

# THE JUDGMENT DAY

Matthew 25:31-46

Last Sunday of the Church Year (Series A)

November 22, 2020

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The gospel lesson for the Last Sunday of the Church Year comes from *The Gospel According to Matthew*, chapter 25, verses 31 through 46. Being the Last Sunday of the Church Year, this text deals with the last thing we will experience on this earth: the Judgment. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From Matthew 25, beginning at verse 31, we read in Jesus' name.

<sup>31</sup> "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. <sup>32</sup> Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. <sup>33</sup> And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left. <sup>34</sup> Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. <sup>35</sup> For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, <sup>36</sup> I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.' <sup>37</sup> Then the righteous will answer him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? <sup>38</sup> And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? <sup>39</sup> And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?' <sup>40</sup> And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.'

<sup>41</sup> "Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. <sup>42</sup> For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, <sup>43</sup> I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' <sup>44</sup> Then they also will answer, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to you?' <sup>45</sup> Then he will answer them, saying, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.' <sup>46</sup> And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

*Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.*

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

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This sounds serious. There will be a judgment. Jesus will separate the righteous from the wicked. He will welcome the righteous into his eternal kingdom, but the wicked he will send into eternal torment. This *is* serious.

When we hear this passage, we all think to ourselves, *What side will I be on? Will I stand on Jesus' right, or on his left? Will he welcome me into his eternal kingdom, or will he cast me into the eternal fire?*

The sticky thing is, neither the sheep nor the goats understand Jesus' rationale for how he judges them. The sheep don't remember doing the thing Jesus said they did, and the goats don't remember not doing the things he says they didn't do. It catches them all off guard.

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We will all be in one of those two groups, standing either on Jesus' right or on his left. So which group will we be in? This sounds serious enough that we should probably figure it out beforehand. And since this is such a serious matter, I'm going to ask you to think with me a bit today.

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One of the great things about studying Scripture is learning a different way of looking at something. The mind of God is different than ours. Or maybe it's better to say that *our* minds are the different ones, because the mind of God is the standard. Our minds are the deviation. So when we read Scripture, we learn a different way of thinking. God gives us a correct understanding of the nature of the world and the nature of man. He gives us correct definitions of love, justice, wisdom, faith, humility, grace, and all sorts of other virtues. Most importantly, he reveals his nature and his work. In the Scriptures we find a God whom we never would have imagined. We never would have imagined that he could be so perfectly just and so perfectly gracious at the same time. We never would have imagined that God would sacrifice himself unto death for us. Scripture is full of surprises. It surprises us because we are not the way we should be. If we were, the good things of Scripture would all seem obvious. But since we are corrupted by nature, Scripture surprises us. Sometimes this is actually quite painful.

The surprise for today is not very painful. At least, I don't think so. One of the fun ways Scripture surprises us is when we study a passage and realize that it doesn't really mean what we thought it meant. This was one of those passages for me, and I'm guessing it might be for you as well.

We learn a different way of looking at it, and it seems new. That's what makes it fun. But what we might perceive as new, might actually be very old. That's how it is with this text. I had always heard it explained a certain way, and I thought that was just the normal, correct explanation of the passage. But that explanation was actually the new interpretation. And by "new," I mean that it gained popularity within the last two hundred years. That might sound old, but when we consider two thousand years of church history, anything from the last few hundred years should be regarded as new. And since doctrine doesn't change—"Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever" (Heb. 13:8)—we should have a little bit of skepticism toward new things. If someone thinks a thought that no Christian has ever thought before, it is probably going to be wrong. But sometimes there are old thoughts that were simply forgotten and are in need of a comeback. So when we hear something new, we should consider if it really is new, or if it is actually old, but simply new to us.

This is one of those texts where there is an old way of understanding it, which, for a long time, was the dominant view in church history. But it has been almost completely forgotten in the last couple hundred years. Fortunately, there are still a few people who read old books, and then they write new books for the rest of us (e.g., Sherman Gray, Jeff Gibbs).

So I'm going to share with you some corrections I learned this week.

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First, and this is pretty simple: this is not a parable. Maybe this didn't trip you up, but I always assumed it was a parable. Sometime in the last few weeks, as we've been reading through Matthew 25, you maybe even heard me call it a parable. But that's not right. I guess I assumed it was because it follows right after the parable of the ten virgins and the parable of the talents. And there is one metaphor in it regarding the sheep and the goats, but the rest of it is simply plain language. Jesus doesn't introduce it as a parable. He doesn't say, "The kingdom of heaven is like ..." He often says that when introducing a parable, but not here. And he doesn't compare himself

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to a bridegroom or a master who went on a journey. He calls himself, “**The Son of Man,**” which is a biblical title for the Christ that Jesus often used to refer to himself. And the passage itself is straightforward, plain language about what will happen when Jesus comes in glory. So it’s not a parable. That was my first correction.

