

## Christ the King 2023

Last week, we talked about how we are not failures when we encounter challenges in this life.

Challenges are a common aspect of human existence.

This week, I want to look at how adopting this understanding of life improves our ability to live out the gospel.

In general, there are Christians who view this world as a test, and Christians who view this world as educational, with the *assessment* coming later.

First, those who see it as a test tend to be fearful that they might fail that test.

After death, they anticipate a judgment that is essentially delivery of the test results—thumbs up or down, with potentially severe consequences.

They naturally shun others whom they consider to be failing because they fear being contaminated by such people.

Along with the Pharisee, they pray “God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector,” and they ask, “Why does Jesus eat with sinners?”

They wish to maintain their purity so that they can pass the test.

Thinking that life is a test interferes, in other words, with our ability to love God and our neighbor.

We end up surrounding ourselves with people who are just like us.

This means that we share the same blindnesses, have the same faults, and therefore are unlikely to be challenged to grow.

We easily see the limitations of others—those thieves, rogues, adulterers— but have trouble recognizing our own.

Those who see the world as educational, on the other hand, see our incarnation on earth as heuristic, that is, as a place where learning occurs through discoveries that result from investigations made by the student.

Simply put, it is a version of learning by doing—we walk, we stumble, we fall, we get up, we walk, we stumble, we fall, we get up.

We learn, just like toddlers.

When this existence is over, we expect not test results, but an evaluation of our progress, an assessment of what we need next, just like athletes speaking with their coach after practice.

Let me give you an example.

We get married, then we get divorced.

Those who believe that this life is a test would say that people who divorce have committed a failing error—“God, thank you for not making me like this divorcé(e).”

There are even churches that will not allow such people to take communion.

Divorcé(e)s are shunned rather than loved.

Those who see existence as heuristic, as educational, on the other hand, would say that, through the difficult experience of a divorce, one may learn something important.

People who are divorced often say that their later relationships are different, improved because they have learned something.

We do not shun, but celebrate with them that they have grown and pray that we, too, will face our own difficulties with the same learning attitude.

Here is the crux.

Believing that God is out to trick us into failing produces poor results when it comes to the central message of love your neighbor as yourself.

It sets us up to fail.

Those who believe that our material experience here is educational, on the other hand, can afford to be supportive of others, interested in them, and can more easily love those who, like ourselves, fall and get up, fall and get up, learning along the way.

This being the case, is it not better to cast off forever the notion that God is testing us?

That God is either playing some kind of game with us or that there is something wrong with God's manufacturing process such that many products must be, well, not destroyed, but tortured forever?

Imagine a parent who tests a child's love.

If the child fails, the parent withdraws care.

That is not love to begin with.

It is abuse.

Children need guidance when they make mistakes, and they *will* make mistakes.

To thrive, children need to live in the constant assurance of parental love.

We claim that we have the constant assurance of God's love, but then create theologies that conflict with that assertion.

It is not that we would ask people to believe that there are no eschatological dangers in this world.

(Remember, that's our new word that means pertaining to ultimate things.)

People can become lost, can stray so far from the love of God that they have trouble getting back on the path.

I would say that believing that God is playing games with us makes this more likely.

C.S. Lewis famously said that he thought the gates of hell were locked from the inside, so yes, there is the possibility that we end up in a place of weeping and gnashing of teeth, but it is self-imposed because we stop looking for love, stop moving towards God.

The Bible is a collection of texts that indicate how others have learned along their journeys.

It is encouraging to read that people have failed in various ways and yet continued along their paths.

Moses, David, Mary Magdalene, Peter, Paul are all models for us.

We learn from their transformative experiences.

We believe, moreover, that Jesus was the best model, and we therefore call him our king.

He showed us how to learn and to grow with integrity, how to love our neighbors to the very end, even when they may be blinded by hateful ignorance.

He came to restore us to God, to help us to stay on the path that grows our relationship.

This all brings us to the judgment scene in Matthew, where some are sent away from God.

Notice that Jesus does not say that those sent away failed God, but that they failed to act with love towards others—“I was a stranger and you did not welcome me.”

Though they think of themselves as righteous rule followers, because they do not truly value love, they are not able to be with God, who is love.

Someone might point out that Jesus sends them away to “eternal punishment.”

Jesus repeatedly warns his disciples against taking things literally, however.

We do not take the parable of the talents as investment advice, nor should we take the parable of the sheep and goats as a literal depiction of judgment.

Jesus is giving us a metaphor for what happens when we do not love.

We exclude ourselves from God’s grace and love.

The primary point of the story is that congratulating ourselves for our obedience to the rules does nothing for others and does not contribute to our own well being.

When we base our lives solely on obedience to the rules, in other words, we miss out on love.

The parable of the sheep and goats is not an exact description of some future scene—there are no sheep and goats.

It is a teaching device that tells us of the importance of loving our neighbors.

We cannot love our neighbors if we fear that, by association, they will somehow make us fail the test.

We will always be looking for any sign of the “bad ones” and not inviting them in.

In other words, taking it literally will prevent us from doing the very thing that the parable is encouraging us to do.

It is encouraging us to the next level of existence, the one in which we are freer to love our neighbors.

When we recognize that everyone has limitations, everyone has been sent to earth with predetermined blindnesses that force us to have certain experiences, we realize that we are all on a path of learning that necessarily involves sin and failure as part of the process.

We more easily look with humility upon others when we realize that we, too, have our own limitations.

We more easily love others, even though we need to realize when to protect ourselves from their stumbling.

The point is not to rid ourselves of all faults, but to connect with others through them.

As long as we are seeking God, we are on the path.

Life is not a test, but a heuristic, that is, an educational experience the point of which is to deepen our appreciation of love, of God, just as Jesus explains in the parable of the sheep and the goats.