

“It All Comes Out in the Wash”  
Matthew 25:31-46/Isaiah 58:6-9b  
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I. Introduction

You have probably heard it before.....probably felt it.....maybe even said it: “This isn’t fair.” Perhaps you thought about that with Wall Street bailouts and million dollar bonuses.....or downsizing and a lost job.....or the West Virginia coal mine explosion that killed 27 miners, and the coal company that has had a history of safety violations.

Fairness and justice, that’s one of the themes of the musical *Les Miserables*. A dialogue in the prologue between a prisoner, Jean Valjean, and an inspector, Javert, raises the question about fairness and justice that runs through the story:

Javert: Now bring me prisoner 24601/ Your time is up/ And your parole’s begun/You know what that means.

Valjean: Yes it means I’m free

Javert: NO!/It means you get your yellow ticket of leave/Your are a thief

Valjean: I stole a loaf of bread!

Javert: You robbed a house!

Valjean: I broke a window pane! My sister’s child was close to death/And we were starving!

Javert: And you will starve again/Unless you learn the meaning of the law

Valjean: I know the meaning of these 19 years/A slave of the law

Javert: Five years for what you did/The rest because you tried to run/Yes 24601

Valjean: My name is Jean Valjean

Javert: And I am Javert/Do not forget me/24601

And so begins a wonderful story of justice and redemption, fairness and grace.

“Life isn’t fair.” As Valjean protests, “19 years in prison for stealing a loaf of bread to feed a starving child.” “Life isn’t fair.” Maybe it isn’t....but maybe we shouldn’t be so quick to settle for less than fair. Maybe we could work to make it a little fairer.....a little more just. And maybe.....it will be in a day to come.

II. Text: **Read Matthew 25:31-46.**

III. Exegesis

Fairness and justice.....that’s really what the judgment at the end of time is all about, isn’t it? It’s about setting things right. Evil is judged, and condemned. The

righteous are judged, and rewarded. A standard of justice is finally established, without corruption. And the risen Jesus Christ will return as the victorious king, and knowing all he will judge fairly. The problem of injustice.....the cries of "It's not fair!".....settling for less.....it will all come to an end.

In Matthew 25 we have seen Jesus teach about the second coming and the end of this age. He has told Christians: "Be ready, you don't know when it will be" (Mt. 24:45-51); "Be prepared for a long wait, but don't give up" (Mt. 25:1-13); and "Be faithful by using your talents to share in the kingdom until Christ returns" (Mt. 25:14-30). And now Jesus comes to the end of his teaching; "Be just and compassionate, because it will matter in the end" (Mt. 25:31-46).

A. Introduction (vv.31-33) In this teaching it is the end of days, and Jesus has returned. This time he comes in the glory of God, with an assembly of angels, and all know who he is. He sits on a throne like a king, because he comes to reign. All nations gather before him, and one by one the people gathered there separated; some go right and some go left. Jesus says it's like a shepherd separating his sheep from his goats.

I thought this seemed a little strange, so I called Dr. Ken Bailey. Dr Bailey is an internationally recognized New Testament scholar who spent most of his life in the Middle East. Ken and his wife Mickie live in New Wilmington. His special gift to the Christian church is looking at the New Testament through the eyes of the Middle East. He told me that the image Jesus uses is a little strange because sheep and goats aren't herded together very often. They require different shepherding styles. Sheep stay together, are relatively passive, and together obey the call of their shepherd. But goats are different. Goats are stubborn. They get into things. They fight. They ignore the shepherd. Dr. Bailey said, "Sheep and goats, that's a troubling flock for the shepherd." And I thought, Jesus, our Good Shepherd (John 10:11), would probably say "Amen" to that. We've been a troubling flock.

Dr. Bailey went on to say that this unusual flock of sheep and goats would only be separated at a time of shearing or butchering. It's a time of accountability. At that time you are what you are, a sheep or a goat, and there's no confusion.

And so this troubling flock of "all nations" has come to a type of final accountability.....and you are what you are; sheep to the right, and goats to the left. And as we hear the story, we wonder; will there be any difference, and if so, why?

B. Sheep (vv.34-40) The king then turns to those on the right as says, "Welcome to the kingdom of God, the glory of God, prepared for you before creation ever began. You shared in the grace of God. You 'loved your neighbor as yourself.' You practiced

compassion and fairness in a time and place with those in great need. You showed glimpses of my kingdom. And it wasn't the big things.....it was the small things done with love. You gave food to the hungry and thirsty. You clothed the naked. You welcomed the stranger. You visited the sick and imprisoned. And you did it for me. I was with them. Whenever you cared for those in need.....whenever you acted with justice and fairness.....whenever you acted with compassion and grace.....you cared for me also. I was there."

And those on the right are surprised. They never saw Jesus as the pauper king among the needy. They just did what they thought was right.....what was loving.....what was fair.....what was needed. Life wasn't fair to many.....but those on the right tried to help.....tried to make it better....tried to act with justice. And now, at the end of the old age and the beginning of the new age the King sets things right. "Welcome home," he says.

C. Goats (vv.41-45) Then the king will turn to those on the left and say, "Depart from me. You did not share in my kingdom then. You will not share the kingdom in the age to come. You could have made a difference, but you did not. You could have stood up for justice, but you did not. You could have shared the grace you received, but you did not. And it's not the big things.....but small things you thought didn't matter. You didn't give food to the hungry and thirsty. You didn't clothe the naked or welcome the stranger among you. You ignored the sick and imprisoned. And when you missed the needy and powerless among you, you also missed me."

