

Unto the Least of These My Brethren

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“When the Son of man shall come in all his glory, and all the holy angels with him, then shall he sit upon the throne of his glory: and before him shall be gathered all nations; and he shall separate them one from another, as a shepherd divideth his sheep from the goats: and he shall set the sheep on his right hand, but the goats on the left. Then shall the King say unto them on his right hand, Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: for. ...”

For. . . what? For, you were members of the Protestant Reformed Churches? Or, for, in your theology you adhered most closely to the truth of the Word of God?

Church membership is, without a doubt, important. And the Lord has given us His Word in order that, when we worship Him, we might worship Him as He is, not robbing Him of any of His glory. But it’s interesting to note that, in the judgment day, when public justification is given for the verdict rendered (in order that it might be clear to all that the Lord judges righteously), the question is going to be, not “What did you profess?” but “What did you do?” God judges every man according to his works (Rev. 20:13). Did you feed the hungry? Did you give a glass of water to one who was thirsty? Did you befriend the stranger? Did you clothe the poor? Did you visit the sick and those in prison? (See Matt. 25:31-46.) In other words, was goodness as it is a fruit of the Spirit of Christ, evident in your life?

Perhaps it goes without saying in this magazine that, though the kingdom of heaven is indeed the reward only of those who do the works, the works do not in themselves constitute the ground of entry into it. That’s evident in Jesus’ instruction to His disciples on the occasion referred to above. What is it the King will say to those on His right? “Come, ye blessed of my Father.” The reward, you see, goes to those whom God is pleased to bless. Further, the kingdom is referred to as an inheritance, which excludes the idea of obtaining by merit — especially so, since it was prepared from the foundation of the world, and for you. The reward, therefore, actually preceded both the work and the worker. So what then is the ground? It’s the good pleasure of God, as that is revealed in the decree of election (Rom. 9:15-19). When in the day of judgment the King judges on the basis of works (which can be seen), He judges on the basis of what really is the proof of faith (which is unseen and which according to the clear testimony of Scripture is the gift of God — Eph. 2:8). Only when we maintain this do we give all the glory to God.

That’s good theology — because it’s based on God’s Word. And, because it’s grounded in the Scriptures, every child of God is obliged to subscribe to it too. Unwavering affirmation of the absolute sovereignty of God in His dealings with men is not optional. And yet, we say again, the question in the day of judgment is not, did you have, so to speak, all of your theological ducks in a row? Nor even, did you spend your life somehow in a defense of the truth? It’s this: how did you treat the least of My brethren?

We will not be asked to recall great and mighty deeds of kindness, which caused men to sit up and take notice. Most people who wait for an opportunity to crawl into a burning building in order to drag out an unconscious victim of smoke inhalation will wait in vain. But the question is, did you give a cup of cold water, in due season. . . when nobody was looking? That is the highest manifestation of the grace of God in the hearts of His elect. That is the proof of the sincerity of our professions. And that is what goodness is all about.

Goodness is not only a desire, be it ever so sincere, for the happiness of others. It’s an active disposition to promote that happiness. It’s that kind of goodness that we see in Christ. Of Jesus

of Nazareth, Whose devotion to the welfare of men we must emulate if we would possess the grace of true goodness, it is said that He “went about doing good” (Acts 10:38). Jesus Himself testified of that when He said to the unbelieving Jews, “Many good works have I showed you from my Father” (John 10:32). So many were those works, in fact, that if all of them were to have been recorded, “I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that should be written” (John 21:25).

Jesus had truly on countless occasions shown Himself to be concerned for the welfare of individual saints. We think, for example, of the leper who came to Jesus near the beginning of His public ministry in Galilee. The man’s affliction was a terrible one. The disease, which began as nothing more than little spots on the skin, progressed through the body till the whole became a mass of rotteness. This particular leper, according to Luke’s account, was “full of leprosy.” The disease must have been in its final stage and appeared in all its horribleness. We can imagine that the disciples must have backed away, maintaining a discreet distance, so as to avoid levitical defilement. But not so Jesus. On hearing the man’s plea, “Lord, if thou wilt, thou canst make me clean,” Jesus reached out and touched him and said, “I will: be thou clean” (Luke 5:13).

Jesus was touched with the feeling of that poor leper’s physical infirmities. His healing of the man’s disease was therefore a display of His goodness; it was a part of His going about doing good. But the physical cure does not tell it all. Jesus’ concern for others did not consist only, or even primarily, in a desire to give them relief from bodily ills. His healing of the leper was actually a demonstration of a deeper concern, for, as leprosy spoke to the Jewish nation of sin, so did the cure of it speak of the spiritual reality of salvation for sinners, as that would be accomplished by Christ on the cross. Jesus was, above all else, concerned about the spiritual, eternal well-being of His sheep.

