

## ... far above all rule and authority and power and dominion

Ezekiel 34:11–16, 20–24

Psalm 95:1–7a

Ephesians 1:15–23

Matthew 25:31–46

### **Text: Ephesians 1:20-21**

God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come.

### **Introduction**

Journalist and historian Anne Applebaum's 2020 book *Twilight of Democracy; The Seductive Lure of Authoritarianism* details what she sees as the tendency in structures of human governance towards authoritarian rule. In one part of the book she spoke of acquaintances who began to dislike the democracies they lived under having deemed them "too weak and or too imitative, too indecisive or too individualistic—or because they personally were not advancing fast enough within them." Applebaum recounts a conversation she had about this phenomenon with Greek political scientist Stathis Kalyvas who said, "Unity is an anomaly. Polarization is normal. Skepticism about liberal democracy is also normal. And the appeal of authoritarianism is eternal."<sup>1</sup>

1. I have referenced from time to time the 1934 Barman Declaration, authored principally by Karl Barth, written at the time of unfolding Nazi rule in Germany; its opening line states, "Jesus Christ, as he is attested to us in the Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God which we have to hear, and which we have to trust and obey in life and in death." Early this fall a group of pastors concerned about what they see as growing threats to civil liberties as it pertains to churches in Canada, published a [Declaration](#) aimed at bringing "Canadian churches together around our common commitment to the Lordship of Jesus Christ, freedom for the Gospel, and constitutional liberty for the churches." In October Cardus Religious Freedom Institute convened a Webinar panel discussion titled 'The Church, the State, and the Pandemic,' probing whether the restrictions were reasonable or unreasonable limits on religious freedom. The concern regarding eroding liberty for the church in Canada is a subject on the minds of many Christian leaders.

In the first century Mediterranean world—the world in which the Apostle Paul's mission to establish churches unfolded—the cult of the worship of the Roman Emperor dominated. Oh, you could enjoy your local religion, but there was always one above it; allegiance to the Emperor was a must—an annual ritual commitment was required. In that world, Christians were accused of being seditious because they declined to be involved in Emperor worship. Their allegiance was to Someone else. (Recall that Jesus too was charged with sedition.) Typical of this charge was the one levelled against the Christians in Thessalonica—"They are all acting contrary to the decrees of the emperor, saying that there is another king named Jesus." (Acts 17:7)

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<sup>1</sup> Anne Applebaum, *Twilight of Democracy: The Seductive Lure of Authoritarianism*, Signal, 2020. P. 55

Those levelling this charge against the Christians were correct about one thing—we do say that there is another King named Jesus. The gospel claims that Jesus now occupies a place ‘far above all rule and authority and power and dominion.’ It ought not surprise us that authoritarian rulers perceive the Christian allegiance to Jesus as ruler of all a threat to their rule. It is my personal conviction that the source of much animus aimed at the church today is because of our allegiance to Jesus as Lord of all; our conviction that he is coming to judge the living and the dead. This is Reign of Christ Sunday (or Christ the King Sunday) in which we highlight the Christian commitment to his Lordship of our lives. I invite you to reflect with me on what sort of King we serve.

2. The Apostles’ Creed was first articulated around 150 A.D. The reason it is called the Apostles’ Creed is because each line is regarded as something all the Apostles taught. Each line finds its antecedent in scripture and it functioned as the convictions that kept the church on a Christian trajectory. When we confess our faith with the Creed, we confess with the Apostles that Jesus ‘is seated at the right hand of the Father, and he will come to judge the living and the dead.’ This judgement is the subject of our Lord’s parable of the sheep and the goats.

In the way Matthew arranges his story of Jesus, this parable is one in a series about living during this time between Jesus coming among us in humility and his second coming in glory. The first parable was about the slave who remained faithful in his work though the master was delayed; a second one was about 10 bridesmaids, five of whom came prepared for the possibility of a delay; the third was the parable of the talents where the two slaves got busy in the work of the master’s business with what had been entrusted to them; and then this one of the sheep and the goats. These parables all belong to this theme of being our Lord’s people during this delay.

“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him,” began our Lord, “then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him.” In the gospel the judgement is presented as a word of hope for believers. Consider the context of these parables. Jesus is on the Mount of Olives with his disciples. They can see that spectacular Jerusalem Temple on Mt. Sion across the Kidron valley gleaming in the sunlight. The disciples cannot imagine a world without it and yet Jesus has predicted its soon destruction. The disciples are reeling at this pronouncement—how is this possible? Jesus had said to his disciples earlier, “when the Son of Man is seated on the throne of his glory, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, .... And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields, for my name’s sake, will receive a hundredfold, and will inherit eternal life.” (Matthew 19:28-29). In this parable Jesus is assuring them again that when the Son of Man comes in his glory it is good news for them.

It is good news because judgement will be rendered. If there is no final accounting then the categories of right and wrong, good and evil do not exist and the rich and powerful who can muscle their way in this world have indeed won the evolutionary lottery. Most humans want their sense that pedophilia is a violation of all that is good to be true. In our hearts we know the categories of right and wrong to be more than simply categories of the preferable and unpreferable. The judgement is the news that the atrocities suffered will be set to rights.

