



**VILLAGE  
CHURCH**

Presbyterian (USA)

# Jesus and The Least of These

SCRIPTURE:  
Matthew 25:31-  
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April 30, 2023 — Sermon by Rev. Dr. Rodger Nishioka

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**F**riends, let me set the scene for us. Jesus is talking with his disciples—the men and women who have been with him for three and a half years. They are soon to arrive in Jerusalem to begin the events of Holy Week and the last thing he says to them, the last vision he shares with them, is these verses in Matthew 25. Bible scholars call this “the last judgment” or “the judgment of the nations.”

Jesus tells them, “When the Son of Man comes in his glory.” Who is the son of man? Jesus himself. In the New Testament, only Jesus calls himself “the son of man.” No one else ever calls him “the son of man.” It is the most humble of all the titles for Jesus of Nazareth. The “son of man” refers to the servant of humankind. Jesus says when he come in his glory, he will sit on his throne. This is a royal image and the angels are with him. Then all the nations, all the peoples of the earth, will be gathered before him and just like a shepherd does, he will separate the sheep from the goats and the sheep will be on his right and the goats on the left. And Jesus will turn to the sheep and say, “Come you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.” This is grand and expansive language.

Then Jesus explains why these on his right are blessed by God. Why they will inherit the kingdom prepared for them from the foundation of the world.

Because I was hungry and you gave me food.

I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink.

I was a stranger and you welcomed me.

I was naked and you gave me clothing.

I was sick and you took care of me.

I was in prison and you visited me.

Each time, Jesus says, “I was hungry, I was thirsty, I was a stranger, I was naked, I was sick, I was in prison. Then the righteous, the blessed, will answer him, surprised. They will ask, “Lord, when was it we saw

you hungry and gave you food and thirsty and gave you something to drink and a stranger and welcomed you and naked and gave you clothing or sick and took care of you or in prison and visited you?”

Jesus says, “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.” That’s where we ended the reading today but the scene continues.

Jesus goes on and turns to those on his left and the news is not so good for them. Jesus says, “You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels” and you hear the same phrases but shared very differently:

Because I was hungry and you did not offer me food.

I was thirsty and you did not offer me something to drink.

I was a stranger and you did not invite me in.

I was naked and you did not give me clothing.

I was sick and you did not take care of me.

I was in prison and you did not visit me.

Then those on his left will ask a similar question to those on his right. “Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison?” And Jesus will say, “Just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.” This description of the last judgment only appears in Matthew’s gospel. Jesus speaks of this judgment nowhere else in all of scripture.

Theologians note that there is no debate here about what one believes or does not believe. There is no discussion here about creeds or confessions or even sin, forgiveness or grace. The only criteria here for God’s judgment is how we cared for one another and not just one another but for those persons whom Jesus calls the “least of these:” the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, the prisoner and not just because they are hungry or thirsty or

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a stranger or naked or sick or in prison but because they are Jesus Christ himself. The only criteria for salvation here is that we would see the face of Jesus Christ in the least of these.

For many years, the leaders of the 17 Japanese Presbyterian Churches in the United States would meet annually for a conference. We would take turns meeting at one of the churches. It was like a family reunion of sorts. The pastors would enjoy seeing each other. The spouses of the pastors, most of them women, would enjoy seeing one another. There would be lay leaders from the churches who would meet every year. I was working for the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church offices in Louisville, Kentucky, and that year the Japanese Presbyterian Churches met at the Christ United Presbyterian Church in heart of Japantown in San Francisco. My Mom and Dad and several other members of the Seattle church were there and I was so glad to see them. The pastors always came in a day early and then the rest of us arrived on Friday. We had a marvelous worship service Friday night in both English and Japanese.