And those on the left are also surprised.....and devastated. They never saw the king among the needy they ignored. Perhaps they will cry out "Unfair! This isn't fair! We never saw you." And the king may say, "It is fair. It is just. And it is final. You chose to not share in my kingdom then. You will not share in my kingdom now. Things are being set right."

D. Conclusion (v.46) And things are set right. The compassion, justice and fairness that was longed for has come to pass. Those on the left go away into the darkness they chose, and those on the right enter into the glory of God of which they hoped. The gavel of the king, the judge, the Lord and Savior has come down.

#### IV. Reflections

At the end of time, Jesus tells us, compassion matters.....fairness matters.....grace matters. We have prayed "thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" in the Lord's Prayer many times. And here Jesus says it matters that we invite God to answer that prayer through our lives....."thy kingdom

come, thy will be done” through us. “Love your neighbor as yourself,” “Go and do like the ‘Good Samaritan’” (Luke 10:25-37).....here Jesus says it matters. This is the great hope of God spoken through the prophet Isaiah: “Loose the bonds of injustice, share your bread with the hungry, cover the naked, welcome the poor.....and the light of God’s kingdom and glory will shine in this world” (Isaiah 58:6-9b). Life may not be fair, but it can be better, and when it is the kingdom of God breaks through in this world.....and we share a little in a glimpse of the new day that will come.

In an early March television broadcast Fox News TV host Glenn Beck urged his audience to leave congregations that refer to social justice or economic justice. He said, “Look for the words ‘economic justice’ or ‘social justice’ on your church web site. If you find it, run as fast as you can.” Beck went on to hold up a picture of a swastika and another picture of a hammer and sickle, declaring that social justice is the same philosophy as Nazism and communism. (ABC World News, “Christians Rip Glenn Beck Over Social Justice Slam,” by Hanna Siegel, March 12, 2010).

Glenn Beck is wrong. He’s on the wrong side of the history of the church when it has been at its best. He’s on the wrong side of scripture that expresses God’s care “for the least of these.” He’s on the wrong side in this teaching of Jesus. And he’s on the wrong side of the sheep and the goats. Contrary to Glenn Beck’s foolish words and theological poverty, justice and compassion are expected of followers of Jesus Christ.....fairness and grace in a world that longs for things to be set right. It is the way of Jesus. It is the kingdom of God.

There is also another interpretation of this passage. In Matthew 24 and 25 Jesus has been teaching about Christians and the end of time....Christians and the second coming. He’s taught that Christians are to be ready, to be patient, and to be faithful in using gifts to share in the kingdom of God. Jesus has taught about Christians and the end. But what about non-Christians? What about people who did not hear the Christian message, or who did not or could not respond to the Christian message? What will happen to them? This text suggests an interesting answer.

As Jesus begins this image of the end of time he says “All the nations will be gathered before him” (Mt. 25:32).....”All the nations.” Who is that? There is a strong argument in Biblical theology that “all the nations” means people throughout time who, for various reasons, have not come to belief in Jesus Christ, and confess him as Savior and Lord. Up to this passage Jesus has taught about Christians and the second coming. Here he teaches about the second coming and non-Christians; “all the nations.” This is the 16<sup>th</sup> C Aztec, the Hindu family down the street, and uncle Larry who never went to church. What will happen to them? Contrary to the often voiced opinion “If you

don't believe in Jesus you won't go to heaven," this text gives us some additional theology to ponder.

In this text Jesus is expressing his presence with "the least of these." He's in solidarity with the hungry, thirsty, naked, lonely, sick and imprisoned. He is with them. He is "Emmanuel," which means God with us, and that also means with those in need. Therefore acts of compassion.....acts of justice, fairness and grace by those who don't know Jesus, shared with those in need, also puts those who don't know in Jesus in relationship with him. That's what surprises them at the final judgment; "Jesus, you were with the hungry and sick? Wow, we never knew." No one, Christian or non-Christian is saved by what s/he does. All are only saved by what God has done in Jesus Christ, and our relationship to him. Christians are in relationship with Christ through belief. Non-Christian are in relationship with Christ through acts of compassion and justice with those in need....because "when you cared for the least of these my brothers and sisters, you cared also for me" (Mt. 25:40). The grace of God in Jesus Christ is wider, deeper and more wonderful than we often realize.

In Les Miserables Jean Valjean, who has been hardened by injustice, is transformed by grace. The bishop of a church welcomes this stranger and ex-con into his home, and gives him something to eat and drink (echoes of this passage about "the sheep and the goats"). Valjean, one of "the least of these," is forgiven, and called to live for God and God's kingdom. And so as the story in Les Miserables is told, Valjean does extend fairness and compassion, often "to the least of these" as he once was. And as we listen to the story we hear a deep truth; we hear that the longed for justice is not found in violent revolution, nor in the cold justice of law.....but in the grace and compassion of a person, shared with one person at a time. The revolution of justice happens when compassion is shared with the hungry, thirsty, lonely, naked, sick and imprisoned.....one person at a time. It's the revolution of one; one person, one need, one act of justice and care. Life may not be fair on this side of the new heaven and new earth. But it can be better. And at the end of days, it will all come out in the wash.