This becomes more apparent perhaps in a later miracle of Jesus, performed not for the direct benefit of only one person, or a few, but for a large multitude. This one also occurred in Galilee. Jesus’ popularity was growing steadily — to the point that, with people coming and going constantly, He and His disciples had difficulty finding time even to eat (Mark 6:31). Jesus said therefore to His disciples, “Come ye yourselves apart into a desert place and rest awhile.” So it was that they entered a boat, left Capernaum, and headed for a desert area which lay to the north of the Sea of Galilee, a couple of hours walking distance east of Capernaum.

The “rest” which they sought, and which Jesus so sorely needed, was not yet, however, to be theirs. For, their departure had not gone undetected; and somehow the people had learned where they were headed. So determined were Jesus’ followers to see and hear more of Him that they were willing to follow Him, even if it required a long walk out into a desert place. Men, women, and children from Capernaum and surrounding villages set out on foot, running; and they outwent Jesus, reaching the place where He intended to find solitude, even before the boat which carried Him had arrived (Mark 6:33).

When Jesus saw the multitude He uttered no cry of dismay, no complaint for their imposition on His time or invasion of His privacy. He was moved, rather, with compassion “because they were as sheep not having a shepherd” (Mark 6:34). As always, Jesus was ready to put the needs of others first — i.e., before His own. He did not, in other words, do good only when that was convenient. There was very really personal sacrifice involved in Jesus’ acts of kindness. Thus here, though He had left Capernaum in order to find temporary respite from exactly this kind of constant pressure, He plunged right into the work of teaching (Mark 6:34) and of healing their sick (Matt. 14:14).

As the afternoon wore on, and the people gave no indication at all that they were ready to

leave, nor yet Jesus to stop teaching, the disciples grew increasingly concerned. Aware that the people had brought with them no food, and that many of them were far from home, the disciples finally made bold to interrupt Jesus with a suggestion that, for the people's own good, He should send them away. Jesus however had also seen and was touched by their need. Disposed as He ever was to the welfare of His people, He said to the disciples, "They need not depart; give ye them to eat."

The story is familiar. With but five loaves and two fishes Jesus fed a multitude of some 8,000 people (5,000 men, plus women and children). It was of course a sign — as were all of Jesus' miracles. It pointed to Himself and what He accomplishes in the realm of grace. He is the true bread, sufficient for all of His people, no matter how great may be the multitude of the redeemed.

The truth is that the significance of the miracle was not perceived by the people — at least by the vast majority of them. They reacted carnally to this wonderful work of Christ. They had indeed been impressed by Jesus' earlier miracles; but nothing that He had ever done before generated as much popular excitement as did the miracle of the loaves. Five loaves and two little fishes, in His hand, had been enough to feed the whole multitude! What then, really, they must have wondered, could be beyond His power? Surely in Him lay the solution to their physical, economic, and even political problems!

Can you imagine the excitement which must have gripped the people in that multitude? For centuries the Jews had eagerly awaited the coming of the Messiah. And here He was, before their very eyes! Here was the Christ, Who had it in His power to do all manner of good things for them. They would make Him their king (see John 6:15). ~

But the Galileans were inventing a kingdom that the prophets had never promised. And in their reaching for the "good" life, they sought nothing more than bread for their stomachs, cures for their physical ills, freedom from foreign domination. They were soon to learn that Jesus of Nazareth, Who did indeed go about doing good, was not about to satisfy their carnal desires. He would not be their king. He would not give them more bread — at least, not of the kind they wanted. The blessed truth that Christ is the bread of life to His own, through the giving of His flesh in order that they might have eternal life, was to the Galileans a "hard saying" (John 6:60). It was that because it blasted all of their hopes for an earthly kingdom, and in it an abundance of good things of this life. Hence, they would not hear it. They were completely disillusioned. And they left Him (John 6:66).

Such was the goodness of Jesus. He was interested first of all in the spiritual well-being and the eternal state of His people. Had He given the bread-seekers the "good" they desired, an earthly crown would have been His for the asking ("All this power will I give thee. . .if. . ."). But Jesus had no ambition for earthly prestige or power for Himself, nor yet material or political advantage for the Jews. The blessings of His Kingdom were spiritual. He chose that for His people — even though it meant desertion by hundreds of His Galilean followers on this occasion, and for Himself eventual suffering and death at the hands of His enemies in Jerusalem, all in order that the elect might be saved, and enjoy the blessings of His goodness forever.

