

Introduction

Some years ago, a destitute and dying woman was brought in to Mother Teresa's *Home for the Dying* in Calcutta, India. She had a huge and gaping wound on her body that was alive with squirming maggots. A novice nun, who was assigned the task of cleaning it, did what most of us would do. She held out tweezers at arm's length, turned her face away as much as possible, and began to remove the maggots one by one. Just then Mother Teresa happened along, saw what the novice was doing, and immediately went to her. She took a scalpel and began to skillfully clean the wound. Her face was within inches of the putrid mass of flesh as she did and she paid no attention to the stench of the wound, which grew even worse as she probed it. After a few minutes, she spoke softly to the novice and said: **"You must understand that this is Jesus. We are cleaning the wound of our Lord."** She then gave the scalpel to the novice who obediently began doing just as she had done.

Let me ask you a critical question. When Mother Teresa said they were cleaning the wound of Jesus, was that just nice talk meant to encourage the novice? Or was it actually true? It was actually true, as Jesus Himself teaches in Matthew 25:31-46.

The Least of These

The subject of His concern in this text is what He calls **"the least of these"** in verses 40 and 45. He does identify who the least of these are in verses 35-36 and 42-43. They are the hungry, the thirsty, the strangers, the naked, the ill, and the imprisoned.

This list of people isn't meant to be exhaustive but representative. The hungry, the thirsty, and the naked represent those in material need. The ill represent those in physical need. And the strangers and the imprisoned represent those in relational or social need. The least of these, in other words, are people who have needs, whatever they are.

My father, who owned a little neighborhood grocery store, died when

I was six years-old. Two years later, my mother sold the store, paid off all the bills, and she, my sisters, and I moved into a rental home. On the day we moved, we had one nickel **“to our name,”** and literally nothing to eat. We were the least of these that Jesus talks about here.

There are many such people in the world at large and our personal worlds. A wife’s husband of 32 years leaves her and she’s devastated. A widow’s roof needs fixed but she can’t afford it. A child is born with special needs. A patient has no way to get to chemotherapy treatments. Parents struggle with a rebellious son. An overworked waitress spills food on a customer. And a little leaguer makes an error that loses the game for his team. All of those and countless others like them are people in need. They’re the least of these.

Synonymous with Jesus

Now, Jesus makes what is just a staggering claim about the least of these in verses 40 and 45. First, when we do to them, we’re doing to Him. Promoting their well-being and joy is the same as promoting His. And second, when we don’t do to them, we aren’t doing to Him. Ignoring their well-being and joy is the same as ignoring His.

Verses 40 and 45 have three companion verses in the Book of Proverbs. The first is 14:31, **“He who oppresses the poor reproaches His maker.”** Afflicting the poor is the same as afflicting God. The second is 17:15, **“He who mocks the poor reproaches His maker.”** Scorning the poor is the same as scorning God. And the third is 19:17, **“He who is gracious to a poor man lends to the LORD.”** Giving to the poor is the same as giving to God.

Verses 40 and 45 and those three verses in Proverbs, together, reveal a remarkable and defining truth of our existence. Jesus and the least of these are one. In some mystical we can’t grasp, He is somehow synonymous with them. He identifies so closely with them that their experience is His experience. How they are regarded and treated, He is regarded and treated.

A transforming incident in the life Francis of Assisi illustrates what I mean. Francis was born to a wealthy merchant and lived the life of a libertine, partying freely and irresponsibly with his young friends. Then, one day, he was riding in the countryside when he came upon what he feared the most – a leper. The leper was loathsome in the ugliness of his disease and normally, Francis would have fled in terror. But something, the Holy Spirit I think, induced him to do otherwise. He dismounted his horse, hurried to the leper, and flung his arms around him, whereupon he had a vivid and compelling vision - of the leper's face morphing into the face of Jesus. He realized what the vision meant, that he was encountering Jesus in the person of the leper, and it profoundly impacted him. That occurrence was one of several that led him to eventually denounce all worldly wealth and devote his life to Jesus and the poor.

That illustrates the meaning of verses 40 and 45. Jesus is somehow synonymous with the least of these. Consequently, whenever we encounter them, we're encountering Him. Because we are, we should do two things, each of which I want to explain.

Regard the Least of These as Jesus

First, we should regard the least of these as Jesus. When we see their face, we, as Francis did, should see His face. Whenever we encounter them, we need to recognize in our mind's eye that we're encountering Him. That Jesus is synonymous with them is the single most significant fact about them. And we need to keep that in the forefront of our thinking as we interact with and engage them. That's what Mother Teresa did with the destitute and dying woman about whom I told you. She saw in that woman's face the face of Jesus.

