

# The Least

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It has been said the basic task of preaching is "To comfort the afflicted, and on occasion, afflict the comfortable." This article is designed to afflict the comfortable. I dare say, in terms of what we are going to discuss, we all fit the description of being "comfortable."

I would like to draw your attention to the familiar sheep and goat judgment described by Jesus in Matthew's Gospel. There are two verses that I specifically want us to notice.

*The King will answer and say to them, 'Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me.'* (Matthew 25:40)

*Then He will answer them, 'Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me.'* (Matthew 25:45)

The common denominator in each of those verses is Jesus' mention of "the least." Who is (or who are) the least? I believe Jesus is speaking specifically of one or several among His followers. This is confirmed when He says of the least, "one of these brothers of Mine." The least, then, is a brother or sister in Christ.

The idea of someone being "least" would speak to how others might view their lack of importance, or value, in the local church. The apostle Paul addressed this kind of erroneous thinking, concerning one's lack of value.

*But now there are many members, but one body. And the eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you"; or again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." On the contrary, it is much truer that the members of the body which seem to be weaker are necessary;* (1 Corinthians 12:20-22)

Paul says, in terms of the functioning of the local body, all the members are needed. Every member has a value and an importance. That may be what the inspired apostle wrote, but is this what we believe and practice? Here is where we begin afflicting the comfortable. Consider the following important question: Who is Your Least?

In Matthew 25:40, we saw the least were cared for by those who, by virtue of their care and concern for even the least, would enter into eternal life. However, in Matthew 25:45, the least were ignored by those who, as a result of their neglect of the least, would suffer the fate of eternal punishment. So again, I will ask, "Who is your least?"

The sad truth is, I believe we all have someone, or even several, who would be, based on our actions, or lack thereof, considered "least." You might be quick to deny such a charge, but the sooner we acknowledge this truth, the better we will all be. Don't fight the discomfoting, afflicting feeling. Let it come. It is the only way we are going to get well.

Who is your "least"? Unfortunately, just about anybody can be a "least" to somebody. It is no fun being someone's least. It is an experience that can be very painful.

When Jesus walked upon this earth, He spent a lot of time with the "least." He spent time with the ignored brethren of the religious people of His day: tax collectors, sinners, the poor, and the sick (cf. Matt. 9:11).

Ignoring the least was not limited to Jesus' day and time. Sadly, it also happens in the church today. It shouldn't, but it does. Because it does, we should feel ashamed for allowing it to occur, and being a part of it in, of all places, God's family!

Who are the "least"? They are the ones you don't call when they are absent for several weeks. Chances are, you won't even notice they are absent. They are the ones you don't visit when they are in the hospital. Not because you don't have time, but because you don't make time. They are the ones you don't invite to lunch or to the movies, or to your home. They are the ones you don't

look to talk to on Sunday morning. They are the ones you don't notice much, but, I can guarantee you, they notice you. When there is a tight group among the young people, the least are often the ones excluded. They are on the outside wanting in.

We all have those with whom we enjoy spending time. This is natural. We develop closer relationships with certain individuals. Maybe they are more outgoing, or share common interests. The truth is, some can be harder to get to know. They are more reserved. They are not as outgoing. Perhaps they are just not as involved in what's happening in the local church.

The problem in all this comes when, knowingly or unknowingly, we become guilty of preferential treatment when needs arise. We might prefer not to think of it as preferential treatment. However, when we are sometimes willing to do things for one, that we are unwilling or seemingly unable to do for others, what would you call it? James warned about the danger of preferential treatment in the body of Christ.

*My brethren, do not hold your faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ with an attitude of personal favoritism. (James 2:1)*

*If, however, you are fulfilling the royal law according to the Scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," you are doing well. But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. (James 2:8-9)*

Our care and concern must be to everyone, not just those we happen to like, or those with whom we enjoy spending time.

Let us start looking beyond those with whom we are closer. I want to challenge all of us to turn those who are our least, into those with whom we demonstrate great care concern, and genuine love.