

The Gospel of Matthew, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 32: The Sheep and the Goats

Matthew 25:31–46

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

This is the climactic scene of Jesus' teaching on His return, and it is among the most important passages in Scripture on final judgment. What is doctrinally at stake is the certainty and finality of judgment, the deity and authority of Christ as Judge and King, the reality of two eternal destinies, and the nature of genuine saving faith. Jesus describes one judgment of all the nations, conducted by Himself in glory, resulting in only two outcomes: eternal life or eternal punishment. There is no third category, no second chance after the verdict, and no earthly political kingdom that bypasses this judgment. Teach this clearly, and guard against both universalism (the idea that all will finally be saved) and any premillennial scheme that postpones or fragments the one final judgment.

The passage also teaches profoundly about the nature of saving faith. The sheep are marked by lives of practical love for the hungry, the stranger, the sick, and the imprisoned, while the goats are condemned for the love they failed to show. This is not salvation earned by good deeds; it is the truth that genuine, living faith inevitably bears the fruit of love (Galatians 5:6; James 2:14–17). Hold grace and works together rightly: we are saved by grace through an obedient, working faith, and the absence of love reveals the absence of that faith. Note too that both groups are surprised, which shows that true love serves without calculating, simply because it loves, while self-conscious good works done for show are a different thing entirely.

Beyond the doctrine, this scene aims to reshape how students see people and how they live. Christ identifies Himself with the least, so that mercy shown to the overlooked is mercy shown to Him. Aim to send students home both sobered by the reality of judgment and two destinies, and moved to let their faith take concrete, costly, joyful shape in love for the people Jesus loves.

Question 1

Student Question:

Jesus describes Himself coming “in his glory, and all the angels with him,” seated on His glorious throne to judge the nations (vv. 31–32). What does this scene reveal about who Jesus truly is, and how does it compare with the way the world saw the carpenter from Nazareth?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Let the majesty of this opening scene land. The same Jesus who, within days, would be arrested, mocked, and crucified, here describes Himself coming in glory with all the angels, seated on a

glorious throne, with all the nations gathered before Him (vv. 31–32). This is a staggering claim to deity and universal authority.

Highlight the contrast with how the world saw Him. To His contemporaries He was a carpenter's son, a traveling teacher, soon to be a condemned criminal. Yet He calmly speaks of Himself as the universal Judge before whom every person who has ever lived will stand. Only God can rightly claim such a role (Genesis 18:25; John 5:22, 27).

Tie this to the doctrine of who Christ is. The judgment of all humanity has been given to the Son. The One who will judge us is the same One who loved us and gave Himself for us. The Judge bears the scars of the cross.

Help students feel both the awe and the comfort. The fact that Jesus is Judge means perfect justice, nothing overlooked, no wrong unaddressed, but it also means the Judge is the Savior who knows us, loves us, and died for us. That is a steadying truth for the faithful.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Christ's deity and universal authority as Judge (vv. 31–32; John 5:22, 27)
- The contrast between the world's view of Jesus and His true glory
- The Son entrusted with the judgment of all humanity
- The Judge who is also the crucified Savior

Discussion Prompts

- What does it tell us about Jesus that He will judge all the nations?
- How does it change things to know the Judge is also the Savior who died for us?
- Why is it both awesome and comforting that Christ is the Judge?

Question 2

Student Question:

The King says, "as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me" (v. 40). Who are the overlooked people in your life that Jesus may be asking you to treat as though you were serving Him?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Here is the heart-piercing center of the parable: "as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me" (v. 40). The King so identifies with the hungry, the stranger, the sick, and the imprisoned that to serve them is to serve Him, and to ignore them is to ignore Him. This is a self-examining question, so make it concrete.

Help students grasp the staggering implication. Christ is present, in a real sense, in the overlooked and the needy. The person we are tempted to walk past, the one who can do nothing for us in return, may be the very place we meet Jesus.

Resist letting this stay abstract. Ask students to name the actual least of these in their own world: a lonely elderly neighbor, a struggling single parent, a difficult coworker, a prisoner, a refugee, a sick member, a child who needs patience. Christ is found there.

Move toward action. The point is not guilt but transformed seeing. When we begin to see Christ in the overlooked, ordinary acts of mercy become sacred encounters. Encourage one specific person each student can serve this week as though serving the Lord Himself.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Christ's identification with the least and the needy (v. 40)
- Serving the overlooked as serving Christ Himself
- Transformed seeing that recognizes Christ in others
- Ordinary mercy as sacred encounter

Discussion Prompts

- Who are the least of these in your everyday life?
- How does seeing Christ in them change the way you would treat them?
- Who is one person you could serve this week as if serving Jesus?

