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Swift Creek Baptist Church (swiftcreekbaptistchurch.com)
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Matthew 25:31-46 “The Great Divide”

Intro. In this text of Scripture Jesus presents a sharp contrast between two groups of people at the great end-time Judgment, and what a contrast we see! One group is called “blessed of my Father” (v.34). The other group is called “cursed” (v.41). One group is invited to enter the kingdom of God (v.34). The other group is forever excluded from the kingdom of God (v.41). One group will inherit life that never ends, and the other group will go away into torment that never ends (v.46). Now if I were you, nothing would be more important than making sure that you are a part of that first group. And if you will listen today, I will tell you how you can be blessed both now and for all eternity. I will tell you how you can be a part of an eternal Kingdom, ruled by the King of love.

So this text of Scripture tells us that a great judgment will result in this great division of humanity. Commentators disagree regarding the timing and nature of this judgment. Which interpretation one takes depends on his or her view of prophecy and end-time events. Those who believe in a literal 1000-year reign of Christ on earth generally interpret this text as a judgment that is separate from the Judgment Seat of Christ for believers, and the Great White Throne judgment for unbelievers. They see it as a judgment to determine which survivors of the Tribulation get to enter into the earthly Kingdom of Christ that is yet to come. Based on a prophecy in Joel 3:2, 12, what is left of the human race will be summoned to the valley of Jehoshaphat to be judged. It was called the Kidron valley in Jesus’ day, which was between Jerusalem and the Mount of Olives. So as Jesus spoke these words from the Mount of Olives, it’s quite possible that He was reminded of the prophecy of the judgment that would take place in the valley down below from where He was sitting.

On the other hand, v.46 sounds like the words that will be spoken at the final judgment, so some interpreters see this as just another statement of what will take place at the final judgment at the end of time. In this case, the Lord is not placing these end-time events neatly into a chronological chart, but is giving some basic principles that should apply to all of us today, and not just the survivors of the Great Tribulation. That will be the approach I will take today.

Jesus Christ taught quite a bit about judgment. The day is coming when you will stand before Jesus. The outcome of that judgment completely depends upon what you do in this life. And Jesus loves you enough to warn you of an outcome that you want to avoid at all cost.

This morning I am going to share with you in more detail about the fact that Jesus Christ will come again and judge the world. I will also tell you how you can know that you will enter into the kingdom of God. I will also warn you of what will happen to you if you fail to do what it takes to enter into God’s kingdom. So examine your heart and life this morning to see which group you would be a part of, and then respond accordingly.

So let’s look together into our text, where we see the first main truth, and it is this:

I. JESUS IS COMING AGAIN

This truth is repeated over and over again in chapters 24-25 of Matthew. And our text opens with the following statement in v.31, “When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all

the holy angels with Him....” Back in 24:30 Jesus said that He will come again “on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory.” So Christ is coming again with great power and glory, and He will be accompanied by angels. They are mentioned here because they are given a task to perform. They will gather not only gather the elect (24:31), but they will also gather all others to appear before the judgment throne of Jesus. I will talk more about that in just a moment.

Now when Jesus comes again, He will do at least 2 things that are mentioned in our text. He will come again:

A. To Claim His Kingdom – Jesus says in v.31, “When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory.” Of course, the fact that He will sit on the throne indicates that He is coming as King. In fact, notice that He calls Himself “King” in v.34. The Gospel of Matthew especially presents Jesus as the King. So the day is coming when He will take the throne of this world, just as prophesied in Daniel 7:13-14.¹ The description of our text indicates a most glorious throne. What a contrast with His first coming in humility, weakness, and shame. I am looking forward to the day when Jesus takes control of this world! Man has failed to exercise proper dominion of this world (Gen. 1:26). There has been such abuse of power, injustice, and death as a result of man ruling the nations. But when Jesus takes control, there will be peace, justice, love and joy.

Have you invited Jesus to occupy the throne of your heart? Have you made Him Lord of your life? If you do not claim Him as your king now, how can you be sure that you will be able to enter into His kingdom then? This question leads to the second purpose for the return of Jesus:

B. To Determine Who Enters His Kingdom – Jesus says in v.32, “All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate them one from another....” In ancient societies the king also served as judge. Even so, King Jesus will be the judge of all nations. His office of universal Judge is unmistakably taught throughout the New Testament. For example, in Acts 17:31 Paul said that God “has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead.”

Again, our Lord’s reference to “all the nations” could be a reference to the prophecy in Joel 3:2. I do not believe that the Lord is talking about judging nations as opposed to individuals within nations. I believe He is simply talking about all people of all nations (cf. 24:14; 28:19). It is clear from the text that the Judge will examine each person and separate those who will enter the kingdom from those who will not. This will be the great divide. There will be a thrill of happiness for those who are selected for life, and a shrill of horror for those weeded out for judgment.

