

COVENANT PULPIT



RECOGNIZING JESUS

“Glory with an Aching Belly”

Matthew 25/2 Kings 6&7

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We passed by her several times a day as we strolled along the picturesque canals of Venice, Italy. She sat in the same place from early morning until late evening—an embarrassment to the locals and a jarring unpleasantness to tourists. The old beggar’s emaciated body was covered in black—as if she was in perpetual mourning. Her eyes were watery pools of sadness. Calloused hands were misshapen by years of labor. Periodically she would raise them like a worshipper, silently pleading with passersby to drop something into her bowl.

Most folks ignored her, intent on shopping for trinkets in nearby Venetian shops. A priest crossed the plaza from the little Renaissance cathedral to shoo her away. I figured that the good reverend was worried that she was scaring away visitors from his church.

Every time I dropped some Euros into her dish, she looked away in shame. I wondered what had reduced her to this humiliation. Was she a mother or grandmother? Had there been a time when she was someone’s lover or wife? Was there a springtime when she walked saucily down the street while Italian men whistled at her youthful beauty? How many beggars might have been kings or queens—if only life had dealt them a different hand?

Whenever people turned to go to the little cathedral, she would hold a glossy picture of the crucified Jesus in front of her face. Maybe she was trying to cover her shame with the face of Jesus. Or perhaps she was a very clever beggar, forcing passersby to remember that Jesus also suffered. Maybe she hoped that compassion for Jesus might put a few coins in her beggar’s bowl.

For a hot afternoon hour in Venice, I sat in the shade and watched her as she held that picture of Jesus in front of her face. I recalled the words of Mother Teresa when a reporter asked her to describe the beggars in Calcutta’s slums. She famously replied,

“They are Jesus in disguise.”

Mother Teresa’s words echo the 25th chapter of Matthew’s gospel. In it, Jesus gives a frightening picture of the Final Judgment. Our Savior is no longer “gentle Jesus, meek and mild.” He is now clothed in glorious radiance, surrounded by legions of fire angels, seated on a lofty throne as the King of kings and Lord of lords. The nations have been dragged before his Awful Majesty. This is the Jesus that most of us seldom imagine—but all of us ought to fear!

In the most vivid of imagery, the King of kings separates the goats from the sheep—those who are destined for outer darkness from those who are bound for eternal life. This is a moment of heart-stopping suspense. How will the King of the Ages decide who is goat or sheep? Most Evangelicals would give their typically shallow answer: “your salvation depends on saying a sinner’s prayer and inviting Jesus into your life.” That’s why Jesus’ words are so shocking. To the goats—those destined for outer darkness—he says in verses 42&43:

For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink. I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.”

Conversely, he says to the sheep—those righteous who are destined for eternal life—in verses 36&37:

“For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.”

There is a protest in verses 37&44, “Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger, or needing clothes or sick or in prison...” The King replies in verses 40&45, “Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.” A phrase leaps off the page: “...**the least of these...**” Be careful here. These are not “the least of these” to our Lord. He sees them as his brothers and sisters. More than that, they are, in Mother Teresa’s words, “Jesus in disguise.” Remember verses 40&45: “What you did for one of the least of these...*you did for me.*”

The “least of these” are the ones that the world defines as losers in the lottery of life: the down-and-outer; the alien; the convict; the ragamuffin; the handicapped; the old person warehoused in a Medicaid *Cuckoo’s Nest*; and others who we write off as “the least of these.”

I needed to see that picture of our crucified Savior in front of that beggar’s face. Without it, I might have forgotten who she really was. All those rushing to buy trinkets in Venetian shops could hardly imagine that they were passing by Jesus. Will he remind them of that beggar woman when they protest at the Final Judgment, “Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger?”

Because Trent and I love our Covenant family we feel compelled to take you deep into Matthew 25. This series isn’t for the faint of heart. Over the next seven weeks we will do a spiritual inventory that may be painfully revealing and convicting. But we know that you are up to the challenge because you are *committed to the Word*. You don’t mind being taken to places where you have to be *dependent on the Holy Spirit* or *grow in grace*. You know that a *loving family* must *reach out in mercy*—especially to “the least of these.” We are confident that you want to live out our vision because you are committed to our mission of *developing fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ*.

