"He Will Come to Judge"
Matthew 25:31-46
January 31, 2021

INTRODUCTION:

Today's passage is a description of what will happen on the Day of Judgment. We are considering this passage in our sermon series on the mission of the Church for the simple reason that faithfulness to our mission and belief in the biblical doctrine of hell go hand in hand. Whenever the church holds firmly to the biblical doctrine of hell, its faithfulness to its mission remains strong. If, on the other hand, the church begins to doubt in the reality of hell and judgment, its faithfulness to its mission will inevitably falter for the simple reason that there is no clear sense of what exactly the gospel saves us from. No one said more about hell than the very one who will serve as Judge on that day, our Lord Jesus. His teaching ministry began with warnings of judgment (Matt. 7:21-23) and here it ends with such warnings. As we recite in the Apostles' Creed, we believe that Jesus "will come to judge the living and the dead."

There is an important interpretive detail we need to clarify before we get into the details of this passage. Is this passage primarily about ministry to the poor or about Judgment Day? More specifically, who is meant by Jesus' phrase **"the least of these my brothers"** (v. 40)? This is an important question because it is the response to this group that determines whether one is a sheep entering eternal life or a goat entering eternal punishment. Some understand this phrase universally to apply to the poor in general. What often accompanies that understanding is the idea that the main ministry of the church is poverty alleviation. While it is crystal clear in the Bible that we are to care for the poor, I don't believe that's what this passage is teaching. Who then are these "brothers" Jesus speaks of, help for which is such a prominent part of Judgment Day? I believe it refers to Christians. In Matthew's Gospel, the word "brother" always refers either to Jesus' physical brothers or to the spiritual family of God. Further, the word "least" is the superlative form of a word, *mikroi* (little ones), which always refers to Jesus' disciples in Matthew. So this passage is not primarily about caring for the poor, but about Judgment Day.

I. The Setting of Judgment Day

Jesus speaks plainly here about a day that dominates much of Scripture. Adam and Eve were warned of this day when they were told that death would result if they should choose the path of rebellion and eat of the forbidden fruit. Noah preached about this day as it was prefigured in the waters of judgment sent at the great Flood. The Old Testament prophets spoke repeatedly of the "Day of the Lord," by which they meant this Judgment Day. But no one said more about

it than Jesus. He speaks plainly here about it because that's what we do when danger threatens. If your house is on fire and your loved ones are inside, you don't gather them to tell them a story about danger, hoping that they will get the point. You say, "The house is on fire. Quick, leave as fast as you can."

The first feature we notice about this day is that it is a day that will reveal the glory of Jesus. Twice in verse 31 Jesus mentions his glory. His first coming was marked by humility and weakness, while his second by power and glory. He comes in glory and sits on his glorious throne. We note also that heaven will be emptied because all the angels will be with Jesus. These are the same angels the Bible describes in such a way that only one of them reduces humans to terror. Gathered with Jesus on this day is not just one angel but all of them. I don't know how many that is. Daniel 7:10 speaks of the thousand times ten thousand angels standing before the throne of God. Even if we are not meant to take that literally, it is clear that their number is vast.

Also present on this day will be **"all the nations"** (v. 32). This means every single individual who has ever lived, Christian and non-Christian alike. Just prior to this, Jesus will have raised from the dead every single person who has ever lived on the earth (John 5:28-29). All will be gathered on this day, and Jesus will be the center of it all, seated on his throne. No one will dispute his right to sit on that throne. I notice how later in this passage even the goats, those who are commanded to depart from him, refer to him as "Lord." On this day, as Paul taught in Philippians, **"at the name of Jesus every knee should bow... and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord"** (Phil 2:10-11).

Then comes the great separation. It is not the kind of separation we sinful humans have often made, one based on race, education, political views or economic status. It is a separation into two groups that will determine where each person spends eternity. The time of human decision will have passed, and Jesus will be the ultimate decider, and no departure from his decisions will be possible on this day. Everything is at stake in this decision, for it will be permanent. There will be siblings separated from one another, a husband from his wife, a neighbor from his neighbor.

