

Calvary United Methodist Church
September 21, 2008

MY STANDARD OF LIVING
Rev. Dr. S. Ronald Parks

Children's Sermon

Matthew 25:35-36, 40



We are children of the living God who has created us, who has redeemed us and by whose grace we are sustained this day. We welcome the children to the front of this worship space in order to celebrate the gift that God has given to all of us.



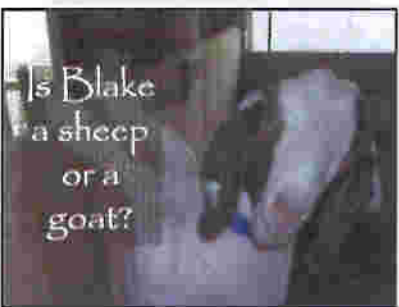
Good morning everybody! I saw a TV show the other day, as I was scanning through the dials, on a shepherd and I thought, well this looks like it might be interesting. All of the things that have changed through all the years, being a shepherd is one of the occupations that is no different now than it was, let's say, two thousand years ago when Jesus was walking around in the Middle East. This was one of the scenes from that particular show. It shows a shepherd walking his flock down a road.

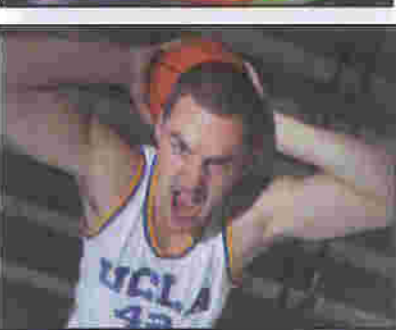
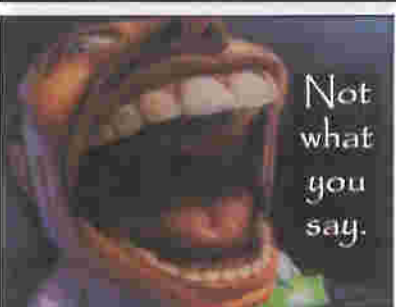
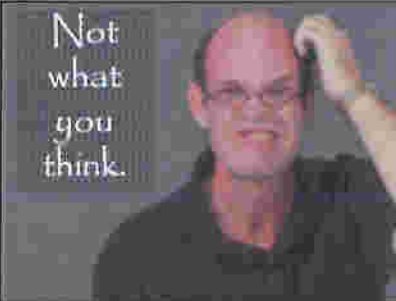
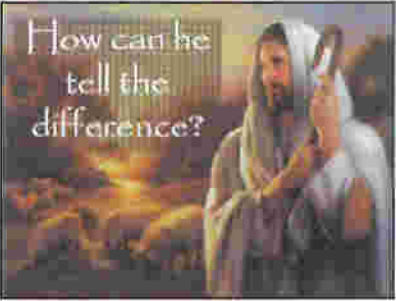
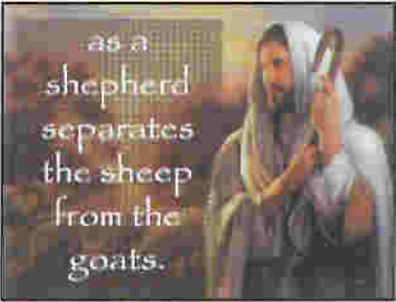


But if you look closely you will notice there are two different kinds of animals in that flock. Do you recognize either one of them? This is a picture of one of each of the kinds of animals. Now can you recognize what they are? Well, one is a goat. Guess what the other one is. A sheep and a goat. I got to thinking, I don't know if I know the difference between a sheep and a goat so I decided maybe the only real way to learn the difference between a sheep and a goat is to take a real look at one of them and then compare it to perhaps another one.