In the first of our **Recognizing Jesus** series, we begin with the first phrase in verses 35&42: “For I was hungry...” We want to take you back some 850 years before Christ walked this earth to a time when a Syrian army besieged the city of Samaria, the capital of Northern Israel. After months of siege, the city was reduced to starvation. The picture of hunger painted by 2 Kings 6&7 is horrific. But God intervenes in the

most amazing way. The story that begins with horror ends with joy! It is one of the Bible's most redemptive stories. Mostly it teaches us a powerful principle about ministering to hungry people everywhere:

The greatest joy in wealth is in sharing it.

This story perfectly illustrates what Jesus is talking about in Matthew 25. A city is paralyzed by hunger. There are few things more painful than hunger. The Puritan Matthew Henry wrote, "They that die by famine die by inches." Charles Dickens wrote about starving children in *Oliver Twist*, "There are people in the world so hungry, that God can only appear to them as bread."

Hunger comes in all forms. Food deprivation is the number one health risk on Earth. Each year, hunger kills more people worldwide than AIDS, malaria, and tuberculosis combined. Every night 929 million people go to bed malnourished. Eleven million children under the age of five die from hunger every year. People in developed nations may not suffer as much from food deprivation, but emotional and materialistic hunger is eating the heart out of Western Civilization. Mother Teresa said of rich people in the developed world, "I think that being unwanted, unloved, uncared for, forgotten by everybody is a much greater hunger, a much greater poverty than the person who has nothing to eat." One thinks of the words of an Old Testament prophet:

"The days are coming," declares the Sovereign Lord, "when I will send a famine through the land—not a famine of food or a thirst for water, but a famine of the words of the LORD. People will stagger from sea to sea and wander from north to east, searching for the word of the LORD, but they will not find it."

—Amos 8:11&12

Jesus speaks of those who "hunger for righteousness." Starvation comes in different ways. If Samaria was a city in the grip of hunger, the same might be said of cities as rich as Naples. Let's see what we can learn from Samaria, and then apply it to our lives today.

1. THE HORROR OF HUNGER

Warning: This incident begins in 2 Kings 6 with disturbing images. The starvation is so bad that people are paying a year's salary for a donkey's head, and a month's wages for a handful of seeds. But hunger has not yet exacted its full horror. The frantic king of Israel is walking the walls when a mother cries out to him to settle a conflict. The story she tells in verses 28&29 is unimaginable: "This woman said to me, 'Give up your son so we may eat him today, and tomorrow we will eat your son. So we cooked my son and ate him. The next day I said to her, 'Give up your son so we may eat him,' but she has hidden him."

We can hardly believe what we are reading. There are few taboos more repugnant than cannibalism. It is even more disgusting that two mothers would enter into a devilish pact to consume their own children. Robert Falcon Scott was a British explorer who almost died of

hunger in Antarctica. He wrote in his journal, “Dogs are made fiercer by hunger, but not nearly as fierce as humans.” Hunger drives people to do the unthinkable. The ancient philosopher Homer said, “Hunger is insolent, and it will be fed.” It drives two Israeli mothers to infanticide and cannibalism. It causes outcastes in India to sell their little girls to human traffickers who then use them in the vilest ways. Hunger attacks the body, destroys dignity, erodes moral character, and reduces people to scavengers and predators.

There are other kinds of hunger that drive people to bizarre and destructive behavior. Parents in America may not do what those mothers did to their children—but too many do abort, abandon, and abuse them. Driven by soul hunger, people emotionally cannibalize each other while leaving behind the carcasses of relationships that have been picked clean. Hunger for materialism leaves people and nations bankrupt. Hunger for power causes politicians to devour one another.

This Old Testament story pulls no punches. We may wish that we didn’t have to deal with disturbing images of two desperate mothers, but God wants us to grasp the horror of hunger. We can’t just walk by the beggar woman, or ignore the images of starving children, or write off other kinds of hunger as “none of our business.” We *are* responsible. We can’t pretend we didn’t see or hear. When those two mothers make their shocking confession, the king has to do something! And so do we. Those who pass on by simply don’t recognize Jesus.

2. THE RANCOR OF THE RULER

We see several responses to the horror of hunger. The first is the king. Verse 30 says that he tears his robes in grief. He is angry about this cannibalism. Beneath his ripped robes, the onlookers see his sackcloth. This king has been in prayer and repentance, pleading with God to do a miracle and save his people. We all know how hard it is to wait on God when our world is falling apart. But what he sees this day pushes him over the edge. He cries out in 2 Kings 6:31, “May God deal with me, be it ever so severely, if the head of Elisha son of Shaphat remains on his shoulders today.”