Do you believe in a final judgment? Years ago, when Muammar Qaddafi was the ruler of Libya, England decided to close its Libyan Embassy. It so angered Qaddafi that he ordered England to be removed from all maps in Libya. Clearly, such an action did not mean that England ceased to exist, any more than people not believing in hell or a final judgment means that those things do not exist. This day is real, a fact established by no less an authority than Jesus. Will you be ready for it? What does it mean to be ready for it? Like someone who is given the answers to the test before having to take the test, Jesus gives us the answer. Let's look at that now.

II. The Surprise on Judgment Day

The chief drama of this passage lies in the surprises attributed to both the sheep and the goats. It is recorded of neither group that they are surprised to be in the group to which Jesus assigns them. Rather, their surprise lies in the reason given for that assignment. The sheep are surprised that Jesus gives them credit for having tended to his basic needs. In Jesus' telling of the events of this day, he lists four times these basic six needs. They are listed in order from the most basic to the higher, beginning with food and drink. He then moves to shelter, saying, **"I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me."** The last two are social needs: **"I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me."** The sheep are surprised to be credited with these acts of kindness. Jesus does so by aligning himself completely with his people. **"Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me"** (v. 40). The goats are also surprised at Jesus' accusation that they have neglected these same acts of kindness toward him. They deny that they have ever treated Jesus in the way he accuses them. But again, Jesus says that they have done so in their neglect of showing kindness to his followers.

What is the point of these surprised responses? Jesus is teaching us about one of the most fundamental differences between the sheep and the goats, which is also one of the most fundamental differences between those who enter eternal life and those who are condemned to eternal punishment. What is that difference? In a word, it is humility. In this scene of glory, where one's eternal condition is announced by Jesus, the temptation would be to puff one's resume. Yet the sheep do no such thing. The reason is that they have learned the humility of being honest about one's sin. They have learned not to boast in their own righteousness. The goats, on the other hand, have spent a lifetime boasting in their own accomplishments. They have not learned the humility of being honest about their own sin. So on this important and defining day, they cannot receive from Jesus a word about their sin.

Notice that Jesus highlights their sins of omission. Have you ever noticed how those who have not learned to trust in Jesus boast of their own righteousness by pointing to their successes in avoiding certain sins of transgression? Theologians have divided sin into these two categories of sins of transgression and sins of omission. A sin of transgression is when we do something that God says we shouldn't do, while a sin of omission is when we fail to do something that God says we ought to have done. It is quite common for people to have a false confidence of their entry into heaven by boasting of having avoided some sins of transgression. "I've never murdered anyone, robbed any banks or sexually molested anyone." But Jesus here focuses not on sins of transgressions but sins of omission. The goats have neglected to care for Jesus' brothers and sisters in their simple needs. They may have managed to live decent, respectable lives, but they have been guilty of these sins of omission.

Why does Jesus not give a more evangelical message here? Why doesn't he say that the difference between those who enter into eternal life and those who are condemned **"into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels"** (v. 41) is whether or not they have trusted Jesus for their salvation. Isn't that what the Bible teaches? **"For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast"** (Eph. 2:8-9). Jesus teaches the same thing here. Note that the first thing he says of the sheep is that they are "blessed by my Father" (v. 34). Further, he says that they "inherit the kingdom" (v. 34). Inheritances are granted, not earned. Even so, Jesus' emphasis is on the performance of these acts of kindness. Why is that? It should be pointed out that the Bible is consistent in teaching that we will be judged by our works on Judgment Day. For example, the apostle Paul, who so clearly teaches that salvation is by grace through faith, and not by works, speaks about Judgment Day in the same way Jesus does here. **"For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil"** (2 Cor. 5:10).

So the Bible is clear in teaching that salvation is by grace and through faith, and equally clear in teaching that judgment will be based on our works. How do we put those two truths together? We do so by recognizing that good works are the evidence of our salvation, not the basis of it. True faith leads to the kind of changed heart that loves God and people. Faith in God is the root and love is the fruit. Salvation is by faith alone, but the faith that saves is not alone. It is an easy thing to deceive ourselves and think that we are trusting God for our salvation when in fact we are not. So the Bible invites us to look to our works as evidence of a genuine faith.

