

Matthew 21:23-32  
September 25, '11

"GOD'S LINEUP"

WHAT COMES TO MIND WHEN YOU THINK OF A "LINEUP?"

IS IT PERHAPS A "POLICE LINEUP?"

I'M SURE VERY FEW, IF ANY OF YOU, HAVE EVER BEEN PART OF A POLICE LINEUP OR, IN FACT, HAVE EVER EVEN *SEEN* ONE OTHER ON TELEVISION OR IN THE MOVIES.

HOW ABOUT A "BASEBALL LINEUP?"

I KNOW THAT IN MY BRIEF & VERY FORGETTABLE BASEBALL-PLAYING DAYS AS A YOUTH, I WAS ALWAYS STUCK IN THE 7, 8 OR 9 SLOT BECAUSE I WAS A SURE OUT – USUALLY NEVER EVEN MAKING CONTACT WITH THE BALL, OTHER THAN AN OCCASIONAL FOUL BEFORE STRIKING OUT.

YOU MIGHT ALSO THINK OF A "TICKET LINEUP."

DID YOU SEE THE STORY LAST WEEK ABOUT THE COUPLE WHO WERE FIRST IN LINE FOR BOB SEGER TICKETS – ARRIVING 4 DAYS BEFORE THEY WENT ON SALE?!

I WAS FIRST IN A TICKET LINEUP JUST ONCE.

I WAS A DETROIT PISTON FAN & FOR YEARS, THE PISTONS WERE THE MOST DREADFUL TEAM IN THE NBA. THEY FINALLY MADE THE PLAYOFFS ONE YEAR & IT WAS ANNOUNCED ON SATURDAY NIGHT THAT TICKETS WOULD GO ON SALE AT 10:00 ON SUNDAY MORNING AT COBO ARENA IN DETROIT.

I DROVE DOWNTOWN JUST TO SEE HOW MANY PEOPLE WERE IN LINE.

I GOT THERE & DIDN'T SEE ANYONE SO I PARKED RIGHT IN FRONT OF THE ARENA & WALKED AROUND, LOOKING FOR THE SPOT WHERE PEOPLE WOULD BE WAITING.

I ENDED UP PEERING INSIDE THE FRONT DOORS, RIGHT NEXT TO THE MAIN TICKET WINDOW WHEN A COUPLE GUYS APPROACHED ME & SAID, "*ARE YOU IN LINE FOR PISTON PLAYOFF TICKETS?*"

FOR THE FIRST, AND PERHAPS ONLY, TIME IN MY LIFE, I THOUGHT QUICKLY ON MY FEET.

WHAT WENT THROUGH MY MIND IN AN INSTANT WAS – "*IF I DON'T SEE ANYONE ELSE HERE & IF THESE GUYS ARE LOOKING FOR THE LINE, AND IF I'M STANDING WHERE THE LINE WOULD LOGICALLY START, I MUST BE THE VERY FIRST PERSON IN THAT LINE.*"

I SAID, "*YEAH, THAT'S WHY I'M HERE – THE PISTON PLAYOFF TICKETS*" – WHICH, TECHNICALLY, WAS TRUE. THAT'S WHY I WAS THERE.

ONE OF THEM SAID, "*WELL, I GUESS WE'RE NEXT IN LINE.*"

IT WAS BITTER COLD WITH THE WIND WHIPPING OFF THE DETROIT RIVER RIGHT NEXT TO THE ARENA. THESE GUYS HAD COME PREPARED - THEY HAD HEAVY COATS, HATS & GLOVES, ALONG WITH THERMOSES & CHAIRS.

I, ON THE OTHER HAND, SINCE I HAD NO INTENTION OF BEING THERE UNTIL THE BOX OFFICE OPENED, WAS JUST WEARING A LIGHT JACKET & HAD NOTHING MORE WITH ME.

BY MIDNIGHT, THE LINE HAD GROWN TO MORE THAN A HUNDRED WITH ME BEING AT THE FRONT OF IT, FROZEN TO THE BONE!

