

The Parables of Jesus

Week 10: The Judgment -- Matthew 25:31–46

Jesus has been teaching about His return, and now He draws back the curtain on the scene toward which all of history is moving. “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne.” After the parables of waiting servants and watching virgins, this is the moment they were all waiting for. The King has come. He is no longer the carpenter from Nazareth, no longer the man of sorrows on a cross; He is the glorious Judge of all the earth, seated on His throne with the angels of heaven around Him. And before Him, Jesus says, “will be gathered all the nations.” Not some. Not a select group. All the nations, every person who has ever lived, assembled before the throne of Christ.

Then comes the separation, and Jesus describes it with an image any shepherd would recognize. In the mixed flocks of Palestine, sheep and goats grazed together all day and were divided only in the evening. So the King “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.” The mingling is over. The two groups that walked the same fields and looked, from a distance, much the same, are now divided forever. And what determines which side a person stands on turns out to be something startling.

To those on His right the King says, “Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.” And His reason? “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.” The righteous are genuinely puzzled. When did we ever do these things for You? And the King answers, “As you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.” The mercy they showed to the hungry, the sick, the imprisoned, the forgotten, they were, without knowing it, showing to Christ Himself.

Then He turns to those on the left, and the words are terrible: “Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.” Their failure was the mirror image of the others’ faithfulness: “I was hungry and you gave me no food.” They too are puzzled, protesting that they never saw Him in need. And the answer comes: “As you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.” Jesus closes with one solemn sentence that has hung over the conscience of the church ever since: “And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.” Read this passage slowly, and read it on your knees. It is the final scene of the whole story, and it asks what your life is showing about whose you really are.

Group Discussion: Jesus says that what separated the sheep from the goats was how they treated the hungry, the stranger, the sick, and the imprisoned, the people the world overlooks.

Why do you think the King points to deeds of mercy toward “the least of these” as the evidence that comes out at the final judgment, and what does that reveal about the kind of faith that is real?

Personal Reflection: Both groups were surprised; neither had been keeping score of their kindnesses or their neglect. As you consider your own daily life, what would an honest look at how you treat the overlooked and the needy reveal about your heart? Where is Christ inviting you to see Him in “the least of these”?

Read Matthew 25:31–46

Study Questions

1. 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?
2. 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?
3. 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?
4. 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?
5. 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?
6. 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.
7. 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?
8. 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?

9. 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?
10. 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?

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: John 5:28–29, the hour coming when all who are in the tombs will hear His voice and come out, some to the resurrection of life and some to the resurrection of judgment; Acts 17:30–31, that God has fixed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the man He has appointed; 2 Corinthians 5:10, that we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ; James 2:14–17, the faith that has no works and cannot save; 1 John 3:16–18, loving not in word only but in deed and in truth toward a brother in need.