

November 26, 2023
Matthew 25:31-46
Faithful Standards
Michael Stanfield

‘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 the left.

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; 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, 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.”

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? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?”

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.”

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; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, 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.”

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?”

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.” And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.’



When I was a child in the late 1960’s and early 1970’s, my parents built this house in what seemed then an idyllic setting: a developing neighborhood deep in the woods off the fifth hole of a brand new golf course, Forest Oaks, in Greensboro, NC. Through the back yard, between my

house and the golf course, there was a very large, rolling field. Our house was the only house at the end of a gravel road. Off the front of the house was a grassy cull de sac surrounded by nothing but woods. Beyond the miles of forestland were cattle and tobacco farms, some of which we kids knew how to reach about as fast *through* those woods as our parents could on the road by car.

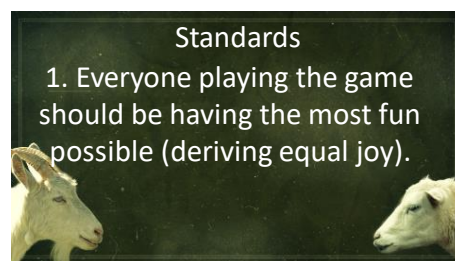
Although my house was on the edge of that development, for the many children who lived there, it was the undisputed hub of the neighborhood – the woods in the front being large enough to get lost *in*; the sage brush field between our house and the golf course, that my father would mow for us, large enough to play baseball *on*.

With such a combination of open fields and thick woods, we kids would play games like hide and seek, and kick the can, or better yet, we would make up games – games we would play well into the night.

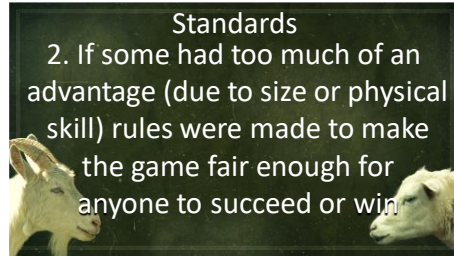
And it was a funny thing about those made-up games. For them to be worth playing in the first place there had to be agreed upon standards – rules that included boundaries. Too many rules and all you did was argue. Too few rules and it either gave some who were playing the game unfair advantages, or it was so difficult to understand what the real goal of the game was, that playing seemed pointless.

It was the same with the boundaries. If the boundaries were too wide and the space too large – particularly in games where running and chasing was involved, then the task of catching someone or finding someone became impossible. If the boundaries were too tight and the space too small, the game was too easy; the result then being that we all became bored with the game very quickly.

What we didn't know then was that we were deciding on what the rules were based on two simple but important standards:



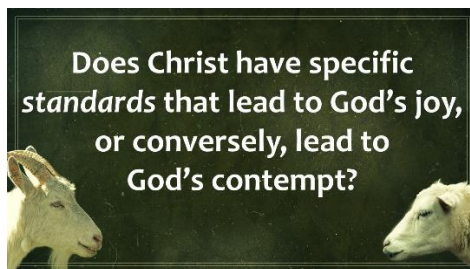
1. The first? *Everyone* playing the game from the smallest to the tallest would derive equal joy from the game.



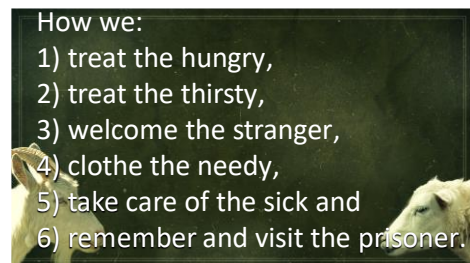
2. And the second? If there were some, because of their physical skills such as running, that gave them too much of an advantage, so that they won every time, rules had to be made to level the playing field.

That's it. But getting those standards just right meant that time seemed to stand still. We hit that sweet spot of deep and eternal childhood joy.

Little did we know the valuable lessons we were learning that we would take with us for the rest of our lives – lessons, I would argue were similar to those of Christ in our morning text.

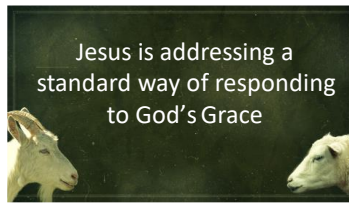


Today, we are invited to ask ourselves, “Does Christ (whom *we* acknowledge has a claim on our lives) have specific *standards* that lead to God's joy, and our joy? Or conversely, lead to God's contempt and joyless lives for us? Our morning text would answer that question with an unequivocal, “Yes!” In fact, Jesus suggests that there are six such standards:



- 1) how we treat the hungry,
- 2) how we treat the thirsty,
- 3) how we welcome the stranger,
- 4) how we clothe the needy,
- 5) how we take care of the sick and
- 6) how we remember and visit the prisoner.