Question 3

Student Question:

The King separates all people into only two groups, sheep and goats, with two destinies (vv. 32–33, 46). What does this teach about the reality and finality of the judgment, and why is there comfort as well as sobriety in the truth that Christ Himself is the Judge?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Jesus divides all people into exactly two groups, sheep and goats, leading to exactly two destinies (vv. 32–33, 46). There is no middle group, no neutral category, no in-between place. This stark simplicity is meant to sober us about the reality and finality of the judgment.

Teach the finality honestly. This is the last scene; there is no indication of appeal, reversal, or second chance after the verdict. The decisions made in this life issue in eternal outcomes. Scripture is consistent: it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment (Hebrews 9:27).

But draw out the comfort as well as the sobriety. The Judge is not a cold, arbitrary power but the Lord who knows each of us perfectly and loves us. There will be no miscarriage of justice, no

detail overlooked, no favoritism. For those wronged in this life, that is deep comfort; for all of us, it is reason to live honestly before Him now.

Help students hold both notes together. The finality of judgment should make us earnest, both about our own readiness and about the lost around us. The character of the Judge should keep that earnestness from collapsing into dread. We face the day with sober hope.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Two groups and two destinies, with no third option (vv. 32–33, 46)
- The finality of judgment and the absence of a second chance (Hebrews 9:27)
- The perfect justice of Christ as Judge
- Sober hope rather than dread before the judgment

Discussion Prompts

- Why does Jesus reduce all people to just two groups?
- How is it comforting that Christ Himself, who knows and loves us, is the Judge?
- How should the finality of judgment shape the way you live now?

Question 4

Student Question:

The righteous are genuinely surprised, asking, “Lord, when did we see you hungry?” (vv. 37–39). What does their surprise reveal about how true, humble love operates, and how is that different from doing good deeds to be noticed?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

One of the most beautiful details in the passage is the surprise of the righteous: “Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you?” (vv. 37–39). They are genuinely unaware of having done anything remarkable. Their love had become so natural that they were not keeping score. This is a self-examining question, so draw it out.

Explain what this reveals about true love. Genuine love serves without calculating, without an eye on the reward, without even noticing its own goodness. The sheep were not performing for an audience or building a spiritual résumé; they simply loved, and Christ saw it.

Contrast this with self-conscious good works done to be noticed, which Jesus condemned earlier in this Gospel (Matthew 6:1–4). The difference is the heart. Love that keeps a running tally of its own kindness is a different thing from love that pours itself out and forgets.

Help students aim for that kind of unselfconscious love. The goal is not to do good deeds in order to pass an exam, but to become the kind of person whose heart so loves others that

mercy flows naturally. Ask where God might be growing that in them, and where calculation still creeps in.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- True love that serves without calculating or keeping score (vv. 37–39)
- The contrast with good works done to be noticed (Matthew 6:1–4)
- Love as the natural fruit of a transformed heart
- Becoming people of mercy rather than performers of good deeds

Discussion Prompts

- What does the surprise of the righteous reveal about real love?
- Where does calculation still creep into your good deeds?
- How is God growing in you a love that serves without keeping score?

Question 5

Student Question:

Jesus presents acts of mercy, feeding, welcoming, clothing, visiting, as the evidence that distinguishes the sheep (vv. 35–36). What is the relationship between genuine saving faith and a life of practical love, and how do we hold this together with salvation by grace?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question goes to the relationship between faith and works, so teach it with care and balance. In this scene, lives of practical mercy distinguish the sheep, while the absence of such love marks the goats. We must neither downplay the works nor misread them as a way of earning salvation.

State the balance clearly. We are saved by grace, through faith, not as a reward for piling up good deeds (Ephesians 2:8–9). Yet the very next verse says we are created in Christ Jesus for good works (Ephesians 2:10). Genuine faith is never alone; it inevitably bears the fruit of love. As James says, faith without works is dead (James 2:17), and as Paul says, what counts is faith working through love (Galatians 5:6).

So read this judgment scene rightly. The acts of mercy are not the price of admission; they are the evidence of a living faith. Their presence reveals a heart transformed by grace; their total absence reveals a faith that was never alive. The works show what the faith really was.

