

Matthew 25: 31-46

THERE IS A CERTAIN EXERCISE...A TEST...THAT CHALLENGES YOUR ABILITY TO CONCENTRATE. IT IS QUITE INTERESTING. IT'S A VIDEO. IN THE VIDEO, THERE ARE SEVERAL PEOPLE WITH WHITE SHIRTS AND PEOPLE WITH RED SHIRTS. THE WHITE-SHIRT PEOPLE THROW A BALL TO OTHER WHITE-SHIRT PEOPLE AND THE RED-SHIRT PEOPLE THROW A BALL TO OTHER RED-SHIRT PEOPLE. TO TEST YOUR ABILITY TO CONCENTRATE, YOUR JOB IS TO PICK ONE OF THE SHIRTS...WHITE OR RED...AND COUNT THE NUMBER OF TIMES THAT THE TEAM THROWS TO A MEMBER OF THEIR TEAM.

THE INSTRUCTIONS IN THIS TEST SAY "IGNORE EVERYTHING ELSE. JUST FOCUS ON THAT." SO, THE CONCENTRATION TEST UNFOLDS. YOU WATCH PEOPLE RUN AROUND AND THROW A BALL. "SEVEN, EIGHT, NINE, TWELVE, FOURTEEN, SEVENTEEN, TWENTY-ONE. TWENTY-ONE!"

AT THE END OF THE VIDEO, YOU ANSWER THE QUESTIONS—IF YOU FOLLOWED THE WHITE SHIRTS, HOW MANY TIMES DID THEY PASS THE BALL? AND IF YOU FOLLOWED THE RED SHIRTS, SAME QUESTION..WAS IT SIXTEEN, SEVENTEEN, NINETEEN TIMES? AND THERE IS A CORRECT ANSWER..BUT IT MOVES ALONG FAST.

AND THEN..AFTER YOU GUESS THE NUMBER OF THROWS TO TEST YOUR CONCENTRATION..THERE IS THIS QUESTION: "DID YOU SEE THE GORILLA?"

MOST PEOPLE—SO FOCUSED ON THE ASSIGNMENT OF COUNTING THE TIMES THE BALL IS THROWN—SAY "WHAT?...A GORILLA?"

YES, THAT IS THE REAL QUESTION! A GORILLA AMIDST THIS BUSY GAME OF WHITE SHIRTS AND RED SHIRTS THROWING A BALL. SO, YOU GO BACK AND WATCH THE VIDEO AGAIN..AND SURE ENOUGH...HALFWAY THROUGH, A GUY IN A GORILLAS SUIT WALKS ACROSS THE STAGE BETWEEN ALL THE PEOPLE THROWING THEIR BALLS..AND THEN WALKS OFF THE STAGE.

YOU THINK THIS IS A DIFFERENT VIDEO. WHO COULD MISS THAT..A GORILLA?!! BUT ALMOST EVERYONE MISSES IT IN THIS CONCENTRATION TEST.

AND WHAT WE LEARN FROM THIS TEST IS THIS....WHAT WE FOCUS ON DETERMINES WHAT WE SEE. WHAT WE ARE LOOKING FOR OFTEN BLINDS US TO EVERYTHING ELSE THAT MIGHT BE HAPPENING. WHAT WE SEE ARE USUALLY THE THINGS WE EXPECT TO SEE.

IT'S A GREAT GIFT TO BE ABLE TO FOCUS, TO CONCENTRATE...BUT IT ALSO HAS A FLIP SIDE. THE VERY ACT OF FOCUSING, LIKE A CAMERA, YOU FOCUS ON THE FOREGROUND, THE BACKGROUND BECOMES BLURRY. YOU FOCUS ON THE BACKGROUND, THE CLOSER IMAGES BECOME BLURRY, MAYBE EVEN DISAPPEAR.

WHAT WE FOCUS ON USUALLY DETERMINES WHAT WE SEE. WE CAN LOOK AT A MOUNTAIN AND WE CAN SEE A GREAT PLACE TO HIKE, ENJOY NATURE. SOMEONE ELSE PULLS UP TO THAT SAME MOUNTAIN, AND THINK THEY COULD MAKE A MILLION DOLLARS BY BULLDOZING IT DOWN AND BUILDING A TOURIST ATTRACTION. WHAT WE FOCUS ON DETERMINES WHAT WE SEE.

WHAT WE ACTUALLY SEE, HOW WE SEE, IS SO OFTEN COLORED, AFFECTED, FILTERED BY SO MANY VARIABLES, BIASES, PERCEPTIONS, LIMITATIONS.

JESUS CARES VERY MUCH ABOUT HOW WE SEE...WHAT WE SEE. WE JUST HEARD THAT VERY MESSAGE IN OUR GOSPEL READING. DID YOU CATCH THE WORDING: "LORD, WHEN WAS IT THAT WE SAW YOU HUNGRY, OR THIRSTY...WHEN WAS IT THAT WE SAW YOU AS A STRANGER OR NAKED,....SAW YOU SICK OR IN PRISON?"

