

The Parables of Jesus, Teacher's Guide

Week 10: The Judgment

Matthew 25:31–46

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

This is the climactic and heaviest doctrinal week of the entire study, and it must be taught with both clarity and reverence. Several great truths converge. First, the certainty and universality of the final judgment: the Son of Man comes in glory, all the nations are gathered, and every person is judged. Second, the identity of the Judge: it is Christ Himself, seated on His glorious throne, the reigning King returned to judge. Third, the basis on which the judgment is revealed: practical mercy toward the least of these, which the King receives as done to Himself. Fourth, the two eternal outcomes: eternal punishment and eternal life. None of these may be softened. Jesus means this scene to settle on the conscience and to shape how we live.

Hold the doctrinal boundaries firmly, because this passage is a focal point for end-times confusion. This is the one general final judgment of all people, not one of several separate judgments. Jesus gathers all the nations at once before one throne and renders two verdicts; there is no warrant here for a special preliminary judgment of living nations at the start of an earthly reign, nor for separate judgments of different groups at different times. Likewise, there is no future earthly thousand-year political kingdom in view. Christ is already reigning, seated on the throne, having received His kingdom; He returns not to begin an earthly government but to bring history to its appointed end in resurrection and judgment (Daniel 7:13–14; Acts 17:31; 1 Corinthians 15:23–26). The kingdom the righteous inherit is the eternal kingdom, eternal life with God, prepared from the foundation of the world, not a political realm on earth. Keep the lesson anchored here and do not let it drift into charts and timetables.

Be just as careful on the relationship between works and salvation, because the basis of judgment here is deeds of mercy, and a careless reading turns the passage into salvation by charity. It is not. The deeds of the sheep are the natural, often unself-conscious fruit of hearts that belong to Christ; their surprise (“when did we see you?”) shows they were not tallying merit but simply loving. Scripture is one: we are saved by grace through faith, not by works, and yet the faith that saves is a living faith that shows itself in love and mercy (Ephesians 2:8–10; James 2:14–17; Galatians 5:6). The judgment reveals what was real. A faith that never moved toward the hungry and the suffering is exposed as no faith at all, while genuine faith in Christ bears exactly the fruit the King commends. Teach the works as evidence of a living faith, never as its purchase price. Then drive the whole scene toward formation: send your students home seeing Christ in the least of these and living, today, in light of the throne.

Question 1

Student Question:

Jesus describes the Son of Man coming in glory, seated on His throne, with “all the nations” gathered before Him to be judged (vv. 31–32). What does this teach us about the certainty and the universality of the final judgment, that every person who has ever lived will stand before Christ?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Begin with the sheer scope of the scene. The Son of Man comes in glory, takes His throne, and “all the nations” are gathered before Him. Teach the certainty of the judgment first: this is not a possibility but the fixed appointment of history. God “has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness” (Acts 17:31), and it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment (Hebrews 9:27).

Then teach its universality. Every person who has ever lived will stand before this throne, from every nation and age. No one is exempt, overlooked, or beyond reach. The great and the obscure, the religious and the irreligious, all are gathered before the same Judge. This levels every human distinction; the only division that finally matters is the one the King makes.

Note that the same Jesus who was judged by men now judges all men. The One who stood silent before Pilate now sits on the throne of glory. This is the vindication and exaltation of the crucified Lord, and it should fill us with both awe and hope.

Apply it honestly. A truth this certain and universal cannot remain abstract. Help students feel that they personally will stand in that gathering, and that this is not morbid but clarifying. To live well is to live in light of the throne we are all moving toward.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The certainty of the final judgment as God’s fixed appointment (Acts 17:31; Hebrews 9:27)
- The universality of the judgment: all nations and all people gathered
- Christ, once judged by men, now Judge of all
- Living in light of a judgment we will personally face

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean that the judgment is both certain and universal?
- How does it change things to know you personally will stand before this throne?
- Why is it significant that the One judged by men is now the Judge of all?