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The second correction was more significant. It has to do with what the passage means. It doesn’t mean what I thought it meant. It all hinges on what Jesus means when he says, “**As you did it to the least of these my brothers, you did it to me**” (25:40). So we need to ask, *Who are Jesus’ brothers? And why is eternal salvation or damnation based on what we did for Jesus’ brothers?* Keep those questions in your mind as we walk through this.

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Jesus is speaking about the Judgment Day. That much is obvious. Jesus will come in his glory. All the angels will accompany him. He will sit on his glorious throne. And all the nations of the world will be gathered to him. This means all people. And this includes both the living and the dead. Remember, the resurrection of the dead also occurs when Christ comes in glory (e.g., Dan. 12:2; Matt. 25:6-7; John 5:28-29; 1 Cor. 15:23; 1 Thess. 4:16; Rev. 20:13). So no one will escape this judgment, not even the dead. We will all be gathered before Jesus’ throne.

And notice, it’s Jesus who is both King and Judge. It’s not his Father. Jesus judges all mankind. The one who died for the sins of the world and prayed, “**Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do**” (Luke 23:34), is the same one who will cast the wicked away into eternal punishment (25:41, 46). Jesus is the Judge, and he will send people to hell. By the way, if you ever hear a pastor or teacher deny this biblical truth, you need to reject their teaching—all of it—because their teaching is based on wishful thinking, not the Word of God. Trust those pastors and teachers who are willing to teach you the unpopular truths. God is just, and he does punish sin. Jesus is the Judge, and he will send people to hell.

Now what is the basis for Jesus’ judgment? That’s the central issue of this passage. Jesus says to the righteous, “**Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world**” (25:34). Why? “**For I as hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me**” (25:35-36). This is the basis for their eternal salvation.

The judgment of the wicked is the flipside of this. They did not give Jesus food or drink (25:42). They did not welcome Jesus, clothe him, or visit him (25:43). This is the basis for their eternal punishment.

Both the righteous and the wicked react the same way: basically, “We don’t remember any of this” (25:38-39, 44).

So Jesus reveals, “**Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me,**” and, “**As you did *not* do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me**” (25:40, 45). Jesus refers to his “brothers,” and he regards our reception or rejection of his brothers as reception or rejection of himself.

So this brings us to the pivotal question: *Who are Jesus’ brothers?*

For my whole life, I had only heard one explanation of the passage: Jesus’ brothers are anyone in need of food or water. It’s any stranger in need of clothing. It’s anyone who is sick or in prison. When we care for the poor and needy, we care for Jesus.

We could call this the “social ministry” definition of Jesus’ brothers, and it’s almost certainly wrong. For one thing, Scripture consistently teaches salvation by grace, through faith, not by

works, and certainly not by picking out one specific kind of work—like care for the poor and needy—and making salvation dependent on that one kind of work. More significantly, though, nowhere else does Jesus identify the poor and needy as his brothers. He cares for them, and he teaches us to care for them too. But he doesn't refer to them as his brothers, there is a different group he calls "brothers."

Now this doesn't get us off the hook in terms of caring for the poor and needy. We still have enough other passages in Scripture that command us to care for them. But this passage just isn't one of them.

I'm not sure why, exactly, this interpretation became, not just the dominant interpretation, but the nearly unanimous interpretation in the last couple hundred years. I can think of two possible reasons: One, biblical literacy doesn't seem to be as high as it used to be. So when we hear a passage, we're not as quick to remember all of the other passages that might shed light on it. Two, the social gospel has really taken off during this time. That's the brand of Christianity that sees the primary purpose of the Church as offering social care. And if you see that as the primary function of the Church, you're going to put this passage in that box without giving it much thought.

The ironic thing with the rise of the social gospel, is that it corresponds to a real decrease in the Church's actual social care. As we've come to think of the Church more and more as a charitable institution, our charitable work has kind of fallen off a cliff. It used to be that almost all social care was done by the Church. We built the hospitals. We took care of the homeless. We fed the hungry. And Christians still do those things, probably more than anyone else. But as the social gospel rose, we let the state take over more and more of that work. It's ironic. But I think what happened is that we lost the Church's true identity. That is, "The congregation of saints in which the Gospel is purely taught and the Sacraments are correctly administered" (*Augsburg Confession*, VII). When we lose the primary and essential function of the Church, everything else suffers, even those secondary functions that get more attention. But social care is still important, so when I tell you that this passage isn't about social care, that doesn't get us off the hook. But we need to focus on something else.

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To get the proper understanding of this passage, we need to understand who Jesus is talking about when he refers to his "brothers." And the best place to look is elsewhere in *The Gospel of Matthew*.

Back in chapter 12 you may recall this kind of odd incident where Jesus is teaching in a house. And while he's inside, his actual mother and brothers come and want to talk to him. That would be Mary and Jesus' half-brothers, whom everyone assumed were his full brothers, but Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit, not Joseph, so we understand them to be his half-brothers. Anyway, when it's reported to Jesus that they are outside and want to talk to him, Jesus asks our question of the day: "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?" (12:48). Then he answers his own question, which is always a welcome thing with Jesus. Pointing to his disciples he says, "Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother." (12:49-50).