I'd like to introduce you to Blake who is going to help us in our little examination between a sheep and a goat today. This is Blake. (A live goat is brought in.) Good morning, Blake, how are you? Blake is not used to so many people because Blake spends most of his time in a pen and in a barn. I want you to take a good look at Blake because Blake is obviously a sheep or a goat. Which do you think he is? Blake is a goat. The question is, if Blake is a goat how can you tell the difference between a sheep and a goat. Here's a picture of a couple sheep. Take a good look at Blake and look at the picture on the wall and you tell me what the difference is between a goat and a sheep. That's right, sheep are furrer. Actually sheep have a different kind of a coat so while Blake's coat is kind of stiff and a lot like hair, a sheep's coat is very fuzzy and fluffy and it's where wool comes from. Can you think of any other differences? Look at the face. Can you see any differences in the face between that face and this face? They have a different shape of their face. Look at how his face kind of has a bone that arches out down his nose and take a look at his ears and look how floppy they are. Sheep ears do not lay down the sides of their heads, they stand out from the sides of their heads. And there are other differences. There are behavior differences. Sheep are docile and passive. Goats are a little bit more rambunctious. They play a lot more and they are little bit rougher. So





that's why at the end of the day you separate the sheep from the goats because they are very different animals and it's important that they have their space.

That idea of separating out the sheep and the goats is a really interesting idea that is lifted up in the Bible time and time again. Here's what it would look like to have a whole herd of both of them mixed together on a hillside and when you go to put them away at night, or if you go to separate them into their different species, you have to be able to tell the difference. You have to know what you are looking for. Jesus tells a story about a shepherd who has a flock of sheep and goats together. That story is found in Matthew 25 but I just want to share a couple lines from that story because that story is quite long.

When Jesus comes in glory he will gather everyone together. There will be a whole big flock of humanity. He'll do it as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.

How will Jesus actually tell the difference between the sheep and the goats? Now, Jesus is not actually talking about actual sheep and actual goats. He is talking about us. He is talking about people. The idea in the story is that there are two kinds of people: there are people who love God and for whom Christ is the center of their lives and then there are other people who don't love God and for whom Christ is not the center of their lives. And these are some of the things that will not count.

It will not matter what you think. It won't matter whether or not you think that people should be baptized by sprinkling water on their heads or by laying a wet hand or by having them get down in a river and stand back up. It won't matter about all these things we think so much about. That's not what will determine who is a sheep and who is a goat. It will also not matter what you say. It doesn't matter what kind of words we use. It doesn't matter what we say that we have as the center of our lives or who is the cornerstone of our life. And it also won't matter how you feel: oh, I think Jesus is cool, I love him. You see it is not about feelings. It is not about speech. It is not about what is in our head. What makes all the difference is this—it's what you do. It's what you do that defines whether or not you are a sheep or a goat. There is nothing else that matters. In this story in Matthew 25 there is nothing that separates out Christians from non-Christians except what they do.

Let me read some of the things that are so important in terms of what Jesus thinks people ought to be doing who say they love God.

I was hungry and you fed me. I was thirsty and you gave me a drink. I was homeless and you gave me a room. I was shivering and you gave me clothes. I was sick and you stopped to visit. I was in prison and you came to me.

Then the Master will say, "Whenever you acted out of love for someone overlooked or ignored, that was me—you loved me."

Now we have seen people in our lives as we lived the last week that have kind of been overlooked and ignored. Maybe they've even been insulted and degraded. Maybe these are people who don't have a lot of friends. Maybe they are having a hard time with school and class. Maybe in the gym class or on the playground they get picked absolutely last. There may be people that you know who get overlooked a lot. Or maybe they are not ignored but the attention they do get is not the attention anybody wants. Whenever we act out of love to anyone it is like they became Jesus and we gave the gift of God's love straight to them. And that's what makes the difference between us being sheep or goats. It's not that a goat is a bad animal or the sheep are good animals but they are very different things and God has called us to share his love with other people. When we do that we are collected into God's flock and we spend all of our day in God's presence.

I know you are dying to just pet Blake a little aren't you? While we are doing something really important I'll give you a chance to do that.

