

# “Ye Have Done It Unto Me”

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[Wisconsin State Teachers' Conference: Wisconsin Ev. Lutheran Synod, October 27-28, 1983 - Milwaukee, Wisconsin]

Can you picture him? There Ralph sat in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade room, so obese that he almost took up a desk and a half. His haircut looked homemade and his parents not only looked, but were old fashioned. He was so timid he wouldn't open his mouth to say “Boo” and when the school year was over, the records showed Ralph had missed almost half of the 180 days.

Then there was Clarence. He came to us in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade from a home where the father didn't care and the mother was both emotionally and physically sick. From the way he carried himself and the way his eyes squinted you could tell he was out to prove himself obnoxious. His scraggly hair and big mouth brought reaction and the more reaction he received the nastier Clarence became.

Or how about Joan? Her parents were immigrants and their dress and language showed it. She was fat and developed beyond average for her grade. She dressed poorly and strangely and seemed to leave a trail of body odor. That “puppy dog” smile Joan always wore must have covered up a lot of inner hurt.

Meet Tom, that energy-overcharged boy who could never sit still. Half way through the Bible History story his hand would go up and if you asked him what he wanted, out would come talk about snowmobiles or basketball or fishing. I always wondered what would happen if Tom were chained to his desk for just one entire morning.

Carol was a new student. Through no fault of her own, but because of the move of her parents, she was tossed into our 7<sup>th</sup> grade. Watching a new student enter is like watching new fish being put into an aquarium. - The new ones hide in the weeds, either to escape the bold old ones who try to push them around or they wait to see if there are any friendlies in the tank. Or else the new fish dash around trying to prove they can indeed fit in. Carol was the type that dashed around and tried to take over. The resentment which resulted was predictable.

Every class has a Tim, that slow student who gets all the “God” questions in Catechism class. He hardly ever raises his hand and when he does, you can see the fear in his eyes. He's bound to be wrong, the teacher will tell him so, all the rest will snicker, and it'll take even longer till Tim raises his hand again.

We need more Tony's, more Christian children who try to live their faith. But because he did, because he didn't help stuff up the toilets in the shower room after practice, because he wouldn't let them copy the answers from his catechism worksheets, you can guess what happened. Persecution can take many forms, but Tony can tell you they are all painful.

Donna was our thief. At tournament time she was caught downtown shoplifting and many of her classmates knew it. There is such a fine line between concern and judgement; gossip is so easy to fall into, and so is mistrust. How come everybody looked in Donna's direction the next time something was missing from a locker?

Kelly was another example. You didn't almost have to correct her tests. She never seemed to get anything wrong and she also never seemed to have any friends. Her thick glasses and pushing parents didn't help matters. So when she came to school functions, the few times she did come, you'd find Kelly hiding half-alone in the corners or trailing along three steps behind the crowd.

Recognize any of these children? These are all very real; the names have been changed, but they are real flesh and blood, bodies and souls very much alive during my 23 years of ministry. Do you have any like them in your classrooms? Chances are you do and if you do, how do you view them and what do you do with them? Should you seal them up in a barrel, as Mark Twain facetiously remarked we should do with teenagers, and feed them what you can through the knothole and plug up that hole at the end of the first semester, hoping the tide of time will eventually wash them on to the next grade? Yes, the question is how do we view them and what should we do with them?

Even more important is the question, “How does Jesus view them and what would He want us to do with them?” That’s the question that concerns us because we are not only Christians, but Christian educators, assisting our Savior in training precious souls for eternity. So we have to ask, “How does Jesus view those children, any and all of them, whom we are privileged to teach?”