JESUS CARES SO MUCH ABOUT WHAT WE SEE. AND WHAT WE SEE IS OFTEN SO AFFECTED BY WHAT WE WANT TO SEE, WHAT WE MIGHT BE LOOKING FOR, WHAT WE FOCUS ON. JESUS IS ALWAYS TRYING TO HELP US SEE BETTER—SEE GOD'S PLANS. GOD'S WAYS, GOD'S PURPOSES. IN FACT, JESUS WANTS US TO LEARN HOW TO SEE SO WE CAN WORK WITH GOD ON HEALING THE FRACTURES OF THE WORLD. JESUS WANTS US TO LEARN HOW TO SEE SO WE CAN BE GOD'S AGENTS...MOVING OUR LIVES, MOVING THE WORLD, CLOSER TO WHAT GOD INTENDS.

BACK IN THE EARLY PAGES OF SCRIPTURE, ESPECIALLY IN DEUTERONOMY, GOD PROMISES "I WILL BE YOUR GOD." THE CORRESPONDING PART OF THE COVENANT IS THAT WE SEEK TO BE

GOD'S "TREASURED PEOPLE." TO BE "TREASURED" DOES NOT MEAN WE JUST BASK IN GOD'S GOODNESS AND CARE. "TREASURED" DOES NOT MEAN WE ARE JUST SAVED BY GOD'S ABIDING GRACE AND LOVE. "TREASURED" MEANS WE ARE TO WORSHIP AND LIVE, TO LOVE AND SERVE IN A WAY THAT MOVES US AND THE WORLD TOWARD A NEW REALITY IN SYNC WITH GOD. "CHOOSE" IS A FAVORITE WORD IN SCRIPTURE. WE HAVE TO CHOOSE TO LIVE IN SYNC WITH GOD ALWAYS.

THROUGH ALL JESUS' TEACHINGS, WE LEARN WHAT LIVING IN SYNC WITH GOD LOOKS LIKE: WE ARE SALT AND LIGHT, WE LOVE AND FORGIVE, WE SHARE WHAT WE HAVE, WE SPREAD PEACE AND HOPE, JUSTICE AND JOY IN THE WORLD. AND AS WE LEARN IN MATTHEW 25— WE ARE, FOR SURE, CALLED TO FOCUS—SEE—ON A CERTAIN SEGMENT OF SOCIETY—THE POOR AND THE LAME, THE HUNGRY AND THE NAKED, THE STRANGER AND THE PRISONER. WE ARE HERE TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE—NOT JUST ASSUME WE ARE GOD'S TREASURED PEOPLE. WE ARE HERE TO MEND THE FRACTURES OF THE WORLD, A DAY AT A TIME, AN ACT AT A TIME, FOR AS LONG AS IT TAKES TO MAKE THE WORLD A PLACE OF COMPASSION WHERE THE LONELY ARE NOT ALONE, THE POOR ARE NOT WITHOUT HELP, WHERE THE CRY OF THE VULNERABLE IS HEEDED. THIS IS WHAT WE DO AS GOD'S TREASURED PEOPLE...LEARN TO SEE AND HELP THE HURTING; LEARN TO SEE AND CARE FOR THE OUTCAST AND STRANGER; LEARN TO SEE AND SERVE IN WAYS THAT HEAL THE FRACTURED WORLD.

AS ONE MYSTIC PUT IT...BECAUSE THIS IS GOD'S WORLD AND WE ARE GOD'S PEOPLE, SOMEONE ELSE'S PHYSICAL NEEDS ARE MY SPIRITUAL OBLIGATION. THE CHOICE IS NEVER BETWEEN FAITH AND WORKS. IT IS ALWAYS OUR WORKS THAT FAITHFULLY EXPRESS WHO WE ARE AND WHAT WE BELIEVE. IT IS PUTTING CHRIST BACK INTO WHAT IT MEANS TO BE CHRISTIAN. JESUS IS TRYING..IN STORY AFTER STORY..AND ESPECIALLY IN MATTHEW 25..TO HELP US LEARN TO SEE—WORKS AND FAITH ARE NEVER SEPARATE. WE ARE ALWAYS LEARNING TO SEE IN WAYS THAT CHANGE US...CHANGE EVERYTHING ABOUT US.

