The Last Judgement

Text: Matthew 25:31-46

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**Scriptures:** Daniel 7:9-14; Matthew 25:31-46

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 96, 445, 337, 338, 184

Series: Occasional

**Theme:** Jesus foretells of His glorious return to judge all people

**Proposition:** Carefully examine your own lifestyle to see whether it evidences saving faith

**Introduction**

Many people have an inward sense that there is a time of reckoning coming. A day when the good and evil a person has committed in their lifetime will be judged. The Bible tells us that the Law of God is written on the heart of every person (Romans 2.15). So this widespread expectation of this Day of Judgement is not surprising. However, what will surprise many is the nature of this event at which everyone will be in attendance. Jesus gives everyone who will listen to him an accurate description of what is to come.

Our text comes at the end of a section of Jesus’ teaching about the coming end of this age. A point in time when Jesus, the Son of Man, will be seen coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory (Matt 24:30). A day and hour only known to God the Father (Matt 24:36). An event for which the wise are ready – as Jesus explains in the parable of the ten virgins (Matt 25:1-13). A final day of reckoning where account must be given of how the resources given by God to each individual servant were utilized – as Jesus explains in the parable of the talents (Matt 25:14-30). The Last Judgement where Jesus separates those who are destined for an eternity of joy and peace in the loving presence of God from those who are sent away to experience the everlasting torment of an existence separated from all goodness, truth and grace.

The Last Judgement is a coming reality which is referenced in many places in Scripture e.g.

* Rom 2:5 “*the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed*”.
* 2 Cor 5:10 “*For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil*”.
* Heb 9:27 “*And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment*”.

The mighty Word of God confronts us this morning. Those who are wise and desire to be ready for the Last Judgement will ask themselves the question “Does my lifestyle give evidence of saving faith?”

Let’s look at these words of Christ under three headings.

1. **The Kingdom of Grace (v34)**

In popular thinking the entrance into heaven is through ‘the pearly gates’ where Peter supposedly decides who will be allowed to enter in; like some kind of ‘celestial bouncer’ at the door. This erroneous idea comes from a ‘cut and paste job’ on two texts:

* Revelation 21:21 which describes not one, but 12 gates to the New Jerusalem - each entrance being made of a single pearl.
* Matthew 16:19 where Christ says to Peter “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven” after the Apostle confessed Jesus as ‘the Christ, the Son of the Living God’ (Matt 16:16).

The entrance to the Kingdom of Heaven is not through a pearly gate, but through a court room where Christ, the glorious Judge, presides in complete authority. Jesus describes the separation of a gathered assembly of all people who have ever lived. Nobody will be absent. He uses a simile from what would have been a familiar rural setting to his original hearers – a shepherd separating sheep from goats.

Our text has some features of a parable ‘an earthly story with a heavenly meaning’ – like the parable of the ten virgins and the talents which precede it. The sheep are not real sheep, nor are the goats real goats. In Scripture, sheep represent God’s people e.g. Eze 34; Matt 18:10-14. These sheep are placed to the right of Christ the Judge and King, and addressed with these wonderful words: *“Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world*”. We can learn much about the Kingdom of God from these words:

1. Entrance into the New Heavens and New Earth is strictly by **invitation only** –issued by Christ Himself in the word ‘Come’

* Not ‘stand at a distance’. Not ‘depart from me’. But ‘come’.
* It’s an invitation to be with Jesus forever.

1. Those who enter into paradise are those who have been **blessed by God**. When God blesses people, He grants them favour and bestows on them true happiness. Those who are blessed are those who have received gifts, not wages.
2. Those who enter into eternal life in the presence of the Living Christ are **not** those who have earned the right to be there. They are those who have had an inheritance bestowed upon them.

* An inheritance is a birth right which comes to those who are born into a privileged family. One commentator has expressed it this way “*The child that lies in yonder cradle, over which the coronet is emblazoned, may claim his broad ancestral estates simply by right of birth: and it is on that tenure that the saints hold heaven*”.
* The Apostle Peter writes this “*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you*” (1 Peter 1:3-4)

d) The ‘sheep’ gathered on the right of Christ the judge have not been arbitrarily put there by some random selection process. No, the kingdom which they are to collectively inherit has been prepared for them from the foundation of the world. God’s overarching plan to save a specific elect people especially for Himself has come to fruition. Each one of these individual people have been ‘chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world’. Each one has been adopted into God’s family through Jesus Christ, according the purpose of God’s will to the praise of his glorious grace (Eph 1:4-5). The name of each individual written in the Lamb’s book of life (Rev 21:27).

So what can we say then about entrance into the Kingdom of heaven? **It is absolutely all of God’s bountiful grace**:

1. Christ the Good Shepherd’s gracious invitation ‘Come’.
2. God’s blessed favours graciously given.
3. A supernatural spiritual birth from above which brings the guarantee of an inheritance – not earned, but conferred.
4. God’s inscrutable decree to choose each individual who would populate the New Heavens and the New Earth even before this world came into existence.