We should do the same. A few years ago, I walked into the floral department of a store to buy flowers for my wife and one of the clerks was crying to the manager. She had had a busy hectic day filled with cranky customers and she finally lost it. **"I can't take it anymore,"** she cried out to the manager, **"I can't take it anymore. You've got to get**

me out of this department.” He was empathetic and did his best to console her but told her she had to stay. She then proceeded to wait on the next customer – me. I recognized something as she did. She was one of the least of these and Jesus was somehow synonymous with her. In my mind’s eye, therefore, I saw Him when I saw her.

I’ve said many times before that our mind is the place of our widest and most basic freedom. We can place it on whatever we choose. Consequently, when we encounter the least of these, we choose to place it on the most significant fact about them. Jesus and they are one. So, when we look into the face of the lonely widow, we see Jesus. When we look into the face of the laid off worker, we see Jesus. When we look into the face of the harried checkout clerk, we see Jesus. When we look into the face of the special needs child, we see Jesus, and on it goes. We regard the least of these as Jesus.

Treat the Least of These as Jesus

But we don’t just regard them that way. We treat them that way as well. Jesus explains how we do that in verses 35-36. We give them food to eat. We give them water to drink. We invite them in. We give them clothes to wear. We visit them. And we come to them. Those actions represent what we should do when we encounter the least of these. Act in practical ways to meet their needs as we can. We would do that for Jesus if He were in bodily form. So we do it for them.

Verses 35-36 reveal what we might call **“the ministry of small things.”** So many Christians are caught up in **“the big deal.”** They think they have to be powerful people with national platforms of ministry to do something significant for God. But nothing could be further from the truth. The big deal in fact isn’t what ministry is primarily about.

500 years ago, Francis de Sales used an instructive analogy that clarifies what I mean by that - sugar and salt. He noted that sugar has a more exquisite taste than salt does. But salt is used more frequently than sugar is. He then pointed out that big acts of service are like sugar

and small acts like salt. The big acts are rare. The small acts are common. The big acts require a greater sacrifice that's temporary. The small acts require a lesser sacrifice that's constant.

Do you realize what all of that means? Small acts of service are the substance of ministry. Don't misunderstand me. We do need big acts of service that dramatically impact the lives of many. But small acts of service that impact singular lives are the essence of ministry.

That gives us a strategy for ministry. It's to make service a normal way of living. For many, service is nothing more than a code of ethics. It's a list of things to do and once those things are done, their service is over. Jesus calls us in verses 35 and 36 to make it not a code of ethics but a normal way of living. He wants us to look for the needs that are everywhere around us every day and to simply meet them as we can.

In his book *Celebration of Discipline*, Richard Foster discusses what he calls "**service in the marketplace.**" He writes: "**Service to be service must take form and shape in the world in which we live. Therefore, we must seek to perceive what service looks like in the marketplace of our daily lives.**" He then lists practical ways we can minister every day. Those ways include but aren't limited to the following services: helpfulness, guarding the reputation of others, being served, common courtesy, hospitality, listening, bearing the burden of others, and sharing what we know. Those are just a sampling of the endless ways we can serve the least of these in our daily lives.

My retired brother Harold, for instance, learned that a man in his church needed rides to chemotherapy treatments and volunteered to give them over the course of several months. It didn't take him long to realize what a valuable service that was. So, he began doing it on a regular basis and still does. He takes ill people, who don't have transportation, to treatments they need.

My brother isn't a powerful person with a national platform. But service is a normal way of living for him. Every time he gives a person a ride to a treatment, he's giving Jesus a ride. His service, through the

ministry of small things, is great.

Great in the Kingdom

That in turn makes Him great. We see that in verses 34 and 41. The whole context of this passage is the final judgment. Jesus uses a simile to describe it. Just as a shepherd separates sheep from goats, so Jesus will separate people who served the least of these from those who didn't. Those who served the least of these will be glorified. They will be powerful and great in God's eternal heaven. Those who didn't serve them will be shamed. They will languish in God's eternal hell. It's unmistakable. How we regard and treat the least of these, since they're synonymous with Jesus, determines the nature of our eternal destiny.

On the day my mother, sisters, and I moved into our rental home, a woman from our church named Helen Eberle dropped in. She had a grocery bag for us her containing bologna, bread, potato chips, and a pack of cookies. I can't explain the depth of how much that meant to me. I've not had a meal since that tasted better to me than that one did 54 years ago. It was a small act of service that dramatically impacted me. It is one of my most vivid memories in life and I will never forget it.

But remember Jesus was synonymous with me so that my experience was His as well. And He will, I believe, make known at judgment what He and I experienced that day. Helen Eberle, who was a follower of His, will stand before Him and He will publicly describe that act of service she did for Him and me – and what it meant to us. He will then pronounce His **"well done"** to her and declare her greatness in His eternal kingdom.

Conclusion

I close with an observation. So many Christians sort of whine around about ministry and the Lord's will for their life. They don't know what He wants them to do and just wish He would tell them. Actually, He has told them. It's to **"do it unto the least of these."** That's His call. Let's leave here and live it out!