In the judgement serving Jesus with our lives will be vindicated. In this parable when the king answers his sheep's question, 'Lord when was it?', the king says "just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." The surprise was that doing such for the least was to do it to the king.

These disciples have been with Jesus three years and they know this is how you live life walking with this King. These disciples are Jews steeped in the traditions of the scriptures knowing that God's will for his people is to care for the poor, the hurting, the destitute. They know that feeding the hungry, giving the thirsty drink, welcoming the stranger, clothing the naked, caring for the sick, visiting the prisoner are how you walk in company with this God whose kingdom will never end. This is not what surprises the sheep. One day, Jesus assures them, they will hear the words of the judge, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world."

Think for a moment about the early church who are the first recipients of Matthew's gospel. They have been likewise schooled in these same traditions that following Jesus is to follow him with his eye that is on the needy, the sick, the hurting one. The phrase 'one another' occurs 100 times in the New Testament. These Christians would have been derided by the world around them for ascribing to such values in life. Jesus' parable is an assuring word that his kingdom will prevail.

In our self-serving culture the reason you are given to care for some need of another is the prestige it brings you or the fact that it makes you feel good (until the clapping dies down.) Think about how counter the gospel is to the values of our culture. A baseball player who goes to the plate ten times and misses the ball seven times is paid millions of dollars (getting a hit three out of ten times makes you a highly valued .300 hitter.) But the PSW who wipes your chin when you can't stop drooling anymore is paid a pittance in comparison. And we are immersed in that culture and following Jesus looks strange by comparison.

The reason that grounds all other reasons for the believer's welcome of judgement is the identity of Judge. Jesus, the one who gave his life for us, is this judge who comes. And this is surely what Matthew is drilling down on as he tells his story of Jesus. Listen to the next sentence in Matthew's gospel following this parable about judgement—"When Jesus had finished saying all these things, he said to his disciples, 'You know that after two days the Passover is coming, and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified.'" (Matthew 26:1-2.) Everything in Matthew's gospel is moving towards what happens next in the story. All the gospel writers give space and detail to their account of the crucifixion of Jesus making clear that this is the climax of his ministry. The Judge of all takes the just judgement of our sin upon himself.

These believers who are hearing Matthew's gospel hot off the press, so to speak, know the good news that Jesus gave his life for them to rescue them from their sin. They know that the just judgement of their rebellion against God was borne at the cross. They have heard the proclamation that in Jesus the judgement of their sin has been borne by another and they are acquitted. It is their conviction, attested to them by the Apostles, that Jesus is the one who lived this human life such that he is the one with whom the Father is always pleased; that in clinging to Jesus in faith our life is hid in him and we are clothed in his righteousness.

We must be careful to read this parable in the context of all that the gospel teaches. The care the sheep gave for the hungry and the thirsty and the stranger needing hospitality and the sick and the prisoner was not the ground for their admission to the kingdom but the evidence of their saving relationship with the Lord. The service they render others is not the price of admission but the right response to the love of the One who paid the admission price for us.

This is the King we serve—the one who pours himself out without remainder at the cross for our sakes. The gospel asserts that God’s power is most characteristically on display at the cross where Father and Son together secure the redemption of the world. By most human measures it looks like weakness. And serving Jesus, answering his call to care for the hungry, thirsty, sick, the stranger, the prisoner looks weak as well in a world the touts’ wealth and fame and merit and power over others. The parable calls Jesus’ followers to stay the course.

Now about the goats and the warning Jesus gives. I have noted with you before that the emphasis of Jesus’ preaching was God’s ready welcome into the kingdom and the joy of that kingdom. While this is his emphasis, he also offered warnings as in this parable; warnings that rejecting God to the point where God gives what is desired—a godless existence—is perilous. God has not abandoned the world that he loves though humanity has turned its back on God; the place that God abandons is not a trifling matter, according to Jesus.

3. I invite you to return with me to the king’s pronouncement in the parable answering his sheep’s question. “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.” Note that Jesus did not say, ‘it is as if you did it to me’, rather ‘you did it to me.’ How is this so? How is our care of another when illness strikes care of this king? There is a school of thought that reads this as a call to see Christ in the other person. While that has a certain attractiveness, I wonder if more is indicated.

The scriptures teach, for example, that in the redemption of Jesus all our diseases are healed; by his stripes we are healed. The truth of this assertion reaches its completeness in the age to come when every tear is wiped away from our eyes. Still, in this life, our Lord’s redeeming work undergirds all healing—Jesus in not recoiled by our illness or removed far away hoping we do okay. Jesus is near and is at work in the lives of the hungry, the thirsty, the ill, and the lonely to relieve. So, when we do these acts of kindness and love we join the One who is already present in the hurts we seek to relieve thus we ‘do it to him.’ Perhaps the Apostle Paul is expressing something similar when he said, “I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings.” Until the world is finally redeemed Jesus is bearing its suffering—the wounds of the cross are still visible.

Friends, this King who is far above all rule and authority and power and dominion is not distant from us, immune to our suffering. He is with us having taken on the suffering of the world at the cross. The King is the One promised by God through the prophet Ezekiel, “I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd.” This King is truly worthy of the Lordship of your life.