

## Judgment Day

Matthew 25:31-46

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**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."

The day is coming. Judgment Day. What do those two words mean to you? A survey done Thursday night in Broad Ripple revealed some of the thoughts of the people of our city. . . Why not?!! The reason we can't make judgment day to be whatever we think it should be is that God has already told us what it will be. And you need to know about it because you're going to be there, and Jesus wants you to be ready for your day in court. This text teaches us 3 truths about judgment day.

### **I. THE REALITY OF JUDGMENT DAY, vv. 31-33**

This is now the final section of Jesus' teaching on His return, and in fact the final story in Jesus' public teaching ministry. He has talked about the signs of His coming, the need to be prepared, and now in this concluding section He gives us a sneak preview of what that Day will look like. He tells us why we need to be prepared—because he's coming to judge—and how, specifically we can be sure we're ready. There are 3 realities:

Notice first, **a. *The glory of Jesus, v. 31.*** He uses His favorite name for Himself, Son of Man, but the dominant thought of v. 31 is glory. The human heart craves glory. Think of the most glorious sight you've ever seen. No, not Reggie Wayne hauling in a TD pass from Peyton; not Cowboys Stadium right before kick-off tonight; but something more glorious: the vastness of the Grand Canyon; the beauty of a sunset over the ocean; the majesty of the Rocky Mountains. All of that is but a candle compared to the sun of the glory that Jesus will come in

To understand judgment day properly, you must begin with Jesus. Let me try to help you see His glory.

He is the image of the invisible God; all the fullness of deity dwells in Him; He is the radiance of God's glory, and the exact representation of His being.

He is the one whose face shown like the sun on the mountain of transfiguration and whose clothes became as white as the light.

He is the one Daniel saw in his vision (ch. 7), when thrones were set in place and the Ancient of Days took his seat, whose throne was flaming with fire and its wheels are all ablaze, a river of fire was flowing, coming out from before him. Thousands upon thousands attended him; ten thousand times then thousand stood before him. The court was seated, and the books were opened. The Son of Man approached the Ancient of Days and was given authority, glory, and sovereign power.

He is the One whom John saw in the Revelation, one like a son of man, dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash around his chest. His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire. His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters.

He is the Lion of the tribe of Judah.

He is the One of whom loud voices in heaven said (Rev. 11), "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever", before whom the 24 elders fell on their faces and worshipped, saying, "You have taken your great power and begun to reign."

He is the rider on the white horse in Rev. 19, called Faithful and True, who in righteousness judges and makes war, whose eyes are like blazing fire and on his head are many crowns. He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is the Word of God. Out of his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, for He rules them with an iron scepter. On his robe and on his thigh he has a name written, King of kings and Lord of lords.

And it is this Jesus who now appears in all of His glory, no longer veiled by the clothing of human likeness that He had adopted. And He comes not alone! How powerful is one angel? Powerful enough to destroy 185,000 Assyrians soldiers in one night! Terrifying enough that whenever they appear to people, they tremble in fear. And now Jesus comes with all the angels, myriads, millions upon millions, the armies of heaven, the awe-inspiring, suck your breath away, petrifying posse of the Son of Man, the King of Kings. And, the text says, He sits on His throne in heavenly glory; He takes up His position to judge. This is where a proper understanding of judgment day must begin: not with what we think is right or wrong or should happen or not happen, but with who Jesus is. He is the King, He is the judge.

Notice, secondly, **b. The scope of judgment, v. 32a**. All nations. It is global, it is universal, all peoples. But it is also individual; the verse says He will separate the people one from another. What we are to picture here is a vast assembly of all people who have ever lived, from among all nations and tribes and peoples and languages. None is exempt, none will escape. All will be gathered before Him, the Judge, you and I included, to await His decision about them.

Thirdly, see **c. The clarity of justice, vv. 32b, 33**. During the day, a shepherd's flock of sheep and goats would mingle in the pasture. But at night, though the sheep were happy in the open air, the goats needed the warmth of shelter, so the shepherd would gather them all together and then separate them from each other, the sheep in one group and the goats in another. There was never any question as to who was what; it was obvious from their features which were sheep and which were goats. And there were no other possibilities; you were either a sheep or a goat. What Jesus is saying here is that all of humanity will be divided into two, and only two, groups. Every person through history will be placed in one of two groups. There are no other options. And there is no defense. There are no lawyers, there is no argument, no appeals, there is only a decision, a verdict by the Judge. This is not a trial but a

sentencing, because the Judge already has all the evidence that exists—and by the time you meet Him He will already have decided your case.

