

“Wellness Check”

Sunday, November 26th, 2017

25th Sunday after Pentecost

 **Matthew 25:31-46 (CEB)**

[On Screen]

This is the Word of God for the people of God.

Thanks, be to God.

[2ND Service: Affirmation of Faith]

Twice a year, I visit my primary care physician for a checkup.

My health insurance encourages this and pays for it, in an effort to keep me from getting seriously ill.

To make them effective, however, I must show up for the exam and then pay attention to the doctor’s advice.

I think the Bible offers the same kind of wellness checks for our spirit.

There is no charge for these examinations and they can save us from serious maladies of the soul.

The key is paying attention to the advice we receive.

Let us pray... Lord, today we come to a text that we have heard many times before. Lead us to understand that you intend for us to learn from this scripture, not to be frightened by it. In Jesus' name. **Amen.**

[MESSAGE]

So, every six months, I go to the doctor to be poked and prodded.

They draw blood for a variety of tests; they do an EKG; and ask a lot of annoying questions.

After all that, I get to listen as he tells me to lose a little weight and get more exercise.

Apparently, I haven't been paying attention.

These visits are inconvenient; they involve driving to St. John's; and they take a lot of time.

If I was paying the bill, I probably wouldn't go.

That would be a short-sighted decision, given how important it is to maintain good health.

These regular visits have been helpful over the years and identified things that needed to be addressed before they got serious.

A little inconvenience, it seems, is worth the effort.

Today, we hear the last of Matthew's "**end times**" stories that are placed in his gospel right before the last week of Jesus' life on earth.

You may have heard this parable before.

My Bible has the heading "*The Judgment of the Nations*" over this section; there is accountability **and** condemnation in the story.

There are a couple things we should notice about this parable.

First, it IS a **parable**, not a "*history lesson*" or a "*prophetic prediction*."

Like all parables, this is a short, fictional narrative designed to teach a moral lesson or illuminate a truth.

This is important for us to think about as we read this story; Jesus is not trying to scare us here.

Second, notice the label: “*The Judgment of the Nations.*”

What is the significance of this label?

Is this a clue to the intention of the gospel writer or does it reflect something about Jesus’ intention in telling the story?

Finally, why did Matthew include this story as the last of the “end-time” parables and why is it placed at this point in his writing?

What follows this story is the narrative of the last days of Jesus on earth: from Bethany to the Garden to the Resurrection and the Commissioning of the Disciples.

I wonder what Jesus wants us to take away from this parable.

So, this is a parable, a narrative, a story.

It has the same purpose as the previous set of parables Matthew wrote about:

We are called to do the right thing always.

In 25:10-14, Matthew tells us that growing discord and faltering love are the most dangerous cancers facing the followers of Christ.

[Bible Gateway Link](#)

This remains true today, as we see discord and lack of will to reconciliation dividing local churches and whole denominations.

When we disagree, we distance ourselves from others, allowing bitterness and even apathy to grow like a tumor.

We believe these actions have no consequences on the wider church, but the cancers become malignant.

The image of final judgment is a diagnostic tool designed to inspire faithfulness, root out self-centered living, and help each one of us measure who and where we are, as we grow in the likeness of Christ.

This is a counseling session to guide us toward healthier living habits.

There are recommendations here not unlike the doctor telling us to eat better and exercise more.

Jesus describes the tests and suggests the consequences of various tests results.

Jesus is telling us here that our choices matter.

He states clearly and forcefully that anyone who thinks there are no consequences to their actions are mistake.

This world may seem like it is too big to be changed; we may not believe that what we say and do has any effect.

The fact is, our lives have more meaning and value than we imagine.

What we say and how we treat others has a domino effect...A small action here seeds another action there, that spurs a larger action somewhere else, and all these events are connected.

I realize that our choices are not the only things that make a difference in the world; certainly, the grace and mercy of God is greater than anything we can do or even imagine doing.

But, I believe that Matthew lifts up these stories as a way of showing us the importance of what we do with our lives.

The point is that how we spend our time and who we actively love and do not love provides a “wellness check” of our overall spiritual health.

In this parable, those who have failed the test didn’t realize that their lack of action had any real consequences.

Those who passed the test didn’t do well because they tried to; they did well because they paid attention to the lessons of their wellness checks along the way.

Second, it would be easy for us to see the heading “*Judgment of the Nations*” and hear this text to be about larger corporate and social issues.

There is scholarship to suggest that the original context of this story places the Gentiles in the position of being judged and the Jewish people as those who were treated either badly or well by them.

However, this misses the understanding that “nations” does not usually refer to political or geographic entities in the Bible; “nations” is normally a reference to racial or ethnic groups of people.

In this context, Jesus is talking to all people, not to a specific group or state.

Finally, why did Matthew include this story as the last of the “end-time” parables?

I think it is because Matthew believes that time is running out; as we’ve said before, First Century believers thought Christ’s return was imminent.

There was a sense of urgency about being right with the Lord before it was too late.

While Jesus didn't return as they had planned,
there is still a sense of urgency.

We understand that we were created in the image of a
freely giving God who created all humanity.

Being created in God's image means that we love
those who are unable to give back.

We don't do this to earn God's love or to gain
favor with people, or to be sure we're at the
head of the "**sheep line**" at the end of time.

We give as an expression of the love that lives
inside us, bubbling up, spilling, over, and
flowing out.

*"...just as you did it to one of the least of these
who are members of my family,
you did it to me..."*

There really is no time to waste in failure.

I think this passage provides a "wellness check," and
maybe even a warning to those living in unhealthy,
self-centered ways.

Like when the nurse measures your weight and your blood pressure, how we treat those who are strangers, prisoners, and all who are hungry, thirsty, naked, and sick, is a key diagnostic tool to help us assess our spiritual health.

Loving those for whom Jesus gave his life, particularly those who are undervalued, is a primary expression of our love of God and of our experience of God's love for us.

We may not like being inconvenienced by a wellness check or listening to the doctor chide us for our bad habits; after all, they ask us to change.

However, this is a powerful wellness overview designed to lead us closer to Christ.

**In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.**