

Matthew 25:31-46

Jesus said, “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. 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. And he will place the sheep on his right but the goats on the left.

Dear Friends in Christ,

- 20/20 Vision - Physically speaking, our vision often declines as we get older. Spiritually speaking, as we grow in faith, our vision gets better and stronger!
- Three weeks ago - we focused on Jesus the Lamb / Church pictured as saints
- Two weeks ago - we focused on Jesus the Bridegroom / Church pictured as ten virgins, five were wise and five were foolish
- Last week - we focused on Jesus the Master / Church pictured as three bought and paid for slaves, two were faithful, one unfaithful
- Today, we focus on Jesus the Judge / All people are divided into two groups - believers and unbelievers, pictured as a shepherd dividing sheep from goats.

(High School story of speeding down the highway, trying to not violate a curfew, passing an unmarked deputy sheriff’s car, and facing an unexpected judgment. Relatively speaking, the “judgment” wasn’t all that serious - there was a fine to pay and my parents were disappointed. But there is a point of comparison with our Gospel lesson for today, where judgment will come as a thief in the night, and for many there will be an eternal price to pay.)

In Matthew 7, Jesus says it this way, ***“For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.”***

Surveys suggest that fewer and fewer Americans are on the way that is hard and leads to life and that more and more Americans are the way that is easy and leads to destruction. Barna research suggests that the percentage of practicing Christians has declined from 45% in 2000 to 25% in 2019. Practicing Christians are defined as those who say that faith is important and have attended church at least once in the past month. Another survey shows that while 90% of Americans believe there is a God, only 72% believe there is a heaven, and 58% believe there is a hell. Digging down even deeper into the numbers, a survey in the UK indicated that only 10% of people believe they were going to hell, and another survey suggested that as few as 2% of Americans believe they will be spending eternity in hell.

In today’s message, we would focus not on the results of surveys or the opinions of Americans. Rather we would fix our eyes on Jesus, the Judge who will be coming back

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again as a thief in the night to judge the living and the dead. Two truths we want to learn today about Jesus the Judge / King / Son of Man.

Truth #1 is that this Judge says what He means and does what He says He will do. And truth #2 is that for this judge, the evidence is personal.

Truth #1 is that this Judge means what He says and does what He says He will do. It's tempting to think of God as this warm and fuzzy grandpa kind of a guy who just wants his grandchildren to be happy and almost never speaks hard truths. It's popular to emphasize that God is so full of love that He could never really sentence good and decent people to an eternity of condemnation. It's increasingly true even in the pulpits of our churches that preachers are promoting the idea that in the end, pretty much everybody is going to be saved, aka universalism.

In today's teaching, Jesus totally refutes the idea that everybody will be saved whether they repent of their sins or not. He blows away the false teaching that there are alternate pathways to get into heaven or that there is any other name other than the name of Jesus by which we may be saved.

Dear friends in Christ, Jesus means what he says when He declares on the one hand that on the Day of Judgment **Believers will be invited to receive their "inheritance," and on the other hand, Unbelievers will be sent away into the "eternal fire."** On the one hand of the King there will be the sheep and on the other hand goats. The sheep have been listening to the voice of their Good Shepherd, He knows and calls them by name, He has been leading them into green pastures and still waters, and even when they walked through the valley of the shadow of death, they have not been afraid. On the other hand, there will be the goats who have not been paying attention to the Word of God. They have not been heeding the warnings of Scripture, they have not been clinging to the promises of their Savior, they haven't been grazing in the green pastures nor by the still waters, when they have passed through the valley of the shadow of death, they have been afraid.

On the one hand of the King there are those who have been made disciples through Baptism and the preaching and teaching of God's Word and the Holy Supper, and on the other hand there are those who have refused to be gathered, enlightened, and sanctified in the Christian faith.

Dear friends in Christ, our God isn't only a God of love who wants us all to be happy now and into eternity. He is also a God of law and order that must see to it that sin is punished. He isn't only a God of mercy, He is a God of justice. Which is precisely why God sent His only and beloved Son in the flesh to be our Savior. The price that had to be paid - Jesus paid it. The punishment that we deserved - Jesus took it into His own body. The cup of wrath we should have been drinking - He drank it. The suffering that we

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should have endured - He endured it. The sacrifices we needed to offer, He offered up once and for all.

