

The Sheep and the Goats

Matthew 25:31-46

It is often said that only two things in this life are certain, namely death and taxes. There is, of course, a genuine sense of truth in that expression. The idea, of course, is that nothing in this life is certain. But we will die, unless Jesus returns first. And that return is certain, as well! That is before us this afternoon. It has been a focus for many sermons now. Jesus predicted the fall and destruction of Jerusalem and the whole of the Jewish temple, prompting the earnest question from his disciples, "When will these things be?" And while Jesus spoke about the actual physical destruction of the temple in his response, that historical event from AD 70 serves as a helpful and specific sign and symbol of the final judgment that will follow at the end of this age.

I. THERE WILL BE A FINAL JUDGMENT.

A final reckoning. Of that judgment, there are multiple declarations of Scripture. The Bible leaves no question. For example,

Heb. 9:27 "And as it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment, 28 so Christ was offered once to bear the sins of many. To those who eagerly wait for Him He will appear a second time, apart from sin, for salvation."

That judgement will be universal, with application to everyone.

2 Cor. 5:10 "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ..."

Rom. 14:10 "But why do you judge your brother? Or why do you show contempt for your brother? For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ. 11 For it is written: "As I live, says the LORD, Every knee shall bow to Me, And every tongue shall confess to God." 12 So then each of us shall give account of

himself to God."

Each of us, believer and unbeliever, Christian and non-Christian. In our text this afternoon, we simply read,

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."

Thus the starting point for understanding this judgment is to recognize, and to believe, that,

A. Jesus shall return in glory at the end of this age.

Jesus shall return! "He will appear a second time." "The Son of Man comes in His glory." And that event will signal and represent the end of the age. There is no intervening age, no subsequent thousand year millennium before the judgment. He will return in glory at the end of this present age. As I noted last week on Easter Sunday, reading from,

1 Cor. 15:20 "But now Christ is risen from the dead, and has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. 21 For since by man came death, by Man also came the resurrection of the dead. 22 For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive. 23 But each one in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, afterward those who are Christ's at His coming. 24 Then comes the end, when He delivers the kingdom to God the Father, when He puts an end to all rule and all authority and power."

We learn more about that return in glory in,

1 Thes. 4:15 "For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord will by no means precede those who are asleep. 16 For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. 17 Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord."

Our parable this afternoon emphasizes one specific think about that return of Jesus in glory, namely its emphasis and focus upon judgment. So it is that,

B. Jesus shall return to judge the world at the end of this age.

That judgment is clearly implied by the reference to Jesus sitting on his throne!
v.31

And the universal, worldwide nature of that judgment is evident by the next verse,
v.32a “All the nations will be gathered before Him.”

This final judgment will be a judgment of the nations, a judgment upon the whole world. The book of Revelation makes that clear and obvious as well,

Rev. 20:11 “Then I saw a great white throne and Him who sat on it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away. And there was found no place for them. 12 And I saw the dead, small and great, standing before God, and books were opened. And another book was opened, which is the Book of Life. And the dead were judged according to their works, by the things which were written in the books. 13 The sea gave up the dead who were in it, and Death and Hades delivered up the dead who were in them. And they were judged, each one according to his works. 14 Then Death and Hades were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death. 15 And anyone not found written in the Book of Life was cast into the lake of fire.”

Notice how this judgment is described. The “books were opened.” There reference there is to two books. One is the book of life, a frequent biblical reference to the listing of all of God’s people. The other book, by contrast, is a listing of those who will

face condemnation, the book of death we might call it, what John there in Revelation 20 calls “the second death.”

Rev. 20:14 “This is the second death. 15 And anyone not found written in the Book of Life was cast into the lake of fire.”

Those two books define for us the great separation, and that is what stands out in all that the Bible teaches about judgment. There will be a separation.

II. THERE WILL BE A FINAL SEPARATION BETWEEN GOD’S PEOPLE AND THE WICKED.

I expect you are well familiar with the language of sheep and goats.
v.32-33

The sheep and the goats. Interesting, the image of goats isn’t used elsewhere in the Bible as representative of the wicked and unbelievers, but the reference to sheep is often the way in which God’s people are identified. In this parable of the final judgment, the goats become a helpful and useful label for all the others, all the non-sheep!

