

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

Whoever Is Not Against Us Is for Us

Matthew 10:40-42

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Analysis by Matthew DeLoera

40 Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. 41 Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet's reward; and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous; 42 and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple—truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward.



Water is Life – Boamaeric1

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The power and grace of God has a track record of bubbling up wherever and whenever we least expect, and in the most unexpected and unorthodox apostles who nonetheless pronounce Jesus' forgiveness to us and to others whether we ask for it or not. Jesus is persistent in his promise that we will not "lose our reward."

Author's Note: Verse 40 seems to establish the underlying principle of this lection, that the one who is sent represents the full presence (or power) of the sender. However, verse 41 doesn't seem to have a Synoptic parallel and it is unclear as to exactly who such "prophets" and "righteous persons" are. So, I take a "prophet's reward" or "reward of the righteous" to signify what one might receive from the sender's own self. Therefore, Jesus would need to imbue the disciples with his same powers, for example to heal or to forgive sins, to then send them out in his own name. So then, who are the "little ones" in verse 42? If the verse is an adaptation of Mark 9:41, then we might consider "little one" to highlight the degree to which an emissary might even pale in comparison to their sender. Hence, I suggest that Jesus' ending phrase "none of these will lose their reward" might be better translated as something more like, "fail to gain what they expect or anticipate" (as my lexicon suggests). In other words, we may not think someone could or should pronounce absolution in Jesus' name (i.e., they don't deserve to do so), yet it remains efficacious. As Jesus advises, "Whoever is not against us is for us" (Mark 9:40).

DIAGNOSIS: Expecting the Worst

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): Unqualified Ministry

Grounding: Prior to this conclusion of Matthew's "Missionary Discourse," Jesus has been instructing his disciples to send them out to do the same ministry that he himself has been doing. As he tells his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few" (Matt. 9:37). So, he gives them "authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness" (Matt. 10:1). However, Jesus also introduces an interesting twist by instructing them, "Take no gold, or silver or copper in your belts, no bag for your journey, or two tunics, or sandals, or a staff" (Matt. 10:9-10). On the one hand, this shouldn't be surprising if everything ultimately depends upon God. Yet, they will also be dependent upon the kindness of strangers, and hence might face some questions as to how they could possibly render care if they go about so unprepared. We also know that the disciples look and act in unconventional ways like eating with unclean hands (Mark 7:2), which raises questions about the veracity of their discipleship. So, perhaps it's not so surprising that Jesus warns them, "When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next" (Matt. 10:23).

Tracking: We likewise question and evaluate those who minister in Jesus' name. We judge their appearance, perhaps the wardrobe of an ordained woman or a minister's uncovered tattoos or piercings. We judge them by their behavior, their sexuality, their language, their politics, or any number of other criteria. Of course, everyone seems to have their own opinions as to what makes one qualified to lead, and preconceptions as to what constitutes "holy."

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): Guarded Hearts

Grounding: The disciples will certainly encounter expectations from those whom they meet. Of course, the disciples are only human. They will face failure, like failing to cast the demon

out of a boy (Matt. 17:14-20), whose father then reaches out to Jesus to fix what the disciples couldn't. Though they have successfully cast out many other demons with Jesus' authority (Mark 6:7-13), here they may be fully discredited and dismissed—perhaps because they have no second chance to make a first impression. Jesus himself knows how this feels by failing to live up to Messianic expectations, as when John's disciples ask him, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" (Luke 7:20). No wonder he asks his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" (Mark 8:27).

