

“The Great Paradox”

The Rev. S. Shane Nanney – April 28, 2024

Acts 8:26-40, Matthew 25:31-46

This passage is a call to believers, reminding us of the inseparable link between our faith and our actions. It is a call to bridge the gap between belief and behavior, to become beacons of Christ's love. It echoes the words of the great preacher Charles Spurgeon who said, "Every Christian is either a missionary or an imposter."

In the passage, we see a vivid picture of the final judgment. Quite honestly, it is rather terrifying. It is a scene of separation, a division of humanity into two groups. On one side are those who have shown kindness and compassion to the needy, and on the other are those who have not. The criteria for this separation is not based on religious rituals, not on doctrinal correctness, not even on personal piety. It is based on acts of love towards the "least of these."

Now, who are the "least of these"? In the context of the passage, they are the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, and the prisoner. They are the marginalized, the overlooked, the forgotten. These are the ones society often deems as insignificant, as unimportant. But in the eyes of Jesus, they are of utmost importance.

As followers of Christ, our faith is about both the right beliefs and doing the right things. It is not just about professing love for God, but also about demonstrating love for our neighbor. And not just any neighbor, but especially those who are in need.

The passage is a call to practical love. It is about meeting the physical needs of people. When Jesus talks about feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, welcoming the stranger, clothing the naked, caring for the sick, and visiting the prisoner, He is talking about acts of mercy that address the basic needs of people. This is not a call to a vague, abstract kind of love, but to a concrete, tangible kind of love. It's a love that gets its hands dirty, a love that is willing to be inconvenienced for the sake of others.

We are also called to sacrificial love. Notice that the acts of kindness mentioned in the passage are not easy or convenient. They require time, effort, and resources. This is the kind of love that Jesus demonstrated on the cross. It's a love that is willing to give, even to the point of sacrifice.

So, this passage is a call to practical, sacrificial, inclusive, and transformative love. It's a call to be the hands and feet of Jesus in this world. It's a call to live out our faith in ways that make a difference in the lives of people. We should be the kind of believers who not only talk about love, but also show love.

So now, we find ourselves standing at the intersection of faith and action. It's here, at this crossroads, that we truly begin to understand the depth of Christ's teachings and the breadth of their implications for our lives. Here, we see a call to a love that is not just spoken but lived.

Jesus did not specify who the "least of these" are. He did not say, "I was hungry, and you gave me something to eat, because if I belonged to your race, or your religion, or your social class." The call to love is a call to love all, regardless of who they are or where they come from. It's a love that does not discriminate, a love that does not show favoritism.

When we show kindness to the "least of these," we are not just helping them, we are also helping ourselves. We are not just changing their lives; we are also changing our own. By serving others, we become more like Christ. By loving others, we learn more about the love of God. This is the transformative power of love.

In the original Greek text, the word used for "love" in this passage is "agape". This is a selfless, sacrificial, unconditional love. It's the highest form of love, the kind of love that God has for us. This word is used throughout the New Testament to describe the love of God, the love of Christ, and the love that we are called to have for one another.

In John 3:16, we see this word used to describe the love that God has for the world: "For God so loved (agape) the world that He gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life." In Romans 5:8, we see this word used to describe the love that Christ has for us: "But God demonstrates his own love (agape) for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." In 1 Corinthians 13, we see this word used to describe the love that we are called to have for one another: "LOVE (agape) IS PATIENT, LOVE IS KIND. IT DOES NOT ENVY, IT DOES NOT BOAST, IT IS NOT PROUD."

So, as we continue to reflect on this passage, let us strive to live out this love in our daily lives. Let us strive to be practical in our love, sacrificial in our love, inclusive in our love, and transformative in our love. Let us strive to be not just hearers of the word, but doers of the word.

In his book, "The Cost of Discipleship," Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, "Christianity without the living Christ is inevitably Christianity without discipleship, and Christianity without discipleship is always Christianity without Christ." This quote underscores the importance of living out our faith, of being active disciples of Christ. It is a reminder that our faith is not just about what we believe, but also about how we live out those beliefs.

This love is not selective or exclusive, but all-encompassing. It extends to all people, regardless of their race, religion, or social status. It is a love that sees beyond the superficial differences and recognizes the inherent worth and dignity of every individual.

This is a love that is willing to give without expecting anything in return. It is a love that is willing to sacrifice for the sake of others. It is a love that mirrors the sacrificial love of Christ, who gave his life for us.

This love is not just about lofty ideals or abstract concepts, but about practical actions. It is about feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and imprisoned, and welcoming the stranger. It is about meeting the practical needs of people, about making a tangible difference in their lives.

So, as we stand on the threshold of this compelling truth, let us embrace this call to become beacons of Christ's love. Let us embody this love in our everyday interactions, let us extend this love to all people, let us be willing to sacrifice for the sake of others, and let us meet the practical needs of people.

Let us always remember that the love of God isn't just something we talk about, it's something we live out. It's not just a concept, it's a calling. It's not just a feeling, it's a force that propels us into action. It's not just about us, it's about others. And it's not just for now, it's for eternity.

God's love is the thread that weaves through every page of Scripture, every moment of history, and every aspect of our lives. It's the heartbeat of the gospel, the foundation of our faith, and the fuel for our mission. It's the reason we gather, the message we proclaim, and the hope we offer. It's the gift we've received, the grace we've experienced, and the glory we anticipate.

So, let's not just be hearers of the word, let's be doers of the word. Let's not just be consumers of grace, let's be conduits of grace. Let's not just be recipients of love, let's be representatives of love. Let's not just be believers in Christ, let's be bearers of Christ. Let's not just be part of the church, let's be the church - a church that feeds the hungry, quenches the thirsty, welcomes the stranger,

clothes the naked, cares for the sick, and visits the prisoner. A church that loves not just in word or speech, but in truth and action. A church that reflects the heart of God, reveals the hand of God, and rejoices in the hope of God.

Amen.