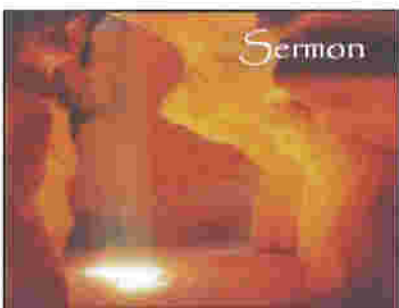
There is something we have to do. We do it out of love and what we do out of love is share with other people. There is a bag that we are going to distribute this morning for those who would like to take one. The bag is in support of the Ecumenical Food Pantry—not the Food Pantry that we have here at Calvary but the Food Pantry that we have supported through the years. If you would like to take a bag I'd ask that you would stand so one of these young people could bring a bag to you.

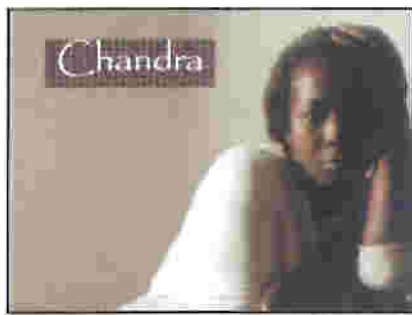
Remember that the reason that we do this is not because we are nice people, not because we think it's kind of cool to share our stuff. We do it because God first loved us and because God first loved us we have learned that that's the way we are to relate to and share with every other person. We are to act out of love and that's the thing that separates the people who love and who follow Christ from everybody else.

We want to thank Blake for being here and being such a good Children's Sermon illustration. You can pet him if you like. I want to thank Mr. Grubb and Mr. Price for letting Blake come in this morning.

Message James 2:14-17, 24

Preston is 22. He attends New York University and as a Jewish student he believed he had heard perhaps every slander, every slang term that could be leveled against a young Jewish person until he went to play piano at a local United Methodist Congregation. After the performance, which went very well, as he was standing in the reception line he heard two older folks, two men, use the term *Christ killer*. Have you heard that term before leveled at Jews? He was surprised that he heard it inside a church. He thought, these people talk about the love of Jesus Christ. We share the same spiritual heritage but the label *Christ killer* stuck with him and still does today some seven years later.

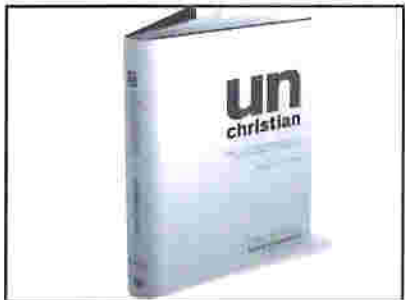




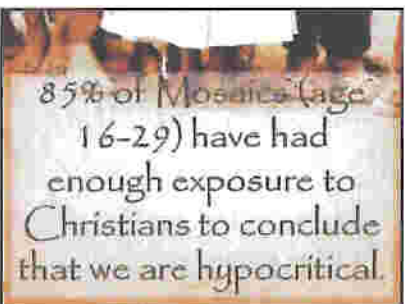
This is Chandra. Chandra is the wife a deacon of her Southern Baptist Church in Atlanta. One Sunday morning her husband was invited to speak and so he chose the love text—love God with all your mind and soul and strength and love your neighbor as yourself. Chandra was impressed by the words and moved by the Spirit as she watched her husband speak. And then they went home, had lunch and later that day after drinking he beat her and put her in the hospital for the fifth time in six months.



This is David. David has been an altar boy since he was a young kid. He had always loved the church. He loved all the rituals. He loved even the mass in Latin. He loved everything about his faith. He loved what it meant to be a part of that community and receiving the sacrament. He loved the celebration of mass. But something happened the day that his priest was arrested for child abuse.

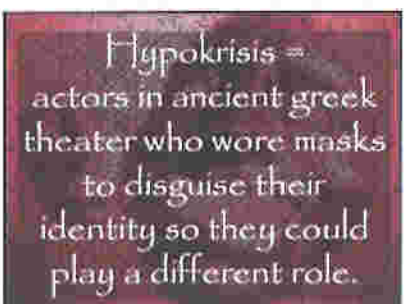


Extreme cases you say? We don't do things like that. We are not involved in stuff like that. We as Christians know that it's a sin to commit violence against another person whether by thought, word or deed, or to be abusive against another human being. We know these things are wrong.

