

## Matthew 25:31-46

### Introduction

This morning, we come to the end of the Olivet Discourse, which is also the last of the five discourses in Matthew. It all started with the disciples' question about the destruction of the temple and the Parousia of Jesus at the end of the age. In Jesus' response, He has fortified our hearts to live in hope. We are to view all of the painful labor pains of this age as the sure and certain signs of His coming – knowing that the one who endures to the end will be saved. We must not be surprised at trials and tribulations or worry that God is not in control. Jesus has told us all things in advance. But in the midst of these labor pains, we can know that the Gospel will go out, and that it will conquer in every generation to the very end of the age. Immediately after the tribulations of this age, the Son of Man will come on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. 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.

This is the Christian hope. This is *why* all Christians should be living every day with uplifted faces, waiting for the appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ. But waiting doesn't just mean watching and looking to the heavens. It means *living* every day in light of the fact that His coming could be today (remember the parable of the two servants). It means *preparing* every day in light of the fact that His coming could still be delayed (remember the parable of the ten virgins). We must *live* to be *ready*, because the outcome of Jesus' return is a matter either of eternal life or eternal weeping and gnashing of teeth. By faith, we need to be taking full advantage of the responsibilities and opportunities that God has entrusted to us in light of our unique abilities and resources in order that we might have something to give back to Him – who has given everything to us (remember the parable of the talents). This is how we know that we are not pretenders. This is what it looks like to have the full assurance of hope. This is what it means to be *ready*.

But now in order that none of us might ever waver, Jesus brings us to that final Day of Judgment.

**I. 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.

The *Son of Man*, in His *glory*, with *all the angels*, sitting on his *glorious throne*. This is *it*. This is the moment to which the whole history of the world has been moving, and *is* moving even today. Jesus has chosen His words in order to clearly set before our minds the awesomeness of that day. “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne.”

The point is not that He wasn't already sitting on His glorious throne. That He has been doing since He first ascended to the right hand of God. The point is that now His royal authority will be seen by all the world. And now He will sit on his throne specifically in His capacity as the *Judge* of all the world. Every knee will bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. Even the enemies of Jesus will come cringing before him, feigning obedience (Psalm 81:15; 18:44; 66:3).

“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne.” Do our hearts *tremble* at the thought? And even as we tremble, do we *greatly long* for this day to come?

**II. Matthew 25:32–33** — 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. And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left.

No one will be missing.

Every soul of every human being who has ever existed in all the history of the world will be gathered there on that day – including you – and including me.

We know from the context that “all the *nations*” is a reference to all **humanity**.

In chapter 28, Jesus will commission His disciples to go out and “make disciples of *all nations* (28:19).

In Acts chapter one, we find that this mission to “all nations” was to begin *in Jerusalem*, extend throughout *all Judea* and Samaria, and then extend even to the end of the earth (1:8).

And so now all of these nations without distinction, whether Greek *or Jew*, *circumcised* or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, or free are gathered together to stand before Jesus.

This is not just a judgment of Gentiles, as some have suggested.

From other passages of Scripture, we know that “all the nations” includes all the resurrected dead from all ages of history.

Jesus is not giving us a systematic, comprehensive treatment of the final judgment.

This is important for us to remember because a lot of wrong things have been assumed from Jesus’ teaching here simply because of things Jesus *didn’t* say, for *reasons* which we will see later – including everything from a judgment only of the *Gentile* nations who are *alive* at Christ’s coming all the way to the possibility of salvation by works.

What Jesus is describing for us, here in this passage, is the final, universal, “great white throne” judgment of all the human beings who have ever existed throughout all the ages of the world.

All the “nations” are gathered before Jesus, but the point here is not the judgment of governments or people groups, but rather of *individuals*. “He will separate **people one** from **another** as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left.” I will be there. You will be there. We will all be there. And on that day, you and I will be assigned to one of these two groups. I will be called to stand either on Jesus’ right, or on his left. Just as sure as we sit here today, so on that day, we will find ourselves standing in one of these two places. So the single, most important question that we have to answer every single day of our lives is just this: “Are we ready?”

We saw in chapter twenty-four that at the coming of Jesus, a separation was already made between the sheep and the goats as the angels were sent out to gather God’s elect. On that day when all the nations are standing before Jesus, it will already be clear to every individual what his or her verdict will be. In fact, if we’re going to press the *details* of Jesus’ words, then we should remember that before any pronouncement is ever made, the sheep and the goats have already been separated, and are already standing on Jesus’ right and on His left. The point of this

judgment is not to figure things out, and neither is it to tell people something they don't already know (cf. Rev. 20:11-15). The point of the final judgment is to *demonstrate* the absolute sovereignty and righteousness of God as Judge of all the world. And the point of Jesus' teaching about the final judgment is so that *today* we might be absolutely sure that we are *ready*.

