

Parables Of The Kingdom

“But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only.” (Matthew 24:36 ESV)

“Then the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom.” (Matthew 25:1 ESV)

*“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. 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.”
(Matthew 25:31–32 ESV)*

The Parable Of The Sheep And The Goats

April 7th, 2019

Matthew 25:31-46

Rev. Paul Carter

Introduction:

Good morning church! I want to invite you to open your Bibles this morning to Matthew 25:31; that's on page 831 in your pew Bibles. We're in the middle of a little 3-week series in which we are looking at some of the things that Jesus said and did during his final week in Jerusalem before he died on the cross and rose again.

The story we are looking at this morning really begins back in chapter 24:1. The disciples had asked Jesus a question about the destruction of the temple. As typical first century Jews they had assumed that the temple was a permanent symbol of God's presence among his covenant people – but Jesus had just predicted it's destruction. He said:

“You see all these, do you not? Truly, I say to you, there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down.” (Matthew 24:2 ESV)

The disciples, naturally, assume that the destruction of the temple will HERALD the end of the age and the beginning of the eternal kingdom of God and so they ask Jesus when these catastrophic events will take place and Jesus – quite surprisingly – begins to speak to them about the possibility of a very long delay. Jesus says that the destruction of the temple will not be THE END – it will only be THE BEGINNING OF THE END and so begins to share these stories about the need for us to be faithful, the need for us to be obedient and the need for us to be PREPARED – in the event of a very long delay.

And now here, in the passage we are looking at this morning, we come to the dramatic conclusion of this entire dialogue. In this story we learn that however long this delay lasts – and remember - no one knows! Not you, not me, not the preacher you watch on the internet, not the angels of heaven – and not even the Son of Man – no one knows!

It could be tomorrow – or it might not be for 10,000 years.

But here's what we are learning today: No matter how long this delay lasts – it will not last forever. Jesus WILL COME BACK and when he comes back THIS IS WHAT IT WILL LOOK LIKE.

That's the story that we are looking at today. So hear now the Word of the Lord, beginning at Matthew 25:31:

"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." (Matthew 25:31–46 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God!

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne.

Jesus describes the climactic end to human history as we know it in distinctly legal terms. He will be the judge, he will sit on the throne, we will be on trial and verdicts and decisions will be rendered. Therefore it seems appropriate for us to examine this teaching both in terms of the FACTS that it presents and in terms of the FORCE that it exerts upon those of us who hear it.

Facts:

First of all then, in terms of the FACTS presented to us in this story, I think it makes sense to start with the most obvious; this parable is telling us, in no uncertain terms that there WILL BE A FINAL JUDGMENT.

1. There is a Final Judgment

Jesus has been talking about the possibility of a VERY LONG DELAY. That was the whole point of the Parable of the 10 Virgins. Jesus said: No one knows that day or the hour – so it could be 10 minutes from now or it could be 10,000 years from now – but KNOW THIS, Jesus is saying here – however long the delay – there WILL BE A FINAL JUDGMENT.

And that's important for us to hear because the longer this delay goes the more likely we are to forget or ignore or even deny this crucial fact.

Just a few weeks ago we were talking about how some people – even in Peter's day – were denying the Final Judgment on the basis of what they considered an unusually long delay. In 2 Peter 3:4 Peter says that scoffers are scoffing and challenging the notion of Christ's Return and Final Judgment saying:

"Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things are continuing as they were from the beginning of creation." (2 Peter 3:4 ESV)

It's been 30 years – they cried. Surely you aren't STILL BELIEVING in a physical, bodily return of Jesus Christ to the earth? If he were going to come back he would have done so already.

That's what people were saying 30 years after the ascension of Jesus into heaven – how much more are they likely to be saying that now – almost 2000 years further on?

Friends, Jesus has been gone for a very long time and so just like Jesus predicted we are starting to see a lot of people – who at one point in time would have called themselves Christians – starting to fall away from the faith and starting to live self indulgent lives. And we're even starting to see – again just like Jesus predicted in the parable of the wise and wicked servants – we are even starting to see people who at one time would have considered Christians starting to persecute and abuse the true followers of Jesus Christ.