Let's pause for an application. The goats are unaware of their sin, while the sheep have seen the depth of their sinfulness. Covering up your sin is the most dangerous thing in the universe. I heard a sad story this week of the son of a PCA pastor who died recently. He was at a party and drank too much and fell and struck his head. He told his friends not to take him to the hospital because he was underage and fearful of getting into trouble. He was unaware that his fall had caused a brain hemorrhage, which a trip to the emergency room would have easily revealed and led to proper treatment. The sad result was his death from this blow to his head. Are you acting more like a goat or a sheep in your life? Are you busy covering your sin, or have you humbled yourself to confess it?

III. The Deliverance on Judgment Day

This is the last extensive teaching of Jesus in Matthew's Gospel. I notice that the theme of this passage is the same as that of his first extensive teaching in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus' theme in that initial sermon is expressed in

Matthew 5:20. **"For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."** He is making the same point here. Is your heart characterized by the kind of love that shows kindness even when there is no obvious advantage to be gained by doing so? Remember that Jesus is speaking here of sins of omission and not sins of transgression. Many people refrain from sins of commission by the motivation of self-interest. They observe that it is generally not in a person's best interest to rob banks, assault people you're angry at, or fail to pay your bills. They appear to be good people while their motivation is completely self-centered. In stating here that judgment will be based on kindness done to the least of Jesus' people, he is speaking of a heart of love that all of us are incapable of bringing about by our own effort. The great sin Jesus is highlighting here is the sin of indifference. The goats are just indifferent to the needs of others, and that reveals a heart of selfishness. Jesus is humbling us with the love he requires in order to get us to accept the love he offers.

Everyone hearing my voice today will hear Jesus' voice on Judgment Day. He will say to you, **"Come, inherit the kingdom,"** or he will say **"Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels."** The ones who will hear Jesus say "Come" on that day are the ones who hear his "Come" today. Can you hear Jesus' "Come"? His invitation to come requires our humility. We have to say, "I need a heart transplant, because I don't know how to have the kind of love Jesus requires here." It is precisely those who come to the end of themselves that Jesus invites to come to him and find in him forgiveness and a new heart.

CONCLUSION:

What does this passage contribute to our understanding of the mission of the church? Our mission is to lift up Jesus and make disciples of all nations. Doing so requires us to keep before us always the reality of hell and judgment. The gospel is good news that Jesus can take hell-bound men and women, forgive them and transform them. This is the last teaching of Jesus in Matthew's Gospel, and it is concerned with judgment. But the topic of judgment is not yet concluded in Matthew's Gospel. On the day of judgment that Jesus describes in our passage, he is the great Judge. But in the concluding section of this Gospel, Jesus will be the one judged. He is judged, the righteous for the guilty, that we, the guilty ones, might be made righteous. We come now in faith to the one who was judged, that we might here his "Come" on that great day when he sits as the Judge of all people.

Small Group Discussion Questions
Matthew 25:31-46

1. How often do you think about Judgment Day? Do you think about it enough? Too much? Just about the right amount?

2. When you think about Judgment Day, how would you characterize your dominant thoughts and feelings?

3. When the church loses the biblical doctrine of hell and judgment, it also loses its sense of mission. Do you agree with this statement? Can you think of examples of how this may or may not be true?

4. Theologians make a distinction between sins of transgression (doing what God forbids) and sins of omission (failing to do what God requires). Why do you think Jesus lists here sins of omission?

5. Why does Jesus focus on good works in this passage instead of faith?

6. One of the differences between the sheep and the goats can be seen in what surprises each group. The sheep are surprised to hear of the benefits of their simple acts of kindness while the goats are surprised to hear of their failure to show such simple acts. The sheep are humble and the goats proud. The sheep have grown accustomed to being honest about their sin while the goats have tried to cover up their sin. Turn to Psalm 32:1-5 and apply that psalm to this theme of being honest about our sin.

7. What would it take for you to be more honest about your sin?

8. Can you think of a sin you have repented of lately that you would be willing to share with your group?