Now, the Scriptures may elsewhere emphasize God’s Grace offered to us through Christ – that we are all God’s children, no matter what we do – that we are infinitely valued and loved by the creator of the universe simply because we are alive.



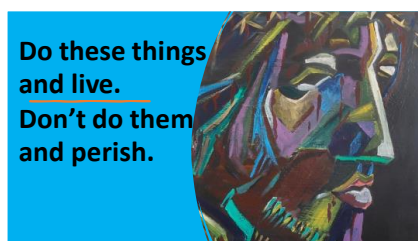
But here, Jesus seems to be talking about a standard way of *responding to* that grace – one that has the potential of increasing the joy of *everyone*.



And there is no ambiguity. Those who faithfully follow the standard of active concern for those who are in the direst need are the ones who demonstrate their love of God. They will thus be invited to “go away” into “the joy of life everlasting.” Those who don’t, won’t. And the reason? Real joy is not possible when there are some playing the game of life who are suffering because they are at such a disadvantage while others who have the advantage do nothing to level the field.



On this Christ the King Sunday, at the end of the church year, and on the cusp of a new year which begins with Advent, we may ask ourselves how we can be faithful to the Standards that King Jesus himself has set forth.

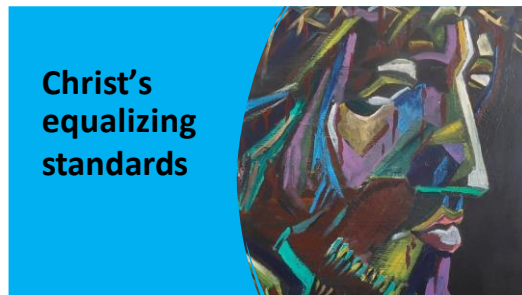


But the answer is rather blunt: *Do these things and live abundantly. Don't do them and perish in torment.*



Preacher and theologian, Barbara Brown Taylor says that somewhere along the line we bought – or were sold – the idea that God is chiefly interested in religion and religious doctrine. We came to believe that God's real eternal home was the Church, that God's people knew exactly who they were, and that the world was a barren place full of lost souls in need of saving via simply professing the right words about God. Barbara Brown Taylor, *An Altar in the World: A Geography of Faith* (Harper Collins, 2009), 7.

But doctrines *about* God, no matter how beautiful and erudite, are not worth much if they have ceased to connect to where the majority of people actually live.



Don't get me wrong. Right belief is important but it does no one any good if it is not connecting us to Christ's equalizing standards. What was it that the Apostle James said? Faith without works is what? Dead.

What if the truth is that many of the people in need of saving these days are those of us in the church, and at least part of what we need saving *from* is the idea that God sees the world in exactly the same way that we and our other *Anglo* siblings do.



You know, I grew up in an evangelical United Methodist Church. I attended revivals and lay witness mission weekends with altar calls, followed by teachings on the fundamentals of the faith. Looking back, although much of the theology of that upbringing was guilt based and potentially harmful, today I can honestly say I am grateful for that early exposure – not so much for the absolutes that tended to heap on the guilt – but for the marriage of Christian experience with personal responsibility as a disciple of Jesus Christ.



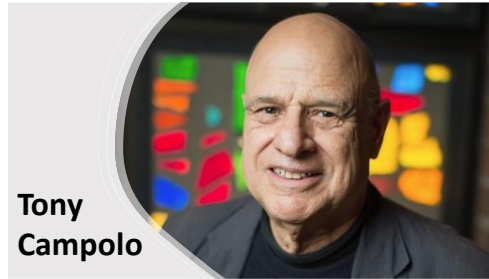
I am a feeling type and *experiencing* spirituality genuinely via my feelings was *very* positive for me as a child – so much so that it eventually led me to an understanding as an adult and as a pastor of the primacy of religious experience – not only in shaping faith, but in helping to faithfully discern and live out of Christ’s standards. My conviction to this day is that it is extremely important that we not just let our *ideas* about God shape our experience but that we also allow our religious *experiences* to shape our ideas about God.



It is really not one or the other but a dialogue between my subjective experience and the objective theological development of our faith over several millennia... that then leads me to new actions in the here and now.

And *that* involves taking risks – putting myself in situations I would not normally if left to depend only on my instincts for self-preservation.

