

# *How to be Good*

By  
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Matthew 25: 31-46

<sup>31</sup>“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory.

<sup>32</sup>All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, <sup>33</sup>and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left.

<sup>34</sup>Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; <sup>35</sup>for 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, <sup>36</sup>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.’

<sup>37</sup>Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? <sup>38</sup>And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave

you clothing? <sup>39</sup>And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ <sup>40</sup>And the king will answer them, ‘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.’

<sup>41</sup>Then he will say to those at his left hand, ‘You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; <sup>42</sup>for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, <sup>43</sup>I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ <sup>44</sup>Then they also will answer, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?’ <sup>45</sup>Then he will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’

<sup>46</sup>And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

Television writer and producer Michael Shur, known for his work on such shows as The Office and Parks and Recreation, has shared that he was first inspired to create his critically acclaimed TV show the Good Place after witnessing "annoying behavior" while driving around LA. He'd see things like "people cutting you off in traffic, and people throwing things on the ground and not picking up after themselves," He said, "I had this game I played with myself where I would just say, 'that's negative eight points.' Like if anyone was keeping score, what you did right there ... you just lost eight points."

In his recent book, *How to be Perfect*, he describes the original premise of the Good Place in this way: "A 'bad' woman, who had lived a selfish and somewhat callous life, is admitted to an afterlife paradise due to a clerical error and finds herself ticketed for an idyllic eternity alongside the very best people who had ever lived - people who had spent their time removing landmines and eradicating poverty, whereas she's spent her life littering, lying to everyone and remorselessly selling fake medicine to frightened seniors."<sup>1</sup>

In the show's fictional cosmology every action you take on earth does have an actual point value and directly impacts where you end up in the afterlife: the good place or the bad place.

Elenor, the main character, realizes that she was sent to the good place by mistake and must hide her morally imperfect behavior while trying to become a better, more ethical person in order to stay there. Conveniently, the soul mate she is assigned in the afterlife spent his time on earth as a professor of moral philosophy so most episodes introduce the work of a wide variety of ethical scholars and moral philosophers from John Locke, to Immanuel Kant, Aristotle to Phillipa Foote.

Elenor and her friends in the good place, also mistakenly sent to this heaven-like utopia, become consumed with what will happen if it is discovered they are there undeservedly, and as in all tv sitcoms a variety of hijinks ensue. It is

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Shur, *How To Be Perfect: The Correct Answer to Every Moral Question*. Simon and Schuster. 2023.

actually the philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre that is center stage at the end of the first season, when it is revealed that these horrible people are not in fact in the good place after all. It is a lie. They have instead been destined to spend eternity torturing each other in the bad place.

Shur has also commented that it was primarily Tim Scanlon's 2000 book *What We Owe to Each Other* that forms the backbone of the entire show's arc as the characters evolve and change together over its four season run. That the point of morality or ethics actually isn't to accumulate goodness points. It's to live up to our duties to each other.

Historically in the church, the parable of the sheep and the goats, has itself been interpreted as a morality litmus test for who will and who will not be welcomed into our Christian version of the good place: the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world or sent to the bad place: the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. As Christians we are motivated by this parable to serve the least and the lost, the most vulnerable in our world, because that is how we serve Jesus Christ, who himself identifies most closely with the poor and the destitute. And that is how we seal our eternal life in glory, by accumulating not points but real and tangible acts of compassion in this life on earth.

This litany of charity shapes much of what most Christian churches do in their mission and ministry today: feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the sick, welcoming the refugee, advocating for the imprisoned. Our congregation is no different.

It is not just in this parable of the sheep and the goats, that Jesus instructs his followers to act compassionately in the world in these exact same ways. The entire Gospel of Matthew is a favorite among scholars of philosophy and ethics, because of the significant amount of time that Jesus spends instructing Christians in how to behave in the world towards neighbor and stranger, friend and enemy alike.

This particular parable was a favorite of moral philosopher Immanuel Kant himself, who used it to argue that the point of religion wasn't about a belief in the divine. But that all one needed to do and be was a moral agent in the world. God actually chooses as the true elect to his kingdom those who extended help to the needy without it ever entering their minds that what they were doing was worth a reward.<sup>2</sup> Faith has nothing to do with it.

The problem with the way that we tend to understand the meaning and the lesson of this parable is that most biblical scholars think that what Matthew actually intended is more in line with Kant's interpretation than ours. To understand the likely original meaning of the text, we have to better understand who in the parable is being judged and who is being served.

The other name we use for this parable is the "judgment of the nations," because that is the exact language in the text. In this first century context what the writer and the hearer of the parable would have meant by the term *nations* would be all those *outside* of the Christian community. This not a story of the judgement of Christians to determine if they were faithful enough. It is a story of the judgement of non-Jesus followers.

And when Matthew describes those being served - those in whom the presence of Jesus dwells - "the least of these who are members of my family," that was language exclusively used to describe not simply the poor but the early Christian community. It is important to remember that the earliest followers of Jesus were incredibly vulnerable, poor, often with tenuous political status in their missionary travels, often imprisoned, wholly reliant on the mercy and compassion of non-Christians to be able to survive in the world.