Question 2

Student Question:

It is easy to live as though the judgment will never actually come. Do you live with a real awareness that you will one day stand before the throne of Christ, or is that a truth you mostly push to the back of your mind? How would living in light of it change this week?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This first self-examining question asks whether students live with a real awareness of the coming judgment or keep it safely out of mind. Most people, including many believers, functionally ignore the judgment, treating it as a distant doctrine rather than a personal appointment.

Help students see how the awareness, rightly held, is not paralyzing dread but clarifying seriousness. Knowing we will give account tends to sober our choices, soften our pride, and reorder our priorities. The early Christians lived with the judgment vividly before them, and it made them bold, holy, and generous, not anxious.

Then ask what would change this week if the throne were vivid. Invite students to name where a living awareness of the judgment would alter a decision, an attitude, or a habit, and to let that awareness exert real gravity on the days ahead rather than remaining a doctrine on a shelf.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The difference between affirming and actually living before the judgment
- Awareness of the judgment as clarifying seriousness, not paralyzing dread
- The judgment as a spur to boldness, holiness, and generosity
- Letting the coming throne exert gravity on present choices

Discussion Prompts

- Do you live with a real awareness that you will stand before Christ?
- How can that awareness be sobering without becoming paralyzing?
- What would change this week if the throne were vivid to you?

Question 3

Student Question:

The One on the throne is Jesus Himself, the King and Judge before whom the nations are gathered (vv. 31, 34, 40). What does this scene teach us about Christ as the reigning King who will return to judge, and how does it correct the mistaken idea that we are still waiting for Him to set up an earthly political kingdom?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question fixes attention on the identity of the Judge, and it is a key place to teach the doctrinal boundary the church must keep. The One on the throne is Jesus, the reigning King. He

does not come to campaign for a throne or to establish an earthly capital; He comes already enthroned in glory, exercising the kingship He has held since His exaltation.

Teach that Christ reigns now. Daniel saw the Son of Man given dominion and a kingdom (Daniel 7:13–14), and the New Testament announces that this has happened: God raised Him and seated Him at His right hand, far above all rule and authority (Ephesians 1:20–22; Acts 2:32–36). He must reign until He has put all His enemies under His feet, the last being death, and then comes the end (1 Corinthians 15:24–26). The kingdom is not a future earthly government we await; it is the present reign of the ascended Christ.

Use this to correct the premillennial picture directly but gently. We are not waiting for Jesus to return and set up a thousand-year political kingdom on earth. He is King now. What we await is His return to judge the living and the dead and to usher His people into the eternal kingdom, the very kingdom the sheep are told to inherit, “prepared for you from the foundation of the world.” That inheritance is eternal life with God, not a seat in an earthly regime.

Apply it to hope. Because our King already reigns, our confidence does not rest on political outcomes or earthly thrones. The Judge on that throne is the same Lord who loved us and gave Himself for us. For those who are His, the coming of the King is not terror but the longed-for appearing of the One they love (Titus 2:13).

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Christ as the reigning King who returns to judge, already enthroned in glory (Daniel 7:13–14; Acts 2:32–36)
- Christ’s present reign until all enemies are subdued (1 Corinthians 15:24–26; Ephesians 1:20–22)
- Correcting the idea of a future earthly thousand-year political kingdom
- The inherited kingdom as eternal life with God, not an earthly regime
- The return of the King as hope, not terror, for those who are His (Titus 2:13)

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean that the Judge on the throne is the reigning King?
- How does the New Testament show that Christ reigns now rather than in a future earthly kingdom?
- What is the kingdom the sheep inherit, and what is it not?

Question 4

Student Question:

If the gentle Carpenter of Nazareth is also the glorious Judge who will one day determine your eternal destiny, how should that reshape the way you treat the people around you right now, especially those who can do nothing for you in return?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-focused question presses the identity of the Judge into present relationships. If the gentle Jesus of the Gospels is also the glorious Judge who will determine our eternal future, that truth ought to reshape how we treat people now, especially the ones who can do nothing for us in return.

Help students connect the doctrine to daily conduct. We often calibrate our kindness to a person's usefulness or status. But the passage that follows reveals that Christ is hidden in the needy and the overlooked, and that He notices how we treat them. The coming Judge is watching, not to catch us out, but because how we treat the least of these is how we treat Him.

