

“We Are NOT the Ones in Charge!”

Matthew 25:31-46; Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24

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Today is Christ the King Sunday, also known as the Reign of Christ Sunday, an annual festival in the life of the church in which we celebrate the reality that Jesus Christ is our King. He’s not just a *good guy* (though he is that); he’s not just a *prophet* (though he is that too); he’s *our King*. There are a lot of different titles for Jesus in the pages of our scriptures – Christ, Lord, Master, the incarnate Word, the Son of God, the Son of Man, the Son of David, the Lamb of God, the Second Adam, the Light of the World, the King of the Jews, Emmanuel, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Good Shepherd, the Bread of Life, the Holy One of God, the Alpha and Omega, the Bright Morning Star, the great I AM, and so on. Each of those titles has its own significance, its own meaning. But here, today, on Christ the King Sunday, we affirm, with boldness and conviction, that Jesus Christ not just all of those things – he’s also *our King*. He is the one we swear our allegiance to. He’s *my* King; he’s *your* King; he’s *our* King.

It’s a reality we sometimes forget. The world likes to tempt us with distractions; the world likes to give us other images or idols or people to bow down to; there are a dizzying array of causes and platforms and organizations of all kinds calling for our support and allegiance. Jesus says, *I am more important than any of that; I am more worthy of your faithful service and devotion than any of those.* That doesn’t mean we can’t offer our time and talents and money in a variety of different ways, but it *does* mean that when push comes to shove, if there is any kind of conflict between serving Jesus and serving any other person or group or thing, *our allegiance belongs to Jesus*. Period. If there is ever a conflict in values, if you are ever faced with a choice between going along with a crowd or bowing down in faithful obedience to Jesus our Lord, there is only one *right* choice. Going along with the crowd might be easier for you in the *short* term. But as Christians, we always need to think about the *long* term.

Our gospel passage reminds us that there is a righteous Judge who will do just that: he will *judge* in *righteousness*. He will judge *everyone*, all peoples *everywhere*, in righteousness. “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. 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, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at his left.” At Christ’s right hand go those who value *righteousness*. Feeding the hungry. Giving drink to the thirsty. Welcoming the stranger. Clothing the naked. Taking care of the sick. Visiting the imprisoned. At Christ’s left hand go those who don’t care about righteousness. The people who do not lift a finger to help others. The people who care only about themselves. The greedy. The selfish. The self-serving.

People either end up on Jesus’ *right* hand ... or his *left*. This isn’t a game. This isn’t for show. This is for *keeps*. This is the final judgment. As the creeds put it: “He will come again to judge the living and the dead.” This is it. Jesus looks at all of our hearts – and he makes a choice, for each one of us.

You end up either on the right hand – or on the left. There is no third alternative. The consequences are real. On the right hand is eternal life. On the left hand is eternal punishment. Period. The end.

Now, it seems to me that people tend to have one of several different reactions when they hear this story, or others like it in the Bible. Some of them try to deny the reality of what Jesus is talking about. Some of them say they don't believe in Hell. Some of them try to argue with Jesus theologically, saying that a loving God would never assign people to everlasting punishment – the implication being that Jesus himself must just be wrong, or not telling us the whole truth. Some of them try to justify their actions, thinking that *of course* they will end up on the “right” side, when the reality is they might not. Some people might *under-value* their goodness, thinking that they are going to end up on the *wrong* side, when their sincerity of heart and genuine repentance has already brought them back into God's good graces. The point is, *we* don't get to have any say about which side we will end up on. That is entirely *Christ's* choice. He's the King, after all. All we have to decide is *how we're going to live our lives*.

