

“Knowing Glances”
by Barbara Brown Taylor from
The Preaching Life

Read Matthew 25:31-46

1. Taylor writes,

So when I hear a story like this one I review my list. First I read it over very carefully and note that I need at least one hungry person, one thirsty one, one stranger, one naked person, one sick person, and one prisoner so that I can supply—in that order—food, drink, a warm welcome, some clothes, a hospital visit, and a prison visit. Then, presumably, I will have satisfied all the requirements for ending up with the sheep instead of the goats. Now isn't that absurd? But—as often happens when I try to make law out of gospel—there is a problem.

Paul, in Galatians, describes the Christian life as one free from the condemnation of the law, yet necessarily leading to good works. On the one hand, using “circumcision” for the requirements of the law, Paul writes,

For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love. (5:6)

But he later adds,

Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. The one who sows to please his sinful nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life. Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers. (6:7-10)

As Keith Green famously pointed out, the difference between the sheep and the goats is precisely what they did and did not do. Fortunately, Scripture consistently portrays our sanctification—which naturally leads Christians to do the good works which characterize the sheep—as a work of the Spirit:

May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it. (1 Thess 5:23-24)

Do Jesus' words feel to you like the lightness of grace or the gravity of the law? How does BBT read the Sheep and the Goats?

2. BBT gives two reasons for surprise of the sheep and goats: a first reason and a “biggest surprise of all.”
- a) What are they?
 - b) Do you think Jesus was describing the surprise of first-century Jews and Gentiles or twentieth-century Christians raised in the Church (or both)?
 - c) Taylor notes, “to read the story carefully is to notice that both groups were totally baffled by the verdicts they received.” Regarding this, D. A. Carson writes,

...Both the sheep and the goats (25:37, 41, 44) are surprised when Jesus pronounces his verdict in terms of the way they have treated “the least of these brothers of mine.” If what Jesus is referring to was compassion of a generic sort, it is hard to see how anyone would be all that surprised. The point is that it is Jesus' *identification* with these people who have (or have not) been helped that is critical—and that is a constant feature of biblical religion. For example, when Saul (Paul) persecutes Christians, he is persecuting *Jesus* (Acts 9:4). Real followers of Jesus will go out of their way to help other followers of Jesus, not least the weakest and most despised of them; others will have no special inclination along these lines. That is what separates sheep and goats (25:32-33).

Why do you think the sheep and goats are surprised?

3. While the popular interpretation is that “the least of these brothers of mine” refers to the needy in general, the majority interpretation historically and among modern scholars is that they are the needy of the disciples in particular. Here is the evidence:
 - a) When Jesus uses the phrase “little ones” in Matthew he's *always* referring to the disciples (10:42; 18:6, 10, 14).
 - b) In Matthew when Jesus speaks of his family members of brothers he's *always* describing the disciples of Jesus who do God's will (12:46-50; 23:8-9; 28:10).
 - c) The parallel in 10:40-42: “He who receives you receives me, and he who receives me receives the one who sent me. Anyone who receives a prophet because he is a prophet will receive a prophet's reward, and anyone who receives a righteous man will receive a righteous man's reward. And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones because he is my disciple, I tell you the truth, he will certainly not lose his reward.”
 - d) “It is with his disciples that Jesus promises to be present in the world until the end of the age (28:20; cf. 18:20).”

(This observation need not detract from our understanding of the Good Samaritan and other parables which show that all people should be the object of our charity and love.)

How does this affect your understanding of this passage? Does it have any impact on BBT's interpretation?

4. BBT writes,

How do we find the courage to get up in the morning, knowing that every pair of eyes that pleads with us that day will be his eyes, asking us for something to eat or drink or wear, asking us for recognition, for time, for attention? That is the question, but the Bible is not a book with the answers in the back. All I know is that we are asked to wrestle with that fact, to let it challenge us and unsettle us and—who knows?—maybe even to comfort us. Jesus is so present with us, and we have such unlimited opportunities to meet him and serve him, that in some way we may never understand, everything we do or don't do affects our eternal relationship with him.

How do you face “every pair of eyes that pleads” with you? Is there any way in which you find these “opportunities to meet” Jesus comforting?

For next week, check the bulletin.