighbour as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets." – 22:37-40.

The messianic king has lived out his teaching that his kingdom consists of service to others ("*... the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.*" – 20:28) and those called to follow him will be judged by the same criterion.

The scene begins with Christ the King turning to those at his right hand and praising them as those who are "*blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.*" (25:34). The king praises them because of the mercy they have shown him: "*for I was hungry and you gave me food, and 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.*" (25:35-36). While they are undoubtedly overjoyed on receiving this message of salvation, those at Jesus' right hand are also perplexed by what might be called "holy ignorance": "*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?*" (25:37-39). Jesus' response is that "*just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.*" (25:40). Christ is met in the "little ones," and those who give "*even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple – truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward*" (10:42). The righteous are those who have led lives of generosity and compassion toward others; they have "*lived out their baptismal vocation and let their light shine before others so that all may see their good works and give glory to God*" (Dirk Lange). They are surprised to learn, however, that in caring for the needy they have cared for the Lord himself; the habits

of mercy that have been instilled in them has guided them into faithful service toward others in fulfillment of the command to *“let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it”* (Hebrews 13:1-2). In practicing habits of mercy and lovingkindness toward God’s people, it was as if they were being gracious and merciful to the Lord himself.

- “See that you do not fail to see me. I shall be close to you in every poor and wretched person who is in need of your help and teaching; I am there, right in the midst. Whether you do little for him or much, you do it to me. You will not give the cup of cold water in vain. You will receive fruit a thousandfold, not because of your work, but because of my promise.” – Martin Luther, 1526.

The principles crimes against those on the left who receive the judgment of *“you that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels”* (25:41) are sins of omission (*“Anyone, then, who knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, commits sin”* – James 4:17). Their behavior is the exact opposite of those how have practiced habits of mercy: *“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”* (25:42-43). When they respond in shocked ignorance, pleading that they had no idea when they might have neglected to show mercy to the king, seeking an excuse and almost putting the blame on the Son of Man himself (as if to say “you didn’t reveal yourself; how could we see you?”), the Lord replies that *“just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.”* (25:45). The opportunities to help were abundant, but the decision to help was withheld, with the result being that *“these will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”* (25:46).

Developing health habits of mercy and lovingkindness is an essential part of living faithfully as a child of God. Christian faith is far more than affirming creeds and statements of faith or knowing the teachings of Scripture and theology; discipleship includes hearing God’s Word and living in obedience to God’s commandments. It means walking as a child of the light and seeing in each person the face of Jesus, since all people are chosen and precious in the eyes of the Lord who *“so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him shall not perish but shall have eternal life.”* (John 3:16).

- “We who follow Jesus know of one other hope: the good news he offered. More astonishingly, he made possible an intimacy with the God of the universe that can solve the thirst for significance ... And thus we who follow Jesus should treat those who rank low on society’s scale – ‘the least of these,’ in Jesus’ phrase – as he did, proclaiming by our deeds what we believe about the image of God in every person.” – Philip Yancey.

The habits we develop become such a regular part of our lives that we often do them without thinking. We make our bed, wash the dishes, help with the daily chores without being asked or giving them a second thought. We make healthy choices automatically, knowing deep down inside that they are the right choices for ourselves and others. When we develop habits of mercy and lovingkindness as children of God, we will live as Christ intended for his people the Church, embodying Christ’s love and seeing in every person the image of God. Our healthy habits of grace and mercy will shine the light of Christ before others so that in us they may experience God’s presence and join us in giving glory to our Father in heaven.

- “Once again, the ‘good works’ has less to do with ethical actions than with living a life of mercy in which the Son of Man is revealed – if only on the last day. This entails, for the believing community, a considerable change in self-perception. Rather than considering themselves holders or keepers of the mystery of God, they discover that God is always already outside the circle they draw and the boundaries they create. Mission itself becomes redefined when we consider the move outwards as a move *towards* God!” – Dirk Lange.

“*Don’t spoil your appetite*” were not the words my childish ears wanted to hear, but they were the loving words of my parents who wanted to instill healthy habits that would serve me well throughout my life. Our call as children of God is to instill the healthy habits of mercy and lovingkindness in ourselves and others so that we might fulfill Christ’s will that we “*love one another as I have loved you*” and shine the light of Christ before all persons so that they know that they are holy and precious in the eyes of Christ, who desire that all might be fed, clothed, and loved. Our habits of mercy as God’s holy people will give us the ability to stand before the Lord as those whose habits of mercy toward “*the least of these who are members of my family*” were acts of mercy for our Lord who is “*gracious and merciful ... and abounding in steadfast love.*” (Joel 2:13).

Amen.