

Be Pleasing in Little Mercies
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West Valley Church

Call to Worship from Psalm 100 (NIV)

- 1 Shout for joy to the LORD, all the earth.
- 2 Worship the LORD with gladness;
come before him with joyful songs.
- 3 Know that the LORD is God.
It is he who made us, and we are his;
we are his people, the sheep of his pasture.

- 4 Enter his gates with thanksgiving
and his courts with praise;
give thanks to him and praise his name.
- 5 For the LORD is good and his love endures forever;
his faithfulness continues through all generations.

Draft Opening for Worship for Hardy

Happy Thanksgiving, Church! We serve a merciful God! We glorify God and show that we belong to God when live mercy-filled lives too. Let's open our minds, and our hearts, and our mouths to declare God's faithfulness this morning!

Sermon Title: Be Pleasing in Little Mercies

Matthew 25:31-46 (The Parable of the Sheep & the Goats)

31 "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. 32 All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. 33 He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.

34 "Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. 35 For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, 36 I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.'

37 "Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? 38 When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? 39 When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?'

40 “The King will reply, ‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.’

41 “Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. 42 For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, 43 I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.’

44 “They also will answer, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?’

45 “He will reply, ‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.’

46 “Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.”

How do you win at life? In a culture that is so obsessed with winning, this seems to be the question that drives us – even if we aren’t consciously asking it. In a *Psychology Today* article I found when I googled *how to win at life*, Dr. Jonathan Fader begins this way: “Unlike in sports, there is no real scorecard in life.”

With respect, I beg to differ. We have all sorts of ways of keeping score, don’t we? We keep score with degrees and titles. We keep score with bank accounts and square footage. We keep score with resumés, with numbers of followers and social media likes, and how many days we can close all our fitness rings and keep our streak going. We keep score all the time! But even as I offer these examples, we intuitively know: These may quantify success in the eyes of the world, but they don’t equal a full and fulfilled life.

Perhaps a better question would be: Who decides? Who determines if you won or not? I don’t want to be the one who decides whether I won or not. If I enjoy a long life and an easy death, I’m sure I will do what so many people do: feel a mixture of gratitude and grief – grateful for the all the wonderful experiences I had, yet sad that I could not have done more good in the world for more people. Last week’s parable spoke to this.

Here’s more context: This last story in Matthew 25 is a parable that isn’t exactly a parable. It’s a parable insofar as it tells a provocative story that evokes strong feelings, moves listeners to place themselves in the story, and calls for decision. But it’s also not a parable because Jesus refers to the Son of Man, a title he often uses for himself. This Son of Man is then called a king, and the king invites people into his kingdom saying, “Come you who are blessed by my Father...” a term Jesus repeatedly uses when he speaks of God. This is more than just a story. This is a description of the future, the finish line, the final judgement. With each parable, Jesus makes it increasingly clear: *This is really going to happen to you.*

There will be day when each of us stands before Jesus Christ as he stands before us—the King of All Creation, resplendent in glory. In telling this parable-that-is-more-than-a-parable, Jesus is confirming a hunch and a hope. He’s confirming our hunch that life has a point. Life isn’t just a

long series of events governed only by cause-and-effect. History is going somewhere, and it is going to culminate in one final, intensely dramatic and emotionally satisfying scene that will complete one story arc, and set the stage for an even greater one. Jesus also confirms our hope that there will be a final reckoning. We can rest assured that everything will be set right in the end, and that the only truly righteous and trustworthy person who ever lived will provide the final verdict. *Jesus Christ, the righteous judge, will decide who has won at life.*

There are at least four very shocking things about how Jesus is going to decide who wins.

First, he will judge based on the BOTTOM, not the top. The goat folks are shocked. When did we see *YOU*...? Jesus, if we had seen you in your glory and power, of course we would have served you. But Jesus says, while you were looking up you should have been looking down. If you wanted to please me – your Lord who was not in your midst and not present to receive your acts of mercy – then you could have shown it to those who were. You should have shown it to those who most needed it, and who were least able to reciprocate. We remember that Jesus said, “You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me...” (Jn 12:8) but now we hear it with new ears, don’t we?

Second, he will judge based on what we do that is FORGOTTEN and unseen, not on deeds that are notable and newsworthy. The sheep folk, we discover, are just as flummoxed by the King’s verdict as the goat folk are. When did we do any of things? We don’t remember any of that! “Exactly!” the King will say. “When it comes to deciding who wins at life, I have a very different kind of score.” When you seek to be pleasing by the regular practice of little mercies, you are not looking for gold stars. You stop keeping track. Jesus: “But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, 4 so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.” (Mt 6:3–4).

Lord, give us eyes to see who is being unnoticed, who has been forgotten, who has been left out and disregarded. We promise that, when you show them to us, we will do what we can to make their burden easier.

This lead to the even more obvious, third shocking thing:

Third, he will judge on the basis of ACTIONS, not on words or beliefs. In the end, talk is indeed cheap, actions do indeed speak louder than words, and the King will not be proctoring a final theology exam. It won’t even matter that you address the King with the proper title. Jesus again, from the Sermon on the Mount: “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.” (Mt 7:21). It will only matter that we cared more about *doing right* than *being right*, and that should be sufficient warning to all the well-churched.

Finally – and perhaps most importantly - he will judge on EASY, not on hard. The King is going to decide who wins at life on the basis of actions that literally anyone can do. No special skills, talents, or training is required. And there will be no excuses. The bar is set so low anyone can

walk over it. If one finds oneself among the goats, then it isn't because "I couldn't." It will only be, "I didn't."

But when we are eager to please the Lord by showing mercy to "the Least of these," this is what we will hear:

- When I was hungry and in rags, you shared what you had with me and helped me survive and grow.
- When I was thirsty, you offered refreshment to my body and my spirit.
- When I was a stranger, you welcomed me in and let me know that I belong.
- When I was cut off from the world, you remembered me and reminded me that I mattered.

So now come, receive the blessing and the abundance that has been reserved for you since the universe was called into being. The wedding feast is prepared, the Bridegroom has arrived. Come and enjoy your Master's happiness!

So we have now reflected on the three parables Jesus provides to help us take the long view on our lives, and remain faithful during difficult days. The days we are in now may be hard, but there will be a Last Day. Whether you see that as the last day of your life on earth, the last day of all history, or both... remember:

Be prepared. The day may seem like it will never come, but when it will. When does, will be ready?

Be purposeful. Each of us has been given a finite amount of time, talent, and treasure. It's all gift. It all goes back to God in the end. Make the most of it.

Be pleasing. No act of mercy goes unnoticed by our Lord. Let mercy, above all else, move you through life. That bumper sticker that says Practice Random Acts of Kindness isn't a half bad way to think about it.

Amen.