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[Jesus said to His disciples], <sup>31</sup> 'When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory. <sup>32</sup> All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, <sup>33</sup> and He will put the sheep at His right hand and the goats at the left. <sup>34</sup> Then the king will say to those at His right hand, "Come, you that are blessed by My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; <sup>35</sup> 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, <sup>36</sup> I was naked and you gave Me clothing, I was sick and you took care of Me, I was in prison and you visited Me." <sup>37</sup> Then the righteous will answer Him, "Lord, when was it that we saw You hungry and gave You food, or thirsty and gave You something to drink? <sup>38</sup> And when was it that we saw You a stranger and welcomed You, or naked and gave You clothing? <sup>39</sup> And when was it that we saw You sick or in prison and visited You?" <sup>40</sup> 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 (*Greek: "brothers"*), you did it to Me." Matthew 25:31-40 (NRSV)

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In the last decade of the last millennia (the 1990s) a trend emerged among many Christians, particularly younger Christians, to wear bracelets and items of clothing with the acronym WWJD – meaning "What Would Jesus Do?". The slogan actually goes back to a book written in 1896 and a book by a Pastor (Charles Sheldon) called "In His Steps: What would Jesus do?" It was a story about a town that changed its mindset when Christians "pledge themselves, earnestly and honestly for an entire year, not to do anything without first asking the question, 'What would Jesus do?'". Thanks to a mistake by its first publisher, the book was never covered by copyright, so it was sold cheaply by multiple publishers. As a result it has sold 30 million copies, putting it in the top 50 bestselling books ever.

In 1989 a youth leader in Michigan (Janie Tinklenberg) re-read the novel and talked to her youth group about it. She considered printing T-shirts for them bearing the slogan, but at the time friendship bracelets were all the rage, so she got a local company to print 300. She opted for the abbreviation WWJD. Tinklenberg asked the group to wear them for 30 days, they caught on locally, and more were needed. Others with more of a commercial eye than Tinklenberg spotted the trend, made their own and took the marketing to the national level. By the time she attempted to register her trademark it was too late. Since then this slogan has been placed on teddy bears, coffee mugs, lunchboxes, baby bibs, and even underwear! It has also been taken up by groups such as "The Occupy Movement" or other political parodies with anti-war T-shirts asking "who would Jesus bomb?", to beyond parody such as the "what would Jesus eat?" biblical diet.

The original question "what would Jesus do?" has been taken seriously by millions of Christians who have worn it over the last 30 years as a reminder to live their life in a certain way. It is a call to consider one's ethics and actions in the light of Christ's

clear words. But there is a limit to how this slogan WWJD can be applied. And sometimes the application of this tells us more about those who promote a certain cause' or 'way of behaviour', rather than God's word itself. After all, Jesus was a carpenter until age 30, He became an itinerant preacher for 3 years dependant on the support of others, He remained unmarried, and He was crucified at age 33 for His convictions (and our salvation). There are not always clear-cut answers for us to "What Would Jesus Do?" in some of the situations we face in life. The slogan "WWJD" may help guide us, but it will not always give us definitive answers. But it does point to an attitude for life.

When it comes to the Holy Gospel for today (Matthew 25:31-46), we come to another well-known set of words. These are the words of Jesus about 'The Final Judgment', with the illustration of separation of 'sheep and goats', and the Jesus' words, "When for I was hungry you gave Me food; when I was thirsty you gave Me something to drink; when I was a stranger you welcomed Me; when I was naked you gave Me clothing; when I was sick you took care of Me; when I was in prison you visited Me."

At one level, like WWJD, we take these words at their simple and obvious level. This is a call for social action. This is a call for God's people to demonstrate His love for people in real and practical ways. This is a call for us to 'lose one's life in order to gain it'. This a call for all of us to consider where we have gone out of our way to help others. These words have been taken up by the 'social arms' of the 'institutions' of 'the church'. And so, for example, these words are often quoted by aid agencies such as Lutheran World Service, or Caritas, or a range of others, in support of care of people. These words of Jesus (Matthew 25:35-40) have become a reference point for many people seeking to 'make a difference' and 'help people in their need'. But just like the limitations of WWJD, there is a context to Jesus' words which should also be taken into account.

When Jesus spoke the words about caring for people, He did so in the context of words about the final judgment. Jesus began, "When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory. All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats..." After Jesus' words about The Ten Bridesmaids with five outside (Matthew 25:1-13), and Jesus' words about the three men given 'talents' to use, with one outside (Matthew 25:14-30), Jesus speaks again of a separation between 'sheep' and goats'. And what is fascinating here is that no number is given, but that there is simply a 'separation'. And furthermore, this will not be revealed until 'the final judgment'. In Jesus' time it was hard to distinguish 'sheep' and 'goats' at a distance. It is sometimes difficult to determine if someone is actually acting in the right way, with the right motives. And so Jesus says that the act of separation will be done by the Shepherd, and not the flock.