Jesus uses an analogy that was very familiar to the people of His day. He says in vv.32-33 that the judgment will be “as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats. And He will set the sheep on His right hand, but the goats on the left.” Though sheep and goats often intermingle during the day, yet at the end of the day it was common for the Shepherd to separate the sheep from the goats. He could easily see the difference between the two. One way the shepherd could separate the sheep from the goats was to call the sheep, and they would follow him, thus

¹ “...behold, One like the Son of Man, Coming with the clouds of heaven! ... Then 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....”

separating the two groups.² So the main point was simply to provide a vivid illustration of the separation that will take place at the end of time between believers and unbelievers.

I tried to think of a parallel that is more familiar to us. At one time I loved to garden. I ploughed the soil, planted the seed, and then waited for the seed to sprout. I was happy when I saw the new plants coming up. But then, I saw some unwanted plants, weeds, that would hinder the growth of the good plants. And so I sought to separate the weeds from the good plants by pulling them out. Too often I lost that battle!

Well, during the present age, believers and unbelievers mix and mingle. But the time is coming when there will be a great separation. Just as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, even so Jesus will separate believers from unbelievers for all eternity.

Notice that Jesus will place those destined for the kingdom on his right hand, and the others on His left hand. In ancient Israel the right hand was considered the hand of blessing and honor, the hand of inheritance. When the patriarch Jacob wanted to bless his grandsons Manasseh and Ephraim, he was careful about whom he put his right hand on, because that person would become the heir (Gen. 48).

So a great separation will take place someday. The group on the right will enter into the Kingdom of God. The group on the left will be separated even further, and sent far away from God's Kingdom. You want to make sure that you will be a part of that group on the right that will enter the Kingdom of God.

Now this brings us to consider the criterion of judgment, or on what basis someone may expect to enter God's kingdom. Liberals love isolating this text from the rest of Scripture. Taken alone, this text seems to suggest that if you are charitable to others in need, you will earn a place for yourself in heaven. Indeed, many sinners have a soft heart when it comes to helping someone in dire need. There are quite a few people who use the proceeds of gambling and alcohol to help people. But does an occasional charitable deed earn someone a place in heaven? Absolutely not! The New Testament is clear on this. Eph. 2:8-9 teaches that we are not saved by our good works. Titus 3:5 says it is "not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit." So let's read on and see who will enter God's kingdom, and who will not. We will also examine the basis of that determination, and the outcome of that judgment.

Here, Jesus teaches that:

II. THE RIGHTEOUS WILL ENTER GOD'S KINGDOM

In v.37 Jesus calls those who enter the Kingdom "the righteous." Yes, in order to enter God's kingdom, the Judge must determine that you are righteous. Now God sees the heart. He knows whether or not you are among the righteous just by examining your heart. Now true righteousness begins with imputed righteousness. The Bible says, "Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness" (Rom. 4:3). The moment you repent of your sin and trust in Jesus as your Lord and Savior, you pass from death to life. From that point on your

² Now many commentators make a point of comparing unbelievers here to the worst characteristics of grown goats. Phillips says that "a goat is a naturally quarrelsome, lascivious, destructive, and evil-smelling creature, often associated with Satanism and witchcraft." But the word for "goat" used here refers to a young goat, the kind that was sacrificed at Passover, or the kind that was considered one of the favorite meats of that day. The young goat was not looked upon in a negative way.

eternal salvation will never be in doubt, for by faith your sins have already been judged at the Cross of Calvary. In fact, nothing is said about the sins of believers in this text!

But the key to understanding this text is that fact that this judgment is a *public* judgment. So this text doesn't focus on inward righteousness, but upon the outward manifestations of inward righteousness that are visible to the eye. God desires to vindicate His decision regarding who enters the kingdom and who does not. Such vindication brings glory to Him. Therefore, He mentions the evidences of true faith in the believers who are invited to enter into eternal life. Here, the focus is not upon the root of salvation, but upon the fruit of salvation. So let's look at 2 evidences of a true believer that are mentioned in this text:

A. A True Christian Manifests Sacrificial Love (vv.35-40) – God is love, and all who are truly born again will share His loving nature, and will manifest deeds of love. Jesus is God's Son, and He likewise showed love to people each and every day in His ministry. He went about doing good, meeting the needs of many (Acts 10:38). And He rightly expects His followers to be like Him (Eph. 5:1-2). And Jesus taught that all the commandments are fulfilled in the commandment to love. Furthermore, He said in John 13:35, "By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another." And though the word "love" is not used in this text, there is no doubt but that the righteous manifest true love, for one good definition of love is "meeting the needs of others." And that is exactly what the righteous do according to vv.35-36. And I say that they especially show love to fellow believers because Jesus said in v.40, "Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me."

