

THE FINAL JUDGMENT

Matthew 25:31–46

We come to the last of the five parables Jesus told in these chapters. There are common threads running through all five of them. The number one message is that Jesus will return. Remember that at this point he had not yet died and the resurrection was something the disciples just couldn't grasp. The certainty that Jesus will return is a common thread. Another is the need to be ready. We don't know exactly when it will happen. A further common thread is judgment. In this final parable of the sheep and the goats these common themes appear again but it's the theme of judgment which forms the main subject.

Verse 31. 'When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory.'

Jesus is coming again. Fact. Not 'if' but 'when'. And there's a further subtlety. What Matthew reports Jesus as saying was not simply 'when' but 'whenever'. It's yet another indication that it could be a long time, but whenever it is, we must be ready.

Jesus refers to himself here as the Son of Man, Earlier at Caesarea Philippi (16:27) he had declared, '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.' Jesus spoke about coming in his Father's glory and it's significant that he now speaks about coming in his own glory. The Father and the Son are equal in glory.

Some time after Caesarea Philippi Jesus said to his disciples (19:28), 'I tell you the truth, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.'

Then when he was speaking about the end times (24:30) he said, 'At that time the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and all the nations of the earth will mourn. They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory.'

When Jesus first came, the event we celebrate each Christmas, he came in humility. He entered this world by human birth. He humbled himself and took the nature of a servant. But when he comes again it will be in great glory, accompanied by *all* the angels, not to suffer as the sacrificial lamb but to reign as sovereign king. He will sit on his glorious throne.

This promise echoes the vision given to Daniel in chapter 7 verses 13 and 14. 'In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshipped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.'

Verses 32 and 33. 'All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.'

All the nations will be gathered before him. Notice the repetition of the word 'all'. He will come and *all* the angels with him. Then the people of *all* the nations will be gathered before him. This is the climax of history when all heaven and all earth will meet.

He will separate the people of the nations one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. This parable relies on the fact that in the middle east sheep and goats are hard to distinguish. Sheep are not the white fluffy animals we have here. They look much more like goats. During the day they graze together, but at night they need

different conditions. Sheep are more hardy and can tolerate the night air, but goats need to be herded together for warmth. So the shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.

The Old Testament regularly used the image of sheep for God's people. The classic example is Psalm 23, 'The LORD is my shepherd; I shall lack nothing.' As Jesus begins to describe the day of judgment he reminds us that there will only be two categories of people, the righteous and the unrighteous, those who are blessed and those who are cursed, those who are accepted and those who are rejected, the saved and the lost.

He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. Right and left symbolise favour and rejection. There is no middle ground.

Verse 34. 'Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.' God has a plan of salvation, a plan that has been in place since the creation of the world.

At this point the parable is dropped. We're not talking about a shepherd with sheep and goats. We're talking about the King and the people who will be gathered before him. He addresses those on his right, those who are accepted, and he gives them an invitation: 'Come.' This was the invitation to the ten girls waiting for the wedding feast. 'At midnight the cry rang out: "Here's the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!"' This was the invitation to the faithful servants who acted wisely with their master's wealth. 'Well done, good and faithful servant! ... Come and share your master's happiness!'

And now here it is again. 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.' Entry to the kingdom of heaven is by invitation only. What an invitation. What a privilege.

Verses 35 and 36. 'For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.'

This takes us on to familiar territory. It's the stuff of children's stories, the pauper and the prince changing places, but this time the prince becomes the pauper, the stranger, the reject. However, there is a problem.

Verses 37–40. 'Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?" The King will reply, "I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.'"

This raises a number of questions. Who are 'the righteous' and on what basis are they accepted? Who are 'the brothers' of the King and what is meant by being the least of them?

There's a naïve understanding of this passage which identifies the righteous as anyone and everyone who tries to live a good life. The brothers of the king are the people they do good to, their fellow human beings. On this understanding the way to heaven is by good works and what matters is not so much what you believe as what you do.

The problem with this view is that it contradicts everything the New Testament teaches about sin and salvation. The clear teaching of the Bible is that 'it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast' (Ephesians 2:8, 9).