This king is angry with God. If he could, he would kill the LORD. But that is impossible. Then he remembers that the prophet Elisha is also holed up in town. If he can’t kill the God of Israel, he will do the next best thing: murder God’s mouthpiece! When tragedies take place, human propensity has always been to blame God. After the Nazi holocaust, a Jewish student rose during an ethics debate at Harvard and said, “The genocide of six million Jews has caused me to kill God in my own mind. He no longer exists.”

Like that angry and disillusioned student, the king of Northern Israel wants to kill God. It’s fascinating how God gets blamed for the suffering in this world. Could it be that it is our way of absolving ourselves of responsibility? If we ask God, “Why do you allow children to starve in Africa?” he might reply, “Why aren’t you feeding them with the food I gave you?” God didn’t create the holocaust. Nazis

decided to murder Jews, Gypsies, and others that they had labeled, “the least of these.” The rest of the world let it happen. And we still sit by when it happens in Cambodia, Bosnia, Rwanda, and the Sudan. Back to our story: Samaria was under siege because Israelites had turned their backs on God. Famine was a result of sin. As long as sin reigns in the world—as long as the powerful oppress the weak, and nations pursue wicked ends, and people pass by beggars, pursue comfort while others suffer, and hunger after that which never satisfies—the world will be filled with “the least of these.” The answer isn’t to blame God for suffering brought on by sin and stupidity. Nor is it to blame God when it continues unabated because of human selfishness and apathy.

3. THE PROMISE OF THE PROPHET

Elisha locks the door of his house. The king stands outside and says in 2 Kings 6:33, “This disaster is from the LORD. Why should I wait for the LORD any longer.” The king has given up on God, and that’s too bad. If he really knew God, he would never say that this disaster was from him. It was caused by Israel’s idolatry and the greed of the Syrian dictator, Ben-Hadad. Hunger, and the horror that it spawns, isn’t God’s fault. He may use people’s sin and stupidity as tools to accomplish his *good* purposes, but he never causes the bad things to happen.

The king is wrong on another count: to give up on the grace and goodness of God. Bad people and a fallen world cause suffering. Apathetic and selfish people pass by, refusing to help those who suffer. But God has redeemed people by his grace, and given them resources by that same grace, to help hurting people. That’s exactly the prophet’s response in 2 Kings 7:1—“Hear the word of the LORD. This is what the LORD says: ‘About this time tomorrow, a seah of the finest flour will sell for a shekel and two seahs of barley for a shekel at the gate of Samaria.’” In short, tomorrow food will be so plentiful that “the law of supply and demand” will drive it down to bargain basement prices.

God is telling us that he always gives enough to take care of the needs of his world. Though he has not ordained that the government redistributes wealth by fiat, he has given enough blessings to enough people that there will always be enough to feed the hungry—if only the wealthy will voluntarily redistribute it to the poor. Watch what God does next: he takes the plunder from the Syrians (which they stole from others), and gives it to four starving lepers. These lucky lepers turn around and pass on their newfound wealth to the starving city. That’s how God feeds the hungry! His methods haven’t changed since.

4. THE CYNICISM OF THE CAPTAIN

Another character appears in this story. He is the king’s right hand officer. The Bible never gives him a name, so we’ll just call him the Cynic. His response to Elisha is recorded in 2 Kings 7:2. “Look, even if the LORD should open the floodgates of heaven, could this thing happen?” Listen to his logic. He is saying that heaven does not possess enough to meet the needs of earth. Even if heaven’s gates unleashed a flood of blessing, it would not be enough. We might laugh at such

absurdity if it were not for the fact that most folks reason just like this cynic. We look at the overwhelming needs of our world and rationalize that there just aren't enough resources to meet them.

We pass by the begging woman and say, "If I helped every beggar on the street, I would go broke." Or, "If I give her a few Euros, she will be out here again tomorrow asking for more." Or, "Maybe she is going to use it on booze, and I have wasted it." The irony is that the tourist goes on to spend much more of his money—even racking up credit card debt—to buy trinkets in the shops of Venice. But this excuse, that we can't meet all the needs (so we can ignore the ones we see), is the devil's lie. Mother Teresa said, "If you can't feed a hundred, feed one." An old African riddle: How do you eat an elephant? The answer: One bite at a time. If everyone did a little something, the floodgates of heaven would open up. Listen to the promise of Malachi 3:10. "Test me in this," says the LORD Almighty, "and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that there will not be room enough to store it."

