

Matthew 25:31–46

³¹“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. ³²All the nations will be gathered in his presence, and he will separate them one from another, as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. ³³He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. ³⁴Then 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. ³⁵For I was hungry and you gave me food to eat. I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me. ³⁶I was lacking clothes and you clothed me. I was sick and you took care of me. I was in prison and you visited me.’ ³⁷“Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you a drink? ³⁸When did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or lacking clothes and clothe you? ³⁹When did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?’ ⁴⁰“The King will answer them, ‘Amen I tell you: Just as you did it for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it for me.’ ⁴¹“Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire, which is prepared for the Devil and his angels. ⁴²For I was hungry and you did not give me food to eat. I was thirsty and you did not give me anything to drink. ⁴³I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, lacking clothes and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not take care of me.’ ⁴⁴“Then they will also answer, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or lacking clothes or sick or in prison and did not serve you?’ ⁴⁵“At that time he will answer them, ‘Amen I tell you: Just as you did not do it for one of the least of these, you did not do it for me.’ ⁴⁶And they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.”

Sermon for St. Paul’s Green Garden, 11-08-20, Last Judgment

Text: Matthew 25:31-46

Theme: “Prepare to Receive a Kingdom”

In the name of Jesus, Dear fellow redeemed,

Some of the best stories are those with surprise endings. They often tell of a reversal of fortunes that happen almost in an instant. There is no story more dramatic than the account of Haman and Mordecai in the book of Esther. Haman is the equivalent of Prime Minister of the Persian empire under King Xerxes. Mordecai is a Jew who serves in the government but has always refused to bow down to Haman. This behavior is so galling to Haman that he vows to see Mordecai hanged.

In the meantime, the king was reading the royal history book and found that Mordecai had exposed an assassination plot against the king but he was never rewarded for saving the king's life. In the middle of the night while the king was reading all this Haman burst in to demand that Mordecai be hanged for his disrespectful behavior toward Haman. But before he could utter a word the king asked Haman "What should I do for the man I want to honor?" Haman thought the king wanted to honor him so he said, "place a gold chain around his neck, put a robe on him that has been worn by the king and have him led on horseback around the city proclaiming, "This is what is done for the man the king delights to honor." The king said, "Good! Do all this for Mordecai." Eventually, Haman is hanged on the gallows he prepared for Mordecai's hanging and the King made Mordecai his Prime Minister.

Mordecai had no idea that by exposing the assassination plot against Artaxerxes that he would one day be promoted. He simply did so because he was loyal to his king. He did not do so with any thought of gaining a reward. Isn't this the kind of love and loyalty that our God expects us to have toward him? He expects us to show our love for him by loving others. This is the evidence of the faith we have in him. And though we do not deserve a reward, and have no right to expect a reward, yet Jesus says that in the end, his people will receive a reward of grace—undeserved yet a reward he wants to give. In one of the last teaching sessions he had with his disciples before he suffered Jesus told his believers, "Prepare to receive a kingdom." It is a kingdom withheld from unbelievers based on clear evidence. It is a kingdom given to believers by grace.

It may have been late on Wednesday or early on Maundy Thursday of Holy Week. Jesus was approaching the climax of his work as our redeemer. Since the defining moment of his ministry was about to take place he really wanted to imprint on his disciples' minds the necessity of being prepared for his Second Coming. By now his disciples, except Judas, firmly believed that Jesus was truly the Son of God, the descendant of King David who would sit on David's throne and rule the universe forever.

So Jesus introduced them to a scene depicting the final judgment. ³¹**"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. ³²All the nations will be gathered in his presence, and he will separate them one from another, as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats."** The King comes to bestow a kingdom. And perhaps, just as the believers received a kingdom, so those who are on the king's left think they will receive a kingdom. But no such thing awaits them. This is judgment, so the King will separate those who will receive the kingdom from those who will not. This

judgment takes place immediately for every person who has ever lived or will ever live, from every nation on earth. The king is qualified to make this judgment because he reads every heart and knows every thought. Just as easily as a shepherd can distinguish between his sheep and his goats when he brings them into the fold at night and separates them, so our King, Jesus, separates believers from unbelievers. And though Jesus first speaks of how he will give the kingdom to the believers, we will first look at how he will deal with those who are not believers.

The judgment has already been made in the separating. The sheep are on Jesus' right hand, the position of honor and power that is granted to others. The unbelievers are on his left. They don't have to wait long to find out why. **“Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire, which is prepared for the Devil and his angels. ⁴²For I was hungry and you did not give me food to eat. I was thirsty and you did not give me anything to drink. ⁴³I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, lacking clothes and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not take care of me.”**

No judgment can be made without solid evidence. Just as we saw the Ancient of Days in Daniel's vision opening the book of evidence at the last judgment so now Jesus shows the unbelievers the evidence he is bringing against them.

They had no faith in Jesus. Remember that the writer of Hebrews says, **“Without faith it is impossible to please God.”**

So the judge says to the unbelievers, **“Here is the evidence that proves you have no faith in me as your Savior. I was hungry and thirsty and needed clothes; I was a stranger and sick and in prison and you did nothing at all to help me.”** What Jesus is saying here is that if they had faith in him, if they had only believed and trusted in the love that Jesus had for them they would have seen HIM in the crying need of their fellow human beings and they would have been glad to meet those needs. The apostle John wrote in his first epistle that anyone who does not love his brother is not a child of God. Jesus will tell the unbelievers on the last day that the evidence against them was their lack of love, real love, for their fellow human beings. They had no love for others because they did not believe that Jesus loved them and redeemed them. And notice that the king does not demand a great work such as a pilgrimage to a holy place. He does not demand that they pray for hours on end. He simply looks for works that any person can do for another human being.