To the Philippian jailer who asked, 'What must I do to be saved?' Paul replied without hesitation, 'Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved.'

When Paul wrote to the Romans he said this about righteousness. 'No one will be declared righteous in [God's] sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin. But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known. ... This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe' (Romans 3:20–22).

Those who are made right with God are not saved by good works but by faith in Christ. However, they are saved *for* good works. That is why Paul says, 'As we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers' (Galatians 6:10).

That is what the righteous do. And here's the surprise. 'Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.' On another occasion Jesus said, 'If anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones because he is my disciple, I tell you the truth, he will certainly not lose his reward' (Matthew 10:42).

The righteous are those who are right with God through faith in Christ, and the brothers of the king whom they serve are their fellow Christians.

Here's another observation. One of the lessons in the parable of the talents is that Christ's servants are not all equal. In that parable we see this in relation to advantages. We don't all have the same opportunities but we'll all be treated fairly. The criterion will be what we've done with what we've got.

That theme is continued here, but this time the inequality is seen not in terms of advantages but in terms of disadvantages, not in terms of triumphs but in terms of trials. Among Christ's followers are those who are hungry and thirsty, alienated and destitute, sick and in prison. These are not trifling inconveniences. They are extreme hardships. This won't happen to all Christians but it will certainly happen to some, and to some who seem so insignificant that they could be described as the least in the kingdom.

Yet Jesus identifies particularly with these people and he expects his followers to do the same. He calls them his brothers and he so identifies with them that he says, 'Whatever you did for one of the least of these my brothers, you did for me.'

Verses 41 to 45. 'Then he will say to those on his left, "Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me." They also will answer, "Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?" He will reply, "I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.'"

Who are the ones on the King's left? They are cast out. They are cursed. They are sent into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. It's very important to identify who they are and whether we are in danger of being among them. They are those who are not in tune with the King, not obedient to his will. Notice that the inheritance of the righteous is the kingdom prepared for *them* whereas the punishment of the wicked, the fire, is *not* prepared for them. It is prepared for the devil and his angels. The cursed ones are going to a fate that was not meant for them.

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus said, "'Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'"' (Matthew 7:21–23).

On that great day of judgment *every* knee will bow and *every* tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. The key factor will not be whether we recognise him but whether he recognises us.

Verse 46. 'Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.'

As Jesus brings to a close this series of parables about the second coming and the day of judgment we are brought face to face with the most serious of issues, our eternal destiny.

I want to say something here about eternal punishment. What is the fate of those who don't believe in Jesus? Jesus tells us here that the unrighteous will go into punishment; the righteous will go into life. And in both cases, the punishment and the life are described as eternal. One commentator says this. 'The judgment of the unrighteous condemns them to the place of eternal torment ...' (Donald Hagner).

I don't want to minimise the holiness of God or the seriousness of sin but the concept of never-ending torture seems to me more barbaric than Christian. Is that really what the Bible says about the lost? What is the ultimate effect of fire? It is to destroy. If those who enter eternal life live for ever then those who are punished with eternal fire will be destroyed for ever.

John 3:16 is the gospel in a nutshell. 'For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him *shall not perish* but have eternal life.' The alternative to eternal life is to perish. The gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus and the wages of sin is death.

I do believe that God will punish wickedness, and that his judgments will be just. But I don't believe in unending torment and I don't believe that's what the Bible teaches.

The other side of this is that those who believe in Christ and belong to Christ will enter eternal life, the life of the new age, a life where there is no sin, no sorrow, no sickness, nothing to spoil. That's what the gospel is all about. It's not threatening people with never-ending torture, but offering them the free gift of never-ending paradise through faith in Christ.

Perhaps the strangest aspect of all this is that within two days of Jesus uttering these words a trial did take place. The king sat on his throne and gave his judgment. The king was Herod and the accused was Jesus, the Son of Man, the King of Kings. That has to be the greatest irony in human history. But a day is surely coming when the roles will be reversed and not only Herod but every other human being will be called to give account to the king of kings in all his glory, and that includes you and me.

The sheep and the goats may live side by side with little to distinguish them in this life but the day of separation will come. The shepherd knows his own sheep. The King knows those who are his. When he comes we must be ready.