

“The Final Judgment”
Matthew 25:31-46
November 24, 2019

INTRODUCTION:

We’ve known for quite some time that this day is coming—the Day of Judgment. Adam and Eve were warned of death should they choose the path of rebellion and eat of the forbidden fruit. Noah preached about it 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 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.

Just as Jesus’ first coming was in the fullness of time, so will be the case with his return. How often has the question been asked about various tragedies, “Why doesn’t God do something?” When cancer, injustice, genocide, cruel dictators and senseless wars continue, the human heart cries out, “How long, O Lord?” The key truth that is often missed is that God’s method of ending all tragedies is the event portrayed in today’s passage. The final judgment is the catastrophe to end all catastrophes. Everlasting joy and peace is the outcome, and judgment the means toward this outcome. God alone knows the perfect time to act in this way. I for one am thankful he did not do so 44 years ago, before he brought me to faith. Because of his great mercy, this Day of Judgment is long-delayed. Don’t make the mistake of thinking that delayed judgment means cancelled judgment. The Day of Judgment is more certain than your next breath. What will that day be like? Here we have it straight from the mouth of one who should know, the Judge himself.

I. The Reality of Judgment

Jesus speaks plainly here of a Day of Judgment, describing its setting and the activities of the day. When danger threatens, people don’t speak metaphorically, but as plainly as possible. If your house is on fire and your loved ones are inside, you don’t tell them a story about danger, hoping they get the point. You say, “The house is on fire. Quick, leave as fast as you can.” So Jesus speaks plainly here, leaving no doubt about this day.

He begins by describing the setting, and it is a setting of glory. 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. And heaven will be emptied, because all the angels will

be with Jesus. I don't know how many that is. Daniel 7:10 speaks of ten 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.”** 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 individual who has ever lived. Jesus taught that in John 5:28-29. **“An hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life; and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment.”** When we recite the Apostles' Creed, we say that Jesus will come to judge the living and the dead, by which we mean those alive at his coming as well as all who have died previous to his coming. All will be gathered before Jesus on this day. The weak and the powerful, the rich and poor, rulers and those ruled—all will be present. And at the center of it all will be Jesus, sitting on a throne. No one will dispute his right to be there. 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).

Kings don't just sit on thrones and wish things were different. They take action, which Jesus proceeds to do on this day. **“He will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats”** (v. 32). C. S. Lewis calls this separation “The Great Divorce.” The time of human decision is over, 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 determine one's eternal destiny. There will be siblings separated from one another, a husband from his wife, a neighbor from his neighbor. And unlike every separation before this, this one will be permanent.

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 Basis of Judgment

Jesus' words here about the basis of judgment have puzzled many people. Why doesn't he give a more evangelical answer, saying that the sheep on his

right are those who have trusted Jesus as their Savior? Why instead does he give what appears to be a works answer, saying that those who go to heaven are the ones who have fed the hungry, clothed the naked and visited the sick and imprisoned? Further, he describes this day in such a way that he manages to go over this list four times, repetition that is designed for emphasis.

It should be pointed out that this passage is not unique in saying that judgment will be based on our works. Almost every time that judgment is brought up in the New Testament, it is said to be based on our works. But it is also clear from the rest of the New Testament that salvation is by God's grace alone and through faith alone, apart from works. How do we put these two things together? We do so by recognizing that good works are the evidence of our salvation, not the basis of our salvation. 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.

This perspective on faith and works appears in this passage too. The first thing Jesus says to the sheep is not to commend them for their good works, but to call them blessed. **“Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world”** (v. 34). They are blessed and they are given an inheritance. Inheritances aren't earned.

What kind of love is the fruit of faith? It is the kind of love that meets people's needs without expectation of getting anything in return. Jesus lists six needs that are listed in hierarchical order. In the first hierarchy is food and drink, without which a person cannot live. Food was not so abundant in this culture as in our own, and anyone giving food to the hungry did so at some risk of having an insufficient amount themselves. The same could be said of water in this arid land. But love risks such things and trusts God for the future. In the next hierarchy is shelter and clothing. **“I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me”** (v. 35-36). And then the final pairing describes social needs. **“I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me”** (v. 36). It is in this last category that we see the biggest needs in our culture. How many in our day are dying of loneliness and in desperate need of social connection!

These are simple acts of love, within reach of all. But they are powerful, with the ability to push back the darkness. In his book *Promises in the Dark*, missionary doctor Eric McLaughlin reminds us of the power of the ordinary as illustrated in a novel by Walt Wangerin.