I REMEMBERED THAT I'D BEEN ON A RETREAT THE WEEKEND BEFORE WITH THE YOUTH GROUP AT THE CHURCH WHERE I WAS THE YOUTH DIRECTOR & I HADN'T TAKEN THE SLEEPING BAG OUT OF MY TRUNK.

SINCE I WAS PARKED RIGHT IN THE FRONT OF THE ARENA – NO MORE THAN 50 FEET FROM WHERE I WAS STANDING – I ASKED NUMBERS 2 & 3 IN LINE IF THEY MINDED IF I JUST RAN TO GET MY SLEEPING BAG.

THEY WERE MORE THAN HAPPY TO ALLOW THAT BECAUSE, AS THEY SAID, THEY WERE GETTING COLD JUST WATCHING ME STAND THERE IN NOTHING BUT A JACKET.

I GOT MY SLEEPING BAG, TOOK IT TO THE FRONT OF THE LINE, CRAWLED INSIDE & FELL ASLEEP.

EARLY THE NEXT MORNING, I WAS AWAKENED BY THE COMMOTION OF THE CROWD IN ANTICIPATION OF THE BOX OFFICE OPENING.

I LOOKED BEHIND ME, DOWN A SLIGHT INCLINE IN FRONT OF THE BUILDING & WAS ASTONISHED AT WHAT I SAW.

THE LINE HAD GROWN TO MORE THAN 2,000 PEOPLE.

WHEN THE BOX OFFICE OPENED AT 10 O'CLOCK, SINCE I WAS FIRST IN LINE, I WAS ABLE TO PURCHASE MY TICKETS & GET BACK HOME, CLEANED UP & TO CHURCH BY THE TIME WORSHIP STARTED AT 11.

I HAVE TO ADMIT, I ENJOYED BEING AT THE FRONT OF THE LINE.

OUR SCRIPTURE READINGS FOR LAST SUNDAY & TODAY AS WELL, ARE ABOUT SIMILAR LINEUPS.

LAST WEEK, IT WAS ABOUT THOSE LINING UP TO BE PAID AFTER WORKING IN A VINEYARD.

TODAY, IT'S THOSE LINING UP TO ENTER GOD'S KINGDOM.

BOTH OF THESE PASSAGES TELL OF EVENTS THAT TOOK PLACE IN JERUSALEM THE WEEK BEFORE JESUS WAS CRUCIFIED.

JESUS TELLS OF THESE LINEUPS JUST AFTER HE HAD OVERTURNED THE TABLES OF THE MONEYCHANGERS IN THE TEMPLE.

IN BOTH LINEUPS, WE SEE THE OVERTURNING OF OUR EXPECTATIONS.

WE SEE, WHAT SOMEONE HAS LABELLED IT, "A SCANDALOUS REVERSAL."

TO UNDERSTAND HOW THIS SCANDALOUS REVERSAL OVERTURNED THE EXPECTATIONS OF THOSE LISTENING TO JESUS, PUT IT INTO MODERN TERMS.

WHAT IF, WHEN I CLIMBED OUT OF THAT SLEEPING BAG, EVERYONE WAS FACING THE OTHER WAY & I DISCOVERED THAT TICKETS WERE BEING SOLD *FIRST* TO THOSE WHO HAD ARRIVED *LAST*?

I WOULD HAVE BEEN OUTRAGED!

THE TICKETS I WANTED WOULD HAVE BEEN GONE & I WOULD HAVE BEEN LATE TO CHURCH AS WELL.

WHAT JESUS IS TRYING TO TELL US IN THIS PASSAGE & WITH THIS PARABLE IS THAT THOSE OF US WHO THINK WE DESERVE SOMETHING HAVE GOT IT WRONG.

OVER & OVER & OVER AGAIN, JESUS – IN A NO-HOLDS-BARRED FASHION - TRIES TO GET THROUGH TO THOSE WHO THINK THEY'RE THE RIGHTEOUS ONES, THE PRIVILEGED ONES, THE HOLY ONES, THE DESERVING ONES.

AND, DARE WE SAY IT, HE'S STILL TRYING TO GET THROUGH TO US.