In answer, come with me now to Galilee. It’s the second year of Jesus’ ministry and He’s about to send the twelve out on a preaching mission. Matthew chapter ten records His instructions to them, where to go, what to do, how to react in the face of rejection and danger. Then follow the words, “He who receives you receives Me, and he who receives Me receives the One who sent Me. Anyone who receives a prophet because he is a prophet will receive a prophet’s reward and anyone who receives a righteous man because he is a righteous man will receive a righteous man’s reward. And if anyone gives a cup of cold water to one of these little ones because he is my disciple, I tell you the truth he will certainly not lose his reward” (10:40-42). From the people’s reception of the disciples, Jesus drew a general principle which applied to the reception they would give to any believer. Be that believer ever so insignificant, be the deed done to him ever so small, like the giving of a cup of cold water, yet Jesus shows how highly He values it. He views it as having been done to Him and promises a reward of grace. Note how serious Jesus is! “I tell you the truth,” the New International Version translates; I like the King James “Verily, I say unto you” better because it sounds stronger. “Verily,” He asserts, using the Greek word ἀμήν (“Amen”) which is the transliterated Hebrew word for “truth” and puts the seal of truth upon it. “I say unto you,” He adds, putting on the seal of divine authority. This expression is always used to introduce an important fact, one often at variance with popular opinion. There can be no doubt about these words or their importance. Note also that He speaks of the “little ones”, using the Greek word μικρῶν. With that expression He’s referring to believers who are nobodies in the eyes of the world, those whom the world doesn’t even recognize much less rank on the scale of importance. But to Jesus, the Master Shepherd and Teacher, even the so-called “little ones” among believers are super important. Can’t you see those children in your classrooms, also the Ralphs and Joans and Toms and Tims, included here?

It’s still Galilee, but the time has changed to the third and final year of Jesus’ ministry. Soon He’ll leave Galilee for the last time. Going into Capernaum that day the disciples had been tossing around a question. “Who is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven?” they wanted to know and Jesus had the answer. “He called a little child and had him stand among them. And He said, ‘I tell you the truth (verily, I say unto you), unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever welcomes a little child in My name welcomes Me. But if anyone causes one of these little ones (μικρῶν) who believe in Me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea ...See that you do not look down on one of these little ones (μικρῶν)... For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of My Father in heaven... In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones (μικρῶν) should be lost.” (Matthew 8:1-6, 10, 14; cf. also Mark 9:33-36, Luke 9:46-48, 17:1-2).

The disciples’ undue concern about greatness in the kingdom brought another important “verily I say unto you” statement from the Master, one that He used a little child to help illustrate. Those disciples were so worried about position in the kingdom, but Jesus instead spoke of something much more basic, about entrance into the kingdom. Was He warning them that they were skating on thin ice, that all this concern about “kingdom position” was taking them farther and farther away from the child-like trust and love in the Savior which is so necessary even to enter the kingdom? Humble trust, created and continued by the Spirit through Word and Sacrament, is the key when it comes to entering and continuing in the kingdom.

Then Jesus pointed to that child in His arms. “Whoever welcomes a little child in My name welcomes Me,” He said. For Jesus’ visit we’d put up our best bulletin boards and our best handwriting on the spanking clean blackboards. For His visit we’d dress up in our best and throw the door open before He could even knock. His visit would make our school newspaper and maybe there’d even be a picture on the morning news. But Jesus has come! He still comes! He comes in the form of those children who walk into our classrooms daily, Ralph and Joan and Tom and Tim included. The King of kings means it when He says, “You welcome them,

you welcome Me.” He also means it when He warns about causing any “of those little ones who believe in Him to sin.” So precious are those believing children, or for that matter any child-like believer, to Jesus, that He says it would be better for anyone who causes them to stumble into sin to have instead an unheard-of-horrible death. Instead, let the large millstone be hung by its center hole around such a person’s neck and let it drag him down to a watery death in the splashing waves of the sea. To make the message hit home more, Jesus added an emphatic imperative. “See to it,” He said, “that you do not look down on one of these little ones, that you do not disregard them as of little or no account.” Could He see how often the church would neglect the humble believer, like those little children? Instead of neglecting them, we are to be associated with God’s angels in the blessed task of watching over them. Can anyone miss the message? All believing children and all child-like believers are precious to Jesus, so precious that He urges us to watch very carefully lest just one humble soul be lost or hurt because of our words or deeds, and that means Ralph and Joan and Tom and Tim, too!