At the cross, God did what He said He would do through the prophet Ezekiel. He said that he would be that shepherd who would rescue his sheep from all the places where they had been scattered, and He did. He said that He would feed his sheep with good pasture and he did. He said that he would come to seek and to save the lost and at the cross that's exactly what he did. He said that he would bring back the strayed and bind up the injured and through the preaching and teaching of His Word, that's exactly what He does. He said that He would strengthen the weak, and in the eating and the drinking at the Table, that's exactly what he does, again and again, week after week.

The kingdom of God is like a congregation of believers full of folks who take the Great Commission seriously. At the same time they are rejoicing and their hearts are hurting. They rejoice in every Baptism, but their hearts hurt every time they see parents and children drifting away from Sunday School and staying away from Divine Service. They rejoice every time a group of teenagers confirm their faith in the Rite of Confirmation, but their hearts hurt as often as they see people of all ages wandering away from those vows to be diligent in the means of grace. They rejoice that the day is soon coming when the Son of Man will be returning in glory and the archangel will be shouting and the trumpet will be blowing and every knee will be bending and their hearts are hurting as they see increasing numbers of their friends and family ignoring and even despising the gifts of God's grace.

Truth #2 is that for this Judge, the evidence is personal. Up to this point, Jesus has been using picture language. He's been talking about bringing oil to keep our lamps burning and making faithful use of the talents entrusted to us. But now Jesus takes a turn towards the specifics of feeding the hungry and showing hospitality to strangers and clothing the naked and visiting the sick and the incarcerated.

Notice there's nothing sensational about what Jesus is asking us to do in these end times. He doesn't say "I was sick and you healed me." He says, "I was sick and you visited me." He doesn't say "I was thirsty and you built my village in Africa a new water system." He says "I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink." He's not talking about completing major projects or doing big miracles, but rather little acts of mercy and kindness. Virtually every Christian is capable of these.

At first glance, this courtroom scene seems to suggest that salvation may be earned by doing good works. But a deeper digging into Scripture makes it clear that salvation is a gift of God and that we are saved by the grace of God through faith alone in Jesus Christ. Today's text makes it clear that those who have received the grace of God by definition become gracious people. Those who have been given the gift of faith by definition become faithful

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people. Or as Jesus said in the Beatitudes, “Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.”

In our text for today, all people are divided into two groups, depending on their relationship with Jesus Christ. As we focus on Jesus as Judge, we note He has already made His judgement. He has already decided who’s in and who’s out. There will be no recounts, no audits, no appeals to higher courts. What’s unusual about the evidence as it is presented is that for this Judge, the evidence is personal.

Two observations I offer in closing today.

Observation #1 is that **Believers will be surprised that their good works are remembered.** Surprised we will be that Jesus has forgiven all the good intentions we have failed to follow through on and that instead, He has remembered the times we got it right. Surprised we will be that He has forgotten the many bad habits into which we have stumbled and instead remembered the times faith was alive with kindness and compassion. Dear friends in Christ, for this Judge, the evidence is personal.

Observation #2 is that **Unbelievers will be surprised that their sins are remembered.** As the five foolish virgins were surprised that the door was shut and the bridegroom refused to open the door, and as the unfaithful servant was surprised when the Master scolded him for burying his talents in the ground, so will unbelievers be surprised on the last day that their acts of decency and kindness are not accepted as evidence of their worthiness to enter heaven. Surprised they will be that without faith it is impossible to please God. Surprised they will be that it’s too late to repent, it’s too late to change their ways, and there is no higher court of higher appeal.

Two stories in closing today.

(Story #1 happened years ago, I made a hospital call early in the morning in Rochester, was hustling back to Janesville to lead a Bible Class on the story of the Good Samaritan, I was a bit late, and as I got off the interstate at Owatonna, there was a bearded man with a backpack on the side of the road, looking for a ride. My first inclination was to drive right on by, and then of course I realized what a hypocrite I was, eager to teach the importance of showing mercy, but reluctant to actually show mercy)

(On Thursday afternoon, it happened again. I was trying to finish this very sermon, and it wasn’t going well. I kept getting interrupted by folks wanting to sign up for a Thanksgiving meal, I was writing and re-writing paragraphs a bit of frustration was rising up inside of me, then one more phone call, but this time it wasn’t for a meal to be delivered on Thanksgiving Day, it was a man who claimed to be homeless in Waseca, and could I find lodging for one night. My first inclination was to find a way to say no, I just can’t help you today, and then

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of course I realized what a hypocrite I was, eager to write sermons about showing mercy, but reluctant to actually show mercy.

The kingdom of God is like a congregation of believers full of folks who spend this week looking for neighbors to befriend, not as a way of earning God's favor but rather in response to God already favoring them. In Jesus' Name. Amen and Amen.