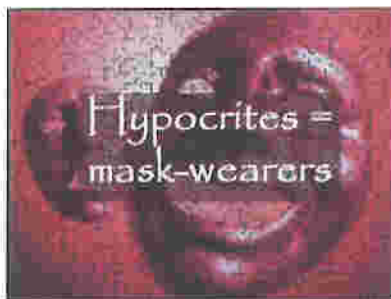


If you read the third chapter of David Kinnaman's book, *unChristian*, which serves as the basis for this sermon series, you recognize that most people between the ages of 16 and 29, 85% in fact, have had just enough exposure by people like you and me to know that all Christians, most of the time, are hypocritical. Eighty-five percent of people between the ages of 16 and 29, including Preston and Chandra and David, either know enough about Christians that they worship with or they have been exposed enough to Christians that they perhaps know only as friends, to know that people who claim to follow Christ in fact do not. And in many cases they don't really understand the level of hypocrisy in their life. They just go on and on and on thinking that showing up at church and wearing the Hawaiian shirt at the appropriate time and then putting on the suit when the weather gets colder or the robe or whatever it might be, that really is pretty much it.

The followers of Christ do these things and these things are very heavily regulated. There are rules. There are expectations. There are standards of living that we are all supposed to align ourselves with. And if we just take the most obvious and outward impressions of what it means to be a Christian we can pretty much fool everybody almost all the time so we think. But people see right through us. They know what's going on. They know how much we are hiding behind something.



The word hypocrite comes from a Greek word, hypokrites. It's a word that is used in Greek theatre and it has to do with the actors who step out onto the stage who wear masks to disguise their real identity in order that they more effectively play a role. In Greek theatre there were no female actors so men would put on a mask that had a feminine shape to it, feminine features and they would change their voice in order to appear to be feminine in character. A mask to disguise your face so that no one could see who you really were while you pretended to be someone



Hypocrisy: the act of preaching a certain belief or standard of living, but refusing to hold oneself to that standard.

else—a hypocrite. And therefore throughout the years the word hypocrite has kind of lost its original meaning. Hypocrite literally means a mask wearer; to put on a façade, to present an appearance to someone that does not accurately reflect the identity behind it.

Hypocrites for us today typically entail the act of preaching or telling someone else they must adhere to a standard of belief or standard of living but then not holding oneself to that exact same standard. Here's what I expect of you but you can't expect that of me. That's a hypocrite. That's a mask wearer.

And for many of us, according to those surveyed in *unChristian*, we believe that our mask is so much a part of who we are there is really no difference between what we say, what we think, how we feel and the actual presence and person of Jesus Christ. But those who know just enough about Jesus to know what that standard of living looks like want us to know that they see right through it and that for many of us most of the time our standard of living is so foreign, so far away, so out of line with what Christ asks of us that we are unrecognizable. If this is what it means to be Christian than we are truly unChristlike.

That's a hard message for us to hear. It's a hard message for us to swallow. But it's kind of laid out for us in the section that I've printed in the bulletin this morning from James. I think a lot of us believe if our head is in the right place, if we feel good in our hearts, if somehow God's love is part of what we think of is what we are about this day, we pretty much can do anything we want. We sin any sin we want, say any word we want, do anything selfish that we like as long as somehow at the end of the day we give a nod to God. James has other things to suggest.

What good is it if you claim to be faithful but do nothing to put your faith into action? Is anyone redeemed when no one decides to make a difference and change a life?

By the way, that "anyone redeemed" includes you and me. Are we redeemed when we make the conscious decision to do nothing to change ourselves or the lives of those around us? Remember the sheep and the goats. It is only those who act by giving food to the hungry, a cup of water to the thirsty, comfort, presence, consolation to those who are sick, those who are homeless, those who are in prison. It is only those who act, not who feel, not who pray, not who think, it is those who act who truly represent and who truly understand what it means to be a disciple of Christ. That includes reconciling ourselves to the love of God.