Apply it to the churches of Christ understanding of saving faith without distortion. We are not saved by faith only, nor by works that earn merit, but by an obedient, working faith that responds to the gospel and then expresses itself in love. Help students see their acts of mercy as the natural overflow of a heart that belongs to Christ, never as a means of putting God in their debt.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Salvation by grace through faith, not earned by works (Ephesians 2:8–9)
- Genuine faith inevitably bearing the fruit of love (Ephesians 2:10; Galatians 5:6)
- Works of mercy as evidence of living faith, not the price of salvation (James 2:14–17)
- An obedient, working faith rather than faith only or merit-earning works

Discussion Prompts

- How do we hold together salvation by grace and the necessity of love?
- Why is faith that produces no love a dead faith?
- How can you see your acts of mercy as overflow rather than payment?

Question 6

Student Question:

The goats are condemned not for doing evil things but for failing to act, the meal not given, the stranger not welcomed (vv. 42–45). Where are you most prone to the sins of omission, the good you could do but leave undone?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Notice carefully what the goats are condemned for. The charge is not a list of terrible crimes; it is a list of things left undone: “I was hungry and you gave me no food... a stranger and you did not welcome me” (vv. 42–43). They are judged for the good they failed to do. This is a self-examining question, so make it personal.

Teach the seriousness of sins of omission. We tend to measure ourselves by the bad things we have avoided, but Scripture also weighs the good we leave undone. James puts it bluntly: whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin (James 4:17).

Help students examine their own pattern of omission. Most of our failures of love are not active cruelty but passive neglect: the visit not made, the call not returned, the help not offered, the gospel not shared, the kindness left for another day. These are easy to overlook precisely because they are absences.

Move toward intentional action. The remedy for sins of omission is not vague guilt but concrete attentiveness, noticing the need in front of us and actually responding. Encourage students to name one area of neglected good and one specific step to begin doing it.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The condemnation of the goats for sins of omission (vv. 42–45)
- The good left undone as genuine sin (James 4:17)
- The subtle danger of passive neglect rather than active cruelty

- Intentional attentiveness and action as the remedy

Discussion Prompts

- Where are you most prone to leave good undone?
- Why are sins of omission so easy to overlook in ourselves?
- What is one neglected good you will begin to do this week?

Question 7

Student Question:

The King tells the sheep to “inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world” (v. 34). What does it mean that this inheritance was prepared before creation, and how should the certainty of that prepared kingdom shape the way you live now?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

To the sheep the King says, “Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world” (v. 34). Two glorious truths shine here: this is an inheritance, and it was prepared before creation itself. Let students savor both.

Explain inheritance. An inheritance is not wages earned but a gift received as a child of the family. The kingdom is not a paycheck for services rendered; it is the Father’s gift to His children. This guards against any merit-earning view even as the passage takes works seriously.

Marvel at from the foundation of the world. Before God ever made the heavens and the earth, He had already prepared this kingdom for His people. Our salvation is no afterthought or rescue plan improvised on the fly; it is the eternal purpose of a God who set His love on us before time began (Ephesians 1:4).

Apply the certainty. Because the kingdom is already prepared and waiting, the believer lives with profound security and hope. We are not striving to build our own place; we are walking toward a home already made ready. Let that certainty produce both gratitude and perseverance, and encourage students to live now as heirs of a sure inheritance.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The kingdom as an inheritance received by God’s children, not wages earned (v. 34)
- Salvation as God’s eternal purpose, prepared before creation (Ephesians 1:4)
- The security and hope of a kingdom already prepared
- Gratitude and perseverance as the response of heirs

Discussion Prompts

- What is the difference between an inheritance and a paycheck?

- How does it move you that the kingdom was prepared before creation?
- How should the certainty of that inheritance shape how you live now?

Question 8

Student Question:

Both groups address Jesus as “Lord” (vv. 37, 44), yet only one group is welcomed. How does this challenge you to examine whether your own faith is showing up in action, not just in words and worship?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Notice that both groups call Jesus “Lord” (vv. 37, 44). The goats are not atheists or open enemies; they address Him as Lord, yet they are turned away. This pointed detail challenges any faith that is merely verbal or merely formal. This is a self-examining question, so let it search the heart.

Connect it to Jesus’ earlier warning: “Not everyone who says to me, Lord, Lord, will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father” (Matthew 7:21). Saying the right words, even worshiping, even claiming Him as Lord, is not the same as a faith that actually loves and obeys.

Help students examine the gap between profession and practice. It is possible to attend faithfully, sing sincerely, and call Jesus Lord, while a real love for people remains thin. The judgment scene asks whether our confessed faith is showing up in how we treat the least of these.