Jesus speaks of 'separation' and Jesus speaks of 'reward'. In Matthew 16:27 we hear Jesus say, "For the Son of Man is going to come in His Father's glory with His angels, and then He will reward each person according to what they have done." In Matthew 12:36-37 we hear Jesus say, "But I tell you that everyone will have to give account on the day of judgment for every empty word they have spoken. For by your

words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned.” In 2 Corinthians 5:10 we hear God say, “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each of us may receive what is due to us for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.” And in Romans 14:12 God also says, “So then, each of us will give an account of ourselves to God.” Here in Matthew 25:31-46 the emphasis is to be on the grounds of judgment, a judgment which applies to individuals, and is based on both the Law and the Sermon on the Mount. It examines people’s willingness to show consideration and mercy.

But the reason that the righteous are spared is not because they are seen as ‘not guilty’ on the basis of their own merits (they do not think that they have any merits; compare Romans 3:19-20), but rather because the quality of their lives will reveal that they are those who have been blessed by God (Matthew 5:3-9) who have been ransomed (Matthew 20:28) and forgiven (Matthew 18:27; Matthew 18:32 compare Matthew 6:12-15), who have been filled with righteousness by the Righteous One (Matthew 5:6). They have become new creations (2 Corinthians 5:17), and are living out the effects of the blessing of God (Matthew 5:3-9).

It is also noteworthy that Jesus does not address them as ‘you righteous’, but as those who have been ‘blessed by His Father’. God has spoken His word of blessing over people, and we are recipients of that grace. We are simply called to reflect that love and mercy which we have received from Christ, and display that in our lives in relation to the lives of those around us. But this has a context. We are the sheep, Jesus is the Good Shepherd.

The Lord’s teaching on the final judgment challenges every disciple of Jesus to be a harbinger of God’s kingdom in a broken world. Note the very basic nature of these six mercies: Food, drink, hospitality, clothing, nursing care, and visitation. Every person has the potential to provide these kinds of mercies. One need not be wealthy to buy a hamburger and soft drink for a hungry person. One need not be a nurse to help a sick person. One need not be ordained to visit a prisoner in jail. Earlier, Jesus told a rich man to sell all that he had and to give the money to the poor (19:21), but there is no such overarching demand here. The kinds of mercies that Jesus rewards here are within the reach of every person. They do not require great sacrifice on the part of the mercy-giver, but they do alleviate great pain for the mercy-receiver.

But perhaps the most important part of this parable: We are to be sheep under authority of the Good Shepherd. The separation takes place between sheep and goats before either group is told what they have or haven’t done. The sheep are told before they know anything about what they’ve done, “Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.” It is not their “good deeds” that brings the blessing; it is because they are sheep, God’s people, living under authority and the good grace of the Good Shepherd. In the end it is not so much ‘what you do’ (although that is not unimportant), but whose you are.

It would be easy to interpret this teaching as a lesson in works-righteousness. After all, the Son of Man judges people based on what they do or do not do. Yet the teaching is much more nuanced than that. Those on the right hand are told, “Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you” (25:34).

The kingdom is an inheritance, a gift, not something earned. This teaching is not only a fitting conclusion to all that Jesus has taught in Matthew, it is also a preparation for the passion story that is about to begin. These words of Jesus, identifying Himself with the world's outcasts, come immediately before the narrative of His own betrayal, arrest, torture, and execution. Indeed, we see that Jesus as the Son of God stands deliberately and voluntarily in the shoes of the powerless, the weak, the defenceless, the hated, the tortured. He began as a refugee and He ends as a condemned criminal. He gives His life a ransom for many.

Within Matthew's gospel, our text is Jesus' last speech before the Passion Story begins—the story in which Jesus becomes one of the despised 'goats', a scapegoat. In John 12:31,33 we read, "Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out." ... He said this to indicate the kind of death He was to die." Seen from this angle, being preoccupied with judgment is not necessary; thus, our story indeed is "Gospel", Good News. Jesus indicates that He is approaching the cross to deal with the judgment:

There's a lot to be said for certainty. There can be some fun and exciting things around spontaneity and unplanned events. But, I think for a lot of us we feel much more comfortable with the known rather than the unknown. But we have been dealing with uncertainty this past year. And uncertainty is not just a by-product of an election or a pandemic or other big-picture things in our lives. We have continual uncertainty about big and small things alike: our job, our vehicle, our home, our relationships, our family, our health, or just about anything. Uncertainty and the fear that can come with that is a by-product of sin, and it's a by-product that will continue to be with us as long we live in this world. Which makes what is before us today so comforting and uplifting.

As we crave certainty, God gives us certainty in two important places: first, there is judgment coming; second, Jesus is our judge. And Jesus makes it clear to the sheep how they got to this position: "Come, you who are blessed by My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.

This eternal life is something that God had prepared and provided for them. This was not something that they built or that they bought or that they prepared. This eternal reward is not about them being good enough—it was about their Saviour being good enough in their place. We are among the sheep, not because of choices that we have made or things we have done, but because this was prepared for us. We did not earn it or buy it; it has been given to us. Our sin had excluded us from any blessing from God, but Jesus forgave our sin by His death on the cross. The Judge died to save the guilty. We are saved because of His love for us.

In a world with seemingly no certainty about anything, take this comfort this morning. Your Saviour has lived and died for you. Because of that, you are one of His precious sheep who will inherit the kingdom of God the Father for eternity. Let your absolute confidence shine in your actions and words in this life. Serve your fellow people with a self-sacrificing love knowing that these actions not only serve your neighbour, but also thank your God. What you do for the one the least of these, you do for Him. Thanks be to God, our Saviour, Judge, and King! Amen.