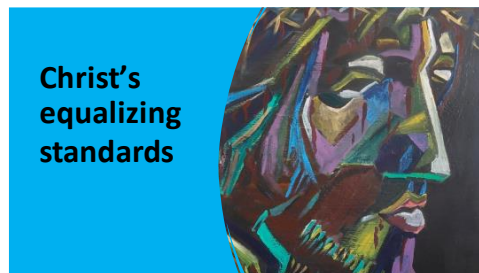
I find it ironic today that the evangelical movement which originally grounded my own faith in religious experience has morphed into something that completely eschews experience in favor of acquiescence to a set of absolute postulates. Some-where along the line, evangelical Christianity left its roots in making room for an experience of the Holy Spirit and, in essence, out of fear, emphasized the fundamentals of the faith to the exclusion of any experience of God that might challenge those fundamentals.



My favorite evangelical speaker – from the 1970’s on – has been Tony Campolo. Campolo is everything that I remember from my youth as being appealing about the evangelical movement. His is a living faith that addresses the deep needs and yearnings of those who are in the most pain and are looking for Good News.

Today, Campolo is a retired university professor and author of multiple books. At 88, he continues to self-identify as an evangelical. However, he has become one of evangelicalism’s greatest critics. He says that Protestant Christianity, as a whole, began to be redefined in the mid-70s by positions of being “pro-life” and opposing gay marriage. “Suddenly,” says Campolo, “*God* fell to the background.” Christ’s love was replaced with absolute adherence to conservative stances on social issues, such that harsh stances, rather than love of the unloved, became central, producing a battle throughout Christianity on *issues* rather than being true proclaimers of God’s radical love.

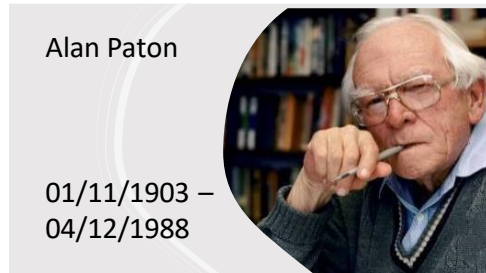
And somewhere in the middle of all the change, says Campolo, what was (and still is) known as popular Evangelical Christianity, crossed the line of faith and belief into hatred and abuse of those standing outside the acknowledged “fundamentals” of the faith. And we see where it has gotten us today – a majority of Evangelical Christians who are staunch public supporters of the most morally bankrupt leader and political agenda this country has ever seen.



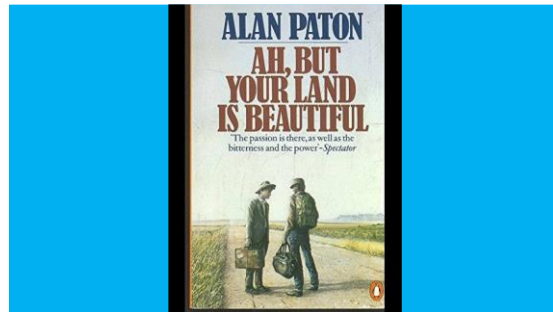
American Evangelical Biblical Standards are just not the standards of Jesus himself. The standards of Jesus would have us wrap our arms around those, that I am sorry to say, most evangelicals would just as soon throw on the trash heap. On the contrary, the standards of Jesus tell us that the concrete sidewalks on Quail Drive (where the last person in Columbia was shot and killed) may actually look more promising to God than the tile floors of our Sunday School rooms, and a soul seemingly lost to alcohol or drugs may strike God as more receptive to the movement of God’s unpredictably loving spirit than a lifelong believer.

In fact, our morning text is shockingly clear: whether one *says* the words, “*I believe* in Christ” is virtually irrelevant to Jesus. What marks one of Christ’s own is how much active compassion

one has for the outcast, the hungry, the thirsty, the refugee, the stranger, the one whose ways, whose sexual identity, whose racial make-up *seems* foreign, the one who is without adequate clothing, housing, or medical care – the one who is in prison, regardless of what he or she may have done.



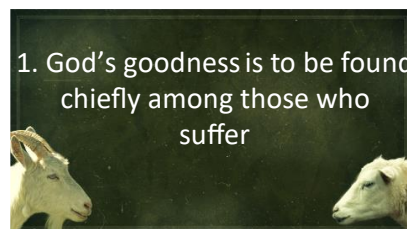
Last week, we took in Delbert Botes as our newest member. Since Delbert hails from South Africa, I could not resist including a quote this week from one of South Africa's greatest writers and activists, Alan Paton.