Invite a concrete reorientation. How would today look if we treated each person as someone for whom we will answer to Christ, and in whom Christ may be met? Encourage students to identify one relationship or pattern of treatment that the reality of the coming Judge should change this week.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Letting the identity of the Judge reshape present relationships
- Refusing to calibrate kindness to a person's usefulness or status
- Treating others as those for whom we will answer to Christ
- Meeting Christ in the people we are tempted to overlook

Discussion Prompts

- How should the gentle Jesus being your coming Judge change how you treat people?
- Where do you calibrate your kindness to what others can do for you?
- What relationship should the reality of the coming Judge change this week?

Question 5

Student Question:

The King separates the sheep from the goats based on how they treated the hungry, the sick, the stranger, and the imprisoned, saying, "As you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me" (vv. 35–40). What does this teach about the connection between our love for Christ and our practical mercy toward the needy and overlooked?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question draws out the basis on which the judgment is revealed: practical mercy toward the least of these. The King points not to grand religious achievements but to food given, water offered, strangers welcomed, the sick and imprisoned visited. And He makes the staggering identification: "As you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me."

Teach the union of love for Christ and love for people. The two great commands are joined again here, as they were in the Good Samaritan. We cannot claim to love a Christ we have not seen while ignoring the needy we have seen (1 John 4:20). Christ so identifies with His suffering people, and with the needy, that mercy shown to them reaches Him, and neglect of them is neglect of Him.

Be careful with the phrase “the least of these my brothers.” Whether read most narrowly as Christ’s disciples in need or more broadly as the suffering and overlooked, the principle the King establishes is the same and runs throughout Scripture: God watches how we treat the vulnerable, and genuine faith expresses itself in mercy (James 1:27; Proverbs 19:17). Do not let the interpretive question blunt the plain call to practical love.

Apply it concretely. The judgment will not ask how much we knew or how impressive our religion looked, but whether the love of Christ in us reached the hungry, the stranger, the sick, the imprisoned. Help students feel that ordinary acts of mercy are not spiritually minor; they are where love for Christ becomes visible.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The union of love for Christ and practical mercy toward people (1 John 4:20)
- Christ’s identification with the needy and the overlooked
- Genuine faith expressed in mercy to the vulnerable (James 1:27; Proverbs 19:17)
- Ordinary acts of mercy as the visible form of love for Christ

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean that Christ receives our mercy to the needy as done to Him?
- How does this join love for Christ to love for people?
- Why will the judgment look at practical mercy rather than impressive religion?

Question 6

Student Question:

Jesus identifies Himself with “the least of these.” Who are the least of these in your own world, the people easiest to overlook, and how are you actually treating them? Name one person or group in whom Christ may be inviting you to serve Him this week.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-focused question asks students to name the least of these in their own world and to examine how they actually treat them. The exercise moves the doctrine from the abstract category to specific people: the difficult neighbor, the lonely widow, the struggling coworker, the prisoner, the immigrant, the poor, the forgotten in our own congregation and community.

Help students resist the impulse to keep the least of these safely far away, a cause overseas, a category in the news. Christ is most often met in the overlooked person near at hand, the one easy to step past, like Lazarus at the gate. The question is not whether we admire mercy in the abstract but whether we show it to actual people.

Then press for one concrete act. Encourage students to name one person or group in whom Christ may be inviting them to serve Him this week, and to take a definite step of mercy toward them. Seeing Christ in the least of these is meant to move our hands and feet, not merely our sympathies.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Identifying the least of these as specific people near at hand
- Resisting the urge to keep the needy safely distant and abstract
- Meeting Christ in the overlooked person we are tempted to pass
- Taking one concrete act of mercy this week

Discussion Prompts

- Who are the least of these in your own world?
- How are you actually treating the overlooked people near you?
- In whom is Christ inviting you to serve Him this week?