Christians cannot be cynical. We can't do everything, but if we do something, our God will do the rest. This is a good time to challenge you regarding **Project Serve**. For one Saturday, on February 18, our Covenant family is going to blanket Naples with works of mercy. We can't meet all the needs of hurting people. So far 100 of you have signed up, but we need 300. There are so many needs waiting to be met. Is it possible that, by spending a single day of doing some small acts of kindness for some desperate folks, that we might unleash the floodgates of heaven—and that Southwest Florida would never be the same again? We have a choice: we can think like Elisha or respond like the cynical captain. Will you help us make a difference?

5. THE LUCK OF THE LEPERS

The story takes a wonderful turn. Outside the city Gates are four lepers. They too are nameless. Maybe we should just call them Charlie, Harley, Farley and Claude. They too are starving. But their lot is even worse. As lepers they are not allowed inside the gates. At least the hungry folks inside have each other for company. These four are not only famine victims, they are also outcasts. They are the least of the "least of these." So they cook up a desperate plan. They figure that they are going to die anyway, so why not surrender to the Syrians. They know that once the enemy sees that they are lepers, they won't let them inside their camp. But maybe they will throw them some scraps of food to keep them at a distance. So off they go. God does a miraculous thing, recorded in 2 Kings 7:3-7. He makes these four tiptoeing lepers sound like an army of horses and chariots. The Syrians wake up in terror and figure that the Egyptian army has come to the rescue of Samaria. They flee in panic, leaving everything behind.

Charlie, Harley, Farley and Claude arrive at the camp. They can't believe their luck. Standing before them are tents full of plunder and food left behind by the marauding army. Pretty soon they are digging

holes to bury their newfound wealth: the First National Bank of Charlie; the Harley and Farley Savings and Loan, and The Second National Bank of Claude. They are so much like us. We stumble onto our wealth, and we immediately try to hoard it for a rainy day. We think we earned it by our own hard work. We pulled ourselves up by our bootstraps, unlike the beggar sitting on the side of the street. But the truth, we are all a single disaster away from being lepers outside the city wall. Like Charlie, Harley, Farley and Claude, we all stumbled into our wealth by God's grace. We might ask the question again: How many beggars might have been kings or queens; how many kings and queens should have been beggars—if only things had turned a little differently? Whatever good we possess is a blessing of God's grace. By all rights, it belongs to him—not us. We are simply stewards for a brief moment of his grace shining on us.

6. THE WISDOM OF THE WEALTHY

Fortunes change so quickly. Earlier these guys were the least of the least. Now they are lucky lepers who hit the Lotto. They may be *nouveau riche*, but they are wiser than a lot of folks who have been rich for a long time. In 2 Kings 7:9 they come to the same conclusion: “What we’re doing is not right. This is a day of good news and we are keeping it to ourselves. If we wait until daylight, punishment will overtake us. Let’s go at once and report this to the royal palace.” Notice that they aren’t motivated by compassion. They figure that a king, who will try to kill a prophet who represents a God that he thinks is too slow, surely will have a meltdown if he discovers that they hoarded their newfound wealth to the neglect of a hungry city.

Listen, fellow lepers-saved-by-God's-grace, the same is true for us. We have seen our king in Matthew 25. He cares about hungry cities and starving people—even mothers who are driven to desperation that sends them into a downward spiral of depravity. Notice their words again: “This is a day of good news...” We have been given good news to share. We can’t keep God’s grace to ourselves. Jesus himself left the glory of heaven behind to come to a world of desperately hungry people. He became a poor man so that we might be rich. He became a social leper so that we might be saved from the spiritual and emotional hunger. He cares about the hungry. He repeatedly faced hunger. If we know him—if we have a relationship with him—we will see him in the hungry beggar, the thirsty soul, the naked, the stranger, the convict, the sick, and a thousand other “least of these” people. We will be wise enough to understand his plan: he has made us rich in so many ways so that we can feed those who are poor in so many ways. Only those who are truly his sheep have figured that out.