It's happening and the longer this delay goes on the more we are going to see that. We are going to see this LONG DELAY continue to WEED OUT nominal Christians whose LOVE WILL GROW COLD – just like Jesus said:

But the one who endures to the end will be saved. (Matthew 24:13 ESV)

So everything is happening exactly like Jesus said. And therefore let's state the obvious: this delay is not proof that there will not be a final judgment. If anything, this delay is only proving how perfectly Jesus predicted the progress of human history.

And if he has been right about everything so far, you can bet that he is going to be right about this: There will be a Final Judgment – that is the FIRST and MAIN FACT being presented to us in this teaching.

And the second builds upon the first. There will be a final judgment and that final judgment will be universal in its character.

2. It is universal in its character

I mean that in a couple of different ways. First of all I mean that this is not “one judgment day among many” it is THE JUDGMENT DAY. Some 20th century American scholars argued for a season that there were multiple judgment days and they were always trying to decide which judgment day is which and who will stand and which – but there is no warrant for that kind of thinking at all. Charles Spurgeon for example says here:

“It seems impossible to apply the full meaning of our Saviour's majestic words to any scene except the general judgment of the whole human race.”¹

I quite agree. This is not 'A Judgment'; this is THE JUDGMENT. This is the judgment of every human being who has ever lived.

I also mean to say that it encompasses both individuals AND nations. The individuals are easy to spot. The text says:

he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. (Matthew 25:32 ESV)

¹ Charles Spurgeon, *Commentary On Matthew* (Edinburgh: The Banner Of Truth Trust, 2013), 391.

So we are talking about PEOPLE; INDIVIDUALS; being separated – ONE FROM ANOTHER. This is a judgment that every human being needs to be prepared to face.

And this is a judgment that every NATION needs to be prepared to face. Look at verse 32:

Before him will be gathered **all the nations** (Matthew 25:32 ESV)

Countries will be judged. Empires will be judged. People groups will be judged. D.A. Carson says something here that feels very relevant all of the sudden. He says:

“The fate of the nations will be determined by how they respond to Jesus’ followers, who, “missionaries” or not, are charged with spreading the gospel and do so in the face of hunger, thirst, illness, and imprisonment.”²

We’ll get into the criteria in just a moment but for now I just want you to be impacted by the breadth and scope of authority exercised by Jesus on that day. He will stand in judgment over kings and Presidents and Congresses and NATIONS and will SCRUTINIZE and ASSESS how they responded to the efforts of his people to spread the Gospel in their midst – have you ever thought about that before?

The British government – who last month denied entry to an Iranian Christian seeking asylum BECAUSE THE BIBLE CONTAINS VIOLENT VERSES – I kid you not – the British government will answer to Jesus on Judgment Day.

The Canadian government will stand before Jesus and will be required to explain the Summer Jobs Attestation.

The American government will be asked to explain why the case of a cake maker was taken all the way to the Supreme Court and why it took so long to outlaw slavery and put an end to segregation particularly given that so many of those African people were brothers and sisters in Christ.

Kings, Queens, Judges, Congressman, Prime Ministers and Presidents are going to be summoned before the throne of Jesus Christ and required to give an answer for those sorts of things - have you ever thought about that?

To be a human being is to be an individual but it is also to belong to groups and apparently both are going to be scrutinized by Jesus Christ on Judgment Day.

The third fact is this; there will be a final judgment; that final judgment will be universal in its character and that judgment will be conducted on the basis of our works.

3. It will be conducted on the basis of our works

This is the part of the story that is the hardest for us to understand. As Christians we are raised on the glorious truths of the Gospel. The Gospel says that we are saved by GRACE ALONE through FAITH ALONE because of CHRIST ALONE – amen?

Amen.

² D.A. Carson, *Matthew Chapters 13 Through 28* in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995), 520.