Question 7

Student Question:

Both the righteous and the cursed were genuinely surprised, asking, “Lord, when did we see you?” (vv. 37–39, 44). Neither group had been keeping a tally. What does this surprise reveal about the difference between mercy that flows naturally from a heart transformed by Christ and a calculated, performed religion done to be seen?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question draws out a crucial detail: both groups were surprised. The righteous ask, “Lord, when did we see you hungry?” and the cursed ask the same. Neither had been keeping a ledger. The sheep were not performing good deeds to secure a verdict; they were simply loving, and they had no idea they were serving Christ. The goats were not consciously snubbing Christ; they simply never bothered, and they had no idea they were neglecting Him.

Teach what this reveals about genuine faith. The mercy of the sheep flowed naturally and unself-consciously from transformed hearts. It was character, not calculation. This is the mark of authentic faith: it does good not to be seen or rewarded but because love has become its nature. Jesus warned elsewhere against the performed religion that does its deeds “to be seen by others” (Matthew 6:1); the sheep are the opposite of that.

Note the sobering side. The goats' failure was also unself-conscious. They did not commit dramatic atrocities; they simply did nothing, and never noticed the Christ they were passing by. Like the rich man with Lazarus and the servant who buried his talent, their condemnation lay in a settled, unnoticed neglect. Indifference, too, reveals the heart.

Apply it to self-examination. The truest measure of our faith is not the religion we display when we know we are being watched, but the instinctive mercy or neglect of our unguarded moments. Help students see that what we do when no one is keeping score reveals what we have actually become.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Mercy as natural, unself-conscious fruit of a transformed heart
- Authentic faith doing good from love, not to be seen (Matthew 6:1)
- Indifference and neglect as revealers of the heart
- Our unguarded moments as the truest measure of our faith

Discussion Prompts

- What does the surprise of both groups reveal about genuine faith?
- How is unself-conscious mercy different from performed, to-be-seen religion?
- Why is settled indifference as revealing as active mercy?

Question 8

Student Question:

The sheep served almost without noticing, while the goats failed almost without noticing; in both cases their daily, unguarded actions revealed the true state of their hearts. Is your compassion a settled habit of the heart, or is it thin, selective, and reserved for those who can repay you? Where is your mercy most lacking?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-focused question asks whether the student's compassion is a settled habit of the heart or something thin, selective, and reserved for those who can repay. It builds on the previous insight that our unguarded mercy reveals our true character.

Help students examine the patterns of their compassion. Many of us are generous toward those we like, those like us, or those who can return the favor, while our mercy thins out toward the inconvenient, the different, and the unrepayable. The sheep, by contrast, served the stranger and the prisoner, exactly the people who could offer nothing in return.

Then invite honest naming and a step toward growth. Where is your mercy most lacking? Encourage students to identify the place their compassion runs thin and to take a deliberate

step to extend it there, asking God to make mercy not an occasional act but the settled disposition of the heart.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Mercy as a settled disposition versus an occasional, selective act
- Examining whether our compassion is reserved for those who repay
- Extending mercy to the inconvenient, the different, and the unrepayable
- Asking God to make mercy the habit of the heart

Discussion Prompts

- Is your compassion a settled habit or thin and selective?
- Toward whom does your mercy tend to run out?
- Where is your mercy most lacking, and what step would extend it?

Question 9

Student Question:

Jesus ends with two destinies: “these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life” (v. 46). How does this passage teach the reality of one final judgment of all people with two eternal outcomes, and how do the works of mercy here function as the evidence of a genuine, living faith rather than as a way of earning salvation by our own good deeds?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the climactic doctrinal question of the entire study, and it deserves your most careful, confident handling. It brings together the final judgment, the two eternal destinies, and the relationship between faith and works. Take it in deliberate steps, and do not soften any of it.

First, the one final judgment of all people. Jesus gathers all the nations before one throne, at one time, and renders His verdict. This is the general judgment of the entire human race, not one of several separate judgments staggered across an earthly age. The wider New Testament agrees: the hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear His voice and come out, those who did good to the resurrection of life and those who did evil to the resurrection of judgment, in a single climactic event (John 5:28–29; Acts 17:31; 2 Corinthians 5:10). Resist any scheme that splits this into a judgment of nations now and individuals later, or that inserts an earthly reign between the resurrection and the judgment. Christ comes, all rise, all are judged, and the end has come.