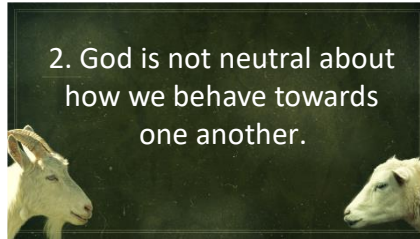
In Paton's book, *Ah, But Your Land Is Beautiful*, there is a moving conversation between a black character and a white character, both of whom are about to put themselves in great danger fighting for racial justice in South Africa and risking their lives.

One of them says to the other that they may end up bearing a lot of scars for their efforts. The other responds: "Well, I look at it this way. When I get up to heaven, the great judge will say, 'Where are your scars?' And if I haven't any, he will ask, 'Were there no people worthy of getting scars for?'" David Wolpe, "The scars to prove it," *New York Jewish Week*, January 19, 2016. blogs.timesofisrael.com. Retrieved June 11, 2017.

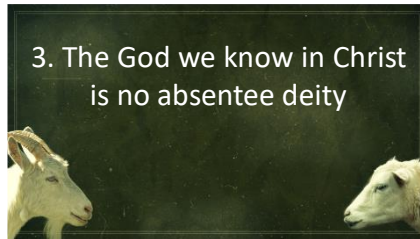
Today's passage from Matthew makes three things clear:



-God is good but that goodness is to be found chiefly among those who suffer.

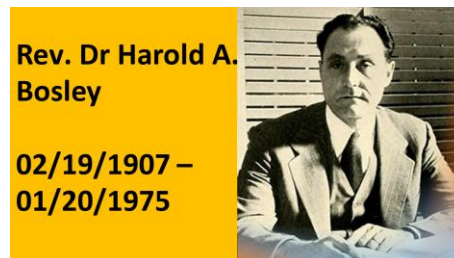


-God is not neutral about how we behave toward one another.



-The God we know in Christ is no absentee deity. No action grounded in the relief of the suffering of another is too small for God to miss, and no action not grounded in said relief is so large that it can cover up the deception that is beneath it.

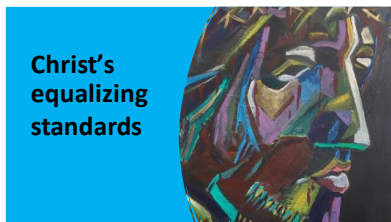
God *will* judge whether we have tended to the things of God by taking care of those in need – or not.



Harold A. Bosley, a noted Nebraskan preacher and Biblical commentator finally adds this: He says, “Two strange and, in a sense, troubling insights are to be found in this parable:

1) some people discover that, although they have not known it, they have been on God’s side doing God’s work, keeping faith with God’s will all the time

2) while others discover that in waiting around for some striking moment, some great way in which to demonstrate their loyalty to Christ, they have missed the only chance they would ever have to serve him.”



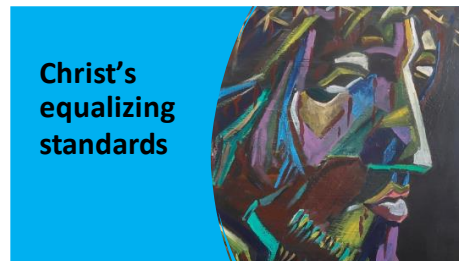
The point is this: the standards of being a Christian *are* important; but for many who call *themselves* Christian they may not be what they thought they were.



Maybe today we might do well to remember that the word “standards” also describes certain jazz melodies that serve as frequent starting-points for improvisation. Aspiring jazz musicians are expected to learn these standards. Although those melodies undergo many and varied alterations, they remain recognizably themselves.

Sometimes it can be difficult to determine precisely where a jazz standard ends and where improvisation begins. No analysis of individual notes, no matter how meticulous, can reveal that borderline. The standard is undoubtedly present, but in jazz its edges are indistinct, its essence malleable.

The same can be said of God’s standard: Accept Christ as the center of your life and live out of that acceptance. That’s the standard. But where that *religious* standard ends and improvisational *loving* of the unloved begins is harder to determine.



Christ’s standards are important – not because if we don’t follow them we will be punished; but because if we *do* follow them, we will discover love and grace coming and going in directions we didn’t think was possible; like kids playing the perfect game together, or a great jazz musician who is in the zone - a piece of eternal joy breaks through the crusted cracks of time.

Let us pray. Jesus, thank you for meeting us in our most dire need – for loving with a standard like no other. Help us to remember that whenever we meet those needs in others, we are demonstrating those same standards of love.