This idea isn't popular in our day and age. Erwin Lutzer said that we used to believe everyone had a right to their own opinion; now we're taught to believe that everyone's opinion is right. To be politically correct is never to judge other people or the rightness or wrongness of an idea. But Jesus cares not for our notions of political correctness. He teaches that there are only two groups, ultimately, among people. In fact, Jesus' teaching in Matthew is full of this motif of the division of people. You might recall the narrow and the wide gates, the good and the bad trees, the house on the rocks and the house on the sand from the Sermon on the Mount (7:13-27). Or those who will recline at table in the kingdom and those who will be thrown into the outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth (8:11, 12). Or those who acknowledge Him and those who deny Him (10:32, 33). The wheat and the tares (13:40-43), the good fish and the bad (13:49, 50), those who seek to save their lives and those who in losing theirs save it (16:25, 26), those who are thrown out of the wedding feast for not being dressed properly (22:14) and those who are not; Noah and his family in the boat, the others who perished (24:38,39) two men in the field, one taken the other left, two women at the mill, one taken the other left (24:40,41); the faithful and the wicked servant (24:45-51); and as we saw last week, the wise and the foolish virgins and the working vs. the worthless servants (25:1-30). Jesus is the boulder in the middle of the river, and the water must go one way or the other. At the end of history waits not only a glorious unification of all things (Eph. 1:10) but also an awful separation of all persons (Bruner, 566).

This division is the only one that really matters. The most momentous selection process of all time, the Great Divide! In the Kingdom of God, there is no room for racism, sexism, nationalism, or elitism—but there is 'salvationism.' Because one's eternal destiny will hinge on which group he or she is in. Jesus sees if you are a sheep or a goat, and He puts you in one group or the other. End of discussion. This decision of Jesus about you and me is the single most important thing about us. Which are you—a sheep or a goat?

## **II. THE RATIONALE OF JUDGMENT DAY, vv. 34-45**

If this decision is so monumental, we had better understand the basis of it, and that Jesus goes on to explain in vv. 34-45. It is not an arbitrary decision, it is not capricious; there is a clear rationale behind it, because, much to our relief, this Judge is both True and Fair. And here's where the text gets interesting. He is now about to tell His disciples, and us, more explicitly how they are to be ready for Him when He comes by giving us His criterion for judgment.

Jesus says that there is one feature, one characteristic, which distinguishes a sheep from a goat. Let's see if we can discover what that is. V. 35, "For" is the reason the sheep are blessed and v. 42, "For" is the reason the goats are cursed. There are six things the sheep did and six things the goats did not do that make all the difference. Essentially repeated 4 times.

- Hungry → gave food
- Thirsty → gave drink
- Stranger → welcomed
- Naked → clothed
- Sick → looked after
- In prison → visited

Both groups are puzzled, not at the decision but at the reason given. Jesus says that the reason the sheep get into heaven is that they helped HIM when He was in need; and the reason the goats go to hell is that they didn't help Jesus. The sheep know they helped people out, but they never realized they had done it to Jesus; they were just helping people. The goats know they didn't help people, but their question in v. 44 implies that if they had seen Jesus Himself in need they certainly would have helped him; it was just ordinary people they ignored.

There are 3 questions we need to answer in this section:

### **1. Who is Jesus talking about?**

Verse 40 is critical for understanding which needy people Jesus is talking about. Here's where we need to do careful biblical interpretation. In the Gospel of Matthew, the expression "the least of these" (*elakiston*, a superlative of *mikron*) is used 5 other times (10:42; 11:11; 18:6, 10, 14) and in each instance it refers to disciples of Jesus. The word "brothers" always means either physical or spiritual kin (5:22-24, 47; 7:3-5; 12:48-50; 18:15, 21, 35; 23:8; 28:10). Some biblical interpreters have taken these verses to mean that whatever we did for any poor or needy person in the world, we have done to Christ. But it seems upon closer inspection that Jesus is referring specifically to how we have treated other believers, not the world in general. Yes, we are to love our neighbor as ourselves, we are to care for the poor in general (Mt. 19:21; Lk. 14:13; Gal. 2:10); but this text is saying that our eternal destiny will hinge on how we have treated believers in need. We are to do good to everyone, but especially to those who are of the household of faith (Gal. 6:10).