So there's the first part of our answer. Jesus' brothers are not the poor and needy, but his disciples. And this is a thoroughly biblical answer. Nowhere does Jesus refer to unbelievers as his brothers. But it is believers, his disciples, the children of God, who are his brothers. This should be obvious.

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But we still need to narrow it down a bit more, because, according to this definition, all of the sheep standing before the throne would be Jesus' brothers. But when Jesus refers to **"the least of these my brothers,"** he's speaking of a narrower subset of disciples. So this is actually a third group in the scene. They're not goats. And even though they are sheep, they are separated here from the sheep, because Jesus speaks to the sheep concerning them. Instead of standing in front of Jesus, these brothers are actually sitting beside him.

We see who Jesus is talking about back in Matthew 19:28, where Jesus says to the twelve apostles, **"Truly I say to you, in the new world, when the Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne"**—notice the similar language to Matthew 25—**"you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel."**

And then one more passage from earlier in Matthew that will finish the explanation and help us see the point of what Jesus is saying. In chapter 10, when Jesus appoints the twelve apostles and sends them out on their first preaching mission, he says to them, **"Whoever receives you receives me, and whoever receives me receives him who sent me."** Notice how similar that already sounds to chapter 25. And Jesus goes on, **"And whoever gives one of these little ones even a cup of cold water because he is a disciple, truly, I say to you, he will by no means lose his reward."** (10:40, 42). Here Jesus is clearly speaking of the twelve apostles. So in chapter 10, Jesus equates the treatment of his apostles with the treatment of himself, and he promised to reward those who gave care, even just a cup of cold water, to these apostles.

So then, when we read the passage about the Judgment Day in Matthew 25, we come up with a better understanding of who Jesus calls his "brothers." As good and noble as it is to care for all the poor and needy, that's not really what Jesus is talking about. He's talking about receiving his messengers, whom he sends to make disciples of all nations. They left everything to follow Jesus. They literally became poor and needy for the sake of the Gospel. They became hungry and thirsty. They became strangers in foreign lands. They probably got sick on some of their journeys. And they were certainly imprisoned. Everything Jesus says about the poor and needy was true for his apostles.

So when Jesus rewards the sheep with **"the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world,"** it's not because the sheep took care of the poor and needy. It's because they received the messengers he sent to them. And, of course, by receiving the messengers, they received the message of salvation they proclaimed.

These messengers proclaimed the good news of Jesus Christ, crucified and risen for the forgiveness of sins. The sheep are the ones who believed this message and, therefore, also received the messengers. The goats are the ones who rejected this message and, therefore, also rejected the messengers.

So the judgment on the Last Day isn't based on our good works. Nor is it based on our care for the poor and needy. The judgment is based on faith. Those who hear and believe the saving message of Jesus Christ will be saved. But Jesus presents the Judgment Day in this way as an encouragement to his apostles. He said this to them privately as they sat on the Mount of Olives, just days before Jesus' crucifixion. So try to hear it through their ears. They would suffer for the sake of the Gospel. They would become poor and needy. But at the Judgment Day, they would be vindicated, and all who received them would be rewarded for their faith. You can see how they would have been encouraged by this.

And to us it is a call to receive the messengers God still sends. That means, first and foremost, to hear and believe the Word they proclaim to us. This is Christ's primary concern: that we would hear the Word of God and repent. That means trusting in him for the complete

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forgiveness of all our sins. This is Jesus' primary concern. It's why he suffered and died for our sins, and it's why he sends messengers.

Second, it means that we support the messengers Christ still sends. Many of Christ's pastors and missionaries still suffer for the sake of the Gospel. I should tell you, by the way, that I have not had to sacrifice much of anything, at least, not since coming here. You have taken very good care of me, and I am very thankful for that. We can, however, still remember and support those ministers of the Gospel who do suffer much. They still exist.

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The Judgment Day is coming. And Jesus is the Judge. We will all stand either on his right or on his left. And he will either welcome us into his kingdom, or he will cast us into the eternal fire. But we need not to wonder what side we will be on. The Judge is the same Jesus who loved us by bearing our sins in his body. He suffered and died to forgive our sins. It's the same Jesus who has sent messengers to us so that we might believe this Gospel and be saved.

The verdict is clear. All who receive this Gospel and trust in Jesus for salvation will be saved. Do not trust in your own works. Do not trust in your care for the poor. Do those things, but trust in Christ alone. He died to give you his righteousness. He rose again and lives forever. And he is coming again to judge the living and the dead. For all who trust in Christ, the Judgment Day will be salvation. Amen.

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He who testifies to these things says, **“Surely I am coming soon.”** Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!

The grace of the Lord Jesus be with [you] all. Amen. (Rev. 22:20-21)