

**Biblical reflections to encourage us in the work of evangelisation*****UNMERITED GRACE, MERITED REWARD & JUDGEMENT***

*When the Son of Man comes in all his glory, escorted by all the angels, then he will take his seat on his throne of glory. All the nations will be assembled before him and he will separate people from one another as the shepherd separates sheep from goats. He will place the sheep on his right hand and the goat on his left. Then the King will say to those on his right hand, 'Come, you who whom my Father has blessed, take for your heritage the kingdom prepared for you since the foundation of the world. For when I was hungry you gave me food [etc]'. Then the virtuous will say to him in reply, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you? [etc]'. And the King will answer, 'I tell you solemnly, in so far as you did this to one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it to me.' (Matthew 25:31-40. Slightly shortened. Do read whole parable, ie vv 31-46)*

This parable is one of the main sources for our ideas of judgement and the end of the world. Yet I feel it is a very puzzling and even perplexing one. Neither the virtuous nor condemned seem to be informed about the criteria to be applied. Should not the judge have made the rules and criteria clear in advance? Does not judgement then appear unjust? Could not the guilty plead ignorance of the law? Even the virtuous are not consciously obeying the law or seeking reward. Does not this make the whole thing arbitrary? The claimed relationship of the judge to some of the participants the hungry etc is also worthy of consideration: does this imply partiality? Faith tells us that God does judge justly so there must be more to all this than meets the eye! I have enjoyed pondering this parable at some length, and it is truly rich. I cannot do it justice here, but will attempt to draw out a few points that have occurred to me.

***Christianity holds together faith and action***

Jesus appears to be judging people on actions - on their concern for others shown in practical terms. In fact, he is quite explicit about this. The theme of our service of others and of love of neighbour is repeated elsewhere by Jesus and taken up elsewhere in the New Testament. This parable implies there is merit in the actions (of the virtuous) and that this attracts Divine favour and reward. This is not just about the quality of our Heavenly life

**either: eternal punishment is the result of its lack. Is not this totally at odds with what we find elsewhere in the Bible about human actions being dead and unable to please God? Does it not contradict salvation being received freely when we confess our sins? Does it not dilute or destroy the conviction that grace achieves everything pleasing to God?**

**At such fundamental levels Scripture cannot contradict itself and remain Divinely inspired. Each of its key features must be capable of harmonisation even if producing such heavenly music is often beyond the mind of men. Paradox and mystery may have to be accorded space too. This parable, and others like it, challenge us to consider how we read Scriptures about grace and forgiveness and especially the sound bites we reduce them to. Many tomes could be written on this and all I want to do here is outline some personal thoughts on the links of faith and action, reward and grace.**

**There is a tendency to see faith in inner personal terms and almost exclusively as trust<sup>1</sup>. These are both important features of faith but it is a reduction of faith to see it only this way. We need to overcome a polarisation between interior private faith and exterior public actions. This separating mindset<sup>1</sup> did not exist for Jesus or the Jewish outlook of his time or Bible more generally. Paul, the great apostle of grace, also demonstrated real commitment to overall moral formation and to practical concern for others. More recently John Wesley saw a commitment to personal holiness and to social righteousness as going hand in hand. Others could also be cited.**

#### ***The Work of Free Grace and its Merited Reward***

**Nor is faith just about trust. The faith Paul describes is an obedient, as well as a trusting, faith. James and John robustly argue this point, linking faith and loving action. One without the other is seriously lacking, and faith can be as dead and odious as actions. Jesus is Lord as well as Saviour. He cannot be the one without being the other and must also be our Judge and King. Certainly it is God's free and merciful initiative to us that makes our salvation possible. But our co-operation, in an ongoing way, is also essential. God loves us, his creatures, and wants our free co-operation with his plans. God-given freedom along with grace-inspired co-operation, means that in a sense we own<sup>1</sup> the grace. Its fruit becomes ours and as such we can be judged and rewarded. Certainly the merit in such action is from God, and impossible without God, but it is also ours. God is in an important sense only recognising, affirming and crowning his own grace and gifts. But he is also crowning us and seeing merit in action he sees as ours.**

**Is this contrived and even twisted? No! It points to the generous and even altruistic attitude of God and to his non-possessive love that delights in giving and seeing itself flourish in the other. Good human parenting is similar and provides an insight. Children receive life from their parents. It is not merited and what the child does reflects and is dependent on the gifts and ongoing care of the parents. Yet children grow increasingly adult and independent. They take responsibility for their own lives. Their actions, good or bad, are their own. A good parent watches even co-operates with - this process with satisfaction, happy to recognise and rejoice in their own influence, without choking or denying the independence, value and merit of the offspring's life and actions. God is the perfect parent!**

**The good virtuous wise person always knows that they remain a child and that they are in debt to their parents for life itself and, in good cases, for much unconditional love and sacrifice on their behalf too. While receiving all this, they are grateful and freely love in return. They have received as children and thus express gratitude by loving the other children of their parent with love too, sharing what they have received with them. In affirming God as our Creating and Redeeming Father, we affirm all other people as our brothers and sisters. God has an equal care for them as for us and wants us to share in his love for each of them. This love values each person for themselves and looks and listens closely enough to discover and then supply their real needs. This outlook and conduct is shown by the virtuous in this parable whose love is natural and unfeigned. It is not self-seeking. It is the outworking of grace. It is all the more full of merit for all these reasons. Not looking for reward, it is rewarded!**

***The link between Living in love and Seeing who Jesus really is***  
Jesus made clear that loving God and loving our neighbour go hand in hand. Recognising, responding to and receiving Jesus for who he really is and loving our neighbour in practical and just ways are also very closely related. This parable explores this. Matthew places it at the end of Jesus<sup>1</sup> ministry when people are about to judge him and reject him as not being from God. In being judged he will in reality be established as the judge of all humanity. In becoming man and being raised up as head of a new creation, he is identified with all, especially the poor and mistreated; Jesus, who helped the poor and proclaimed justice, still stands on their side. People who overlook justice for the poor and care for the needy did not, and still do not, truly recognise Jesus either. How do we respond to God, present in the carpenter from Nazareth and present in the poor among us today.

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