I think what Jesus is doing is expanding on what He said in 10:40-42 when He sent His disciples out on their mission, "Whoever receives you receives me, and whoever receives me receives him who sent me. The one who receives a prophet because he is a prophet will receive a prophet's reward, and the one who receives a righteous person because he is a righteous person will receive a righteous person's reward. 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." If you help apostles, missionaries, you're helping Him, He said. Now He's saying if you help any believer in need, you're helping Him.

This actually makes perfect sense if you think about it this way. The reason that when you help a believer you're helping Jesus is that Jesus, literally, lives in that person! He has taken up residence in that individual in the person of the Holy Spirit. And so Jesus is hungry, thirsty. . . And if you love Him, you'll want to do something about it. Tertullian, "You saw a brother, you saw your Lord."

### **2. What is He talking about, i.e., what kind of help?**

Notice that He doesn't say here that you should give money to poor people. Giving money is a tricky thing and potentially more dangerous than many of us realize. Our money will be needed to provide help, but we want to be careful with how we do it. 3 categories: food and drink, most basic needs of humans. Clothing and hospitality, next step up the hierarchy of needs. Visiting hurting people—when they are not in productive circulation or attractive or strategic. Every person we meet is dying for a drop of love (Henrietta Mears).

### **3. How does this fit into a biblical theology?**

If you are thinking theologically, this should raise a huge question. Evangelical theology teaches that we are saved not by our works but by our faith alone. Grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, Eph. 2:8,9. Liberal theology teaches that we are saved by our faith plus our works. So is Jesus a liberal?! It seems that He is teaching a salvation by works: help needy Christians and you'll get into heaven; don't help them and you won't. This is an incredibly important question, because the very Gospel is at stake here.

Chinese philanthropist example. Is he going to heaven because he helps others? Or to push it right to the edge, suppose Hitler gave some money to help Christians out, would he get into heaven?

A fundamental principle of biblical interpretation is called the analogy of faith, simply that since God cannot lie, Scripture, which has been breathed from God, cannot contradict itself. We must always use Scripture to interpret Scripture. We must try to fit all of Scripture together into a unified whole, not to explain away parts of it but to see how it all fits together. Remember, Matthew is not writing a

systematic theology. Jesus does not say everything we need to know about the Kingdom of God in one place. What He says here is true, but it is only part of the whole.

Jesus Himself said to Nicodemus in Jn. 3 that the way to get into the Kingdom of God was to be born again and that everyone who believes in Him would have eternal life. But He also said (Mt. 5:20) that unless your righteousness surpassed that of the Pharisees and teachers of the law, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven. In a nutshell, the question is: What is it, faith or works? Jesus said in Mt. 16:27, a verse that our passage today gives more detail on, that the Son of Man is going to come in His Father's glory with his angels, and then He will reward each person according to what he has done. But Paul says that by observing the Law no one will be justified (Gal. 2:16) because the righteous will live by faith (Gal. 3:11). This was in fact the rallying cry of the Reformation, when Martin Luther saw from Scripture that the just shall live by faith, that there is nothing we can do to earn our salvation.

So how do we fit all this together? There is an important link that He doesn't mention here. Interestingly enough, I think it is James, the brother of Jesus, who helps us tie these threads together when He says that faith without works is dead. James 2:14-18, "What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace, be warmed and filled,' without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. But someone will say, 'You have faith and I have works.' Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works." As has been well stated, it is faith alone that saves but saving faith is never alone.

John puts it this way (1 Jn. 3:17), "If anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him?" And, we might ask, if God's love doesn't abide in him, does God? Kids' song, "I have the love of Jesus love of Jesus down in my heart."

What I believe Jesus is saying is the same thing He's said all along, that by their fruit you will know them (Mt. 7:20). He will know His believers on the great Day of Judgment; He will know who the sheep are, by the fruit of their faith.

Get to heaven → because justified by faith → which produces good works → prove you get to heaven  
Repent and believe → Justified → Receive HS → Fruit of Spirit is love → love acts

So the reason given for making their deeds the reason for admission into the Kingdom, in D.A. Carson's words, is more evidential than causative. In other words, the works are the fruit, the evidence of their salvation, not the basis or the origin of it. The fruit not the root. So Jesus in this text is simply looking above ground level and not at the root system, that of faith in His ransom, that enables the fruit.