Suppose you meet a brother or sister who is without clothes or food. You offer a "faithful" greeting; "God's peace be with you!" but walk away without caring for their needs. What a worthless and cruel gesture. Faith is dead when words and deeds don't match. Righteousness is revealed by what you do, not what you claim to believe.



The people who were part of the survey in Kinnaman's book suggest this: this is what they need from Christians. They need transparency. They need us to be clear. They need us to own who we are because of being a Disciple of Christ means knowing that we are not Christ. Part of being a Disciple of Christ means that we are people who need grace. We are all sinners. Paul is clear. We have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. Every single one of us is in need of change, to be changed, to be laid on a table like newborn baby and to be re-clothed in righteousness. Every single one of us.

Part of what people react to when they see us is the fact that we think that somehow we are better than them. That because we know how bad we are, we know what it is that God has done for us, we know the depth of God's grace, somehow that changes us.

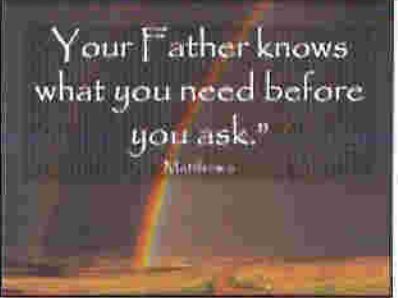
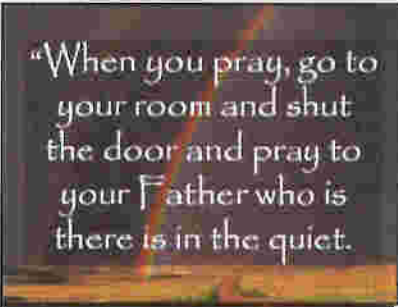
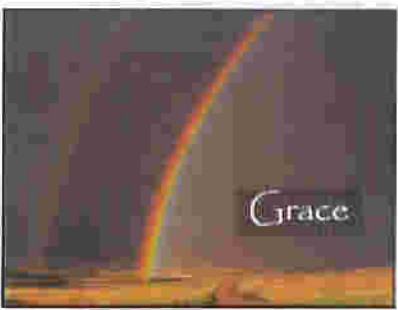
Grace is the only thing that changes us. God's love is the only thing that has the power to remake us and remold us in God's perfect love and in God's image. And this passage is a beautiful symbolism of what it means to devote to assuming and to sharing grace.

When you go to pray, go to the room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is there in the quiet. Your Father knows what you need before you ask.

There is no statement here about all the things that I have done. There is no statement of thanksgiving about all the great gifts that I have been given. What there is here is a quiet time and a place where you and God get together and you begin to describe all the ways in which the grace of God is the thing which forms the foundation of your life. All the things that you mess up, all the bad things that you've said, all the things that you have left undone, all the stuff that you knew you shouldn't have done but you went ahead and did it anyway.

Did you know in this survey Born Again Christians were equally as likely to visit a porn website, gamble, drink to excess, use profanity, turn away from someone who needed help, refuse to assist either with money or time someone who was in need around them even if they knew them. Born Again Christians were as likely to do all of those things as people who had never named the name of Jesus Christ. The percentage of difference between the lifestyle of Christians and non-Christians is too small as to be negligible because we have not accepted God's grace; we have not allowed God to take a hold of us in a way that changes us. We allow God to speak and a little bit of it gets in there but not a lot. That's why for us as people of Christ our standard of living looks not a whole lot different than anybody else's. Why? Because we know our need and we refuse to admit it. We have no humility.

There is a beautiful passage from Matthew where Jesus says to his friends: "Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eyes?"





I was going to show two pieces of wood sticking out of my eyes but I really stink with tools so you just have to use the imagery. Why is it so that we are so willing to point out the littlest thing in somebody else but never, ever allow anyone to see what is going on in our hearts. We are all about wearing the mask. We are all about the façade. We are all about the reputation. We are all about what other people think. Hey, he goes to church. He must be a heck of a guy. He is obviously superior to me. Parks, he's got a robe with three stripes on the side. That's like a colonel in the church, isn't it?