ALL THROUGH MATTHEW, JESUS HAS BEEN THE GREAT TEACHER, AND THIS LAST PARABLE IS JESUS' FINAL TEACHING..THE PARTING LESSON, THE CUMULATIVE MOMENT IIN HIS TEACHING MINISTRY. THIS PASSAGE STARTS OUT "WHEN THE SON OF MAN COMES IN

GLORY.” THIS IS THE SAME JESUS WHO—AT THE BEGINNING OF MATTHEW’S GOSPEL---WAS BORN TO JOSEPH AND MARY SURROUNDED BY GREAT SUSPICION AND ANXIETY. THIS IS THE SAME JESUS WHO AS A BABY HAD TO FLEE FOR HIS LIFE FROM HEROD. THIS IS THE SAME JESUS WHO “HAD NOWHERE TO LAY HIS HEAD” AND IS NOW SEATED ON THE ROYAL THRONE AS KING. HE WAS REJECTED BY PEOPLE IN HIS OWN HOMETOWN, AND NOW “ALL THE NATIONS ARE GATHERED AROUND HIM.” BY MATTHEW 25, WE HAVE COME A LONG WAY WITH JESUS, AND THIS IS HIS FINAL TEACHING, PARTING WORDS ABOUT JUDGING EVERYONE—SEPARATING THE SHEEP FROM THE GOATS.

THE SON OF MAN PRONOUNCES JUDGMENT AND SEPARATES THE SHEEP AND GOATS. FOR THE SHEEP, THIS NEWS IS GOOD. THEY ARE GIVEN DIVINE BLESSING AND ARE REVEALED AS THE TRUE HEIRS OF THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN BECAUSE THEY PROVIDED FOOD, DRINK, HOSPITALITY, CLOTHING AND CARE FOR THE SON OF MAN. AS FOR THE GOATS, THEY ARE CONDEMNED, CAST INTO THE DARKNESS, BECAUSE THEY SUPPLIED NONE OF THOSE MINISTRIES, EVEN THOUGH THE SON OF MAN WAS HUNGRY, THIRSTY, A STRANGER, SICK, NAKED, AND IN PRISON.

BUT THIS IS NOT JUST A MORALITY TALE...DO GOOD AND YOU RECEIVE LIFE. DO NOT DO GOOD, AND YOU ARE CAST ASIDE. THAT IS A FAMILIAR RELIGIOUS PARABLE FOUND IN LOTS OF PLACES. THE INTERESTING AND POWERFUL POINT HERE IS THIS: NEITHER THE SHEEP---IN HELPING AND LOVING AND SERVING SAW JESUS IN THE MIDST....NOR THE GOATS, IN THEIR INDIFFERENCE, HAD ANY CLUE THAT THEY WERE REJECTING...NOT SEEING...THE LORD. BOTH GROUPS ASK—“LORD, WHEN WAS IT THAT WE SAW YOU HUNGRY, OR NAKED, OR IN NEED?”

AND THE ANSWER...AS WE ALL KNOW...WHENEVER THEY ACTED COMPASSIONATELY AND WITH GREAT CARE---OR DID NOT ACT THAT WAY---THEY DID SO TO JESUS CHRIST. WE ALL ASSUME---WE HOPE TO BE SHEEP—BUT THE REAL ISSUE IS SINGULAR---IT IS ALL ABOUT OUR COMPASSION AND CARE. SEEING—AND LIVING WITH COMPASSION AND CARE.

JESUS IS EVERYWHERE PRESENT IN THE WORLD. WE ARE TO ACT WITH COMPASSION AND CARE ALWAYS BECAUSE JESUS IS ALWAYS EVERYWHERE.

THIS DESCRIPTION OF THE LAST JUDGMENT IN MATTHEW 25 HAS NOTHING ABOUT ECCLESIASTICAL CONNECTIONS OR RELIGIOUS PRACTICES. THERE IS NOT A WORD IN THIS PASSAGE ABOUT THEOLOGY, CREEDS, OR ORTHODOXIES. THERE IS ONLY ONE CRITERION HERE, AND THAT IT IS WHETHER OR NOT YOU SAW JESUS CHRIST IN THE FACE OF SOMEONE IN NEED AND WHETHER OR NOT YOU GAVE YOURSELF AWAY IN LOVE IN HIS NAME.

THIS PASSAGE IS NOT SOCIAL, POLITICAL, ECONOMIC. IT IS PERSONAL. GOD WANTS NOT ONLY A NEW WORLD MODELED ON THE VALUES OF JESUS. GOD WANTS US...EACH OF US. GOD IS NOT A SOCIAL ENGINEER BUT A GOD OF LOVE WHO WANTS TO SAVE OUR SOULS.

GOD WANTS TO SAVE OUR SOULS AND REDEEM US AND GIVE US THE GIFT OF NEW LIFE--- TRUE, DEEP, AUTHENTIC HUMAN LIFE.

GOD WANTS TO SAVE US BY TOUCHING OUR HEARTS WITH LOVE. GOD WANTS TO SAVE US BY PERSUADING US TO CARE AND SEE OTHER HUMAN BEINGS WHO NEED US.

GOD WANTS TO SAVE US FROM OBSESSING ABOUT OURSELVES, OUR OWN NEEDS, BY PERSUADING US TO FORGET ABOUT OURSELVES AND WORRY ABOUT OTHERS.

THAT IS GOD'S FAVORITE PROJECT: TO TEACH YOU AND ME THE FUNDAMENTAL LESSON, THE SECRET, THE TRUTH---THAT IS TO LOVE IS TO LIVE. MAY IT BE SO. AMEN.