So then why at the Final Judgment is so much attention paid to our works? Have you ever thought about that? And it isn't just in this passage – flip in your Bible to Revelation 20:12-13, or look up on the screen. Here's another picture of Final Judgment and it sounds exactly the same as the one we're looking at here. In Revelation 20 the Apostle John says:

And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, **according to what they had done**. 13 And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, **according to what they had done**. (Revelation 20:12–13 ESV)

Every time the Final Judgment is described in the Bible it is described as being conducted on the basis of WORKS despite that the Bible says that we are saved by grace. Ephesians 2:8-9 says:

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. (Ephesians 2:8–9 ESV)

So how does this all fit together?

We are SAVED BY GRACE but JUDGED BY WORKS? William Hendriksen is very helpful here; commenting on the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats he says:

“What Jesus is saying is, “In your daily life and conduct, in what are often called ‘the little things of life’, **you have furnished proof** that you are my true disciples. Therefore I call you blessed.”³

Are you hearing that?

He is saying that when Jesus exonerates the sheep and welcomes them into the eternal kingdom on the basis of their works – he is NOT saying that they have EARNED their salvation; he is saying they have PROVED their salvation.

They became Christians – by grace, through faith, because of Jesus – but they SHOWED THAT through their instinctive and characteristic LOVE for the least of Christ's disciples.

Do you see that?

It is the SURPRISE of the sheep that makes that point in the parable. If the sheep had done all those things to EARN their salvation then they wouldn't have been so surprised – but they are. They say:

‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink?’ (Matthew 25:37 ESV)

They don't even realize they've been doing this. They weren't doing it to earn brownie points with Jesus, they were just doing it because – it came natural to them. They were filled with the Spirit of Jesus – so OF COURSE they were filled with compassion for the disciples of Jesus – and make no mistake – it is the disciples of Jesus that we are talking about here. Some people try to make this a story about CARING FOR THE POOR GENERALLY but it is not. The Parable of the Good Samaritan tells us to care for the poor generally – but this parable is telling us that it is the instinctive love and practical concern of the sheep for their oppressed and persecuted brethren that SHOWS THEM to be real believers.

³ William Hendriksen, *The Gospel Of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1973), 888.

That's a slightly different emphasis.

Look carefully at verse 40:

'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these **my brothers**, you did it to me.' (Matthew 25:40 ESV)

Well who are the brothers of Christ?

There are only two options: the biological half-brothers of Jesus – James, Joseph, Simon and Jude; OR the SPIRITUAL brothers of Jesus – that is to say, HIS DISCIPLES.

The answer isn't hard to come by because Jesus himself tells us.

And stretching out his hand toward his disciples, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! (Matthew 12:49 ESV)

Therefore commentators are only stating the obvious when they say, as for example R.T. France says:

"It is a term specially for his disciples, not for men in general."⁴

So – to be clear – even though we are saved by grace, through faith, because of Christ – on Judgment Day – we will stand before Jesus and he will EXAMINE US according to our works. He will look at our FRUIT – he will look at the characteristic overflow of our lives - in order to determine the nature and substance of our ROOT identity.

Notice friends that not a single thing is said in this passage about what people BELIEVED.

Not a single thing is said about what people PROCLAIMED AND PROFESSED.

Rather the only subject that is discussed in this passage is what people DID – and specifically what they did towards the least of these followers and disciples of Jesus Christ.

It is love for the BODY OF CHRIST that will prove or disprove our profession of faith on Judgment Day.

That is A FACT according to this Parable.

And then fourthly, and finally, in terms of the facts of this parable, there will be a final judgment, it will be universal in nature, it will be on the basis of our works and it will determine our eternal destiny.