At the Last Judgement the Amazing Grace of God will be clearly seen by all. **“**so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil 2:10-11).

Today we can see this Great Grace in the words of Christ. **“**Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counsellor? Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?" *For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.* (Romans 11:33-36)

The ways of the Lord are perfectly wise, but not always what we would anticipate, as we’ll see in our next point.

1. **The Surprising Standard (v35-45)**

When you think about it, the standard for judgment expressed in words of Christ in Matt 25:35-45 are not what most people would expect. Given what we clearly know from Scripture about salvation by God’s grace alone, through faith alone in Christ alone, we might expect the separation of the sheep from the goats to be on the basis of faith; matching the truth of John 3:36: “*Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him*”.

Many people who do stop to think about a final judgement picture a ‘weighing of the scales’ where all the ‘good’ a person has done will be measured against the ‘bad deeds’ they have committed. If the good outweigh the bad they are in, if not, they are out. A variation on this theme is the Roman Catholic idea of being able to draw from a ‘treasury of merit’ to utilize some of the credits built up by super-spiritual saints so that you can get the balance weighing in your favour.

Now we don’t believe any of this non-Scriptural fiction, but perhaps some of us would be more comfortable with our text if the standard for the final judgement was expressed by Jesus like this:

1. For a pastor/minister. I wanted my Word preached and you delivered 100s of exegetically accurate, expository messages with engaging illustrations and appropriate applications. Come on into my Kingdom good and faithful servant!
2. For a church committee member. I wanted my church run in an orderly manner and you faithfully attended many meetings, contributed carefully to the discussions and ensured that the minutes were always accurate! Come on into my Kingdom good and faithful servant!
3. For those active in relational ministry both within and outside the church community. I asked you to make disciples of all kinds of people as you went about your daily life and you were zealous in this. Come on into my Kingdom good and faithful servant!
4. We could wish for similar benchmarks for musicians, Sunday School teachers, bulletin editors, Cadet & Gem Counsellors etc.

The surprising standard for judgement by Christ in Matthew 25 can be summarized as: **loving acts of kindness towards those in need.** However, the kindness in view here in our text is not towards every type of person but those who Jesus calls ‘my brothers’ (v40). Remember that Jesus radically redefined the meaning of family with the words **“***For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother*" (Matt 12:50). The focus here is exclusively on meeting the needs of fellow believers – those who are committed to following Jesus and doing God’s will.

This is not to say that we should **only** care for fellow Christians. As Paul writes to the Galatians: **“***So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith*” (Gal 6:10)

But here, Christ’s stated standard for entry into the Kingdom is loving kindness towards fellow believers “my brothers’.

Notice that Jesus identifies **six** basic human needs in our text:

a) **Food** – we cannot survive for more than a few weeks without physical sustenance

b) **Drink** – we cannot live without water for more than a few days

c) **Relationship** – we all need to be connected to others in family and community. As God the Creator said, ‘it is not good for man to be alone’. A foundational truth mirrored by the words of English poet John Donne wrote ‘no man is an island’. Strangers are people we do not know, people who may well not be connected to our local covenant community. People whose may well need close Christian fellowship. Loving kindness towards others includes doing all we can to ensure that they are not alone.

d) **Clothing** – we need to be covered both for protection from sun, cold, wind and sharp objects, but also to cover the shame which nakedness now brings in this post-fall world (Gen 3.7).

e) **Health** –when we are sick, we are often confined to home or hospital or rest home and lack much needed fellowship.

f) **Freedom** – when a person is in prison, either because they have been persecuted for their faith (e.g. John the Baptist) or because they are justly serving time for a crime they have committed, they also lack much needed fellowship.

Now not all these basic human needs are present in 21st century NZ in the way in which they were in the 1st century Israelite society when Jesus first spoke these words. We likely know fewer people in need of food, drink and clothing than Jesus’s disciples did back then. Some good questions for each of us to ask in light of these words of Christ include:

* What are the individual needs of the different people within our own congregation at this time?
* How would I find out their needs?
* Is every believer in our covenant community in close relationship with others here?
* Is there anybody in our covenant community, perhaps a visitor, who is a stranger to me? Someone I’ve never had in my home, never had a deep conversation with, never extended loving kindness towards?

How many people leave this building after the morning service with no offer of hospitality from others? Brothers and sisters who return home alone or just with their immediate family longing for closer connection, yet strangers to many in this congregation? Answer: “too many”. Ask yourself ‘Is there anybody I haven’t seen, in a church service or Bible study for a week or so, I could visit or call them to see how they are doing.

A broader question which we could ask with regard to our church ministries is: Does this work of service contribute to meeting some of the needs of those in our congregation with kindness? There is much good service in our church. Much we can give thanks for, but again the key question for each of us from our text is: “Does my lifestyle give evidence of saving faith?” As James says ‘I will show you my faith by my works’ (James 2:18). It is some of these faith-based works which Christ the Great Judge speaks about in our text before giving the final verdict, which brings us to our last point:

1. **The Eternal Verdict (v46)**

We’ve already seen the verdict of Christ the Judge 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*’. Notice again the word ‘Come’. What will make the Paradise in the New Heavens and New Earth even more blessed than the garden of Eden before the fall is the presence of Christ. To enter into the eternal state of glory is to be with Christ. To come into His physical presence and never to leave the Lamb of God.

