

St. Andrew's UMC
November 23rd, 2008
Matthew 25:31-46
"Come, Inherit The Kingdom Prepared For You"

Let me throw you a question: "How does one enter the kingdom of Heaven?" Anyone? Well, the answer is easy: you enter the kingdom of Heaven through the gate.

If you ask an evangelical Christian the same question, however, the answer would be quick and consistent: either he would quote John 3:16:

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."

Or, the Romans 10:10:

"For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved."

Entering or inheriting the eternal life is as same as entering the kingdom Heaven is as same as being saved. The Hebrew people talked about entering or inheriting the eternal life, while Jesus proclaimed about entering the kingdom of Heaven, while Paul preached about being saved.

The same question had also been directed to Jesus, and the gospels record it. According to Matthew 19:16:

Then someone came to him and said, "Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?"

Both mark and Luke recorded this story in the similar context. Matthew is the only one, however, to add to the response Jesus gave to the inquirer the commandment which Jesus quoted from Leviticus 19:18: "**love your neighbor as your self.**"

This verse in Leviticus is known to us as the second to the Great Commandment, "Love your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind (Mt. 22:37)."

Jesus told the man to keep the commandments, if he wanted to enter the eternal life. Then the man asked Jesus, which ones? Was he a sly guy or what? I guess the guy knew there were 613 commandments for the Jews to obey. Lucky for him, Jesus cited only 5 from the Ten Commandments, and just one from Leviticus. Who says Jesus does not give people a lot of breaks?

Now if we want to hold Jesus to the letter of what he said, we need to keep only 6 commandments according to Matthew, and only 5, according to both Mark and Luke, in order to qualify as sheep. We know that Jesus later boiled the 6 commandments down to only two: love your God and love your neighbor as yourself.

Jesus apparently liked to have things short and sweet. 613 vs. 2. You just can't beat that kind of discount. I wonder why people are not coming in droves trying to become Christians.

Actually, I know why. That has to do with what Jesus added after the short list of commandments. Can you guess?

“If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.”

Ouch.

Suddenly, the glitter of being perfect is fading fast for some, and the eternal life may not sound that attractive any more. We want treasures here and now.

Now, this Jesus is telling a story in the chapter 25 what it would look like, when the end of time comes. He will be the one who separates the goats from the sheep. Scholars have difficulty believing that this part is an authentic saying of Jesus. They find that Jesus is too judgmental in his saying, and such an attitude seems to contradict his great, self-sacrificing love. They ask, if he so loved the world, and if he were so willing to die for others' sin, why would he be hell-bent on condemning so-called goats?

I am not here to delve into the ramification of the observation. I would like to ponder, however, about the components of the criterion Jesus used, in order to separate the goats from the sheep.

Jesus picked 6 factors that decided the fate of an individual whether he or she belonged to the goat pen or the sheep pen:

Giving food to the hungry, giving water to the thirsty, welcoming the foreigner, giving clothes to the naked, caring for the sick, and visiting the imprisoned.

I must comment on the translation of the Greek word, “*xenos*.” It means “foreigner,” but it is translated as ‘stranger’ in the Gospels. I find this to be less than adequate. A stranger could be a citizen of the same county, and of the same race. The Greek word, “*xenos*,” from which the word, xenophobia (the fear of the foreigners) comes, means less of a stranger than a foreigner or an alien. “*Xenos*” should be translated as “foreigner,” instead.

Now, if we stick to the literal interpretation of this text in Matthew 25, all we have to do in order to be classified as sheep, was just these 6 things. None of these are found in the Ten Commandments, by the way. We would find also that these 6 factors that determine one's fate as either a goat or a sheep are the interpretation of the second Greatest Commandment: love your neighbor as your self.

Indeed, feeding the hungry, giving water to the thirsty, welcoming the foreigner, clothing the naked, caring for the sick and visiting the imprisoned are what we would like to have, if we found ourselves in those situations, aren't they?

So, if we take Jesus literally, it is apparent that Jesus chose to list 6 different ways of loving one's neighbor as one's self. Here is the answer to the question, how to enter the kingdom of heaven: you will enter the kingdom of Heaven , if you love your neighbor as your self.

Jesus again reduced the Two Great Commandments down to One Great Commandment: **“love your neighbor as your self, enter the kingdom of Heaven .”** That is what the entire message of the gospel boils down to. That is how one enters the kingdom of Heaven : “Be a sheep, enter the kingdom.” “Love your neighbor, enter the kingdom.”

As for the religion of Christianity, there are a few ways of understanding. Is the Christianity about confessing one’s belief in Jesus? Is the Christianity about observing the commandments? Is the Christianity about loving Jesus? Is the Christianity about believing that Jesus is God, that he was born through a virgin birth?

Or, is the Christianity about action of loving one’s neighbor as one’s self? This question is the key to understanding why God would call Jesus to the cross.

As we hear the narrative, we come to wonder, why Jesus would insist that:

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

Well, who are “the least of these,” that Jesus referred to? Are they the poor corporate executives who flew to Washington D.C. to plead their case for the government bailout? Or are they the foster kids who stand to lose the county and state support, because of the budget cuts? We know we do not want to ignore Jesus. But Jesus identified himself with the least of these, whoever they might have been. Jesus insists that he and “the least of these” are one and the same.

Is it really true that what we do to the least of the people—that is, to the nobodies, to the weak and the oppressed—is what we do to Jesus? If we loved our neighbors, did we love Jesus? If we ignored the plight of the needy, did we also ignore Jesus? The answer is yes, if we follow what Jesus said:

“If you love me, you will keep my commandments (Jn. 14:15).”

And what are the commandments? He said it previously in the chapter 13:

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another.

The focal point of the gospel message is that we love Jesus by loving our neighbors. Those who love Jesus demonstrate their love though loving their neighbors as themselves.

The kingdom of Heaven is not about confession. Jesus never taught anyone to confess, in order to enter the kingdom of Heaven . Jesus did teach to love one another, love our neighbor as our selves, to love one another as Jesus loved us. For Jesus, that was good enough to give his life, to walk with the cross on his shoulder.

So we question: “Is loving one’s neighbor sufficient a criterion for entering the kingdom of Heaven ?” Or do you also have to confess Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior? Or do you also have to be baptized? Or do you also have to be straight? Or do you also

have to believe that the Bible is the inerrant word of God? Or do you also have to confess your belief in complex articles of faith?

If we truly stick to the literal and inerrant Word of God found in the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 25, all you have to do, in order to **“inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world,”** is:

giving food to the hungry, giving water to the thirsty, welcoming the foreigner, giving clothes to the naked, caring for the sick, and visiting the imprisoned.

That’s all you ever need to enter the kingdom of Heaven .