

Final Separation at the Coming of Christ (Mat. 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."

Introduction

The parables of the Olivet Discourse transcend their story lines. They especially do so regarding the theme of judgment. In the parable of the virgins, Jesus, not simply the groom in the story, tells the foolish bridesmaids, "I do not know you." In the parable, of the talents, Jesus, not simply the master in the story, gives the command to cast the wicked and lazy servant out into the darkness. These are parables about what will happen when He returns. At the end of the Olivet Discourse, Jesus leaves parable behind altogether. Now, in prophetic vision, He tells us that at His coming in glory, He will judge all nations.

Matthew 25.31-46 is a capstone on top of the wall that these teachings build. Intuitively, we get the idea that the line between parable and reality becomes lighter and lighter to a vanishing point (the Lord speaks on the lips of the characters in the stories). The concluding vision of the Olivet Discourse informs us that this intuition is correct. The Day of Judgment is a day of ultimate and final separation. Therefore, the title for today's message is "Final Separation at the Coming of Christ." We will cover this topic in four parts: the time, the fact, the nature, and the basis of the final separation. Then we will make some applications.

1A. The time of the final separation

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne (25.31). Mention of the throne indicates that the Son of Man, Jesus, comes as king. According to 25.34, the king is the Lord Jesus. He is the man in Daniel's vision that comes with the clouds to receive glory and a kingdom: ¹³ I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. ¹⁴ And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed (Dan. 7.13-14).

By means of the resurrection, Jesus became Sabbath king (Acts 2.32-36). Thus, this account of sitting on a glorious throne is not the inauguration of His kingship. This is a consummate exercise of kingly authority with all judgment committed into His hands (cf. **John 5:22, The Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son**). Accordingly, the time of the final separation is when Jesus returns. He comes to sit on the judgment seat and He does so as king, so the judgment seat is a glorious throne. In other words, the throne on which He now sits as Sabbath king since the resurrection and ascension will become a judgment seat when He comes. That is when the final separation will occur.

2A. The fact of the final separation

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 (Mat. 25.32-33).

In this vision, we have more development of the separation theme that runs throughout the gospel of Matthew. Jesus speaks of a separation of wise house builders from foolish house builders (7.24-27), of wheat from weeds (13.30), of good fish from bad (13.47-48), of blessed people from cursed hypocrites (Mat. 5.1-11; 23.13-36), of those taken from those left behind (24.40-41), of faithful servants from those who are unfaithful (24.45-51), of those who enter the wedding celebration from those shut out (Mat. 25.10-12), and of hard working servants from lazy ones (25.14-30). Now we have the separation of sheep from goats.

There is no wheat-weeds confusion because a shepherd has no difficulty discerning between sheep and goats. Christ presents himself here in a distinct way as a shepherd. Earlier in His ministry, He used the shepherd-sheep analogy to describe His relationship to His church. In this capacity, He tells us the good news that He is a shepherd that gives His life for His sheep (Jn. 10.11, **I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep**). As Sabbath Lord and king, Jesus will gather all nations to act as a shepherd to separate sheep from goats placing the former on His right hand and the latter on His left hand. That is the fact of final separation that is coming at the time of His return.

3A. The nature of the final separation

This teaching about the separation that comes at His coming gives us the sobering and profound contrast between eternal punishment and eternal bliss. The truths here stir up joyful anticipation at the same time that they instill a painful realization.

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...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...⁴⁶ And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

On one hand, the final separation opens a door into a furnace of fire. Those on the left side of Christ are "left" behind for the just punishment of their sins. He shuts the door and bars them from the wedding celebration in glory; they are cast into darkness outside where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. Their entire existence is a house built on sand that collapses in the storm of divine judgment. The punishment they experience bears analogy to the burning pain that fire inflicts.

On the other hand, the final separation brings eternal life and bliss to the people of God. They enter the joy of the kingdom in fellowship with the master; they enter the wedding celebration. They have the blessing of a plurality of happinesses. The house of their entire existence endures the storm of divine judgment. They hear the master's words, "well done," and they leave all the challenges, works, trials, and sorrows of this world behind to enter into the joys of eternal Sabbath rest with their Sabbath king.

As to its nature, final separation involves eternal blessing in contrast to eternal cursing, joy in contrast to sorrow, and celebration in contrast to condemnation.

4A. The basis of the final separation

On the surface, this passage seems to indicate that entry into the glory of the kingdom is *based on* good deeds. This is similar to the apparent thrust of Matthew 16.27, **For the Son of Man is going to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay each person according to what he has done**. Repaying suggests something to this effect: "You do the work and I will repay you with kingdom glory." Thus, when we come to Matthew 25, it seems that good deeds merit entry into heaven. You do or do not feed the poor, aid the sick, visit those in prison, and so forth. If you do these things, you enter the kingdom; if you do not do them, you do not enter the kingdom.

