

Commitment to the Cross, II – The Impossible Command of Christ

By Rev. Jonathan A. Malone

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Matthew 25:31-46

“...just as you did it to one of the least of these...”

Christ the King Sunday

Ever feel as if you are being watched? Maybe you saw a shadow jump past your eyes, or a quick glimpse of something that didn't seem right. Or maybe you just had that feeling that you are not alone. Some of us are more paranoid than others and are sure that we are being watched. It is a phenomenon of our culture that has shown forth in a number of our movies. From Mel Gibson's *Conspiracy Theory* to *The Truman Show*, and even *The Day the Earth Stood Still* we all have fantasies, dreams, and theories that we are indeed being watched. Like mice in a maze, we wonder if we are running from work to home, to child-care, to the church activity looking for that one piece of cheese that someone randomly placed in an unknown section in the maze. And many of us feel as if we are being timed, we are being judged, we are being watched. It's this gut feeling, isn't it? Maybe it is our consciousness, or our fear of shame which drives us to try to act and live a certain way – because what if we are being watched. When we are alone in the room, and we are going for that third extra fat, high cholesterol cookie, and we look over our shoulder, who are we looking for? Aren't we alone, or is there that feeling that we are being watched.

That feeling can effect and drive our actions. The Catholic theologian Karl Rahner described this feeling as an urge to ultimately be with God and live in the way that God wants us to live. Those who have these feelings, who feel compelled to live a good life, are Anonymous Christians, living the Christian life without knowing it. Try to be good because it feels right. Try to share because someone may be watching. Try not to fight because some day a spaceship may come down from the sky and tell us that indeed we are being watched and we are being judged. Am I the only paranoid one, or do you ever feel as if you are being watched?

In the passage for today, we are given a vision of the end revealed. In this revelation a king sits on his throne and claims that indeed you are being watched and judged. Some of you got it right and some of you did not, and now you are going to find out whom. Like the outside observer finally stepping out of the shadows, into the light and telling you what he or she saw, the king sits on his throne and claims what he saw done by all those gathered. “Some of you did well. Some of you fed me, clothed me, visited me, and cared for me, while others of you did not.” We can try to use the child's plea of ignorance in our defense, but in this passage, such a defense does not work. “We did not know it was you, and that you were watching,” some may cry, but as the saying goes, “to little, to late.” So the King – which is assumed to be the Son of God (Christ) – separates the “good people” or the sheep from the “bad people” the goats and sends one to eternal life and the other to eternal punishment.

One of the striking things about this passage is that we probably should not read it as a parable, as some biblical scholars suggest. The king does not represent something else. There is not a deeper metaphor. There is no allegory, but straight revelation of the end. The passage is real and it is profound. We are given the picture, the last chapter of the book in our hands through this passage. This passage is indeed suggesting that we are being watched in a very real way, and there will be the day when we will be told how we are doing.

I wonder which is better, to live with ignorance, or to live with knowledge. For with ignorance, we can enjoy the bliss of not knowing better, but with knowledge, we cannot go back, we cannot turn our heads and walk the other way. Through this passage, we are given a view and a picture of what we are called to do and

what Christ is watching for. In this passage we are given that insider knowledge. Have you ever been to a corn maze? When you are in the middle of the maze, the stalks are eight feet tall, and you can only see the path in front of you. But when you ascend a platform and look out over the maze you can see where people need to go, the right and the wrong turns. This is the revelation of Jesus Christ. We are given the big, the whole picture. All through scriptures, God has called to the people, to the Israelites and told them where to go, how to live, what to do. They are directed through the maze. Through prophets, through dreams, and through divine interventions we have been given directions from God sending us this way or that through life. Christ is that ultimate direction, that ultimate revelation, and that is what makes him King of our lives. Through Christ, we know what we are supposed to do. We know where we are supposed to go, we are shown how we are supposed to live in a very real manner. Out of the darkness of unknowing, out of the night of ignorance comes the light of Christ leading us to a life we are called to live.

This is the second part of that sermon from last week. Remember the gifts we are given? Remember the challenge to use those gifts no matter how small? This past week, did you wonder how you were to use those gifts? Did you wonder what you are called to do with your time, and your prayers, and your resources? Well now we have an answer, we have direction; we have been shown the way we are called to live with our gifts. The apostle Paul describes it as moving from darkness to light. As children of the light we have a new knowledge of how to live and that knowledge comes from Christ. Christ is calling us, showing us and leading to the life that he wants us to live. He says, I am watching you and let me show you where to go.

I wonder if this is a blessing, because now our anxiety may increase. We are no longer looking over our shoulders, wondering if we are being watched, because now we know we are being watched. Now we know that Christ has expectations and wants us to fulfill those expectations. So shouldn't we then run out to the streets and try to feed every hungry person, clothe people, visit all of the sick, and go and visit all those in prison? Should we run and make sure that we meet all of Christ's criteria, worrying that we may or may not pass the test? Give it a try and let me know how things work out. Go ahead and try to take care of each and every need that Christ has listed, and then come back and let me know how you did. While you are working, ask yourself, "did I feed enough, did I visit enough, and did I care for enough?" Go ahead and take care of your salvation and let me know how you did.

