

The Unconscious Test

Psalm 100; Matthew 25:31-46

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Things are happening in our world today that many of us are oblivious to. Some are good, and some are not. One of the good things happening today is that cancer is on the decrease. Did you know that? Due to research and new treatments, the cancer rate affecting the world's population has decreased by 20% in the past twenty years. Best of all, it is expected to continue to decrease. When Neil Lamb from HudsonAlpha was here a few years ago for our Williams lectures, he said that cancer is on the cusp of becoming something we live with, not die from. I remember one of our members spoke up and asked him to work fast!

It's not all good news, though. Some of you are aware that our bee population is dying off. That's not something most of us think about every day, but it is quite serious for agriculture. Bees are our pollinators. Studies show that bees are dying at an alarming rate, due mostly to parasites and insecticides. Since 1998, the number of beehives in the United States has decreased by 50%.

We talk about slavery today as if it was a southern U. S. phenomenon of a previous century, and thankfully we have rid the world of that terrible scourge. Many are not aware that human slavery is still a horrible blight in our world. Some estimate 30-35 million people are held as modern day slaves, more than at any other time in history.

I didn't know that human blood is smuggled. In poor countries like India, human farms exist where the poorest of the poor are chained and their blood drawn to be sold on a black market. I did not know that climate change is expanding the world's deserts. People who study these things say that the Saharan Desert has expanded 6,000 square kilometers since 1990. I didn't know that.

We are inundated with social media and twenty-four-hour news, and yet things are happening daily that many of us are oblivious to. Some are more important than what actually makes it into the news cycle.

Today I want to tell you about something else that is happening that most of us are oblivious to. It is a test, an unconscious test that is being applied to you and me every day. Jesus describes this test in one of his most famous parables. It's in Matthew 25, and we call it The Parable of the Great Judgment. This section of Matthew is called the "judgment discourse" and is comprised of seven parables warning the disciples to be alert. Pay attention, Jesus was telling them, to your life and to the people around you. The Parable of the Great Judgment is the last of the seven parables. In fact, these are the last words Jesus spoke to his disciples in Matthew before the Passover, the Last Supper, and the crucifixion of Jesus. The great judgment, he told his disciples, what he described as a separating of the sheep from the goats, is not something that happens far off in the future. No, he said it is happening every day, unconscious to us, in the way we treat the vulnerable people we encounter. Jesus called these vulnerable people "the least of these," people who are hungry and thirsty, people who are strangers and who don't have adequate clothes, and people who are sick or in prison.

According to the parable at the end of time, the great King will gather all the nations before his throne. He will separate them from one another the way a shepherd separates sheep from goats, the sheep on his right hand and the goats on his left. To the sheep, the King will say,

"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 clothes, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me."

Those who are deemed to be sheep are confused, Jesus said. Remember, this is an unconscious test. They want to know when they saw their King hungry

or thirsty or otherwise vulnerable and provided for his needs. And this is what the King says. It is very important.

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.'

In other words, when they cared for the most vulnerable people around them, it was as if they were caring for their King.

Then, Jesus said, the King will turn to the goats. He will tell them to depart because when he was hungry, they did not feed him. When he was thirsty, they did not give him something to drink. When he was a stranger, they did not welcome him. When he was naked or sick or in prison, they did not respond to his need.

Those who are deemed to be goats are confused, too. Remember, this is an unconscious test. They want to know when they neglected their King. This is very important too.

Truly, I tell you, as you did it not to one of the least of these, you did it not to me.

In other words, when they failed to care for the most vulnerable people around them, it was as if they failed to care for their King.

One of the most famous parables of Jesus ends with these words:

And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.

Here's what we need to know. What is happening to the bee population is alarming. If we're really paying attention, it should change our behavior. Slavery too. And blood smuggling. And climate change. And many other things that are happening today that many are oblivious to. That is why I am telling

you about this test, this unconscious test that is being applied to you and me every day. According to Jesus, how we treat the most vulnerable has eternal consequences.

Mother Teresa was one during our lifetime who got this. She once said, “Never worry about numbers. Help one person at a time and always start with the person nearest you.” Her calling, she used to explain, was to help the poorest of the poor: “the unwanted, the unloved, the uncared for.” And Calcutta, India, certainly had plenty.

Some claim this was a defining moment in Mother Teresa’s life. It was nighttime. She was walking down a street when she heard the moans of a woman. She was calling for help. Mother Teresa rushed the woman to a hospital where she was told to wait. She was certain the woman would die if she didn’t get immediate attention, so she took her to another hospital. Again, she was told to wait. This was India, and the ill woman belonged to a low caste. She was not as important as others in the hospital. Finally, Mother Teresa took the woman to her home. Later that night she died in the arms of Mother Teresa.

Here’s the defining moment: she vowed that this would never happen again to anyone. From that moment on, she devoted herself to the care of those who were suffering, so that, whether they lived or died, they would do so with dignity. “I see God in every human being,” she once said. “When I wash the leper’s wounds, I feel I am nursing the Lord himself.”

And I guess she is, isn’t she? As you did it to one of the least of these, you did it to me. She passed the unconscious test.

That test is being applied to each of us every day, whether we realize it or not. How do we respond to the most vulnerable? The hungry. The thirsty. The stranger. The naked, sick, and prisoner. The struggling single mom. The 7-11 clerk. The weary nurse working a COVID unit. The man who keeps our grocery store shelves stocked. You know who I’m talking about. When we respond with love and kindness to the least of these, Jesus said, it is as if we are responding with love and kindness to Jesus himself. Mother Teresa’s advice is good. Don’t

worry about numbers. Help one person at a time and start with the person nearest you.

Closing Prayer

During this season of Thanksgiving, Lord, open our eyes and hearts to the least of these. Amen.