

When was the last time you were genuinely shocked? Good news; bad news; makes no difference. Can you remember a time when you were completely surprised and stunned? Some people enjoy being surprised; others can't stand it, even if the surprise is a happy one. There's usually a little discomfort either way, as we try to come to grips with a new reality.

When Jesus speaks about the Last Day in today's Gospel, it is striking. You've got the Son of Man with his angels, sitting on his kingly throne. You've got the separation of people into two groups, referred to as sheep and goats. And what I want you to notice today is that both groups are surprised. Both groups are stunned by what they hear before the throne of Jesus. What's the source of their shock? Let's look.

The first group are the sheep. They are placed at the King's right, which was the position of honor. The King says to these people, "Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.' Then the righteous will answer him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?' And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.'

The sheep are shocked to discover that when they were serving people in need, they were actually serving Jesus. Their service to them was really service to Him. Make no mistake, this is a 'good surprise.' It reveals that their motives for serving were right.

Then there's the goats. They are placed at the King's left, which is not the position of honor. The King says to these people, "Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' Then they also will answer, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to you?' Then he will answer them, saying, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.'

The goats are shocked to discover that when they passed by people in need, they were actually passing by Jesus. They may have thought that there was no advantage to serving "those kinds of people," but it turns out their refusal to serve them was really refusal to serve Him. Make no mistake, this is a 'bad surprise.' It reveals that their motives for service were wrong.

And the goats go away into eternal punishment, and the sheep enter eternal life.

You might feel a little astonished after hearing this yourself. And that's OK. This is a challenging Word from our Lord. It's a good thing to wrestle with what Jesus says here. Here's a couple of things to keep in mind as you do:

First, the sheep do not enter eternal life simply because they did good things. Remember, the King said to them, "Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world." You really don't earn an inheritance. The sheep do good because they're living in relationship with a loving Father, and their doing of good is not self-conscious.

The second thing is, Jesus is saying that what we do matters. It is true: we are saved by faith alone, but faith doesn't exist in a vacuum. Faith creates people who do Christ-like things. That's the problem with the goats. Their unwillingness to help those in need is a lack of Christ-likeness, which is a lack of faith. If they are doing good, it is a self-conscious attempt to make themselves look better.

One last thing: if you are at all troubled by Jesus' vision of the Last Day, never forget that the King is also the Lamb who was slain; the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. It is still not too late to seek and find pardon in His sacrifice. It is not too late to trust in the payment He made at the cross and then to do good in His Name. His nail-scarred hands still hold the door open. His patient love is the best possible surprise.

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