However, it is incorrect to think that good works ground entry into kingdom glory. We need to be careful and clear in our thinking on this point. It serves clarity to make an important

distinction between these two statements: entry into heaven is according to our good works, but entry into heaven does not have its basis good works. Works are *not a ground* of salvation, but *they are necessary* for it because there is a correspondence between having good works and going to heaven, and between not having good works and not going to heaven. We need to elaborate further on some details regarding punishment and inheritance.

1B. Punishment

Punishment corresponds to the failure to do good works for the people of God, and in that way to fail to do good works for Christ. Jesus clearly says, **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 (25.41-45).** Of course, we have to understand this in light of the preceding parables and in light of broader teachings in Matthew's Gospel. Looking to the broader picture, we know that cursing goes with a lack of love for Christ (Mat. 25.11) and with choosing earthly things instead of God (Mat. 6.24). Therefore, to lack good works means to be unfaithful, lazy (not doing what God commands), unprepared for the future, not mindful of the coming of Christ, unwise, foolish, building on sand instead of building on hearing and doing the words of Christ. In a word, the lack of good works means to lack lived commitment to Christ as your prophet, priest and king (Mat. 11.28-30).

Accordingly, it is easy to understand the correspondence between the lack of good deeds and eternal punishment. We also have the implication that good deeds are necessary for eternal life. We can now shift attention from punishment to its opposite, which is inheritance.

2B. Inheritance

Inheritance of kingdom glory accords with good works also. That is, the basis (the ground, the foundation, the merit) of this inheritance is God's blessing, and good works are necessary for entry into heaven's glory. Let us consider this claim in two steps.

1) The basis of our kingdom inheritance is God's blessing.

Good works identify the people that God blesses for He says, **Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom (25.34).** The blessing is not because you do the good works; you do good works because you are blessed.

To support this more fully, Jesus grounds this blessing in the eternal plan of God. That blessing flows from the eternal covenant. He prepared it for you from the foundation of the world, (**Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world**). This is not a potentiality, which depends on you; instead, it is a certainty in God's plan for you. Everything depends on Him. The basis for it is His work as the good shepherd: the sheep come to Him with saving faith because He effectually calls them by name (Jn. 10.3, **The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out**).

2) Kingdom inheritance accords with good works.

The blessing of God comes to manifestation in our covenant faithfulness.

Therefore, in time, in history, when He bestows His blessing on you, the evidence of that blessing will be fundamentally twofold.

a) First, you will have love in your heart for Christ as your good shepherd (Jn. 10.14, **I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me**). The idea of knowing in John 10 refers to loving; it tells us that Jesus loves His people and they love Him. In the words of the groom in the parable of the virgins, Jesus says to those on His left, "I do not know you, I do not love you" (Mat. 25.12). As foolish virgins and goats, the people on the left side of the throne speak to Christ from a distance; they have no intimate knowledge of Him; they have no love for Him (25.11).

b) A second indicator of God's blessing will be good works in your life. This is what identifies the people of God as His people. Notably, *what sets you apart forever* is your love for one another though good works, namely, through good works that you do for Christ by doing

them for His each other. Thus, the king says, 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.' (25.35-40).

Applications

1) Motivation

Therefore, we have additional motivation to faithful good works. Here faithfulness gives priority to the Christian family, knowing that Christ takes what we do for others in the family as for Him. How we treat the brothers and sisters is how we treat Him. He is the elder brother. Amazingly, the king and *the* Supreme Court Judge is our elder brother. This should strike us deeply: *on the Day of Judgment, the central issue is good works for His brothers and sisters.*

2) An implication for communion

The centrality of good works makes one anothering love an important theme of communion. When we gather for communion, we reflect on the fact that being many we are one loaf because God joined us to Christ, the bread of life. We can never tire of reiterating this fundamental Christian duty. When I speak to you, I speak to myself about the need to be looking for ways to show our love to one another. We cannot be good and faithful servants if we attach ourselves to the church like bumps on a log. We cannot slip in late to the back of the church and slip out as quickly as possible without taking an interest in the lives of others. This little matter of communication with the church family is a serious matter that will come up again on the Day of Judgment. Therefore, we draw attention to love and good deeds every communion service.