4. It will determine our eternal destiny

Look at verses 41-46:

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

⁴R. T. France, *Matthew: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 1 of Tyndale New Testament Commentaries. IVP/Accordance electronic ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 360.

these will go away into **eternal** punishment, but the righteous into **eternal** life.” (Matthew 25:41–46 ESV)

I want you to notice a few things here. I want you to notice first of all that hell was not something God designed with human beings in mind. You can see that in verse 41. Hell was designed for the fallen angels. Its verses like this that cause most theologians to believe that the devil and his angels fell before Adam and Eve fell. That story isn't told in the Bible but verses like this seem to imply that the devil and his angels fell first and hell was the prison that God prepared for them. But then the devil began interacting with human beings and the Bible seems to be saying that people choose to listen to him – if they choose to follow him – if they refuse to be wooed back into right relationship with God – then they will be handed over to what they have chosen, for themselves.

Human beings were not designed for hell. We were designed to enjoy the presence of the Lord forever.

But we were given a will and what we do with that will MATTERS.

I want you to see as well that however long heaven is, hell also is.

Recently some progressive scholars have been going to great lengths to try and prove that hell is not everlasting. But the same Greek word is used here in verse 46 to describe the duration of both heaven and hell. So either it means forever or it doesn't. If heaven is forever then so is hell.

Clearly the text seems to be saying that you will go somewhere forever and you will be assigned that forever destiny on Judgment Day.

That is a FACT according to this Parable.

Force:

What then is the FORCE of this parable? Jesus didn't give this teaching merely to inform people, he obviously gave it to influence people. The text exerts a considerable pressure upon us to move and respond in particular ways. Very quickly let me point them out.

First of all, the text is commending immediate personal examination.

1. It commends personal examination

If history will come to a sudden and unexpected end at a certain unspecified point in time – and if at the end of history we will ALL stand before Jesus and give an account for our lives - THEN OBVIOUSLY we need to immediately conduct a thorough self evaluation in order to understand how we are likely to fare on that fateful day.

You don't want to find out ON JUDGMENT DAY that you are NOT SAVED. It will be too late if you find that out on Judgment Day. None of the goats got to change themselves into sheep in the story we just read. There were no mulligans given out. Who you are on that DAY is who you are for eternity!

So who are you?

That is the question you want to ask and answer in advance.

The Apostle Paul told his people to do this. He said:

Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. (2 Corinthians 13:5 ESV)

And this text tells you what questions to ASK yourself. Everyone who has been to high school knows that if you are told the questions before you are given the test then you really have no excuse for doing poorly on the test – right? Well this parable tells us what the exam question is.

Have you lived a life of consistent and characteristic LOVE for the body of Christ – particularly those who are suffering for the sake of the Gospel? Yes or No?

Have you been compassionate toward them?

Have you prayed for them?

Have you identified with them?

Have you given generously of your own funds and resources to support them?

Real Christians instinctively do that.

So test yourself to see if you are one of them.

And then lastly, it seems to me that this text invites a personal response.

2. It invites a personal response

This text says that on the last day Jesus is coming back to the earth AS ITS RIGHTFUL JUDGE AND KING. He came the first time as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. He came the first time riding on a donkey – even the foal of a donkey because he came in peace – but he will come the next time riding on a white horse and he will make war. He will have a sword in his mouth and an iron rod in his hand with which to JUDGE AND RULE THE NATIONS - so if that is true then obviously this text is suggesting that YOU need to make peace with that King well before the time of his arrival. Psalm 2 puts it this way:

10 Now therefore, O kings, be wise; be warned, O rulers of the earth.

11 Serve the LORD with fear, and rejoice with trembling.

12 Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and you perish in the way, for his wrath is quickly kindled. Blessed are all who take refuge in him. (Psalm 2:10–12 ESV)

You can kiss the Son or you can be crushed by the King. Those are your options friend – and there are no others.

Jesus is coming back. There will be a Final Judgment. For some it will be the prelude to a blessed eternity enjoying the inheritance of their older brother. For others it will be the prelude to an eternity of regret, isolation, judgment and dismay.

Therefore friends, Kiss the Son – bow before him. Confess your sins and claim him as your Lord and Savior. Find refuge in Christ today!

Come! Come unto Jesus and be saved. Thanks be to God. Let's pray together.