

The King of Nations Returns

A Sermon on Matthew 25:31-46

Preached by Paul Liberati, December 13, 2020

And the King will answer and say to them, Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me. – Matt 25:40

A few weeks ago, when we looked at Galatians 4, we considered the great expectation of the people of God down through the ages as they looked forward to the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. And, certainly, as we celebrate the Advent season each and every year, we have the opportunity to enter into and, as it were, relive that anticipation in the weeks and days that lead to Christmas Day. In a sense, we put ourselves back into their shoes, so that we might appreciate, once again, the wonder of the Incarnation of Jesus Christ.

But you know, as we think about all that the Word of God teaches, we realize that a major part of the Christian Life is not just looking back to the first coming, but also looking forward to the second coming as well. In Titus 2:13, the apostle Paul says that the grace of God teaches us to "look for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ." And in Hebrews 9:29, the Bible provides us with an infallible word of promise, saying that, to those who eagerly wait for him, "he will appear a second time."

And so, this morning, Congregation, that's exactly what we want to do. Using the discourse that Jesus provides in Matthew 25, our goal is to learn exactly what he wants us to know about the Day of His Return. But remember, our desire is never to learn these things for the sake of mere knowledge. Instead, we want to learn these things so that we might respond in a way that pleases and glorifies God, in a way that corresponds to the righteous who are this text.

In the same way that John the Baptist prepared a people for the coming of the Lord so our desire should be that the teaching of this text would help us prepare our lives for the *second* coming of Jesus Christ. With that in mind, let us look at some of the details of this passage, and see what the Lord has for us today.

Well, as we do so, one of the first things that we see is that the return of Jesus is described in terms of the final judgment, and *the emphasis here is on his universal authority*.

1. The Universal Authority of Jesus Christ

Now I say that, not just because in verse 34 he calls himself a *king*, or that in verse 31 he mentions the *throne of his glory*. Certainly those details are significant. But here, we can see that his authority is universal by the fact that he identifies himself as the *Son of Man*.

The Son of Man is an important designation, because as you think about that term, you realize that it's a reference to that great eschatological vision of Daniel chapter 7. There, in verses 13 and 14, Daniel says that he saw, in the night vision, one like the Son of Man, ascending on the clouds of heaven, and standing before the ancient of Days.

Now, of course, we know that the vision of Daniel was historically fulfilled when Jesus rose from the dead and ascended into heaven to receive the kingdom from his Father's hand. But the thing that we need to see here is that the authority of this kingdom is absolute and universal. Daniel says,

And then, there was given unto him 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 the one which shall not be destroyed.

Now as we're looking at our text, and we see Jesus describing the day of his return, we need to recognize that the emphasis is on the comprehensive nature of the judgment that he brings. Notice that, in verse 33, he says that when the Son of Man comes and sits upon the throne of his glory, *all the nations of the earth will be gathered before him* on that day. And here, when it mentions the nations, we shouldn't get the picture that these are national bodies or indivisible units of people. Rather, we should see that the final judgment extends even to every individual *within* every nation of the world.

If there's any doubt about just how extensive this judgment will be, consider the vision that the apostle John had in Revelation chapter 20. There, John was a witness to the fact that every man, woman, and child who has ever lived on the face of this earth and in the history of this world, was called to stand before the judgment seat of Jesus Christ.

(Illustration) The other day, I went to the DMV to renew my license, and when I got there, they wouldn't let me renew it because there was an old ticket that I failed to pay. And, you know, as I looked at the statement on my record, the wording was very precise. It wasn't about the traffic violation *per se*, but the wording was about my response to the court date I received. Next to my name it read, FAILURE TO APPEAR. In other words, I got a ticket, I hadn't paid my ticket, and I also failed to appear in court.

Now, just for the record, I paid the ticket that very day, so everything is fine, but the reason I bring that up is that, as you think about what Jesus is saying in our text, you realize that there's a real difference between the summons of a human court and the summons of Jesus Christ himself. According to this passage, Congregation, there will be no FAILURES TO APPEAR on the day of his return.

And so that's the first thing that we see in our text: The Universal Authority of Jesus Christ. The second thing we see is the Infallible Discernment of this judgment. The picture here isn't just about how extensive it is, but also the *absolute precision with which this judgment will be executed*.

2. The Infallible Discernment of the Lord's Judgment

Notice that when Jesus says that all the nations are gathered before his throne, he goes on to say that he shall *separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats: And he shall set the sheep on his right hand, but the goats on the left*.

If there's anything that the Bible teaches it's the fact that the Lord knows exactly who it is that belongs to him. Therefore, even though we might live in an age when no man can perfectly discern the righteous from the wicked, the Bible says that God has infallible knowledge of those who truly serve Him and those who do not (Mal. 3:16-18).