Saturday morning we had morning prayers together and then took a brief break before our first morning session. There, in San Francisco, I remember it was a beautiful day so the doors to the street were wide open and just as we were gathering in the Sanctuary, in walked a tall, slender young man. He had long blond hair and was wearing a floor-length mink coat. He was also wearing a gold, shimmering dress, high heels and bright-red lipstick with red rouge on his cheeks. If you were to imagine someone who would be the exact opposite of all the Japanese Presbyterians in the Sanctuary at the Christ United Presbyterian Church, you could not have done better than this young person.

He (or she) looked around, walked into the Sanctuary and promptly sat down against the side wall and crossed his long legs. She (or he) was clearly challenged with mental illness because he was talking to himself—sometimes loudly and sometimes in whispers. I was trying not to stare. I had never seen anyone like this in my life. She was fidgeting and could not sit still, looking furtively around the Sanctuary. Every once in a while, she would let out a shrill giggle. No one dared to approach him and it seemed like we were just going to go on with our session until she

started laughing again in a high-pitched squeal. We knew someone had to do something but none of the pastors went to him. Then Marion Masada, the wife of the Rev. Saburo Masada who was pastor of the Sacramento Japanese Presbyterian Church, got up from her seat a few pews in front of us and sat next to this young man and started to talk to him. At first, he ignored Marion and kept laughing. But then as Marion continued to talk with her, she started to talk back. Then Marion asked him if he would like some food. It was a Japanese Presbyterian Church event after all and there were tables of food in the social hall next to the sanctuary. He indicated ‘yes’ and Marion stood up and invited him to the social hall. We all watched the two of them—this tall, slender, blond young person in a dirty, floor-length mink coat and this short, round, middle-aged Japanese American pastor’s wife with glasses—leave the Sanctuary.

I was sitting next to my Mom. She elbowed me and said, “Rodger, go with Marion.” I said, “Mom, I’m here for the meeting.” Then Mom elbowed me again and said, “Rodger, you’re big. Get up and go with Marion. Make sure she’s safe.” I said, “Why doesn’t one of the pastors go?” And Mom said, “They’re all busy. Just go with Marion.” So, I reluctantly got up and left the Sanctuary. One of the other women saw me and said, “They’re in the social hall,” so I went to the social hall. Marion and the young man were standing at the end of the long tables of food. Marion had picked up a plate and chopsticks and she was explaining the different foods to the young woman. He began to point to certain foods and Marion put them on the plate then she invited her to sit down at a table with Marion. Marion looked up and saw me and asked me to get some tea and water. I brought both and set them down and Marion invited me to sit with them. I gestured to sit next to Marion but Marion said, “Rodger, please sit next to our new friend.” I thought, “Rats,” and reluctantly sat down on the other side of the young man.

Marion said she would like to say a prayer for the food and she put her hand out and the young man (young woman), put her hand in Marion’s. Then Marion took my hand and gestured to me to take the hand of the young man so I did. Marion and I then closed our eyes and bowed our heads to pray. I peeked and the young person was not bowing her

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head or closing her eyes. Marion went on to pray, "Dear Lord, we give you thanks for the food and the hand who prepared it. And dear God, we thank you for our new friend" and just as she said that, the young man said, "Mercy." And Marion and I opened our eyes and lifted our heads. Marion said, "What, dear?" And the young woman said, "My name is Mercy." And Marion broke out into this beautiful smile and said, "Of course, it is sweetheart. Of course it is."

Then all three of us closed our eyes and bowed our heads. Marion prayed, "And we thank you, Lord, for sending us Mercy. Please bless her and keep her safe."

No creeds or confessions. No mention of sin and

repentance. No talk of forgiveness or even grace.

Jesus said, "I was hungry and you gave me food. I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me. I was naked and you gave me clothing. I was sick and you took care of me. I was in prison and you visited me."

And we will ask, "Lord, when did we do these things to you?" Jesus will answer, "When you did these things to the least of these who are members of my family you did it to me."

Thank you, Lord, for sending us Mercy. Please bless her and keep her safe.

In the name of the Father and of the son and of the holy Spirit. Amen.