See the surprise expressed by the sheep on Christ’s right: *'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?’.* These elect Christians did not live lives of service because they were trying to earn ‘heavenly brownie points’. No. They lived out their faith with lifestyles characterized by loving kindness towards fellow believers in need. It was the natural way for them to live, for their hearts has been changed to grow more and more to be like the heart of Christ.

In his words ‘For I was hungry’, ‘I was thirsty’, ‘I was a stranger’, ‘I was naked’, ‘I was sick’, ‘I was in prison’ Jesus identifies with the suffering of his disciples. As he said, "*Whoever receives you receives me, and whoever receives me receives him who sent me*” (Matt 10:40). Think of the cross. Was not Christ in need of those six basics as a human being? Food, drink, fellowship, clothing, good health, freedom from the captivity of Calvary?

But nobody met his needs with loving kindness. He died hungry, thirsty, abandoned by mankind and God His Father, in failing health, held fast to a cruel cross. Why such sacrifice?

So that people like you and me could be justified before God and called ‘righteous’ – having all the goodness of Christ’s perfect obedience credited to our account. So that people like you and me could hear those loving kind words on the day of Judgement “*Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world”.*

But also so that people like you and me would willingly, lovingly, kindly meet the needs of fellow believers.

Maybe someone who needs a meal, to be taken out for a coffee

Maybe a visitor here or a member who is yet a stranger to you so that you befriend them, and they become no longer a stranger

Maybe one of the many who leave this building on a Sunday to go home alone without any further fellowship who you invite to your home so that they are no longer alone (either as an individual or a family)

Maybe someone who desperately needs to be understood by someone like you so that you come to know how to meet their needs

Maybe someone who is unwell at home and needs a visit by you

Maybe a believer in our corrections system who desperately needs fellowship

How did Jesus, the kind King, answer the surprised sheep on His right? *'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers,you did it to me.*' (Matt 25:37-40)

*Brothers and sisters in Christ,* Jesus identifies with us in our need. He understands. He has suffered more than we have. When we minister to one another, we are ministering to Christ’s body – to Him. *‘the righteous’* in our text *are* those who have been justified by faith alone and who demonstrate the reality of that faith by their righteous acts on behalf of fellow believers in need.

The final verdict for the righteous is eternal life (v46). A perfect existence forever in the presence of The Lord God Almighty and the Lamb (Rev 21:22)

The Bible is clear, from many different Scriptures that **not all** people go to the New Heaven and New Earth. The ‘goats’, those on the left are cursed by God, they are characterized by a lifestyle of indifference to those who do God’s will. They are guilty of sins of omission having not:

Given food to hungry believers

Given drink to thirsty believers

Welcomed believers they did not know well into fellowship, extending to them kind hospitality.

Clothed believers who needed clothing

Visited sick believers

Visited believers held captive

All these sins are forgivable in Christ, but **only** if a person has saving faith in Christ. A person with saving faith in Christ hears the words of our text and checks their own life to see if they are living in a way which demonstrates the reality of their faith. Are there sins of omission which you need to confess today?

This is serious business, because the verdict which Christ will give on the day of Judgement is absolutely final. There is no subsequent court of appeal. There are to be no second chances to live life differently. Christ’s righteous words are chilling: '*Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels*” (v41), **“***And these will go away into eternal punishment*” (v46)

There are different views on the exact nature of the punishment in hell e.g. whether there is physical fire there or their worm which never dies (Mark 9:48). I don’t see profit in speculating here on this. However, we do know these things for certain:

1. Hell is a domain away from the presence of God, away from all goodness, love, beauty, peace and joy.
2. To be in Hell is to be in eternal torment.
3. To be in Hell is a fate anybody with any compassion at all would not wish on anybody else.

Our text certainly calls for each one of us to honestly ask ourselves the question: “Does my lifestyle give evidence of saving faith? – is my life characterized by loving kindness which meets the needs of other believers, both those known well to me and those who are yet strangers?”

Our text also puts the two possible eternal destinies for every human being before us. Should we then with guilty anxiety beat ourselves up for not having told everyone we meet about the last judgement? No. Should we be motivated to befriend all kinds of people we come into contact with so that we can present the whole gospel to them, sin, salvation, service and the last judgement. Yes definitely.

There is a need which all human beings have which is even more basic than food, drink, human relationships, clothing, health and freedom. That need is a living relationship with Christ. This relationship is expressed by Jesus Himself in these words: “*My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me*” (John 10:27).

So, brothers and sisters, let’s follow Jesus and meet one another’s needs with loving kindness, and let’s befriend others who may be God’s elect who need to hear the gospel from us so that Christ can meet their greatest need. There are so many in this city who desperately need to hear the gospel and come to Christ before the coming final day of judgement.

AMEN