In *The Book of the Dun Cow*, Wangerin creates an animal world where the unlikely hero is a rooster that rules his barnyard kingdom from his henhouse, regularly crowing the hours to give a structure and stability to the ordinary lives of the animals. The story goes that God has imprisoned an immense, evil serpent name Wyrm far below the earth's surface. He seethes with anger at his imprisonment,

longing to break out and work his destruction in the world, but the thing that really goads him is that the power of his imprisonment lies in the everyday goodness of a bunch of unaware barnyard animals. They don't know it, but the animals are Wurm's keepers. God, in his wisdom, has done a wonder. The power of the chains of the great Wurm is in the simple, ordinary, even habitual goodness of a bunch of ignorant animals. It is the ultimate humiliation of evil, and thus it is the glorification of God.

These acts of kindness may be simple, but they require a transformed heart, indicated by the fact that these acts are not done to look good and gain the applause of others. Notice Jesus' answer when those on his right are surprised and ask when they did these things. **"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). They did it to "one of the least," someone who is perhaps invisible to others, someone who would not be in a position to repay such kindness. There is a great deal of discussion in the commentaries on the precise identity of "the least of these my brothers." Does it refer to all people or only to other Christians? It seems clear to me that it is the latter, based on Jesus calling them his brothers, and based on Jesus' identification with them. This doesn't mean that we are not to show kindness to non-Christians, because the Bible teaches elsewhere that we are (e.g. Gal. 6:10). The meaning is that the true heart of love is revealed when it is moved by the needs of others rather than one's own desire for a return. It gives without expectation of getting anything in return, seen in giving to those unable to give in return, the least of these.

The English say the true gentleman is the one who uses the proper fork when no one is watching. Suppose a wealthy woman has no children of her own, and her only heir is a twenty-five year old nephew. He always seems so kind to her, but she has the nagging sense that he is only being nice because he wants her money when she dies. So she decides on a test that will tell her what she needs to know about his character. She disguises herself as a poor woman and goes to his house to ask for help. When he treats her rudely and tells her to go away and never come back again, she discovers what she wants to know. Similarly, Jesus disguises himself as a needy man and comes to us to see what we will do when no one is looking. Our response reveals whether or not there is a true heart of love. Such a heart comes only as Jesus transforms us, and he does so as we come to him in humility.

The response of the sheep on his right reveals not only hearts of love, but also hearts of humility. Note their surprise when commended by Jesus as having done these deeds of kindness for Jesus. "When did we do these things?" they ask. They are humble and without self-righteousness. Contrast that with the self-righteous pride seen in the goats. When confronted with their sins of omission in having failed to do these acts of kindness, they profess their innocence. Sheep are humble, while goats are filled with sin to which they remain blind. So what is the basis of judgment? To state it as simply as I can,

both this passage and the rest of the Bible teach that judgment will be based on the presence or absence of the kind of humble faith that leads to love.

III. The Grace of the Judge

Though this is a passage on judgment, it is filled with God's grace. I see it principally in Jesus' identification with his people. Jesus so identifies with his people that it is as if we are showing kindness to him when we do so to his people, and denying such kindness to him when we deny it to his people. This helps me answer one of the nagging questions about what Judgment Day will be like for Christians. Will the sins of believers be mentioned on Judgment Day? It is sometimes said that since the sins of believers have been covered by Jesus' substitutionary death, that those sins will not even be mentioned on this Day. But that conclusion falls short of biblical teaching. For example, Jesus said, **"But I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken. For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned"** (Matt. 12:36-37). And Paul taught that the Day of Judgment will reveal the quality of our work, showing whether or not it was built on the foundation of Christ (1 Cor. 3:13). But the Bible also says that there is no condemnation for those in Christ (Romans 8:1). So apparently our sins will be brought to light and yet we won't be condemned. How could that be so? It is because the Judge is the very One who so identifies with me that he has already stood in my place to be judged. So the revealing of every sin of ours on Judgment Day will only serve to humble us more deeply and to give us more joy in Jesus.

Another evidence of the grace of Jesus in this passage is his presence with us through his people. When we show kindness even to the least of our brothers and sisters, we are showing it to Jesus. Jesus comes to us through his people. Our life together as God's people is life in the presence of Jesus. What does that mean specifically? It means that in our acts of kindness toward others, Jesus is present among us. I have been the beneficiary of so many acts of love and kindness from others, and in those I experience the kindness of Jesus. The fellowship of God's people together is beautiful because it is the presence of Jesus among us.

CONCLUSION:

Will you be ready for this Day? Will you hear Jesus' voice say to you, **"Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world"?** You will hear Jesus' "Come" on that day if you hear it today. He invites you now to come to him for rest, for discipleship, for forgiveness, for a transformed heart that learns to love.