While we read it as a parable of judgement, it is actually a parable of grace, where Jesus describes the essential forms of decency and loving kindness that one human being is obligated to show another regardless of their connection to one another and faith tradition. And that even those who never declare faith

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<sup>2</sup> Ulrich Luz, Matthew 21-28 (Hermeneia). Fortress Press. 2005.

in Jesus Christ as Lord, but who live lives of compassion and care, will be welcomed into the kingdom of God.

Knowing that this might be a hard pill for us in the church today to swallow, Matthew scholar Mark Allen Powell offers this creative interpretation of the parable for us to consider as 21st Century Christians.

“Matthew’s primary interest is in locating the abiding presence of Jesus in the community of his followers: this identification would hold regardless of whether those followers are the recipients of charity or the dispensers of charity. So at the final judgement, Jesus will say to people from the nations, “whatever you did to one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, *you did to me.*” but it is easy to imagine the corollary: Jesus will also say to the distressed people of this earth, “what was done to you by even the least of these brothers and sisters of mine *was done to you by me.*” In a context never envisioned by Matthew - a world where Christians have economic resources and the church has social power - what this text reveals to even the least of those who belong to Jesus’ family is a chance *to become Christ to others*, to be vessels of his mercy, instruments of his peace.”<sup>3</sup>

It is a compelling reminder to us as followers of Jesus that we don’t serve the vulnerable in this world because they are Jesus Christ incognito, but simply because they are a fellow human being. That should be all that is required to compel us to act with compassion in this tragically fractured world.

In an opinion piece published in the New York Times on Thanksgiving Day, author David Brooks reflects on what it means to be human beings living in what feels like such a brutal and violent moment in human history. He draws upon the philosophies of ancient Greece, which teach people in brutal times to be skeptical of rage and humble in the tenuousness of our own achievements. But then he turns to thousands of years of religious thought:

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<sup>3</sup> Mark Allen Powell. *Matthew*. Westminster/John Knox Press. 2023.

He writes, “Another tradition that I think can teach us a very important set of lessons is centered around the city of Jerusalem and the three Abrahamic faiths. All these faiths emphasize what you might call recognition. That’s the idea that every human being, from birth, needs to be seen and recognized and respected. One of the great things you can gift to another person is the gift of seeing them, the gift of paying attention. The Abrahamic traditions teach us to lead with love, even in hard times. In dangerous times, your instinct is not to want to cast a just and loving attention on others because it seems soft. It seems like you’re leaving yourself vulnerable. And indeed, you are. It’s dangerous to be gentle and open-hearted in hard times, but it’s also dangerous to shut off your heart.”<sup>4</sup> Brooks then goes on to encourage us all in these days to practice what James Baldwin called defiant humanism.

That’s what this parable is all about - defiant humanism. The most basic and essential acts of kindness and care that every human being deserves, that they likely will only receive if people choose to act defiantly in this world.

Over the past several months, I have been a part of conversations with a variety of community partners - Township and County officials, Bryn Mawr Hospital, Lower Merion Police and other nonprofits and faith communities - to talk about how to address the needs of people who are sleeping outside here in our own community. Human beings who are the very epitome of those who go unseen in our world. It was a conversation sparked by the death of a man last year outside of Luddington Library.

In a township that doesn’t have much in the way of direct services from the government or nonprofits, and in a county that continues to reduce the resources available to the housing insecure, it would be typical for someone sleeping outside here in our own community on nights in the winter when it was too cold for a human being to be able to sleep in the elements, for Lower Merion police to pick them up and drop them across City Line Ave. so that they can access services in the City of Philadelphia.

It was the overwhelming consensus among all of these community leaders that we have not just the capacity but the obligation to do better than that. But that

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/11/23/opinion/brutalizing-humanity-modernity.html?>

kind of defiant humanism takes a lot of work and a lot of risk. In the midst of months of hard conversations, it has been so encouraging to me that amongst our leaders as a church, that it was clear that we are obligated as Jesus followers to reach out in care and loving kindness to this vulnerable population.

So this January, we as a congregation will serve as a pilot Code Blue shelter for Lower Merion township, welcoming in the 4-5 men sleeping outside in our community on the coldest of nights, providing hospitality, food, warmth, and a human connection. As the details for this pilot come together, I hope that many of you will see this as a way to respond to Jesus' call to care for one another.

In his book *The Dignity of Difference*, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks writes something that I think is an interesting way to paraphrase this parable, "men and women were made – so I believe – to serve one another, not just themselves. We may not survive while others drown; we may not feast while others starve; we are not well when billions languish in disease; we are not free when others are in servitude."<sup>5</sup>

In days when we all feel helpless against the violence, the hate, the disparities of this world, when we each might wonder where God is in the midst of it all, we are reminded in this parable that even in our helplessness we are obligated to help others. To consider not just that Jesus himself will one day reign as the king and judge of all the nations, but that for a short time, he walked among us fully human, showing us and teaching us what humans were created to do - to care for one another. And that through our care the world experiences his compassionate presence still today.

Amen

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<sup>5</sup> Jonathan Sacks. *The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations*. Bloomsbury Continuum. 2003.