



Matthew 25:31-46 - 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. ³² 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. ³³ He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. 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. ³⁵ 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, ³⁶ 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.’ ³⁷ “Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? ³⁸ When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? ³⁹ When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’ ⁴⁰ “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.’

⁴¹ “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. ⁴² For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, ⁴³ 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.’ ⁴⁴ “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?’ ⁴⁵ “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.’ ⁴⁶ “Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.”

Christ will come to judge



To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood – and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father, to him be glory and power forever and ever! (Revelation 1:5b-6)

People have a fascination with finales, conclusions, and last chapters. Maybe it's because we don't want to waste time. We like to cut out the unnecessary and unimportant stuff in the middle and get down to how it all shakes out. Maybe it's because we expect things to happen quickly – like everything else in life. A TV show wraps up nicely within thirty minutes. A feature length film can take you through someone's entire life story in about two hours and leave you with a sense of satisfaction – knowing how this guy's story ends. Dinner can be planned, cooked, and in your hand in the amount of time it takes to “pull around to the second window.” Students long for graduation day, because then, it'll be over. We want to get to the end - because reading the last chapter and putting that book back on the shelf is so satisfying. Done. Accomplished. On to the next thing. But what about when there is no “next thing”?

We confess it in our creeds every Sunday. Just a few minutes ago, you stood up and said about Jesus, “I believe...he will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead.” But do we really think much about that “capital E” End of all things? It can be hard to conceptualize, because it seems like everything in this world just keeps on plugging along just like it always has. So it's difficult to imagine the Day when **the heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare.** But make no mistake, that day is coming, and the judgment of God comes along with it. As obsessed as we can be with “reaching the end,” are we looking forward to that End? Our Scripture lessons for today give us a glimpse at the final chapter of world history when Jesus will return to, just as we confessed in the creed, “judge the living and the dead.”

Jesus tells us, **When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. 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.** When the End comes, Jesus returns to judge – all people of all time for all eternity. It was pretty easy for a shepherd to divide the sheep from the goats, so for Jesus – the One who knows and sees all hearts – the task of dividing all humanity into one of two groups is no problem. There are the sheep – those who trust in Christ alone for salvation. There are the goats – those who rejected God's grace through their unbelief and self-righteousness. I think the most unsettling thing about Judgment Day for most people is the “finality” of it all. Nothing else in life can compare to the “once-for-all” judgment and the *eternity* that follows. We can't even fathom eternity. The best we can do is to describe it in terms of what it isn't – it's an existence outside of time, no beginning, no end. People going through a rough patch in life might console themselves with the popular notion, “Nothing is forever.” But heaven and hell are!

Place yourself in front of the Most Supreme Court of the Lord Jesus on the day of the Final Judgment. What do you see? Hymn writers have put Scriptural images into song: *Day of wrath, oh day of mourning! See fulfilled the prophets' warning; Heaven and earth in ashes burning.* Or another...*The day is surely drawing near, When God's Son, the Anointed, Shall with great majesty appear, As judge of all appointed. All mirth and laughter then shall cease when flames on*



flames will still increase, As Scripture truly teaches. That sounds terrifying. In our Old Testament lesson, Daniel got a sneak peek at the events of the final judgment. **“As I looked, thrones were set in place, and the Ancient of Days took his seat....His throne was flaming fire...a river of fire was coming out from before him....The court was seated, and the books were opened.”** The books were opened. That statement just hangs there. What books? Some of these books contained everything each person has done in their life: every thought, every word, every action. Maybe that’s why some people don’t like to think about Judgment Day. The very idea of having everything you’ve done wrong exposed to the world is not a very attractive thought.

In our gospel lesson, Jesus says 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. 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...”** Wait a minute. Doesn’t that kind of sound like those sheep earned the King’s favor because of all the good works they did? We know the gospel, we rely on Christ for our righteousness, but now is our Savior giving us a new teaching that we are saved by works? If this was the only thing Jesus told us about Judgment Day and how a sinner stands before God, then a religion of works would make all the sense in the world. But we don’t earn our way into God’s good grace – in fact – we can’t. (Notice how the sheep didn’t even remember doing any of those things – let alone think that those good works earned them eternal life!). Those good deeds are brought forward as evidence of a living faith in Jesus.