Aim for integrity, not anxiety. The goal is not to make sincere believers doubt every act of worship, but to call all of us to let our confession and our conduct match. Encourage students to identify one place where their stated faith needs to become visible love.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The insufficiency of merely verbal faith (vv. 37, 44; Matthew 7:21)
- The call for confession and conduct to match
- Worship and right words as no substitute for love and obedience
- Integrity between professed faith and practical life

Discussion Prompts

- Where is there a gap between what you profess and how you live?
- Why is calling Jesus Lord not enough by itself?
- What is one place your faith needs to become visible in love?

Question 9

Student Question:

Jesus speaks plainly of “eternal punishment” and “eternal life” as the two final outcomes (v. 46). How does the Bible’s teaching on one final judgment and two eternal destinies confront both the idea that everyone will be saved in the end and the idea of a future earthly kingdom that bypasses this judgment?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the heaviest doctrinal question of the lesson, so teach it plainly and carefully. Jesus ends with the starkest of contrasts: “And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life” (v. 46). He uses the same word, eternal, for both outcomes. The destinies are real, they are opposite, and they are everlasting.

Establish the teaching of one final judgment. This scene shows all the nations gathered before Christ at His coming, judged together, and assigned to one of two everlasting destinies. The New Testament consistently teaches a single, universal judgment at the return of Christ (2 Corinthians 5:10; Acts 17:31; John 5:28–29), not a series of separate judgments spread across an earthly millennial age.

Confront universalism directly but graciously. Some hope that in the end everyone will be saved and no one will be finally lost. Jesus’ words here make that impossible to maintain. He speaks of eternal punishment as plainly as eternal life. To deny the one is to deny the other, since He sets them side by side in a single sentence. Love does not require us to erase what Jesus solemnly taught; real love warns.

Confront the premillennial error as well. There is no future earthly thousand-year political reign that postpones or bypasses this judgment. Christ is reigning now (Acts 2:30–36; Colossians 1:13), and His one visible return brings the resurrection and this final judgment of all people. The next great event is not an earthly kingdom but the throne of glory described here.

Hold the weight of this truth with pastoral care. The reality of two eternal destinies is sobering, and it should be. But Jesus reveals it not to torment us but to wake us, to drive us to Himself, and to fuel our compassion for the lost. The faithful need not face that day with terror, for the Judge is their Savior; but no one should face it carelessly. Let this truth produce in your class both holy seriousness and urgent love for those who do not yet know Him.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Two real, opposite, everlasting destinies: eternal life and eternal punishment (v. 46)
- One final, universal judgment at the return of Christ (2 Corinthians 5:10; Acts 17:31; John 5:28–29)
- Rejection of universalism: not all will finally be saved
- Rejection of premillennialism: no earthly thousand-year reign bypassing the final judgment (Acts 2:30–36)

- Christ reigning now, with His one return bringing resurrection and judgment
- The reality of judgment as a call to Christ and to compassion for the lost

Discussion Prompts

- How does this passage confront the idea that everyone will be saved in the end?
- Why is there one final judgment rather than a series spread across an earthly kingdom?
- How should the reality of two eternal destinies shape our love for the lost?

Question 10

Student Question:

Looking back over this final scene before the cross, name one specific person or need where you will let your love for Christ take concrete shape this week, so that your faith is shown to be alive.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Use the capstone to turn this towering scene into one concrete response. The whole passage insists that genuine faith shows itself in love for real people with real needs. The danger is to be moved by the scene and yet change nothing. Press gently against that.

Invite each student to name one specific person or need. Not a vague intention to be more loving, but an actual name, an actual need, an actual step: a visit to make, a meal to bring, a lonely person to include, a prisoner or shut-in to remember, a stranger to welcome.

Connect the doing to the loving. We do these things not to earn the verdict but because we love the King who loved us and who meets us in the least of these. Acts of mercy are how a living faith breathes.

Close in worship and resolve. The One who will sit on the throne of glory is the One who first served us, washing feet and going to the cross. Lead your class to love Him by loving His people, and to live this week as those who will one day stand glad before His throne.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Genuine faith expressed in concrete love for real people
- Acts of mercy as the breathing of a living faith
- Love for Christ as the motive for serving the least
- Living now in light of standing before the throne of glory

Discussion Prompts

- What one person or need will you respond to this week?
- How does loving Christ motivate the way you serve others?
- How can this class hold one another to lives of practical love?