3) Symbolic money on the Day of Judgment

This duty to the brothers and sisters is *a big portion of the symbolic money* that the Lord entrusted to you. You will step forward one by one with this trust in your hands. The Lord will have all the details exposed in the clear light of day. No excuses will hold water. Christ will refute all blame shifting. This matter is so serious and so fundamental that it will reveal your identity on the final day. *Your conduct toward the church, your involvement in the lives of God's people, helping and serving them, is the key to genuine Christian faith.* If these deeds are lacking, then your identity as a goat will be evident and the Lord will say to you, **Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels** (25.41). On the other hand, if you have good deeds on the record, and if you have good deeds that you did for the family of Christ (and thus to Him), then your identity as sheep will be evident. Then, the Lord Jesus will say to you, **Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world** (25.34).

4) Motive is critical

The motive of the heart is critical here of course. Outward "doings" for others that arise from pride and for show are not good deeds. They are not good deeds if you do them grudgingly and not cheerfully. They are not good deeds if you do them without a heart of love for God and a passion for His glory.

5) A list of little things

What our Lord is talking about is a long list of little things that you can do for other believers, starting right here in this local expression of the body of Christ. You are to keep revisiting the list to improve it, and you are to keep revisiting it to put it into practice. The list includes the sample items that Jesus gives us in this prophetic vision. 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** (25.35-36). Food, drink, clothing, friendship, comfort, and encouragement are things on the list for us to itemize and to act on. The things on the list relate to a multitude of circumstances. They include giving of your money.

More than that, they include giving of your time and energy to befriend, comfort, and encourage one another. Essential and basic is the greeting of each other when we gather.

6) Some questions

How do I put these things into practice here in the church (am I doing it)? Do I try to show hospitality? Do I want to get together with the members of the church? Getting to know them better involves other things that have to go on the list such as having a forgiving spirit and expressing self-sacrificing love. Do I listen to what others wish to talk about, even if it is not my first interest? Do I share of my thoughts with others in the Christian family? Do I push myself away from just thinking about my needs in order to consider the needs of others?

A key point in Christian one another love, that is, of friendship between brothers and sisters in Christ is that love involves self-sacrifice; it is not gushy feelings but good actions. I am sure you know that.

What might self-sacrifice involve? Surely, it may (it will) involve giving up some of your time. You have only so many hours in the week to relax beyond your obligations to work and household chores. You would rather spend all of your “free” time doing what you want to do in things that you enjoy or feel that you just have to do them. Here is a good way to put that in perspective. When you step forward with your use of time in your hands and present it to Christ, will it show that you sacrificed of yourself, of your time, helping others, I do have duties to my work, family, and possessions.” Of course, you have these duties. However, do you use that fact as an excuse for doing nothing in a self-sacrificing way for the church family? Do you think that that will hold any water when you present yourself before the Lord Jesus at His coming?

7) A point of emphasis

Our Lord makes His point emphatically. The matter of *Christian love is the only thing that He cites in this prophetic vision* regarding His coming and the final separation that will occur before His glorious throne. We know that more things will be on the docket in the judgment, but it is an astounding fact that at the center of everything important for time and eternity is the way you and I treat His brothers and sisters.

This vision of the sheep and the goats is a well-known account about the Day of Judgment. Also, well known is the fact that how you treat the Christian family is how you treat Christ. However, how well do you know, absorb, and apply the fact that the key to good works is this matter of how you show brotherly and sisterly love. That is what reveals genuine faith. Do you realize that if you lack good works of a very practical and sacrificing kind, then Christ will pronounce a curse and send you out into the darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth in eternal punishment?

This emphasis of our Lord shows that Christianity is not about talking; it is about doing. To be sure, what you do will not and cannot earn you a place in heaven. Christ is the only one who can earn you a place in heaven by His good works of redemption. However, this is the clear fact: you must step before the Lord Jesus on the final day and show Him faithful good deeds that you performed for His brothers and sisters. If you do not present them before Him, then any claim that you make to justification by faith alone in His good works of redemption are just talk. If you love Him, then you will love His brothers and sisters.

Conclusion

Ahead of time, would you have thought that one of the most dramatic prophetic visions of Scripture would boil down to an emphasis on Christian love? Who would have thought that the last word of Christ in His last speech before His death would put Christian love on the docket for the Day of Judgment before His glorious throne?

Now if we want to know what faithfulness looks like as an ordinary daily practice, we have our answer. This text and its way of calling us to faithfulness (as part of the Olivet Discourse) should drive us to love the church family. It should drive us to specific acts of love in

light of the coming separation. We are to do good deeds for one another in every way that we can. Finally, and most importantly, in this way we love the Lord Jesus our elder brother.

Now may we fall down before the majesty of our God in humble recognition of His love for us, and in commitment to the great duty that we have *to display love to each other*. May the love of God, the gentleness of Christ, and the communion of the Holy Spirit teach us to love in word and deed for the glory of the triune God; to Father, Son, and Holy Spirit belong all glory now and forevermore, amen.