The scene changes again, this time to the road leading to Jerusalem for the last portion of His ministry. As the Savior rests in a certain village, people keep lining up, bringing their little ones for Him to bless. The disciples, however, had other thoughts and tried to shoo those parents away. Evidently the twelve thought that Jesus was too busy to bother with such seemingly insignificant ones. “When Jesus saw it, He was indignant,” it says (Mark 10:13). Jesus could be deeply moved by the sight of suffering (Mark 1:41), and become sharply angry with unbelief (Mark 3:5), but here is the only time it says that He was “indignant.” And it was with His disciples because they were trying to keep the children away from Him. “Let the little children come to Me,” He commanded them putting it positively. “Do not hinder them,” He repeated stating it negatively, “for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.” “I tell you the truth,” Jesus said, giving another “verily, I say unto you” statement of importance, “anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will not enter it.” Those disciples were to know without fail that those children were important and that His kingdom is composed of such who are like little children in humble trust and love. Children aren’t worth much to Jesus? His words plainly indicated otherwise. So did His actions. The Lord of heaven and earth wasn’t satisfied merely to bless those children in their parents’ arms, but cradled each of them in His arms and laid His hand on each little head. The artists usually picture perfect little children with every hair in place and no shirttail hanging out, but can’t you see Ralph and Joan and Tom and Tim in His arms, too?

The final scene takes us to the Tuesday of Holy Week and the Mount of Olives and involves one of Jesus’ grandest discourses. From the Master the disciples had heard words about the destruction of Jerusalem and the end of the world, urgings about prayerful watchfulness and faithful use of talents. And then had come a glorious preview of that last great Day. For a moment the Eternal Lord lifted aside a corner of the curtain of time and gave His disciples a glimpse of eternity. What He showed them must have quickened the eyes of the heart, the Son of Man in all His glory and all His holy angels with Him, the glorious kingdom prepared for them from the foundation of the world. Carefully Jesus pointed them to His Father as the doer and the agent. They were blessed by His Father; their glorious state in heaven would not be due to themselves, but to the Father whom Jesus called “My Father” in order to remind them that the Father’s blessings come through Him, the Savior. They would inherit a kingdom which was prepared, not by them, but for them since the creation of the world. The inheritance of heaven, the standing on Jordan’s shores, goes back entirely to a loving Father and His saving plan already in eternity.

“For,” the Savior continues with words that we want to look at particularly, “I was hungry and you gave Me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave Me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited Me in, I needed clothes and you clothed Me, I was sick and you looked after Me, I was in prison and you came to visit Me. Then the righteous will answer Him, ‘Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You or thirsty and give You something to drink? When did we see You a stranger and invited You in or needing clothes and clothe You? When did we see You sick or in prison and go to visit You?’ The King will reply, tell you the truth (verily, I say unto You) whatever You did for the least of these brothers of Mine, You did for Me” (Matthew 25:35-40)

There are five points we note in these verses. One is that the believer’s good works are not a cause, but the result of salvation. Remember that on the Last Day the King will render public judgment before the whole

universe of angels and men and that therefore public evidence will be important. At the moment of death the King looks into the heart at the faith which He alone can see. On the Last Day He will present the public evidence of that faith in the form of faith's results, those deeds visible to all. Perhaps we can use Christ's comparison of the believer to sheep to help illustrate. We say, "That animal has wool, it is a sheep. That animal has no wool, it is not a sheep." The wool doesn't make the sheep, but the wool does show it is a sheep. It is born a sheep and therefore grows wool. So good works do not a believer make nor land him on heaven's shores. But the believer makes good works and those will be the evidence of his faith on heaven's daffy.

Point two is that Jesus is talking about the "righteous." Those who do these good works are the righteous, the ones whom the Judge has pronounced free from all guilt on the basis of the righteousness of Christ which they all have through faith. The entire doctrine of justification by faith through the atoning merits of Christ is contained in that expression "the righteous." This truth is also shown by the reaction of the righteous to the King's words. "When did we see You hungry, thirsty, naked?" they ask in astonishment. They kept no records of those deeds and expected no merit points. They have completely forgotten all about those deeds which they had gladly and gratefully performed.