**III. Matthew 25:34** — 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."

"Come." At His first coming, Jesus said: "*Come* to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Mat. 11:28). When Jesus returns, then we'll hear that glorious, wonderful word one more time – *come*. And I wonder – *how* will we come? Will we walk slowly and gravely, and with serious faces? Will we maintain all the dignity of our adult years? Or will we throw off all restraints and dance and leap before our Savior even as David did. I can imagine that our hearts will be literally bursting with joy as we skip and run into the kingdom.

"Therefore, the redeemed of the Lord shall come with singing unto Zion, and everlasting joy shall be upon their heads."

"Come, you who are blessed by my Father." "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has *blessed us* in Christ with *every spiritual blessing* in the heavenly places, even as he *chose us* in him before the foundation of the world." (Eph. 1:4). On that final day of judgment, the fundamental difference between the sheep and the goats will not be works, *or even faith*, but rather the undeserved grace of God who set His saving love upon those sheep before they were ever sheep – *before* the very foundation of the world.

"Come, you who are blessed by My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared *for you* (!) from the foundation of the world." At the very end, God's true children will see that their salvation was *never* in doubt. God has been preparing a kingdom *for us* since the foundation of the world – for us, whom He chose before the foundation of the world! And so on that final day, *we* will be caught up into the grand finale of God's purpose and goal for all of history. God's election in eternity past will come to fulfillment *in our salvation* and His *glory* for all eternity to come. Let us settle it in our minds *and rejoice* that on that day of final judgment, the fundamental *difference* between us and the world will not be our works, *or even our faith*, but rather the undeserved *grace* of God. This is the true meaning of "*grace alone*."

But this sovereign grace and blessing of God isn't something that He waits to reveal to us until the final day of judgment. Listen again to the Apostle Paul: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, *that we should be holy and blameless before him*" (Eph. 1:4). This is the same thing as to say that God chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should have a true saving *faith* – a faith that *works*." Even faith and its works are a sovereign gift of God's saving grace. And so on that final day of judgment, Jesus will go on to explain:

**IV. Matthew 25:35–40** — "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, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me." Then the righteous will

answer him, saying, “Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?” 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.”

Who is Jesus talking about when He says “one of the least of these my brothers”? The answer is simple, isn’t it? In Matthew, the “least” or the “little ones” is a description of *all* those who believe in Jesus, and are His true disciples (cf. Mat. 11:11; 10:41).

- ✓ Matthew 18:6 — Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea.
- ✓ Matthew 18:10 — See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that in heaven their angels always see the face of my Father who is in heaven.
- ✓ Matthew 18:14 — So it is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish.

When we hear Jesus speak about the “least” of these my brothers we know right away that He’s speaking of even the least of all His true disciples. But in case we still had any doubts, we also know that Jesus’ *brothers* are *all* those who do the will of His Father in heaven.

Matthew 12:48–50 (cf. 28:10) — [Jesus] replied... “Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?” And stretching out his hand toward his disciples, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.”

In other words, the “least of these my brothers” is not a third group in addition to the sheep and the goats. This is not a judgment of Gentile nations based on how they have treated the Jewish people. This is a judgment of *individuals*, both Gentile *and* Jew, and here the judgment is based specifically on how a person (whether Gentile or Jew) has received and treated the **disciples** of Jesus (the sheep).

“Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.” Did *what*? Well the answer is *not much*. Food and drink. Shelter and clothing. Companionship and encouragement in times of trial. These are just *basic* human needs. And as France points out, “in a society less materially favored than the modern Western world” (and more openly hostile to Christianity), these basic human needs would have represented “common experience.” Jesus is not calling us here to spectacular displays of goodness, but rather to simple, genuine expressions of *love*. The point here is not that anyone who is genuinely saved will open a food pantry in his home, regularly pass out clothes to the homeless in Chicago, shelter every homeless stranger that appears at his door, and volunteer monthly for prison ministry and hospital visitation. The point here is not just any act of charity or philanthropy. If that were the case, then even the world could boast. The point here is a genuine and practical love for the *disciples of Jesus*. Because how we respond to the *disciples* of Jesus **is** how we have responded to *Jesus Himself*.

- ✓ Matthew 10:40–42 — Whoever receives *you* [my disciples] receives me... The one who receives *a prophet* because he is a prophet will receive a prophet’s reward, and the one who receives *a righteous person* because he is a righteous person will receive a righteous person’s reward. And whoever gives one of these little ones even a cup of cold water *because he is a disciple*, truly, I say to you, he will by no means lose his reward.

It’s in light of this that the writer of Hebrews exhorts his readers:

- ✓ Hebrews 13:1–3 — Let *brotherly love* continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers [traveling disciples]... Remember those [disciples] who are in prison [for the sake of Christ], as though in prison with them.

We cannot truly be trusting in Jesus and yet fail to love His disciples. And we cannot love the disciples of Jesus and yet fail to provide them with food, and clothing, and companionship, and encouragement when they are in need. And we cannot be aware of the needs of Jesus’ disciples unless we are actively living with them and fellowshiping with them in the context of the local church. So we absolutely must take every necessary step to allow for true love of the brethren to continue and grow.