On His way to Jerusalem for the last time, when one would expect Jesus to have been preoccupied with thoughts of Himself, of the terrible death which He faced in a matter of days on the cross of Calvary, we find Him as concerned as ever about the plight of His brethren. Again, how unlike us! How quick we are to view our own "misfortunes" as more than enough reason to put us on the receiving end of goodness. Not so Jesus. We think particularly of two incidents in the city of Jericho. A blind beggar sat by the side of the road. Hearing the noise of a crowd of people passing by, the man asked concerning the reason for it. On learning that Jesus of Nazareth

was the center of attention in this large company of people on the way to Jerusalem for the celebration of the Passover, the blind man seized what he saw to be a once-in-a-life-time opportunity for receiving sight. “Jesus, thou son of David,” he cried, “have mercy on me.”

Had he been an influential man in the community, the blind man would most likely have been escorted directly to Jesus. But he wasn't that. He was a beggar, and therefore only an annoyance. So he was told in no uncertain terms to hush up, with the idea no doubt that Jesus was busy with matters that were far more important than whatever it was that this beggar wanted.

The man was however undaunted by the rebuke of the people. In fact, he only cried the louder, “thou son of David, have mercy on me.” That's right, “Son of David” — i.e., the Messiah, the Christ, He believed it. It mattered not to him that others denied it. He was ready to affirm it before the entire multitude. And Jesus responded to that faith. Contrary to the thinking of the people, Jesus did have time for the likes of this beggar, this outcast of society. He stopped and commanded that the man be brought to Him. Then, by the word of Jesus' mouth and the touch of His hand, Bartimaeus was made able to see. . .the least of these My brethren.

There was yet another man in Jericho who had more than a passing interest in seeing Jesus. His name was Zacchaeus. Whereas Bartimaeus was considered by the general populace to be merely of no account in Jericho, Zacchaeus, was heartily hated. He was a tax collector. He was a Jew who made his living by cooperating with the oppressors, the Romans. And in doing so he had managed to enrich himself, at the expense of his countrymen. So they despised him. In fact, it's probably safe to say that there wasn't a more despised man in all of Jericho.

This tax collector, at any rate, wished to see Jesus. As far as the reason for that desire is concerned, we are told only that he “sought to see Jesus who he was.” Sounds like curiosity. But it must have been something more than that. For when he, being a short man, could not see Jesus for the press of the multitude, he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree in order to be able to see Jesus as He passed. Hardly the thing one would expect of a grown man, and a tax collector besides — if he were motivated by nothing more than idle curiosity. Perhaps it's true, as Calvin suggests, that there was put in his mind a “seed of godliness” — not yet faith, but a kind of preparation for it. It may be therefore that Zacchaeus himself would not have been able to explain why he wanted to look on Jesus. He knew only that he did; and he was willing to adopt rather unusual tactics in order to overcome obstacles in the way of doing so.

Imagine the surprise of Zacchaeus when Jesus stopped, looked up into the tree, and called him by name! The people crowding around Jesus were also surprised. At Jesus' word they too looked up into the tree; and whom should they see but that despised little publican. What in the world was he doing up in a tree? And when they heard Jesus announce to Zacchaeus that He would visit his house that day, their surprise turned to disgust. They began at once to grumble that Jesus was gone to be guest with a man that is a sinner. And so He was. Christ had in fact come into this world exactly in order to save those who are lost, those who are perishing under the wrath and curse of God because of their sins. Before He left Zacchaeus that day, He declared, “This day is salvation come to this house.” . . .the least of these My brethren.

We ourselves possess the grace of goodness only in so far as we walk in the footsteps of Him Who went about doing good. That means, then, that our goodness will be more than mere sentiment. It's easy enough, you know, to talk much and even eloquently about duty to those who are in need. It's easy enough to feel deep sympathy for those who are dying of starvation in Ethiopia, and to feel outrage over the suffering of the victims of war in Afghanistan or Nicaragua. It's easy enough, too, to wish for opportunity to show one's generosity on some grand scale. What's harder is to take opportunities as they come our way every day. Do we

perhaps hear no call for compassion, and see no fit recipient for our benevolence? Then we're not listening, or looking. Jesus found it everywhere. And, oh, what it cost Him to reach out to help those who had need! Just to dine with Zacchaeus earned Him the animosity of the more distinguished citizens of Jericho. But the ultimate price was paid just a little more than a week later, when He accomplished, on the cross, that work by which He merited the salvation of which He spoken to Bartimaeus and Zacchaeus.

Yes, "doing good" does involve sacrifice. The charity of which the world boasts will be found, on examination, either to have cost the dispensers of it very little of what they truly valued, or to have gained for them honors which they valued more. But how about us? Do we find it relatively easy to be liberal in offering God's riches ("We wish you the Lord's blessing"), and difficult to part with our own (Here's \$800 for the school drive)? Be followers of Christ, Who, though He was rich, for our sakes became poor. Help the saints, the least and the greatest; for in doing that, you serve the Lord Jesus. Then look forward to the day of judgment and those blessed words, "Well done, good and faithful servant; . . . enter thou into the joy of thy Lord."

Originally Published in:
Vol 45 No 2 February 1986