The third significant point is the kind of works mentioned. Headline grabbers and history makers aren't mentioned. It's a sandwich for the hungry, a cup of something for the thirsty, a shirt for the naked, a visit for the sick or imprisoned. Not one grand work is mentioned, only those little and seemingly insignificant deeds that make up daily life for so many of us. What a sharp contrast to those who on that Last Day will plead, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name and in Your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?" only to hear the chilling reply, "I never knew you. Away from Me, ye evildoers." (Matthew 022-23T.

Point four we find in that "verily I say unto you" verse and at once we are alerted to its solemn importance. "I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of Mine, you did for Me," the King says. If you want to be noted among men, do great things for great men. But Jesus says the opposite. On that great Last Day we hear Him speak not about the great, but the least. He doesn't even say, "whatever you did for one of these little brothers of Mine (μικρῶν), but one of the least (ἐλαχίστων) using the superlative form of that Greek word. He's talking about the littlest, the smallest, the very least, the humblest of His followers. Those seemingly insignificant and unimportant, those unheralded and often forgotten followers, He calls "brothers of Mine." What love the Savior shows and what a lesson He teaches us!

Point five we find running through the whole section. Count how often the King says, "I" and "Me." Note how He climaxes it with that "verily I say unto you" sentence, "Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of Mine, You did for Me." Every work done for the least He views as done for Him. Any comfort, any concern, any help, ever so slight, is viewed as done to Him and remembered by Him through the ages.

What do these passages tell us, particularly this last one about the least of His brethren? Do they have anything to say about our view and actions toward the Christians we meet in daily life? Even more specifically, do they have anything to say about our view and actions toward the little ones who sit before us in our classrooms? And most specifically of all, do they have anything to say about our views and actions toward the Ralphs and Joans, the Toms and Tims, those least of His brothers in our classrooms? The poster in the bookstore showed a dirty faced boy, thumb in his mouth, blanket up to his cheek, one foot bare, a broken vase at his feet, a big tear in his eye. Underneath was the caption, "God made me and God don't make no junk!" The Ralphs and Joans, the Toms and Tims aren't junk, but God's treasured children. The Ralphs and Joans, the Toms and Tims aren't problems, but divine opportunities. We have the blessed privilege and serious responsibility of handling them. And whatever we do for these least of his brethren, Jesus views as being done for him!

So far hopefully you're nodding your head in agreement. Now comes the hard part. Now you have to go back to those classrooms and back to those least of His brethren. They'll still be the same next Monday and the problems will still be there in full force and those children even seem to bring some of the problems so often on themselves. One poet put it this way, "To live above with those we love, O, that will be glory. To live below

with those we know, now that's a different story." Yes, that's a different story! What will help us deal with these least of our Lord's brethren here below?

You start with love. Those problem children need love, too. They are real people with real feelings and love is one of their big needs. In fact, that may be their biggest need. The world has a way of ignoring the "ugly duckling", or just simply passing him by and failing to notice him. Could anything hurt more? Dr. James Dobson in the well-known film series "Focus on the Family" points out that our children live in a culture which measures worth by physical attractiveness. It's the pretty baby in the hospital with the curl in the middle of the forehead who gets the attention. It's the bright eyed, beautiful child to whom people speak in the supermarket. Tongue in cheek, Dr. Dobson said that men still seem to follow this standard when looking at women because men can look better than they can think. In the classroom, too, this standard can so easily prevail. The bright student, the one from the right family, the basketball star (athletics is another area this culture of attractiveness pursues), the well-dressed one, might receive the attention while the "ugly duckling" is picked on, receives nicknames, and often is left feeling unloved, if not also unloveable. A little bit of serious reading in the psychology books and magazines also shows what a problem this lack of love and the craving for it can cause. That new child entering the class and behaving so obnoxiously is saying, "Hey, look at me. I need your attention. I need your love and I'm going to get it one way or the other." That obese child needs love and affection and when that emotional need is not fulfilled, he may seek it in the pleasures gained by eating.