- ✓ 1 Thessalonians 4:9–10 — Now concerning brotherly love you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another, for that indeed is what you are doing to all the brothers throughout Macedonia. *But we urge you, brothers, to do this more and more.*

It’s absolutely *necessary* that we are *striving* to let brotherly love continue – and it’s absolutely certain that we will if we are truly among those whom God has blessed with His saving grace and love.

- ✓ 1 John 3:11–19; 5:1 (cf. 1 John 2:9–11) — This is the message that you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another... Do not be surprised, brothers, that the world hates you. We know that we have passed out of death into life, *because* we love the brothers. Whoever does not love abides in death... By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. But if anyone has the world’s goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God’s love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth. *By this we shall know* that we are of the truth and reassure our heart before him... Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the Father *loves* whoever has been born of him.

We must not be deceived. On that final day of judgment, our confession of Jesus will be demonstrated to be genuine by our *love* for His disciples, not simply in word, but also in *deed* – not simply by a love that talks, but by a love that *works*. Do we love the brethren? And do we love the brethren not in word or talk, but in deed and in truth? “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. For I was hungry and you gave me food... Then the righteous will answer him, saying, “Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you...? 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.”

**V. Matthew 25:41** — 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.”

Is it possible to imagine any words more terrifying? To the ones on His right, Jesus says, “Come.” To the ones on His left, Jesus says, “Depart from me.” Jesus calls the ones on His right “blessed by My Father.” Those on Jesus’ left, He calls “cursed.” The sheep are called in to inherit the kingdom prepared for them from the foundation of the world. The goats are sent out into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. I cannot imagine any words more terrifying. But *why*? What could possibly result in such a horrible fate?

**VI. Matthew 25:42–45** — “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 welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.” 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?” 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.” And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.

Once again, the point here is not just any charitable deed or act of kindness. If that were the case, then many idolaters and unbelievers would also inherit the kingdom of God, and some might even be expected to be the “greatest” in the kingdom of heaven. The point here is specifically “the least of *these* [my brothers].” *Because* they are the disciples of Jesus, therefore, a failure to *actively love* the disciples of Jesus in deed and in truth is nothing less than a flagrant rejection of God Himself. The very existence of the disciples of Jesus in this world brings condemnation to the world for its failure to *receive* and to *love* these disciples as the *representatives* of Jesus here on this earth (cf. Mat. 10:14-15).

Especially now, we see that Jesus has *tailored* His teaching about the final judgment *in light* of the brand new reality of the *Church* and of the spread of the *gospel* throughout all the world. For example, there will certainly be other standards by which we are judged in *addition* to our love for the disciples (Gal. 5:19-21; Rev. 22:14-15). But Jesus has chosen to emphasize this love for His disciples because it is the practical fruit most intimately connected with *faith in Him* and the sending of the Gospel to all the nations. To love and receive a *disciple* of Jesus is to love and receive *Jesus* Himself. This is why we are not confused when we remember that many people in the world will never have any chance of coming into contact with a true disciple of Jesus. These people will be judged not by their failure to love the disciples of Jesus, but by their failure to live in light of the law which is written on their hearts (Rom. 1:18-23; 2:12, 14-15). But for the present purpose of Jesus, this is ultimately *beside the point*, and we will only end up very seriously distorting His teaching when we fail to remember this (for example, those who see here a separate judgment of Gentiles based on how they have treated the Jews).

## Conclusion

Here in these verses, Jesus has specially tailored His teaching about the final judgment in light of His pastoral concern for the Church, and for the spread of the Gospel throughout all the world. It is absolutely necessary that we devote ourselves to loving the disciples of Jesus – because nothing is more certain than the fact that we *will* if we are truly among those whom God has blessed with His saving grace and love.

- ✓ 1 John 3:14–19 — We know that we have passed out of death into life, *because* we love the brothers. Whoever does not love abides in death... By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers... Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth. By this we shall know that we are of the truth and reassure our heart before him.

On that final day of judgment, our confession of *Jesus* will be demonstrated to be genuine by our *love* for *His disciples*, not simply in word, but also in *deed* – not simply by a love that talks, but by a love that *works*. Do we have a genuine love for all of Jesus’ disciples – a love that is *active* in deed and in truth? If we don’t, then on that day when the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him, and He sits on His glorious throne, He will say to us: “Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.” But as the writer of Hebrews says:

- ✓ Hebrews 6:9 — Though we speak in this way, yet in your case, beloved, we feel sure of better things—things that belong to salvation.

If we do genuinely love Jesus’ disciples, then as Paul says, may we always be looking for every opportunity to excel still *more and more*, so that we may continually *reassure our hearts before Him* – so that we may be *ready* – so that we may *know* that when the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him, and He sits on His glorious throne, then He will say to us: “*Come*, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.”