He speaks here of their ministry to "my brethren." Who are "my brethren"? It could refer to our Lord's Jewish brethren. In fact, the Old Testament background for this text is most likely the prophecy of Joel 3, where God will judge the nations based on what they have done to Israel. But because the New Testament reveals that God's people now include Gentile believers, I believe it probably refers to His Christian brethren. Hebrews 2:11-12 says Christ is not ashamed to call believers His brethren. Surely one motive of helping fellow believers has to do with their association with Jesus Christ. As we see here, to minister to a believer in Jesus Christ is to minister to Christ Himself. After all, He said in Mt. 18:5, "Whoever receives one little child like this in My name receives Me." Surely our love for Christ is manifested by our acts of love for His people.

If you are a true believer, you should manifest the 6 specific examples of love that Jesus mentions here in vv.35-36:

1. You Will Feed the Hungry – 1 John 3:17 says, "But whoever has this world's goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him?" Did you give to our World Hunger offering?

2. You Will Give Drink to the Thirsty –

3. You Will Give Lodging to the Homeless –

4. You Will Give Clothes to the Needy -

5. You Will Visit the Sick – We have available to us the power of prayer. Let us take that resource to those who are sick. Furthermore, positive Christian fellowship tends to promote health and healing. Yet during the pandemic we have done the opposite. We have isolated the sick from their loved ones!

6. You Will Visit the Imprisoned – Prison can be a lonely, isolated place, and prisoners really appreciate it when people visit them.

These are things we all could do. We cannot pass off this responsibility to the government, or to the pastors and deacons. Jesus demands our personal involvement in caring for the needs of others. What did you do last week to meet someone else's needs? Have you recently visited someone who is sick or in prison? Ah, this is a good test to help determine whether or not you are truly saved.

Since the return of Christ follows the Great Tribulation, the context of this judgment may be especially important. We know that the Great Tribulation will be a time of suffering and deprivation for the Jews. It will also be a time of suffering for the countless Gentile believers that we read about in the book of Revelation. They will be hungry, thirsty, homeless, sick, and imprisoned. There will be many opportunities for ministry to the needy during the time right before the return of Christ. In light of this, the reference to visiting prisoners would especially refer to those imprisoned due to persecution. They will be hungry, thirsty, and homeless because of persecution. Those who help Jews and Christians during that time will demonstrate that they have a rightful place in the coming Kingdom.

By the way, notice also in v.40 that Jesus commended them for ministering to "the least of these My brethren." Many will minister to the most important among us. Who will minister to "the least," the ones who can offer no compensation or reward? That could include the young and the very old. It would include the poor, and those with special needs.

B. A True Christian Manifests Humility – Notice in vv.37-39 that the righteous seem surprised by our Lord's commendation. They express real wonder at the undreamed-of significance of their deeds. They won't proudly say, "Yes, Lord, I deserve to enter the kingdom, because I did so many good deeds."

Something else I see in their reply is this: They were not doing these good works as a conscious effort to "act" good on certain occasions. It was just the day to day overflow of a heart of love.

Do you do good deeds only as an act? Are you like the Moslem who counts up his good deeds, hoping that his good deeds outnumber his bad deeds? Or do you do good deeds simply out of love for God, and love for people? The less conscious you are of your good deeds, the more they naturally flow from your heart, the more likely it is that you are a true believer.

So we have seen that the righteous will enter God's Kingdom. But then we also see the solemn truth:

III. ALL OTHERS WILL BE EXCLUDED FROM GOD'S KINGDOM

The "goats" will be separated by the all-knowing, all-seeing eye of the Judge. And then acting also as prosecutor, He will present His case against them. He will show to the entire world why they have been separated from the sheep, a common symbol of God's people. He could convict them by their sins of commission. He could reveal every lie they have told, every curse word they have spoken, every slanderous remark they have made, and that's just for starters. But the King surprises them. In our text today, we see:

A. They Will Be Convicted by Sins of Omission – The Judge of the Universe says in vv.42-43 that they were to depart "for I was hungry and you gave Me no food; I was thirsty and you gave Me no drink; I was a stranger and you did not take Me in, naked and you did not clothe Me, sick and in prison and you did not visit Me." Many people fool themselves into thinking that

they are going to heaven because they can name quite a few sins they *don't* do. Perhaps they don't do drugs; they don't get drunk; they don't commit adultery; they don't steal. But it's not just the sins of commission that convict us, but also the sins of omission. James 4:17, "Therefore, to him who knows to do good and does not do it, to him it is sin." It's not just what you have done that will convict you, but also what you have not done, as stated in vv.42-43. And the greatest sin of omission of all is doing nothing with Jesus. Not to receive Christ is to reject Him.