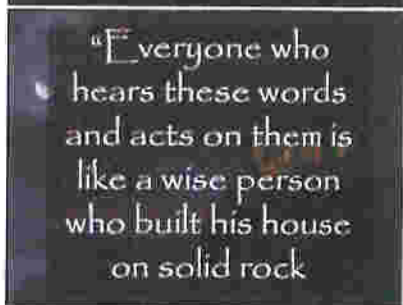
I am not better than any of you and you are not better than any of them. The difference is we know that. That's the difference. That's what separates us out. We are not worried about the facades as much as we are about what God needs to do to perfect us, to lead us to a higher standard of living; not according to the IRS, not on the 1040, but according to God's Kingdom, God's grace. That's what we are about. We are about leading a different life. And because we lead a different life other people are able to see the life within each of us.



Judge not so that you may not be judged. Can you do that? Can you live today without judgment? It's a hard thing to do. It's an almost impossible thing to do but by the grace of God, yes, we can live this day and not judge anybody but ourselves. If the only person I judge today is myself, I've already got enough to do because the list of things that I could be condemned for takes up way too much time for me to ever point out the speck in your eye. I'm too busy wrestling with the long board sticking out of my face.



Grace, humility and something else—charity. That's kind of a dark slide but it is a house built on a cliff. Charity. Jesus, in Matthew again on the Sermon on the Mount, tells the story. It's a simple story. Everyone who hears these words and acts – not thinks, not feels, not believe, not wonders, not questions, not discusses, no debates—everyone who hears these words and acts on them is like a wise person who built his house on solid rock. Why is he a wise person? Because the rock doesn't move. Everything else does and therefore when the rains fell and floods came and the wind blows and beats up along the side of the house and the siding flies off and the shingles fly off and the house gets washed off the stilts on the Gulf Coast, when all of that stuff goes away they stand on the rock. Even if the house is completely destroyed from around them they stand on the rock if they act.



And what's the action? Charity is an expression of love. If you love someone else you can't help but do something to give yourself to them. You can't help it. As has been said many times, you can give without loving but you can't love without giving. It's a simple adage. It rolls around in my head all the time. The difference and the connection between giving and loving. If I act, if I feed, if I clothe, if I visit, if I give a cup of cool water, if I am a redemptive and hopeful presence in the life who is going down the hole, then, if I have acted out of love, they have seen my master right here. And when that happens Wesley calls that perfection. He calls that Christian perfection. When the love of God flows through me, when I am so





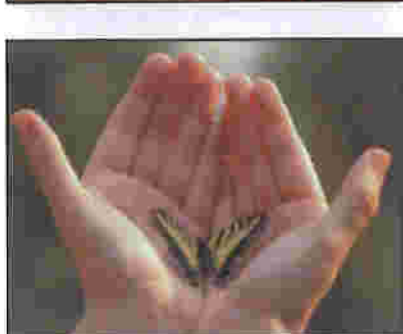
“Having spent time around sinners and also around purported saints, I think I know why Jesus spent so much time with sinners.

I think he preferred their company.

Because the sinners were honest about themselves and had no pretense, Jesus could deal with them.

In contrast, the saints put on airs, judged him and sought to catch him in a moral trap.

In the end, it was the saints, not the sinners, who arrested Jesus.”



transparent that life starts over for myself and for somebody else - what a glorious thing, what a glorious gift.

Phillip Yancey in his book *What's So Amazing about Grace* has this to say to us Christians. They are sobering words. They are so sobering I wanted to share them with you.

Having spent time around sinners and also around purported saints I think I know why Jesus spent so much time around sinners. I think he preferred their company. Because the sinners were honest about themselves and had no pretense Jesus could deal with them. In contrast, the saints put on airs, judged him and sought to catch him in a moral trap. In the end it was the saints, not the sinners, who arrested, who tried, who crucified Jesus.

It was the people who think they are better than everybody else because of their supposed connection to God. That's a sobering thought.

This is a day of new beginnings. It's a day to invite the grace of God to inspire in us both humility and charity so that we may bow our heads in prayer and know that when I say the word "Amen" you and I will not be the same people that we are right now.