Let me try to give an example of this. Suppose there's an orchard full of peach and apple trees. From a distance, they look quite similar. Now if I tell you to go and cut down all the apple trees, what would be the easiest way to ID the apple trees? By their fruit. You see the fruit simply reveals what the tree already is in its DNA—it doesn't change it or turn it into something it's not. And so the fruit of our lives, our caring for needy Christians, doesn't turn us into Christians—that happens by repentance and faith. But once we have become genuine disciples of Christ, the fruit will by necessity show in our lives. In fact, it will be so natural that we will be surprised that anyone noticed at all, as the sheep were surprised that Jesus commended them for their good works. They didn't do them in order to get salvation; they did them as a natural outcome of the spiritual change that happened in them when they put their faith in Christ. Jesus is interested in a righteousness of the whole person, a righteousness from the heart, a righteousness that begins with the imputed righteousness of His holy life and death as a ransom for our sins (20:28), but that works itself through our whole lives like yeast in dough and produces the good fruit of caring for our Christian siblings in very practical ways.

This is what Jonathan Edwards called the "rules of the Gospel", that divine grace faithfully received leads to human mercy faithfully given, that we can't on the one hand freely receive Christ's grace and then turn

around and on the other hand refuse to give it to those in need. It is one of our core values at CPC, one we call extravagant grace, treating others in the way that Christ has treated us. And, as Bruner says, "Those of us who, having been mercied, have no mercy, will hear the merciful judge found everywhere in Scripture speak judgment." (p. 578) To refuse help to the King's brothers is sacrilege (Calvin). It is similar to what Christ taught in the parable of the unforgiving servant (Mt. 18:23-35), that if you have been forgiven much (which we all have) and then turn around and refuse to forgive, your own forgiveness will be revoked.

### **III. THE RESULT OF JUDGMENT DAY, vv. 34, 41,46**

As there are two groups of people, so there are two destinations, and only two.

**1. vv. 34, 46** "Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world." Which v. 46 calls, "eternal life." There is the Kingdom of God, a place of joy and peace, of bliss and delight, where there will be no more sorrow or sickness or pain or tears or death, a place of pure and intimate relationship with God in all His glory. And to this Kingdom, the sheep are admitted.

**2. vv. 41, 46.** The verdict for the goats is 3-fold:

**a. Separation, "Depart from me."** All that is good and pure and lovely will be left behind, forever. This is the curse that the goats receive.

**b. Association, "the devil and his angels."** Who will be the goats' companions for all of eternity? The hordes of hell, Satan and all his minions.

**c. Pain, "Eternal fire".** The metaphor of fire is used at least 9 other times in the book of Mathew (3:10,12; 5:22; 7:19; 13:40,42,50; 18:8,9) to describe the conditions in hell (see also Isa. 66:24; Rev. 14:10,11; 19:20). In Revelation (20:10), God says that the devil will be thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur where he will be tormented day and night forever and ever. And, then, if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire (20:15). The goats.

Will it be a literal fire? I don't imagine. Fire as we know it burns these bodies of flesh but will have no effect on eternal bodies. The imagery of fire is used to describe what it will feel like in hell, because fire is perhaps the most awful and painful thing that we can identify with in these physical bodies. So don't think that if I suggest there's no literal fire in hell that it means that hell is no big deal. "Fire" may be metaphorical, but it is a metaphor for the awful. Whatever it will be like, it will be agony, suffering, and anguish. And the Scripture says that it will be eternal torment, day and night, forever and ever.

What makes this passage even more difficult to digest is that those who are condemned are not condemned because of their sins of commission, the usual list of things like lying, murder, adultery, stealing, coveting, etc. They are condemned not for what they did but for what they didn't do. Could it be that simply failing to help Christians in need is worthy of eternal damnation? Yes, but with this understanding: if you don't have mercy on others it means that you have not been regenerated, you have not been forgiven of your own sins, and it is on that basis that you will suffer eternal punishment, your lack of mercy simply being the fruit of your own sinful, unforgiven heart.

You may object that such a "horrible" doctrine might turn people into infidels. You yourself may recoil at such a doctrine. I myself shudder to think of it. But, as D.A. Carson says, the question is not how men respond to a doctrine but what Jesus and the NT writers actually teach about it.

### **APPLICATION**

You might be saying, "Great!" I came to church today to get some encouragement, to get a little positive energy flowing in my life, and what do I get but some raving hell-fire and brimstone preacher! You know what? This is a hard saying of Jesus, to be sure. It is but one note in the orchestral revelation—but a critical one. He has gentle words as well. He says come unto me all who labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest. If your spirit is faint within you today, God says He knows your way (Ps. 142:3), He cares for you. Now the door is open, now the way of salvation is available, His grace is flowing, rich and free.