I bet you would be exhausted. I bet you would be worn out, and would probably make yourself sick trying to take care of all of the least of the world. Then I'm going to have to visit you in the hospital. It seems silly, such a response, but isn't this a human response to Christ's call. We are given a command, and we try to fulfill it ourselves. Christ says feed the poor, so we try to feed the poor ourselves. Or we begin to compete with other organizations, and other people. I can see it now, a bunch of Christians fighting over one hungry person, trying to see who it is that is going to feed that one hungry person. In the movie *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* two of the miners begin to suspect each other over the gold they found. But there is more than enough gold for everyone, but still they are fighting over it. We get greedy and begin to think of our own salvation.

Or we just give up out of despair. We go into the city, we set up a table with food, and the line snakes down streets, the alleys, and the byways. It is just too much. It is too hard, and it would be much easier to sit in church, pray, and become worried about the poor than do anything about them. That is usually the moment when we become detached and find ourselves talking more about the command of Christ than doing anything. Maybe we try something showy and flashy to feel good about ourselves, but that would be about as far as we would go. It becomes too easy to rest in grace, and ask for forgiveness then to take seriously the call of Christ in this passage. It is too easy to call oneself a sinner then one who tries to follow Jesus. Let's face it; life would be a lot easier as a Christian if we did not have to wrestle with this passage. Life would be a lot easier if we just had the first part of Matthew 25, the part we discussed last week, if all we had to do was grow our church, grow our building, and make ourselves look as pretty as possible.

This is the impossible command of Christ that haunts the big and pretty churches, plagues the small and struggling churches, and causes the individual Christian to wonder about his or her faith. It is heavy on works, it is heavy on action, and it must make us worry. I have a friend from seminary who would not claim to be a Christian or follow Christ. His main reason was that it was too hard. He did not feel that he could take seriously

enough the command of this passage, and felt that it would be better to not follow Christ at all if he couldn't do it well. And maybe when the work seems that great, when the pile is overwhelming, when we look at the line and say, "I just can't do this," my friend's logic may make sense. We reach what Paul Tillich describes as an existential despair – a point when all hope is lost. It is that same despair that we find on the cross – when we see our Lord and our King on the cross we lose hope, and wonder if God can indeed redeem these people. In the same way, we look at the world and wonder if we indeed can serve these people. Alone, you can't. You can't feed all the poor. You can't visit all the sick. You can't clothe all the naked. You can't visit all those in prison.

But, you aren't called to do it alone.

You don't have to follow the command of Christ alone. You don't have to try to live up to the expectations of Christ by yourself. You are not alone. This is the grace of the Church – this is the gift and the hope of the church. Think of what we can do through the church. Together, we can work to house a homeless family, we can feed them, we can cloth them. Together, as a community we can join with other churches to feed and house and clothe more and more families. Think of all the prayer that is needed in the world. Together we can blanket this world with prayer. Together we can offer prayer for more and more people and situations than we ever could alone. Think of the service we could offer. Together we can support a building that offers a place for people to learn about Christ, for clothes and food to be gathered and then distributed, for prayers to be mentioned, for visitation to be organized, and for Christ's presence to be known. And when one of us hits that wall of despair, when one of us says it is too much, the church will circle around you, lift you up and take care of you. We can't follow the command of Christ alone, we can't be a Christian alone, but through the church, through that community we can indeed serve the least of God's children in a way that will have depth and meaning. And on Sundays we gather back together to say, God we know that you are watching us, and we ask you to celebrate with us, to forgive us, and to continue to guide us as a community. I don't want worship to be a place where you can feel good; I want worship to be a place where you can feel convicted. I don't want church to be a place where you can fear God, but to be a place where you can be passionate for the Lord. I don't want this community to be a place that only serves itself, but works to serve the world. The scholar, Avery Dullis describes the church as a community of Disciples, and that is what we are to be. We are to be a community of disciples walking together to follow Christ. We pick each other up, we guide each other, and we care for each other, always encouraging each other to walk to the cross. Through feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and those in prison, we will find ourselves in the shadow of the cross, knowing that Jesus is watching and smiling.

So that is what we are giving to. The church is the place to invest your talents, your energies, your resources, your prayers and your lives. Through this community we can be a presence of Christ to the least of the world. Through this church we can spread the gospel. Will you commit to the work of the deacons – serving and caring for others? Will you commit to the work of the trustees – tending and building up our material and spiritual gifts? Will you commit to the work of Christian education – encouraging growth and learning so others can fully follow the call of Christ? Will you commit to this church, a community of people claiming to follow the call of Christ, no matter how messy, how difficult, and how challenging? We are on our way towards answering this impossible command of Christ, but we can't do it alone. You can't do it alone. Will you make the commitment to Christ, and say yes to this church, walking with others to be the people that God has called us to be? Christ is watching, Christ is with us, and Christ will show us the way.

AMEN