Love them! It's not easy. The rude behavior, the undone lessons, the scraggly hair, the body odor won't help to turn you on, but love them anyway. The godliest thing we can ever do is to love. Jesus Himself said so. He told us, "Love each other as I here loved you" (John 15,12). The word He used for love is agape (ἀγάπη), an extraordinary type of love, a love which is there not because of, but in spite of what someone is, a love which reaches for the unloveable, God's love for the sinful world is truly that agape love and when His love rules in our hearts, we love differently than the world does. We love others, not because of what they are, but because of what we are. Because we are God's beloved children, we will view each child before us as a real person in need of real love. The least of those brethren won't be hot potatoes we can't wait to get rid of. They won't be problem cases we talk about in the faculty room grimly saying, "Just wait till you get him next year." Instead in love we will rack our brains thinking how we might reach them and what else we might try. We will also try to teach the class to love them. We can't make the class love them, but we surely can try. We'll teach the class that Jesus doesn't snicker at Tim when he gets ten wrong, but that Jesus rejoices in the 15 answers Tim had right. By daily word and deed we'll try and that takes daily patience. You have to watch yourself, too. Teachers are the most easily read book in the classroom. One smirk on your face, one word out of place and you will have taught the class something you might not have wanted to. Each child sitting ahead of you in that classroom is a walking videorecorder. He has two microphones and two cameras trained on you-with which to record impressions including your brand of love for the least. The children ahead of us are Christians, but they are still also sinners and so often need on-the-spot reminders of how a Christian loves. They need frequent devotions on this topic. Devotions like "A. Perfect Paste" (page 47) or "God and All Kinds of People (page 183) in *More Little Visits with God* or "Do You Love All People (page 58) or "What Love Does" (page 251 in *Little Visits with God*) will help when the occasion calls for it. Know and study the Scriptures yourself so that you can apply it to your classroom needs also in this area. Let the children see that God's Word is not ancient history with some dusty "thees and thous," but that it speaks and fits today.

Nor dare we forget to teach those least of His brethren themselves about the Savior's love. Those so-called unloveables need to hear frequently of Jesus' love for them. The worthless one needs to hear frequently of Christ's love which has made a king and priest out of him. The lonely one needs to hear frequently the Savior's promise to be with him always. The one to whom so few listen needs to hear frequently the Father's promise, "My ears are open to your prayers." Those who feel unloved and unloveable can never hear too much of Jesus' love for them.

Besides loving these least of His brethren, we need to learn about them. We need to know something about the size shoe they're walking in and where it pinches if we are going to even somewhat understand them. Doesn't this make those home visits at the beginning of the school year important? That time spent in the

child's home visiting with his parents can tell you something about the stability of the home, the parental concern, the interaction between child and parents, the religious atmosphere, etc. That visit will also say much to both parents and child about your desire to learn more about them. Parent-teacher consultations also can help. When the report card has been returned and the general comments made, then launch out and see how those parents view their Ralphs and Joans and tell them what you have seen. Perhaps you will find parents more than eager to cooperate or perhaps the parents themselves form part of the problem, but at least you'll know.

So often we find children around Jesus. He noticed them and had time for them. Certainly He was busy, busier than we will ever be, but His business was with people. So He had time for them, even for the children who many thought were the least. How approachable are we as teachers? Children can tell whether they can come to us. Our presence out on the playground can spell more than law and order. It can indicate approachability. Our smile and greeting in the hallway can indicate that we care and will listen. Our answers when approached at noon time, before or after school, can give either a red or green light to a troubled student. "Not now," "later" are more than delays to those students; they are denials. We need to have time for our students, time to listen to them. Nor can we long fool them. If our attitude says, "I'm listening, but just let me get on with my work," the student will soon think, "What's the use? Neither I nor what I'm trying to say is important." Listening to these least of Christ's brethren is another way to learn about them.