Let me emphasize just a few of the references to sheep, however, as the descriptive identity of God’s people.

Psalms 100:3 “Know that the LORD, He is God; It is He who has made us, and not we ourselves; We are His people and the sheep of His pasture.”

John 10:11 “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd gives His life for the sheep. 12 But a hireling, he who is not the shepherd, one who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees; and the wolf catches the sheep and scatters them. 13 The hireling flees because he is a hireling and does not care about the sheep. 14 I am the good

shepherd; and I know My sheep, and am known by My own. 15 As the Father knows Me, even so I know the Father; and I lay down My life for the sheep.”

Heb. 13:20 “Now may the God of peace who brought up our Lord Jesus from the dead, that great Shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant, 21 make you complete in every good work to do His will.”

1 Peter 2:24 “[Jesus] bore our sins in His own body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, might live for righteousness—by whose stripes you were healed. 25 For you were like sheep going astray, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.”

And back in prophecy of the Old Testament,
Is. 40:10 “Behold, the Lord GOD shall come with a strong hand, And His arm shall rule for Him; Behold, His reward is with Him, And His work before Him. 11 He will feed His flock like a shepherd; He will gather the lambs with His arm, And carry them in His bosom, And gently lead those who are with young.”

So God’s people are sheep, such a blessed identity. And we are the sheep of his pasture. In other words, we will inherit and inhabit that pasture. Or to put it more explicitly,

A. God’s people will inherit the kingdom of God.

The words of the parable express that explicitly.

v. 33 “And He will set the sheep on His right hand, but the goats on the left. 34 Then the King will say to those on His right hand, ‘Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.’”

The language of inheritance refers us all the way back to the

Garden of Eden, for the kingdom of God is the permanent and unchangeable restoration of that Garden, representing the presence of God with his people. So we read,

Rev. 21:6 “And He said to me, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. I will give of the fountain of the water of life freely to him who thirsts. 7 He who overcomes shall inherit all things, and I will be his God and he shall be My son.”

Peter makes a similar reference to this inheritance with his words,

1 Peter 1:3 “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His abundant mercy has begotten us again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, 4 to an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, 5 who are kept by the power of God through faith for salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.”

That is what Jesus is announcing with the parable of the sheep and the goats. God’s people, the sheep, will inherit the kingdom of God, the new heavens and the new earth. That will be the one aspect of the final separation between God’s people and the wicked which Jesus will establish with the final judgment upon his return. And don’t miss the emphasis that this has been God’s plan and purpose “from the foundation of the world.” In other words, the book of life was written before the foundation of the world! The book of life, the Lamb’s book of life as it is called, was written in the secret counsel of God’s own eternal purpose and design. So these are the words of that invitation given to God’s people at that final day of judgment, “Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.”

That same sort of language is used to describe the separation of God's judgment as well, for in Revelation 13 we read of those who rebel against God, who blaspheme him and serve the Satan instead, represented as a beast and a dragon.

Rev. 13:8 "All who dwell on the earth will worship [that dragon], whose names have not been written in the Book of Life of the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world."

There's the eternal separation among all people. Those whose names have been written in the Lamb's book of life, and those whose names have not. In other words, the sheep and the goats!

v.33-34

But then we read further of the goats on his left,

v.41

And, v.46

Without question, without a doubt,

B. The wicked will receive the curse of everlasting death and condemnation.

There is a hell. Fire and brimstone are a real description of that which awaits the wicked. It is real, and personal. It will not be that the wicked simply cease to exist; rather their existence will continue in what is described as "everlasting fire" and "everlasting punishment." Or, everlasting death. Eternal condemnation. Thus the language of,

Mark 9:42 "But whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were thrown into the sea. 43 If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter into life maimed, rather than having two hands, to go to hell, into the fire that shall never be quenched— 44 where Their worm

does not die And the fire is not quenched."

That's the curse upon the wicked. That's the condemnation pronounced upon the goats, those separated from the sheep at the last judgment. Now, let me say something extremely important at this point.

