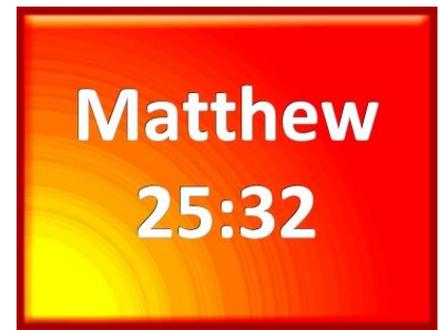


Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24

Psalm 100

Ephesians 1:15-23

Matthew 25:31-46



HE WILL SEPARATE THEM ONE FROM ANOTHER

Matthew 24 begins with Jesus leaving the temple and going out of the city to the Mount of Olives. There he told his disciples that the temple, which seemed to them permanent and immovable, would be destroyed. His disciples said to him, *“Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign of your coming at the close of the age?”* Jesus began to tell them of things to come – of strife, persecution, and false teaching – followed by a time of great tribulation. After that, everyone *“will see the Son of man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory; and he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.”* (Mat 24:30-31).¹

Matthew 24 and 25 then follow with several parables and sayings of Jesus having a common theme: His second coming will be sudden, unexpected, and will end in judgment. Those who have lived in faithful preparation for the return of Christ, as in the parable of the talents we read last week (25:14-30), will be welcomed by him into the kingdom of heaven. But many will be unprepared. These will be *“cast into the outer darkness; there men will weep and gnash their teeth”* (Matt 25:30).

The sayings of Jesus in Matt 24-25 conclude with our lesson today, Matt 25:31-46, which describes the final judgment of all nations, in which all peoples are separated – the sheep from the goats:

Matt 25:31-46. *“When the Son of man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. ³²Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate them one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, ³³and he will place the sheep at his right hand, but the goats at the left. ³⁴Then the King will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; ³⁵for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.’ ³⁷Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see thee hungry and feed thee, or thirsty and give thee drink? ³⁸And when did we see thee a stranger and welcome thee, or naked and clothe thee? ³⁹And when did we see thee sick or in prison and visit thee?’ ⁴⁰And the King will answer them, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.’ ⁴¹Then he will say to those at his left hand, ‘Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; ⁴²for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, ⁴³I 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.’ ⁴⁴Then they also will answer, ‘Lord, when did we see thee hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to thee?’ ⁴⁵Then he will answer them, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it not to one of the least of these, you did it not to me.’ ⁴⁶And they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”*

• *“When the Son of man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him ...”* (v.31). This is the time Jesus described in 24:30-31 (above), after the great tribulation – a time when the nations will be judged and separated, as sheep are separated from goats. How are the “nations” separated? Are people judged collectively as nations, or individually? The final answer must be “as individuals.” Even in this passage it is individuals, not nations, who prepared themselves by treating others kindly. The same is true in the parables in Matt 25:1-30 as well as Ezek 34:17-24, *“Thus says the Lord God: Behold, I myself judge between sheep and sheep, rams and he-goats ...”* (Ezek 33:10-20 is also worth discussing in this respect.)

¹ Bible quotations are from the RSV.

• “*I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink ...*” (v.35-36). There are plenty of passages in the Bible which say clearly that salvation is the result of faith, and faith alone – John 3:16-18, John 5:24 (especially), Rom 10:9, and Eph 2:8-9, to name just a few. But this passage emphasizes the *fruits* of faith. It puts each person on the even scale of justice. It was spoken by the One who said, “*He who is greatest among you shall be your servant,*” and with all his heart put this saying into action – all the way to the cross. Compare Rom 2:6-10, “*for he will render to every man according to his works ...*” In other words, the judgment in Matt 25 is about the *fruits produced by faith* for the glory of God.

• “*Lord, when did we see thee hungry and feed thee, or thirsty and give thee drink? ...*” (v.37-39). We come now to the question of the motives behind these simple acts of charity. Am I motivated by love for God and appreciation for all he has given me and those I love, and not out of fear, or out of expectation of a reward? Several details in this passage suggest the motives of a believer.

First, the works Jesus described are simple acts of kindness anyone may perform. They cost time, but not money, and they are personal – person-to-person. Consider how taking time to visit a sick friend may produce a greater impact on your soul than the effect you get from, say, writing a large check to charity.

Second, the people Jesus described as “blessed of my Father” were not expecting rewards for their good works. They were not thinking of themselves at all. They were acting out of love for God and compassion for others. When these people set aside their own agenda to care for those in need, they had no clue that they were really caring for Jesus. They wondered, “*Lord, when did we see thee hungry and feed thee ...?*”

Furthermore, our Lord’s description of the judgment here verifies what James wrote, that “*faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead*” (see James 2:14-17). Living without regard for others is like the man given one talent in last week’s lesson. If you have faith, you will invest your time and substance in service to others while you have the chance. Because when the battle is over, it will be too late to change sides.

Finally, God has given us plenty of temporal proof that this way of life – taking time to meet the needs of others – pays rich dividends. A corporation president who had risen from the ranks was once asked the key to his success. His answer was simple: “I learned to help others.”

When The United States government built the Statue of Liberty, they inscribed on its pedestal these words by Emma Lazarus, which remain today:

Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore, send these, the homeless, tempest toss’t, to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!

When our nation did this, it pleased God. Since that day he has brought us millions of new neighbors, and with their help he has made America the richest and most powerful nation on earth. *It pays* to please God.

• “*As you did it not to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it not to me*” (v.45). The response of those on Christ’s left, “*When did we see thee hungry ...?*” sounds defensive, as if they meant, “If we had known it was you, of course we would have helped.” But the focus is on performance here as well as intent, and there are no excuses – God’s judgment is final. Note that the word *eternal* appears *twice* in v.46.

When we help people, especially our brothers and sisters in Christ, we do not usually think of ourselves helping Christ. We see Jesus, crowned with glory and honor and seated at the right hand of God. It is we who come to him for help, as beggars seeking the bread of life. And so, in this sense, we will be surprised to hear Jesus one day say, “*As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.*” In fact, picturing this makes our meeting with Jesus seem quite different than what we might otherwise expect.

There is the legend of St. Martin of Tours (316-397 A.D.). His Roman army regiment was sent to Amiens in Gaul. It was a very cold day when they entered the city, and as he passed through the gate, Martin noticed a half-naked beggar shivering at the side of the road. Moved with compassion, and having nothing else to offer, he tore his own cloak in two and wrapped one half around the poor man.

That night, Martin had a dream. In it he saw heaven, and Jesus seated on his throne. Jesus had discarded his kingly robe and was wearing the torn cloak. An angel asked, “Lord, why are you wearing that old cloak?” “It was a present,” Jesus replied. “My servant Martin gave it to me.” And Martin recalled the saying, “*As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.*”