When's the last time you did any studying about the problems of those special students before you so that you might know more about them? When's the last time you did some reading about their special needs? There are counselors at Wisconsin Lutheran Child and Family Service who will be happy to come out to your school and hold workshops and other in-service-training sessions, particularly in the area dealing with children who have emotional and behavior problems. Check also the courses available from the UW extension or from other places. Are there books or magazines you could have in your faculty library in this area? A number of magazines are available like *The Education Digest*, *Learning*, *the Magazine for Creative Teaching*, *Early Years*, *The Elementary School Journal*. You as professional educators will know better than I which are most profitable and worthy of sharing with your colleagues. If you are close to one of our state universities or to a large city library, try that reference tool called "*The Educational Index*." In it you will find references by topics to articles on the educational needs of your children. Whatever you do, take the time and effort to learn as much as possible about those least of Christ's brethren. Walk in their shoes so that you will be able to do more for the Ralphs and Joans, the Toms and Tims.

Love them; learn about them, we said. How about looking out for them? We are not talking about pity, but concern. Pity stifles; concern challenges. Pity is a hole in which to crawl to get out of the rain; concern is the umbrella that helps you walk in the rain. In that series of films "Focus on the Family," Dr. Dobson used an illustration about teenagers which I believe fits also here. He spoke about the walleyed pike and the minnows put into a glass case together. The walleye loves minnows so they don't last long in that glass case. But then a divider of glass was placed into the aquarium between the walleye and the minnows. The walleye can see the minnows, but not the glass. So he goes after those tasty minnows full blast only to hit that invisible glass and bounce back with more than his feelings hurt. A second time he comes on; he can still see those tasty minnows, but this time he comes more slowly and more from the side. Again he hits the glass and bounces back. The next time he goes even slower and eventually he will stop trying for the minnows. Finally he gets to the point that even if you'd remove the glass, he'd leave the minnows alone because he thinks he can't get them and he's been hurt often enough trying.

Are there any walleyes in your class, any children who once came to school as bright-eyed, eager five-year-olds, but have almost stopped trying for the minnows because they've hit the glass of rejection and been hurt too often? Look out for them! They need acceptance for what they are and challenging to do the best they can. Ridicule in any form won't help them or will unfavorable comparison with others. Handing back tests so that all around can see the grade won't spur them on either but only cause them to sink lower into their seats and to try less next time. Looking the other way when the class humiliates them on the playground won't help either, but will make them feel more alone and spur the others on to show even less love to them. Look out for those least of Christ's brethren. They are precious to Him!

What more can we do as we work with these least of Christ's brethren? We have left the most obvious and important to last. When working with them, we can lean on God's Word. How can we step into our classrooms without leaning on God's Word? To neglect to do so is to invite failure. To do so is to find power. "I am not ashamed of the Gospel for it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone that believes," Paul declared confidently (Romans 1:16). "The Word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow," the author of Hebrews reminded us pointedly (4:12). "Is not My Word like fire," declares the Lord, "and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces,"" Jeremiah recorded so powerfully (23:29). Into our hands God has placed a most wondrous tool. We have the fire and hammer of the Word to use in tearing down sin and building up faith. We have the sharper than chromium edged sword of the Word to penetrate into the hearts of men. We have the power of God's Gospel to use on the souls of people. And when we do, when we apply that powerful Word to Ralph and Joan and Tom and Tim, God will remember His promise that the Word that goes out from His mouth will not return to Him empty, but will accomplish what He desires and achieve the purpose for which He sent it (Isaiah 55,11).

With this Word of God we have the privilege of touching the most precious thing-on earth, the souls of children! And the seriousness of the task overwhelms us! But it shouldn't stop us. Instead it should spur us on to our best efforts.

The French horn player in a Salvation Army band played so loudly he drowned out the other instruments. Since he was a new convert, the other band members didn't want to hurt his feelings, but finally something had to be done. So the musicians all got together and told the new man in a kind way that he played a beautiful French horn, but that he should try to play it a bit more softly. "I don't know," the convert replied, "I'll try. But every time I think of what Jesus Christ has done for me, I just have to give the old horn all I've got." When it comes to teaching the least of His brethren, the Ralphs and Joans and Toms and Tims, God help us to give it all we've got. For Jesus' sake