But the day is coming when He will be gentle no more. And that's why you need to hear this hard word today, because it's true, it's a warning of the coming storm. Why were most of us glued to our TV's last Monday night? You wanted to hear bad news. You didn't get mad at the weatherman, stomp up and down, and throw stuff at the TV. No, you wanted to hear bad news! Why? So you'd know how to plan, so you'd be ready. What you heard today from Scripture is not just Randy Ollis, and I love Randy, reporting on the weather—it's from the guy who makes the weather. Probability of judgment day is 100%. The question is: will you be ready?

So let's get back to the point of the teaching. Jesus has been telling us for a chapter and a half that we must be ready for His coming, and now he tells us why, because He's going to come as a Judge and He also tells us how we can be ready. It is by helping believers in need. Caring for believers' material and physical needs is not an option for Jesus. As Joel Green says, the disposition of one's possessions signifies the disposition of one's heart.

Notice how simple and practical these 6 points are: hungry, thirsty, stranger, naked, sick, prison. You don't have to be a great preacher or start huge projects—you just need to help Christians in need, one at a time, the faithful discharge of small duties. Notice that big miracles aren't happening here; little ministries are (Bruner, p.569). Not great plans but little deeds.

So are you doing these things? Tim Keller says, "We should spend *far* more of our money and wealth on the poor than we do on our own entertainment, or on vacations, or on eating out and socializing with important peers." (*Generous Justice*, p. 48) Why don't we do a dry run of judgment day, to see if we're ready for it? Let's do a little inventory right now! Take a minute, and write down, specifically, what you have done in the past 3 months to help the hungry, thirsty, stranger, naked, sick, or in prison. There's probably enough room on the back of the bulletin...

If you're having trouble putting much down, there are 3 possibilities:

**1. You're a goat and you know it.** You don't know Jesus, you don't have His love in your heart, you know you'll be put with the goats on Judgment Day. The storm is coming. Today is the day of salvation; come to Him while it is still called Today.

**2. You're a goat but you think you're a sheep.** You think you know Jesus, but your heart is not very full of His love. The danger for you is you may just know Him in your head but not in your heart. You may be among those who say to Him on that day, "Lord, Lord" as if you knew Him, but He says to you, "I never knew you; depart from me" because you never got serious about doing His will.

**3. You're a sheep but you have one of two problems:**

a. Your heart is cold. You need to get to know Him better, let His love fill you, let it pour out to others. Before you can give this neighbor-love, you need to receive it (Keller, p.77) No heart that loves Christ can be cold to the poor, vulnerable, needy. Self-centeredness is the opposite of God-centeredness. And God-centeredness is the same as other-centeredness. You need to make your calling and election sure by growing and increasing in your brotherly love, a love that acts in practical ways to help your disadvantaged brother or sister.

b. You don't get out much. You may be a true follower of Jesus, love Him deeply, care about His people. But, frankly, you just don't know very many hungry, thirsty... In the 1<sup>st</sup> century, these type of people were part and parcel of society. But you might live, like me, in a suburban bubble and the only suffering you see is maybe on TV. If you're in this category, then I'd suggest you need to get out more. There are needy family members right here in our city—Brookside. See Dale Shaw. There is another whole level of needy believers in the developing world, in countries with famine, drought, flooding, repressive regimes, where there are no government services to provide even a penny of help. Christmas offering... Cambodia... Find out something and do it.

Why? So you'll get into heaven? No! Because you have freely received the grace of Jesus to cover all your sins, and those who have freely received freely give. And if you do, you will, by His grace, be able to stand before the Son of Man at His coming, and receive a rich welcome into His eternal Kingdom.

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## **APPENDIX**

68 people surveyed in Indianapolis, Feb. 4-5. 2011:

"What's the first thing that comes to your mind when you hear the words 'Judgment Day'?"

- #1 "Arnold Schwarzenegger" (ten responses)
- #2 "End of the World" (eight)
- #3 "I don't know" (six)
- #4 "The Lord" (five)
- #5 "We'll be judged by God" (four)
- #6 "2012" (three)
- #7 "Apocalypse/Armageddon" (three)
- #8 "There's no judgment day" (two)
- #9 "I don't think about it" (two)
- #10 "Snow" (two)
- #11 "Am I ready?" (two)
- #12 "Death" (two)

Other interesting responses:

- "I think of voting"
- "Lebron James"
- "I don't watch TV"
- "Great White Throne"

Thanks to Tom Miyakawa and family

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