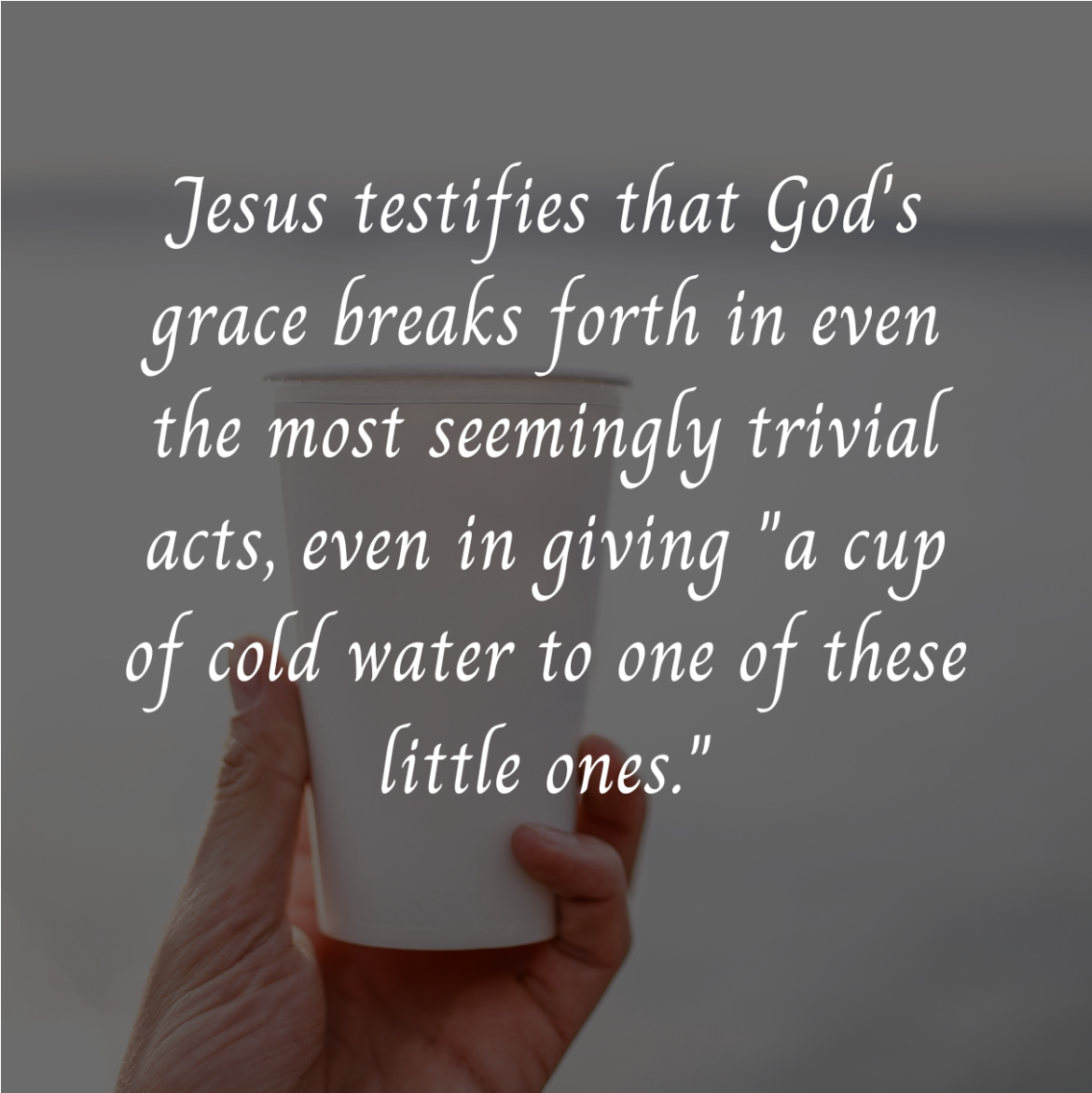
Tracking: We're exacting. When our expectations aren't met, we're unwilling to extend grace or a second chance. Perhaps we've been disappointed and burned so much that we're desperate to guard our hearts and not take risks; we convince ourselves that such action is wise or discerning. "Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me." If we judge the book by its cover that's just proactive. Why even risk disappointment at all? Why not avoid change and stick with tradition as much as possible?

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): Lost Rewards

Grounding: In Mark's synoptic account, long after the apostles "cast out many demons" with Jesus' authority (Mark 6:7-13), they witness a stranger casting out demons in Jesus' name, become alarmed, and try to stop it because the person was "not following us" (Mark 9:38). Surely, they know the overwhelming need they and Jesus face. Are they alarmed because they think the action is just theatrics unless it comes from a "real" disciple (i.e., Jesus' name not being enough in itself)? Do they feel outshined by an "untrained" outsider, and so do whatever they can to shut it down?

Tracking: Ultimately, we don't trust that Jesus' name has power,

because we don't trust the absolution that lies behind it. It surely can't be purely unconditional or freely given, either for us or for others. Certainly not for ourselves, hence all our hard-fought and determined efforts to atone or compensate. We set ourselves up as arbiters of God's grace, restricting its means and channels in the name of "good order." It's irresponsible to give credence to unorthodox, good acts—as if anyone can pronounce healing or forgiveness (i.e., "mutual confession and consolation"), lest it become "cheap." Instead, we judge these actions despite the risk we may just "lose our reward."

A hand holding a white cup, with a quote overlaid on a dark background.

*Jesus testifies that God's
grace breaks forth in even
the most seemingly trivial
acts, even in giving "a cup
of cold water to one of these
little ones."*

PROGNOSIS: Receiving the Harvest

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): Persistent Promises

Grounding: Yet Jesus will not be restricted or arbitrated by any of us. He makes the most unorthodox move of all, by letting himself be crucified and killed in the name of “good order.” Defying all logic and reason, he is raised after three days, fully unbound from anything that could possibly inhibit his determination to forgive or liberate us or others. This, despite our tenacious efforts to oppose him.

Crossing: The power and grace of God has a track record of bubbling up wherever and whenever we least expect, and in the most unexpected and unorthodox apostles who nonetheless pronounce Jesus’ forgiveness to us and to others whether we ask for it or not. Jesus is persistent in his promise that we will not “lose our reward.”

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Surprising Grace

Grounding: Jesus further testifies that God’s grace breaks forth in even the most seemingly trivial acts, even in giving “a cup of cold water to one of these little ones.”

Crossing: Jesus’ unrestrained grace and forgiveness purposely catches us in unguarded moments. In turn, we find ourselves transformed by a faith that is determined to give us a taste of the same grace by whatever means available. So, in hope, we give the benefit of the doubt and extend the same graciousness to others than Jesus shows to us. We’re no longer hounded by fear of mistakes, the burden of responsibility, or a nagging sense that we need to strive for extraordinary acts of holiness or

devotion. We finally recognize a true gift for what it really is.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): Unearthed Hospitality

Grounding: As Jesus equips his disciples to go out in his name, he tells them, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore, ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest" (Matt. 9:37-38). This mission can never depend on their labor alone; God will call others into untold vineyards and fields.

Crossing: We get to witness the new reality brought about by Jesus' words: of laborers venturing into some of the most seemingly inhospitable or unorthodox fields and being surprised by a hospitality that we otherwise never could see or imagine.