In Matthew 13, Jesus told a parable about this very thing. In that parable the disciples came to their master and complained that there were tares that were sown among the wheat. But you remember what the master told them, when they asked if they should go out and separate the two? In verse 29, he said — Don't do that, lest while you gather up the tares you also uproot the wheat. You see, the fact of the matter is that, in this life, there will always be a mixed multitude of believers and unbelievers living together in the kingdom of God; living together in cities and countries, in churches, and even in our own families as well. But what we learn from this text, is that there's coming a day when Jesus will separate the wheat from the tares, the good fish from the bad fish, and (according to the language here) the sheep from the goats.

As you think about that, one of the questions that should immediately come to your mind is, How can I know that I am truly one of the Lord's sheep? You see, it's one thing to acknowledge that none of us can be absolutely sure about the spiritual status of another person. But the fact is that every one of us has the ability to evaluate our own lives, and to see exactly where we stand with the Lord (2 Cor. 13:5).

The good news is that the moment you ask yourself that question you really begin to enter into the lesson of this text. Remember at the beginning I said that we're studying this passage not for the sake of gaining mere knowledge. But instead, our desire is to study this passage and apply it to our own lives so that we might be prepared for the very day that's described in our text. And, again, the good news is that the Lord is very gracious in this text because he doesn't leave us in the dark. He shows us exactly how we can evaluate our lives, and he does that by *giving us the standard that he uses to separate these two groups*.

3. We Need to Use the Standard Jesus Gave Us to Use

That standard is actually very simple. Notice that in verses 35 and 36, and again in verse 42 and 43, Jesus uses one and the same standard for both of these groups. What he says is that you and I can discern our spiritual position based upon the relationship that we sustain to the rest of the church of Jesus Christ.

There was an old Barna poll that was taken in 2017 that measured the unchurched population of our country. And in that study it was found that almost 50% of Americans were unchurched, and yet, among the 50%, Barna reports that almost 89% of them are professing Christians who say that they love the Lord Jesus Christ, and yet they remained intentionally unchurched in their Christian walk. These are the people that Barna describes as those who “love Jesus, but do not love the church.” Well, in our text, we can see that such a proposition is impossible to maintain. Jesus makes it absolutely clear that our relationship with him is *inseparable* from our relationship to the church.

And here, we can see something that’s absolutely amazing, and that is the identity between Jesus and his people. Notice that as he’s dealing with each one of these groups *the issue that he brings to their attention has to do with their service to the church.*

And, at first, you might not see that, because the only thing he says is that *he* was hungry and *he* was thirsty. He says that *he* was the one who was sick and in prison, *he* was the one who was a stranger and needed a place to stay. And yet, at the same time, when the people in each of these groups began to question the Lord, asking him, Lord, when did we ever see you in these situations, Jesus says that they saw it every time they saw one of his people in that very same situation!

As we consider that for just a moment, that should grab our attention. It teaches us that those who fail to meet the needs of the Lord’s people in this world *demonstrate* that they are not truly loving the Lord Jesus Christ. And you know, this principle of the identity of Jesus and his people is something that we see in many different places in the Word of God, and it’s expressed in several different ways. Probably one of the most sobering examples, though, is found in Acts 9 where Jesus confronts the apostle Paul on the Damascus Road.

Now, of course, you remember that Paul was on his way to Damascus with letters from the chief priests so that he might come into the city, arrest the Christians, and haul them off to jail. What we have there is the apostle Paul persecuting the people of God, and yet notice that, when Jesus confronts him on the way, he doesn’t even mention the persecution of the church. Instead, he says: Saul, Saul, Why are you persecuting *me*?

At that point, Paul didn't know what to say, and so he said: Who are you, Lord? And Jesus says: I am Jesus of Nazareth, *whom you are persecuting*. This is amazing! Jesus is so united to his people, that anything that's done to them (whether good or bad) he receives as being done personally to him. That's because of the intimate and even incomprehensible union that exists between Christ and the Church.

Now, admittedly, all that we've seen so far in this passage, can be extremely intimidating. As we think about the universal authority of Jesus Christ, the comprehensive nature of the judgment to come, and the infallible discernment with which he will execute that judgment on the last day, I know just how unsettling these things can be. But you know, as we go our way this morning, there's one thing that we need to keep in mind, and that is, it's only because He loves us that he provides these kinds of warnings in his word.

Jesus warns us about the judgment to come but not so that we might be paralyzed with fear. He warns us so that we might examine ourselves with true and sincere hearts. And, Congregation, if we find that our lives are not in line with the Word of God, then that's a good thing because it means that right now we have the opportunity to turn around and seek the Lord for the grace and the mercy that we need.

But even then, that's only one side of the story. Because the truth is that this passage isn't just a warning for those who need to repent. It's also an encouragement to those of us who are already walking faithfully with the Lord.

As we celebrate this Advent season, and we contemplate the first and second comings of the Lord, Jesus wants us to be strengthened in our faith. And to that end, he provides a wonderful reassurance in the words of this text. He says to us,

Come, you blessed of My Father, and inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me.'

Congregation, may these words of the Lord Jesus Christ be true of every single one of us on the Day of His Return! **Amen.**