Second, the two destinies, both eternal. Jesus says, “These will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.” The same word stands over both outcomes. We are not free to make the life everlasting and the punishment temporary; the grammar and the plain sense bind them together. Teach the reality of eternal life with God for the redeemed and

eternal loss for the lost with sobriety and without speculation, exactly as Jesus states it. This is the most serious truth a human being can hear, and it is precisely why the call to be ready runs through all these parables.

Third, the relationship between the works of mercy and salvation, which must be stated with care. The basis of judgment here is deeds of mercy, and a hasty reading makes this salvation by charity. It is not, and the passage itself shows why. The sheep did not earn their place; they were “blessed by my Father” and given a kingdom “prepared for you from the foundation of the world,” language of inheritance and grace, not wages. And their surprise proves they were not banking merit; they were simply loving out of changed hearts. The deeds are the evidence of a living faith, not its purchase price. Scripture holds this together perfectly: we are saved by grace through faith, not by works, and we are created in Christ Jesus for good works; faith without works is dead; and the only thing that counts is faith working through love (Ephesians 2:8–10; James 2:14–17; Galatians 5:6). At the judgment, the genuineness of faith is revealed by the mercy it produced, and a faith that produced nothing for the hungry and suffering is shown to have been no saving faith at all.

Fourth, keep the boundaries of the whole study intact here. There is no earthly thousand-year reign in this scene, no political kingdom, no second chance after the verdict. Christ reigns now; He returns to judge; and the outcome is eternal. The kingdom the righteous inherit is life with God forever. This is the great hope and the great warning toward which the entire series has been moving.

Land the lesson on grace and seriousness together, and on Christ. The same Jesus who will sit on the throne is the One who fed the hungry, touched the leper, and gave His life for sinners. Those who are truly His have His heart, and His heart moves toward the least of these. Press your students to make sure their faith is the living, loving, working faith that will stand in that day, not because their mercy buys heaven, but because the grace that saves always produces a merciful life.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- One general final judgment of all people at Christ’s return (John 5:28–29; Acts 17:31; 2 Corinthians 5:10)
- No separate, staggered judgments and no earthly reign inserted before the judgment
- Two eternal destinies, both everlasting, as Jesus states them
- Salvation by grace through faith, the inherited kingdom prepared as gift, not earned wages (Ephesians 2:8–10)
- Works of mercy as the evidence of a living faith, not its purchase price (James 2:14–17; Galatians 5:6)
- Christ reigning now and returning to judge, the eternal kingdom as life with God

Discussion Prompts

- How does this scene teach one general judgment of all people rather than several separate ones?
- Why must we take both destinies as equally eternal, just as Jesus states them?
- How do the works of mercy reveal a living faith without becoming a way to earn salvation?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back across this final scene. Jesus revealed the end toward which all of life is moving and showed that what we do for the least of these we do for Him. Name one specific way you sense Jesus forming you through this passage. What is the one change you most need to make this week to live ready for the day you stand before His throne?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The capstone gathers up this final scene and the whole study, pressing it toward one concrete change. Jesus revealed the end toward which all of life moves, not to feed speculation, but to change how we live today. Keep the class personal and practical.

Help students choose a fitting step. For some it is opening their eyes to a specific least of these and beginning to serve. For some it is making sure their faith is real and living rather than a profession that bears no fruit. For some it is simply learning to live each day in light of the throne. Each is a definite step toward being ready.

Close by reminding students that the goal of this study, and of this final lesson, is formation, not information. The King will come; the nations will be gathered; the verdict will be eternal. Invite each person to name one change to make this week, and let the group pray for hearts that love the least of these and lives that are ready for the day they stand before Christ.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Scripture aimed at a ready life, not speculation about the end
- Choosing one concrete step: serving the needy, examining our faith, or living before the throne
- Making sure our faith is the living faith that will stand in judgment
- Living each day in light of the coming King

Discussion Prompts

- What one change do you most need to make to live ready for the judgment?
- Is your step to serve the least of these, to examine your faith, or to live before the throne?
- How can this group encourage you to be ready for the day you stand before Christ?