



Word of the Week

A Choice of Direction

Scripture Reading: Matthew 25:31-46

I'll never forget the trip from Minnesota to Chicago, to our friends' home. Just as we were approaching the big city and coming upon a particularly muddled maze of choices in highways to take, one of our children, who shall remain nameless, threw up. Suddenly I, who was serving as navigator, became distracted. Leaning back over the seat, I tried to help the child in distress.

And at precisely that moment my wife called out for directions. Glancing up, looking at the myriad of road signs quickly passing by, I made a choice. The wrong one, it turned out.

My mistake was quickly apparent. When we finally were able to reverse direction, we had to pay the toll, first for the westward leg of the trip and then for the return. As navigator, the one responsible for adding almost an hour to our trip, I was not the most popular person among our tired, queasy stomached, ready to be done with this road trip, crew.

Choosing which direction to go is crucial. Sometimes people talk a lot about not wanting to end up in the wrong place, but the Bible makes it clear that the real issue, especially when it comes to eternal things, is which direction we are moving. It makes all the difference. Jesus makes this clear in his parable about the nations coming before the king for judgment in Matthew 25. At the end of the passage, in one of my least favorite verses, Jesus says, "And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life." Without going into a long essay wrestling with all the concerns that statement inevitably elicits, I want to reflect on a keyword in it: "go."

In the parable, Jesus makes it clear that some have been living lives that moved with the flow of God's grace and goodness into and among their neighbors in the world. Others, much to their great loss, lived lives that did not. Maybe they had thought themselves wise in the midst of the hard realities of our world, but their actions had ultimately taken them in directions that missed out completely on the life-giving, grace-infusing ways of God.

A consistent biblical principle is that to be open to the grace of God, we need to be open to grace, not just receiving it, but letting it flow freely. We need to let God's grace flow in and out of ourselves, moving, living, giving life. God's grace cannot be captured, or contained, or possessed. It can only flow. And where grace does not flow, it cannot be experienced. No wonder Jesus taught us to pray, "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us." We can only experience God's grace, enjoy and delight in it, as we allow it to flow in and among and through us out into the world, giving and enriching life wherever it goes.

Matthew 25:31-46 is the final parable before the Gospel writer begins recounting the story of Jesus' betrayal, death, and resurrection. In a Gospel so focused on the importance of following Jesus' commands, the parable serves as a capstone to all his instructions. Like the parable concluding the Sermon on the Mount that calls us to build our lives upon the rock-solid foundation of Jesus' teaching, this parable challenges us to consider the direction the impulses and actions of our lives are moving us. Are we trusting God's love and moving with the flow of God's grace? Or are we looking out for our own interests, striving to be safe and secure, and moving ever further from God's good purposes for us and our world? The king in Jesus' parable doesn't so much choose the direction in which to send those who come before him, as to point out the direction they have chosen to go.

Heading in the wrong direction cost my family a little extra time and money on our trip to Chicago, but we recognized our mistake and turned around. We made it to our friends' home and enjoyed a warm and wonderful time. It isn't too late for us spiritually, either. If you are in a position to read this right now, you are in a position to prayerfully consider the direction in which you are moving and make a course correction, whether by a few degrees or a full 180. Today, and throughout October as we focus on this

important parable in our sermon series, God invites us to move in the direction of grace, letting God's love flow to us and through us into the world.

Prayer:

Lord God, who loves us with such sacrificial love, whose faithfulness is sure, whose grace flows like a mighty river, enable me today to so trust your love that I will celebrate it and share it with others. Forgive me, that in my anxiety and fear, I am hesitant to enter into relationships and avenues of service that demand sacrifice on my part. Forgive me, that in my concern for my own well-being, I am too often blind or unconcerned with the well-being of others. Free me from my self-centered ways and lead me in your way of generosity, compassion, and care. By the power of your Holy Spirit, enable me to move with you in the direction of love and life, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Some Things to Try:

- Prayerfully look back over the last 24 hours. Talk with God about the opportunities you had to offer care and compassion. Celebrate times you allowed God's goodness to flow through you. If there are times you feel you should have and didn't, pray about that, too.
- Do something good, compassionate, encouraging for someone. Make it a habit every day.
- Talk with a pastor about getting involved in offering care, compassion, and support in church ministries or in the community beyond. Then take a step and get involved.
- Call a nearby school and ask if you can help out by mentoring or reading to students.
- Get creative and get involved in caring for one of the groups of people in Jesus' parable.

Verse for Meditation and Memorization:

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." Matthew 25:40

Additional Scripture readings:

Genesis 2:18-24

Psalm 8

Hebrews 1:1-4; 2:5-12

Mark 10:2-16

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