WHEN YOU LOOK AT THIS PASSAGE, WHEN YOU CONSIDER THE QUESTION JESUS ASKED AT THE END OF THE PARABLE, IT'S REALLY ONE OF THE EASIEST QUESTIONS HE EVER POSED.

EVEN THOUGH HE DOESN'T RESPOND TO THE ANSWER THE RELIGIOUS LEADERS SUGGEST, HE HAS ANSWERED THE QUESTION IN THE QUESTION ITSELF!

*"WHICH OF THE SONS DID THE WILL OF HIS FATHER?"*

ONE OF THEM SAID AND ONE OF THEM DID.

AND HERE WE ARE PRESENTED WITH ONE OF THE GREAT ISSUES OF OUR FAITH – CONSISTENCY BETWEEN THE WORDS WE SPEAK AND THE DEEDS WE DO.

REMEMBER THE CHALLENGE THAT IS GIVEN IN THE LETTER OF JAMES:

*"WHAT DOES IT PROFIT, MY BRETHREN, IF A MAN SAYS HE HAS FAITH, BUT HAS NOT WORKS? CAN HIS FAITH SAVE HIM?*

*IF A BROTHER OR SISTER IS ILL-CLAD & IN LACK OF DAILY FOOD, AND ONE OF YOU SAYS TO THEM, 'GO IN PEACE, BE WARMED & FILLED,' WITHOUT GIVING THEM THE THINGS NEEDED FOR THE BODY, WHAT DOES IT PROFIT?*

*SO FAITH, BY ITSELF, IF IT HAS NO WORKS, IS DEAD!"*

WE'RE NOT TALKING ABOUT A WORKS RIGHTEOUSNESS THING HERE – WE'RE TALKING ABOUT CONSISTENCY BETWEEN WHAT WE SAY & WHAT WE DO.

PIOUS PROMISES ARE A POOR REPLACEMENT FOR PRACTICAL PERFORMANCE!

DO YOU REMEMBER THE WILLIE NELSON SONG WITH THE LINES –

*"LITTLE THINGS I SHOULD HAVE SAID & DONE*

*I JUST NEVER TOOK THE TIME*

*BUT YOU WERE ALWAYS ON MY MIND*

*YOU WERE ALWAYS ON MY MIND."*

I THINK THERE'S A DANGER IN FALLING INTO THAT TRAP WITHIN OUR FAITH.

*"LORD, DON'T THINK YOU AREN'T IMPORTANT TO ME. YOU ARE – YOU REALLY ARE. WHY, JUST LISTEN TO HOW I RECITE THE APOSTLES' CREED & KNOW HOW TO PRAY & KNOW THE RIGHT THINGS TO BELIEVE.*

*OH, I KNOW THERE ARE LITTLE THINGS I SHOULD HAVE SAID & DONE, BUT I JUST NEVER TOOK THE TIME.*

*BUT YOU WERE ALWAYS ON MY MIND, LORD.*

*YOU WERE ALWAYS ON MY MIND."*

FAR TOO OFTEN, FAR TOO MANY OF US ARE LIKE THAT IN OUR FAITH.

I DON'T KNOW ABOUT YOU, BUT I CAN THINK OF A WHOLE LOT OF PEOPLE WHO MATCH EITHER SON IN THIS PARABLE.

THERE ARE THOSE WHO TALK A GOOD GAME – THOSE WHO TALK ABOUT LOVING & CARING FOR OTHERS – THOSE WHO PIOUSLY SPEAK OUT ABOUT INJUSTICE & HOW OUTRAGED THEY ARE ABOUT THE INEQUITIES OF SOCIETY.

ALL TOO OFTEN, THOUGH, THAT’S ALL YOU GET FROM THAT PERSON – TALKING, SPEAKING & OUTRAGE. BUT THEN, THERE ARE THOSE WHO HAVE LITTLE TO SAY OR ARE SKEPTICAL ABOUT SUCH THINGS & YET, WHEN PUSH COMES TO SHOVE – WHEN A NEED IS PRESENTED TO THEM – THEY’LL NOT HESITATE TO MEET IT.

PIOUS PROMISES ARE A POOR REPLACEMENT FOR PRACTICAL PERFORMANCE.