It is by grace you have been saved, through faith, and this is not from yourselves...Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life. Our status before our holy God is one that is given to us freely and fully through faith in Jesus our Savior. The sheep are sheep because God made them sheep – not because they made a choice to be a sheep, not because they’ve worked hard to become a sheep. They are sheep because God has declared them to be righteous in Christ. At the baptismal font, God laid his claim on you – his sheep. Through the preaching of the gospel, the Holy Spirit created faith in your heart to trust in Jesus Christ alone as your Savior from every sin. When those books are opened on Judgment Day, what’s it going to say in your column? Drunkard? Adulterer? Lazy, lustful, proud? What’s it going to say by your name when the books are opened? Justified, not guilty, righteous through faith in Christ. His perfect righteousness before God is now your personal possession through faith. Jesus isn’t afraid to drop a divine “spoiler alert,” about the final verdict on Judgment Day. You are sheep!

So, there it is – we saw the end! We read the final chapter and the book closes with the awesome words of our Savior, **“Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.”** And eternal life follows. That’s how the story of the believer’s life ends...but we’re not at the end yet. Did Jesus tell us how Judgment Day is going to shake out so that we could put the book back on the shelf and move on to the next thing – so that we could cut out all the unnecessary, unimportant stuff like this earthly life – and just look forward to heaven? Knowing our eternal verdict of “Not guilty” through faith in Jesus means our eternity is secure. Do you see how unbelievably liberating that is? No longer are you enslaved to your worries and wonderings about where you stand with God. You’re not on a hamster wheel exhausting yourself, but getting nowhere. You’re free! And now, your promise of eternal glory in heaven helps you to see the unseen glory of the earthly existence you already have because of Jesus.

Notice the things that Jesus the Judge hauls out as evidence of a living faith. He doesn’t say, “I was sick and you healed me...I was in prison and you set me free...I was thirsty and you spearheaded a world-wide clean water initiative for billions of people...I was in the most basic need of clothes and housing, and you footed the bill to build a 50,000 bed homeless shelter.” What does King Jesus choose to highlight on Judgment Day? The seemingly menial,



unnoticed, unimportant, every-day acts of love and duty – done for even **the least of these** people around us. We don't need worldwide acclamation for our love and service. We don't even need recognition from the one we're helping. Why not? Because Jesus notices. You probably won't see a newspaper headline praising a mom who quietly changed her child's fifth dirty diaper of the day – but Jesus sees, and he rejoices. You will never turn on the TV to see a man lauded for doing his faithful best work at the factory – but Jesus sees, and he loves it. You're not going to gain admirers by doing your homework, helping your neighbor move, or putting your arm around someone who's had a rough day – but it doesn't matter. You have an admirer in heaven, your Savior Jesus who cherishes every fruit of faith because it comes from a thankful heart of faith – thankful for forgiveness, thankful for the guarantee of eternal life. Those every-day, ho-hum, mundane works you do simply because that's where God has put you in life - those works are holy because they are done by those whom God has declared righteous in Christ.

As you wait for the Last Day, don't just sit around and twiddle your thumbs, thinking, "It doesn't matter what I do," or, "I'll never be able to say 'thank you Jesus' in a grand enough way." Live and love and serve where God has put you in this world, and guess what? What a shocking statement – Jesus almost seems to say too much, **I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.** Every fruit of faith produced in the life of the believer has been noticed and received by Jesus as if we did it for him! Sheep do sheep things. That doesn't mean seeking out some grand, glorious, pious, noble, somehow inherently more valuable fruit of faith. Your work has been transformed – appreciate the ordinary, because in through faith in Jesus, it's extraordinary. You do what God has given you to do, and it is holy work. Not because you're holy, but because Christ is. While we wait for Jesus to "come to judge the living and the dead," God grant us confidence in his promised salvation and joy in our work here in his name.

Amen

And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

(Philippians 4:7)