

Put Matthew 25 on Your 'To-Do' List

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What about putting at least a minimum number of acts of charity on one's daily "to-do" list and committing oneself to checking them off when they are completed?

Not me.

First thing in the morning, I've got to write them down in the notebook I keep at arms reach throughout the day. Often I add to the list as the hours pass. And I put a checkmark with a line through it when the "to-do" item has been completed. (The absence of the line through the check means that I attempted to do the task but, for one reason or another, didn't get it done.)

Of course, not everything needs to go on the list daily. A whole lot of things get done out of routine. I don't need, for example, to put "make pot of green tea with slices of fresh ginger root, cloves, and a stick of cinnamon" on the list since I do that out of habit. When I reflect on this for just a moment, I realize there are hundreds, probably thousands, of things I do everyday without thought or an act of the will.

That's true, I would guess, for most people, even those whose job and schedule are pretty much the same day-in and day-out. But I suspect even those folks also have a mental or written list of "to-do" items from time to time.

My list usually is broken into parts: Calls to make; People to see; Meetings to attend; Memos/Letters/E-mails to write; Articles to draft; and the catch-all category of Other.

The simple fact is that I wouldn't get the essentials of daily life done if I didn't develop, daily, that "to-do" list.

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Like many others, I suspect, the list that the writer of the Gospel of Matthew provides in the last section of the 25th chapter (the part that often gets subtitled with phrases like "The Judgment of the Nations" or "The Sheep and the Goats") doesn't make it ever on my "to-do" list.

That's because, if I take that list seriously on a regular basis, I tend to think the imperatives only apply when I happen to come across someone who is hungry, thirsty, a stranger, naked (well, let's say "poorly clothed"), sick, or in prison.

The closest I come to one of these "types" on a regular basis is the man or woman on the street who begs for a contribution, and I've got that down to a routine as well by keeping some dollar

bills in my pocket to feed the paper cups that are being extended to me. (Reading Tolstoy, by the way, caused me to make this particular provision.) But I don't put this on my daily "to-do" list.

I don't, that is, treat the items on the list from Matthew 25:35-36 as things I must get done each day.

But why should I make that assumption?

There are hungry people, thirsty people, lost people, poorly clothed people, sick people, and people in prison and in other forms of bondage around me every day that I habitually don't see. They don't appear on my mental screen, but they are in my presence constantly. And even if they aren't "nearby," they are certainly present still in the contemporary world, albeit at more of a distance—a different neighborhood of the city, another part of the state and country, a different part of the world.

Are these people—what in the Matthew text are called "the least of these"—exempt from my care, if I claim to be a disciple of Jesus, just because I don't see them or hear them or come across them or allow them to enter my consciousness?

It's fair to assume, moreover, that there already are millions—and that there will be millions more—on that Matthean list, given the national and worldwide economic crisis.

Must I, therefore, get these growing numbers on my daily "to-do" list?

I'm pretty sure I should. Seriously, I think I must, especially these days.

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How could this possibly be manageable?

Well, what about putting at least a minimum number of acts of charity on one's daily "to-do" list and committing oneself to checking them off when they are completed?

And what about putting some act of advocacy on that daily "to do" list—advocacy on behalf of public policies that have to do with hunger and housing, or clean water and air, or immigration and poverty, or reforms in our criminal justice and health care systems?

Maybe just one act of charity—a contribution, a visit or call, a helping hand—and just one act of advocacy—a call or note to a public official, a letter to the editor, a donation of time or money to an advocacy organization.

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I know, I know, someone is going to raise the question of whether this isn't a re-introduction of

"works-righteousness" into the Christian life, which is so contrary to the authentic scriptural theme of our being saved by God's grace. Fair enough.

But I think we can read that famous passage in the 25th chapter of Matthew about the sheep and the goats and the judgments of the nations as being directed not to everyone, but particularly to that group of disciples who know firsthand, directly, experientially the abundant and undeserved love of God in their own lives and feel compelled as a result of that divine love to put acts of charity and justice on their daily "to-do" list.