Yet the unbelievers have the audacity to argue with the judge: **“Lord, how can you say such a thing? When did we see you in need and fail to meet your needs.”**

If we had known it was you, we would surely have done it.” But you see, their guilt proves itself by the lack of love for those in need because they have no love for Jesus. In essence they are asking, “Lord, how can you hold this against us. We didn’t even know it was you. How can you call this a just verdict? Surely we deserve a kingdom just as the others.” But their argument will fall on deaf ears.

When we make excuses for our sins, our protests also fall on deaf ears. My sinful nature still rejects Christ, it still wants to gain the kingdom without Jesus, but only by my own works. And what will my sinful nature point to? It will not plead the perfect life and death and resurrection of Jesus as the payment for my sins. My sinful nature wants to point to every good thing that it believes I have done, not unlike the Pharisee who said, “God I fast twice every week, I give a tenth of all my income to the church.” If we try to hand any kind of our works to Jesus in order to claim a place in his kingdom he will throw us out on our ear into the utter darkness that he described in so many of his parables. This ought to cause us such great fear that we never again want to try making excuses for our sins but simply fall down before our Lord and cry, **“God be merciful to me a sinner.”**

We need to remember that making excuses for our sins is the path out of the kingdom. Only repentance over our sins and faith that Jesus’ death and resurrection alone pay the price for them is true preparation for the day when our Lord will give us the kingdom. For he says to believers, A kingdom? While history rolled on day after day, it may have looked as if God’s people were on the outside. They had no power. Most had no prestige. Many were persecuted. The writer of Hebrews says that some believers lived in caves and in holes in the ground. Few if any were kings. Few if any had influence on governments. But now the reversal—now those who lived their lives for Christ not expecting anything will receive a kingdom. They receive it by God’s grace, in the same way they have received his mercy and forgiveness for all their sins.

It becomes quite clear who the sheep represent here. Jesus says about himself, “I am the Good Shepherd” and “my sheep hear my voice.” They are far different from the goats. This is why a shepherd will separate them at night. The goats would tend to butt the sheep, to get them excited and even panic to the point that they might try to escape and injure or even crush some in the sheep fold. Sheep and goats don’t are not very compatible in the sheep pen. In the same way, unbelievers, those who do not love Christ and do not listen to him, have no place in the kingdom with the believers because they rejected the King and those whom he would make kings in his kingdom.

So when the king has all nations gathered in front of him he renders the verdict on his beloved sheep. **‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.** This is really remarkable, too, because these are sheep. They know that they have often gone to places the shepherd had told them not to go. They had done things the shepherd had told them never to do! But what do they hear? No condemnation, no mention of any evil they have done. They know their sins only too well, yet they have believed the Good Shepherd’s truth that he has paid for all of their wrongs. He has suffered the bitter pain of all their punishment. And they, knowing that they could not survive God’s just punishment, simply placed all of their sins at the foot of the cross of Jesus, the Good Shepherd. Jesus guaranteed full forgiveness for them and they believed it. So on the last day, it may come as a surprise to all that it is the sheep, the meek, the peacemakers, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, they will receive a kingdom.

Jesus brings in the evidence that speaks in their favor. **“For I was hungry and you gave me food to eat. I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me. ³⁶I was lacking clothes and you clothed me. I was sick and you took care of me. I was in prison and you visited me.**’ We remember that the righteous depended completely on Jesus. He lived the perfect life that we could not live and he paid for every sin through his suffering on the cross. So their good deeds did not earn them a place in his kingdom, ruling with him. No. Yet their deeds of love for their neighbor gave evidence of their faith in Jesus and all he did for them.

And even if Satan or anyone else would try to point a finger at you and me for our sins and wrongs on that day, yet the Judge will rightly say, “I see no evidence of any kind against them. I have covered over their sins with my own blood. They are holy. They shall rule with me forever.

And this will be amazing to believers because they will wonder, **“Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you a drink? ³⁸When did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or lacking clothes and clothe you? ³⁹When did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?’** It is almost as if they will ask, **“You mean we receive a kingdom, just for loving someone they way we love you Lord?”** Dear friends, you and I are the sheep here. We need to be very clear that when we love our neighbor as ourselves, we do it for only one reason: Our Lord Jesus has saved us from the destruction and torment of hell. We know that in his grace he has promised us a kingdom. We will rule with him in his kingdom for Paul wrote to Timothy, **“Here is a trustworthy saying: If we died with him, we will also live with him; if we endure, we will also reign**

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with him.” What a reversal! Though we hear this now, in some sense it will be a surprise ending for us. Not because we don’t know about it, but because everything that we experience in this life seems to go against God’s truth.

We live in a world where everything from the weather to the political climate, to our health seems to be in a grave state of instability. We ask, what will happen to me in the future? Will I get sick? Will I die an untimely death? Will my family members survive all of life’s trauma and troubles when I am gone? Yet Jesus says, “Look at my promises with the eyes of faith, just as Abraham did. Look up into the sky past your own sins, past the hatred and persecution of and instability of a sinful people here on earth. Instead, as Stephen did when he was being stoned see the heavens opened with Jesus himself standing at the right hand of God. And while the hatred of Satan and unbelievers come pelting down on us, yet we receive a kingdom. That is the surprise ending. But now we know. Now we can expect it—not because of any of our works. But because when the Ancient of Days ascends his throne, when Jesus comes with all his mighty angels, he will judge us and render a verdict in our favor because we have believed in him—his blood and his righteousness. It is because of Jesus that we can and will face the day of judgment full of confidence in him. Amen.