

THE JUDGE

Matthew 25:31-46

Last Sunday of the Church Year (Series A)

November 26, 2023

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

Ny Stavanger Free Lutheran Church, Buxton, ND

The gospel lesson comes from *The Gospel According to Matthew*, chapter 25, verses 31 through 46. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From Matthew 25, beginning at verse 31, we read in Jesus' name.

³¹ “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. ³² 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. ³³ And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left. ³⁴ 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. ³⁵ 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, ³⁶ I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.’ ³⁷ Then the righteous will answer him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? ³⁸ And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? ³⁹ And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?’ ⁴⁰ 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.’

⁴¹ “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. ⁴² For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, ⁴³ 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.’ ⁴⁴ 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?’ ⁴⁵ 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.’ ⁴⁶ 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.

This is a very sobering passage. It continues the theme we've been hearing the last few weeks in Matthew 25. Two weeks ago we heard the parable about the five wise and the five foolish virgins (25:1-13). The five wise went into the wedding banquet, and the five foolish were shut out. Last week we heard the parable about the two faithful servants and the one unfaithful servant (25:14-30). The faithful servants entered into the joy of their master, while the unfaithful servant was cast into outer darkness, where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. This week we hear about the sheep and the goats.

Perhaps the first thing to notice about this passage is that it's not a parable. The only metaphorical part is that Jesus refers to sheep and goats. In this scene, Jesus plays himself. He's

not symbolized by a bridegroom or a master who goes on a journey. As he does in several other places, he refers to himself as “**the Son of Man**” (15:31).

So this is the third literary piece in Matthew 25. And they all speak of the same thing. But, in the two parables, Jesus has been building up until he gets to this conclusion. Now he drops the illustrations and speaks plainly about what will happen.

He will come to earth in glory. All his angels will be with him. And all the nations will be gathered to him. This includes all people, including both the living and the dead. We’ve learned in recent weeks about the resurrection of all the dead. Every body will be raised, and every eye will see Jesus when he comes in glory (Dan. 12:2; Matt. 25:6-7; John 5:28-29; 1 Cor. 15:23; 1 Thess. 4:16; Rev. 20:13). So this is all of humanity, from all of time, gathered in front of Jesus.

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.

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. In fact, they probably remember some other people that they helped, but they don’t remember Jesus being there, and they certainly don’t remember rejecting him. So it catches them all off guard.

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 is serious enough that we should want to know beforehand. And since this is such a serious matter, I’m going to ask you to think with me a bit today.

The meaning of this passage 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.

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 was 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 here’s the pivotal question: *Who are Jesus’ brothers?*

For most of my life, I heard only 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. This is the “social gospel” definition of Jesus’ brothers, and it has become very popular in the last couple hundred years, but it has some problems with it.

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 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.

This would be like if someone got really obsessed with the tire pressure on their car. Let’s call this man Fred. Fred says, “Hey, this is where the rubber meets the road.” So Fred focuses all of his attention on tire pressure. Of course, tire pressure matters, but it’s not the most important thing. So Fred doesn’t pay attention to anything else. The tire pressure light comes on, so he pulls over and fills up his tires. Then the oil light comes on, but Fred says, “That’s not where the rubber meets the road.” Then his car goes “clunk,” and it dies.

The same thing happens to the Church when we prioritize something else above forgiveness of sins in Jesus Christ. The Church loses her heart, and everything else collapses, including the social care that we wanted to emphasize. 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. We still have enough other passages in Scripture that command us to care for them. But this passage isn’t really one of them.

So here are the problems with the “social gospel” interpretation of this text:

First, Scripture consistently teaches salvation by grace, through faith, not by works, and certainly not by picking out one specific good work, like care for the poor and needy, and making salvation dependent on that one good work. The bigger piece of evidence is that 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. Instead, there is a different group he calls “brothers.”

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*.

In chapter 12 there was this 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. When people tell 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. 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 distinguished from the other 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"**—that's the same throne we see 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 who 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 his "brothers" 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:

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that we would hear the Word of God and repent. That means trusting in him for the complete 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.

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.

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).