The passage from Ezekiel is less familiar to most of us, and the imagery is slightly different, but the themes are very similar. God will gather together one group of people – and destroy another group. The group that God gathers have been scattered and need to be rescued, because bad things sometimes happen to good people. Sometimes good people get fired simply because *they were doing a good job*. Sometimes people receive death threats simply because they were *doing the right thing*. My goodness, there are poll workers who put in a lot of long, hard hours to count ballots, who are now *scared out of their wits* because some people who didn't like the results have made threats against them! What kind of madness is this?!? There is evil in the world, *profound* evil, that sometimes wreaks havoc on those who try to live uprightly. That is a theme that resounds throughout the Bible. Here in this Ezekiel passage, we read about evil-minded people who “push with flank and shoulder,” who “butt” other people with their “horns,” who “scatter people far and wide,” who “ravage” other people. Those are the kinds of people that God will judge harshly; those are the kinds of people God will reject. God says he will “destroy” them. God says he will “feed them with justice” – the justice that is due to them, for all the *injustice* they have done. As for their victims, the people who got hurt who were doing the right thing, God will “bring them out,” God will “gather them,” God will “bring them into their own land,” God will “feed them with good pasture,” “they shall lie down in good grazing land,” “they shall feed on rich pasture.” God will “seek the lost,” God will “bring back the strayed,” God will “bind up the injured,” God will “strengthen the weak” – but God will utterly destroy all those who persist in committing injustice, all those who allow evil to work through their words or their actions, all those who think *they* get to be the judge. This passage makes it sound like *God* is the one who will do the judging; what we learn in the New Testament is that God hands over all power and authority to Jesus Christ. *He* will be the judge.

It's Christ the King Sunday. *Jesus* is the one in charge. *Jesus* is the one who holds the scepter in his hand. *Jesus* is the one who gathers his flock and brings them to a place of safety. *Jesus* is the one who sends all the unrepentant evil-doers into a pit of everlasting torment. *Jesus* is the judge of us all.

That really ought to make us all tremble. It ought to make us all *stop* and really *think*. What kind of a person am I, *really*? What kind of values do I promote, *really*? What do my choices say about me, *really*? How do I try to justify my own bad behavior, *really*? What sins am I not confessing and repenting, *really*? When somebody tries to get me to do something that isn't right, what do I do, *really*?

You see, what really matters is not what *you* think about yourself. It's not what your *friends* say about you, or what the *world* thinks about you. What ultimately matters is what *Jesus* thinks about you.

Because *he's* the one in charge. *He's* the one who gets to determine your ultimate fate.

So if Jesus Christ is truly our King – which, hopefully, we all *want* him to be – then we have some serious choices to make. Serious choices about how we are going to live our lives. The Bible has a *lot* to say about how we should be living our lives. Jesus has a *lot* to say about the behavior he expects of us.

Maybe it would help us to hear some reminders. Maybe we *all* need to be reminded, periodically, of just what the Christian life is *really supposed to be about*. “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.” (Galatians 5:22-23) “Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.” (Philippians 4:8) “As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.” (Colossians 3:12) “You must make every effort to support your faith with goodness, and goodness with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with endurance, and endurance with godliness, and godliness with mutual affection, and mutual affection with love.” (2 Peter 1:5-7) “Do justice, and love kindness, and walk humbly with God.” (Micah 6:8) “Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” (Amos 5:24) “Love your neighbor as yourself.” (Matthew 22:39 and others) I could go on and on. You could do an internet search on “virtues in the Bible.” There’s a *long* list!

There are also long lists of *vices* that God tells us to set aside. “The works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these.” (Galatians 5:19-21) “As for the cowardly, the faithless, the polluted, the murderers, the fornicators, the sorcerers, the idolaters, and all liars, their place will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur.” (Revelation 21:8) “Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry)... You must get rid of all such things – anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language from your mouth. Do not lie to one another...” (Colossians 3:5-9) “You shall not commit adultery; you shall not murder; you shall not steal; you shall not covet...” (Romans 13:9). Again, I could go on and on. There are some *very* long lists in the Bible of things that we Christians need to stop doing, if we’re doing them, or never start doing in the first place. It’s not just because these things are bad for other people, or bad for our society as a whole; they’re also bad *for the person who does them*. They put people further and further away from Christ – and, if not corrected, will lead to a person being *rejected* by Jesus on that ultimate day, *judged*, permanently and for all time, by our righteous King.

That’s what’s at stake here. This is not just a matter of, “Let’s all be nice to each other; let’s all try to be good people.” No, this is *far* more serious than that. This is Jesus saying, “Put all those earthly vices *to death*, and serve me in integrity and faithfulness – *or else, watch out!*” He’s not kidding!

I have a fear that there are some base elements in our society that have become so foul, that there are sins that have become so commonplace that almost nobody seems to care anymore, that – especially here in America, where we have practically turned “freedom” into an idol – that there are far too many people who think *they* get to choose what is right and wrong, and that there are also far too many *Christians* who aren’t taking the Kingship of Jesus Christ seriously enough. I have a fear that the gospel itself is being diluted. Let us not ever forget: *we* are *not* the ones in charge. *JESUS* is. The end.

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