Did you realize that not doing good, when given the opportunity, is also a sin? Friend, when you add up both your sins of commission and your sins of omission, you have no hope of entering God's Kingdom on your own merits. Your only hope is to cast yourself on the mercy of God. Your only hope is to trust in His amazing grace. Romans 6:23 says, "the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." Receive that gift while you still have opportunity.

We see something else in our text:

B. No Excuses Will Be Acceptable – They will try to defend their inaction by saying in v.44, "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?" They were right. They did not see the physical presence of Jesus in person. But we read in v.45, "Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me." Their self-centered failure to minister to God's people was a failure to minister to Christ Himself.

Friend, no excuse for your sin will be acceptable to a holy God. Don't think for a minute that you will be able to talk your way out of condemnation. You may be pretty good at that in this life, but it will not work when you stand before Jesus Christ, who has eyes as flames of fire. All your excuses will be consumed like dry tinder in His presence.

Finally, we see the worst truth of all. Instead of entering into God's Kingdom:

C. They Will Be Condemned to Hell – There are a lot of preachers these days who don't say a word about hell. How can a preacher who claims to know Jesus not say anything about hell, when Jesus Himself talked so much about it? We see several truths about hell in this text of Scripture. First, it is a place of punishment. Jesus says in v.46, "And these will go away into everlasting punishment...." That punishment is described in v.41, "Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels." Hell means separation. It is even at times pictured as a bottomless pit (Rev. 9:1, 2; 11:7; 17:8; 20:1, 3). Thus they sink away endlessly from the presence of God and of the Lamb. Furthermore, hell is described as a place of fire. Since hell was prepared for the devil and his fellow demons, and since they are spirit beings, we can't know exactly what kind of fire is intended. But I can assure you it must be as bad or worse than the fire that we are familiar with. The worst thing about hell is the fact that there is no end to it. It is "everlasting." Its grasp is irreversible. Many times we read that the fire of hell is unquenchable. What a contrast between everlasting life on the one hand, and everlasting punishment on the other (v.46).

By the way, we see here that hell was not originally created for people. V.41 says it was "prepared for the devil and his angels." In contrast, we see in v.34 that the kingdom was prepared for people. It's not God's purpose or plan that you go to hell. It is His will and desire that you enter into His kingdom. You were created for fellowship with God. We read in 2 Pet. 3:9 that God is "not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance." Jesus does not want anyone to go to hell. In fact, He suffered incredibly and died to save you from that terrible

place. But if you refuse to repent of sin, and if you fail to believe in Christ, then you will surely share the destiny of the devil.

If I were driving on a country road at night and discovered that a bridge had washed out, and yet did nothing to warn others of the danger, what kind of man would I be? Even so, I must warn of the danger of hell that Jesus gives here and elsewhere in Scripture.

Some people don't want to believe God will punish unbelievers eternally in a place called hell. Well listen, your unbelief has no bearing on whether or not there is a hell. Don't you think the devil deserves to burn in hell? Jesus Himself says it was originally created for the devil and his angels. Don't you believe a man like Hitler deserves to burn in hell? Don't you believe the child molester deserves to burn in hell? Don't you believe the men who flew those jets into the World Trade Center and killed almost 3000 people deserve to burn in hell? Oh, we believe in hell, it's just a matter of who will go there. Well I choose to believe Jesus! Hell is not just for the worst sinners, but for *all* sinners who refuse God's offer of mercy and grace.

Those of us who are Christians need to do all we can to save people from such a terrible place. Will you pray for the lost? Will you share your faith with the lost? Will you back up your verbal witness with a good life-witness of love, good works, and clean living? Will you invite non-Christians to church, where they can hear the Gospel? We ought to have the same concern for the lost as Paul did for his unsaved Jewish brethren (Rom. 9:1-3; 10:1-2).

Conclusion: God sent His Son Jesus to die on a cross, to save you from hell, and to enable you to live the right kind of life. He doesn't want you to go to hell. Jesus endured hell-like conditions to save you. Have you received Christ as your Savior? Does your life manifest the fruit of salvation? If not, I would not allow another day to go by without repenting of my sin and trusting in Christ as my Savior. Make Him Lord of your life today!

Sources: Ronald A. Beers, ed., *Life Application Study Bible* (Tyndale House & Zondervan, 1991); William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1973); John MacArthur, Jr., *Signs of Christ's Return: Matthew 24-25* (Panorama City, CA: Word of Grace Communications, 1987); Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture, Vol 6* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House); J. Vernon McGee, *Thru The Bible*, Vol. 4 (Pasadena, CA: Thru The Bible Radio, 1983); John Phillips, *Exploring The Gospel of Matthew: An Expository Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1999); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [Ver. 5:30] (Ontario: onlinebible.net, 2017); Michael J. Wilkins, *The NIV Application Commentary: Matthew* Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004). Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).