III. THE FINAL JUDGMENT WILL BE A JUDGMENT ACCORDING TO WORKS.

That is the clear point of this parable, both for God's people and for the wicked. I'll start with God's people, the sheep.

v.33-36

A question may arise in your mind at this point, something along the lines of "what about grace?" I though we were saved by grace, not by works. And that is absolutely correct.

Eph. 2:8 "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, 9 not of works, lest anyone should boast."

I could quote many other verses, but I don't think I need to. Salvation by grace through faith in Christ is the gospel, the gospel you hear from me every week. More importantly, it is the gospel proclaimed in Scripture from Genesis to Revelation. We are saved by grace, not by works. But at the final judgment, when our salvation is not in jeopardy, with the confidence that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, at the final judgment God will make evident our good works, works by which our faith is made evident. So we will be judged by our works, that is to say, our good works! Works that demonstrate the reality of our faith. Even as I continue to read in,

Eph. 2:10 "For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them."

So the final judgment for believers, for the sheep, is a judgment of works by which our works will testify to the reality of our faith. Or, to put it another way,

A. God's people will demonstrate their faith and be openly vindicated!

As we read in our Shorter Catechism, question 38, "At the resurrection, believers, being raised up in glory, shall be openly acknowledged and acquitted in the day of judgment, and made perfectly blessed in the full enjoying of God to all eternity."

That's what's going on in the descriptions of this parable. We are openly acknowledged and acquitted! Vindicated. Our justification is openly proclaimed and declared, vindicated by the evidence of our works. And notice the genuine humility expressed in this parable. Even when those good works are identified in verses 35-36, we read,

v.37-39

To which the judge replies,
v.40

So believers will stand before God on the day of judgment. Yet, not to fear condemnation, it will be a day when our good works are acknowledged and judged! That is the meaning of, 1 Cor. 3:11 "For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. 12 Now if anyone builds on this foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, 13 each one's work will become clear; for the Day will declare it, because it will be revealed by fire; and the fire will test each one's work, of what sort it is. 14 If anyone's work which he has built on it endures, he will receive a reward. 15 If anyone's work is burned, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire."

Then, of course, there is the final judgment upon the wicked.

B. The wicked will demonstrate their rebellious unbelief and be judged accordingly.

v.41-46a

That is what we more often think about when we refer to the final judgment, and at this point, tying together the meaning of this parable, the emphasis is that this final judgment is deserved. It is just. It is a righteous judgment. It is not there are some good people wanting to get into heaven but can't because God won't let them. And, it's not that God is unjust in showing his grace to some, because that display of his grace to those whom he has chosen to love in Christ does not mean that those who remain dead in their sin are somehow deserving of something other than condemnation!

The goats are punished, judged for their sin. The wicked are condemned for their wickedness. So even when we talk about God's eternal decree and his decree of predestination, we read these careful words in chapter 3 of our confession of faith, paragraph 7: "The rest of mankind God was pleased, according to the unsearchable counsel of his own will, whereby he extends or withholds mercy, as he pleases, for the glory of his sovereign power over his creatures, to pass by; and to ordain them to dishonor and wrath for their sin, to the praise of his glorious justice."

God ordained the wicked to wrath, "for their sin." There was a reason, a ground, a foundation. And, therefore, it is just. The goats are condemned, separated from the sheep, because they have sinned against the God who made them and rebelled against him in the wickedness of their own hearts. Thus, on that basis, God ordained them "to dishonor and wrath for their sin, to

the praise of his glorious justice.”

That justice makes God’s grace stand out even more clearly, for when considering the condemnation of the wicked, none of us should ever say anything other than this, “There, but by the grace of God, am I.”

And that perspective leaves us with nothing to do but to sing God’s praise for the grace shown to us. In that context, I will end with Paul’s own words and testimony,

1 Tim. 1:12 “And I thank Christ Jesus our Lord who has enabled me, because He counted me faithful, putting me into the ministry, 13 although I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an insolent man; but I obtained mercy because I did it ignorantly in unbelief. 14 And the grace of our Lord was exceedingly abundant, with faith and love which are in Christ Jesus. 15 This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief. 16 However, for this reason I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might show all longsuffering, as a pattern to those who are going to believe on Him for everlasting life. 17 Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, to God who alone is wise, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.”