LET’S LOOK FOR A MINUTE, THOUGH, AT THE “SCANDALOUS REVERSAL” – THE TAX COLLECTORS & PROSTITUTES ENTERING THE KINGDOM BEFORE THE PIOUS RELIGIOUS LEADERS.

JESUS ISN’T SAYING THEY SIMPLY CONTINUE ON IN A SINFUL WAY OF LIFE.

THE WORD THAT HE USES HERE FOR “CHANGE” IS NOT THE USUAL WORD THAT IS USED FOR “REPENT.”

THE MOST COMMONLY-USED WORD FOR SOMEONE CHANGING OR REPENTING MEANS “TO TURN AROUND.”

BUT THE WORD THAT IS USED HERE IS A WORD THAT MEANS TO FEEL “REGRET” OR “GRIEF” ABOUT SOMETHING.

THE FIRST SON IN THE PARABLE JESUS TOLD FELT “REGRET” OR “GRIEF” OVER DISOBEYING HIS FATHER & HE CHANGED HIS WAYS.

THOSE WHO HAD LED SINFUL LIVES LISTENED TO THE CHALLENGE OF JOHN THE BAPTIST OR THE INVITATION FROM JESUS AND FELT “REGRET” & “GRIEF” & CHANGED THEIR LIVES AS A RESULT.

IT’S NOT BECAUSE THEY WERE MORE WORTHY THAN THE RELIGIOUS LEADERS THAT THEY WERE RECEIVED FIRST BUT BECAUSE THEY RECOGNIZED & ACCEPTED THE FACT THAT THEY WERE WORTHY OF NOTHING.

ON SUNDAY AFTERNOON, AFTER I GOT HOME FROM CHURCH WITH MY PLAYOFF TICKETS IN HAND, I GOT A CALL FROM THE GENERAL MANAGER OF THE DETROIT PISTONS.

HE WANTED TO BE SURE I WAS GOING TO BE AT THE FIRST PLAYOFF GAME BECAUSE HE WANTED ME TO MAKE MY WAY TO THE FLOOR AT HALFTIME.

THOUGH I WAS PERPLEXED BY THIS, I DID AS HE SAID.

AT HALFTIME OF THAT FIRST GAME, I WAS CALLED TO THE CENTER OF THE COURT & THE GENERAL MANAGER PRESENTED ME WITH SEASON TICKETS FOR THE NEXT YEAR.

THEY WEREN’T GIVEN TO ME SIMPLY BECAUSE I WAS THE FIRST PERSON IN LINE FOR PLAYOFF TICKETS FOR *THAT* YEAR, BUT BECAUSE I WAS THE FIRST PERSON TO *EVER* STAND IN LINE FOR DETROIT PISTON PLAYOFF TICKETS.

DID I DESERVE SOMETHING LIKE THAT?

OBVIOUSLY NOT.

I HAPPENED TO BE STANDING FIRST IN THAT LINE BY LITTLE MORE THAN A FLUKE SET OF CIRCUMSTANCES.

**IT WAS CRAZY!**

**BUT, YOU KNOW WHAT'S EVEN CRAZIER THAN THAT?**

**THOSE WHO ARE FIRST IN GOD'S KINGDOM DON'T HAVE TO DO ANYTHING - ANYTHING OTHER THAN  
SIMPLY ACCEPT THE FACT THAT THEY DON'T DESERVE TO BE STANDING IN THAT LINE AT ALL!**

**THERE IS NOTHING THEY CAN DO TO BE WORTHY OF A REWARD.**

**THEREIN LIES A GREAT PARADOX OF OUR FAITH.**

**WE AREN'T REWARDED FOR OUR DEEDS.**

**WE ARE REWARDED FOR NO REASON AT ALL.**

**AND WHEN WE UNDERSTAND THAT – WHEN WE ACCEPT IT – WHEN WE EMBRACE GOD'S AMAZING &  
UNDESERVED GRACE – WE ARE DRIVEN TO RESPOND WITH NOTHING SHORT OF DEEDS - DEEDS OF LOVE & GRACE  
TO OTHERS IN RETURN. AMEN.**

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