

The Least of These

Matthew 25:31-46

In this final sermon in Matthew, Jesus describes the great judgment that will come upon all nations and individuals within them. So far in the Olivet Discourse Jesus has been predicting the destruction of the temple, which would take place within one generation, and warning His people to be ready for it (24:34-25:30). With the end of His life in sight, He tells the disciples what to focus on for the rest of theirs. When He comes in glory and they stand before Him, what will matter?

When He Comes in Glory

Jesus was born to young, poor, and unknown parents. He grew up in the nowhere town Nazareth with a stepfather who worked as a construction worker. His disciples, countrymen, and the leadership of Israel had a hard time squaring His ability with His human origins (Matt. 13:55-57; Jn. 1:46; Matt. 21:23). He lived what looked like on the face of it a very normal human life. Like a number of upstart religious figures, He ran afoul of the authorities and ended up hanging on a Roman cross. But then He rose from the dead, revealing that He had conquered sin and death, and ascended into heaven to reign at God's right hand. He is enthroned in glory and therefore comes in glory. Most interpreters believe Jesus is talking about coming in final glory and judgment in this passage. Regardless, it applies to that great and final judgment. Just as we can and should apply the parable of the talents to our generation even though the apostles applied it first to theirs, so if this is about what would be fulfilled in 70 AD it still teaches us how to live in Christ's kingdom before we go to stand before Him. Sometimes biblical prophecies have multiple or ongoing fulfillments. Peter Leithart gives the example of Jeremiah's prophecy about the new covenant begin first fulfilled in the restoration, 70 years after exile: "Days are coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah" (31:31). He also says at that time the city will be rebuilt, and this occurred in the sixth century before Christ (31:38). But the author of Hebrews tells us that Jesus brought in the new covenant and the old was ready to vanish away (Heb. 8:6-13). This passage sounds similar to what Jesus said back in Matthew 16, that He "will come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and then He will reward each according to His works. Assuredly I say to you, there are some standing here who shall not taste death till they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom" (16:27-28). When speaking of the judgement in His generation, He said the gospel would be preached in all the world as a witness to the nations (24:14). The only other time Matthew uses the phrase "glorious throne" is in 19:28 which describes "the regeneration" when the Son of Man sits on His throne in glory and apostles reign on twelve thrones. The Church today minimizes the fact that Jesus is enthroned and we are living in the regeneration (cf. Ps. 2:7-12; Is. 65:17-20). We need to understand history and our time in light of His glorious reign and its transforming impact (cf. 26:64).

Blessed of the Father

The Bible teaches that we are "justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law; for by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified" (Gal. 2:16). But it also teaches that we were saved *for* good works: "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them" (Eph. 2:8-10; cf. Tit. 2:14). Salvation by grace through faith goes hand in hand with good works, and it's God's sovereign grace at work through all of it. Notice that Jesus describes the sheep as *blessed of My Father* (v. 36). Calvin comments: "Among the Hebrews the phrase blessed of God means one who is dear to God, or beloved by God.... There can be no doubt, therefore, that

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Christ, in describing the salvation of the godly, begins with the undeserved love of God, by which those who, under the guidance of the Spirit in this life, aim at righteousness, were predestinated to life.” Like sheep you were all astray and only came home because Christ went and found you and set you at His right hand, the same place where Jesus reigns next to His Father (v. 33; Ps. 110:1; Ps. 16:11). He called you by grace, sustains you by grace, and enables to walk in the grace of good works. His workmanship works, and then He rewards you for doing it. Some may worry that if we promote good works we will produce Pharisees who try to climb a ladder into heaven on the rungs of their good deeds. This is similar to the way people conclude it’s a good idea to sin up a storm because the gospel causes grace to abound. Knowing people will abuse the gospel, Luther said, “Let them!” Preach the good news and let goats be goats. The sheep will act like sheep. Jesus tells His disciples to know they are servants, “[and] when you have done all those things which you are commanded, say, ‘We are unprofitable servants. We have done what was our duty to do’” (Lk. 17:10). This is the attitude the sheep have, not even knowing how much they’ve pleased the King (v. 37). Watch parents teach their child how to walk and you’ll see a glimpse of the joy and kindness of God in the good works of His children.

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The King rewards those who gave Him food when He was hungry, drink when He was thirsty, shelter when He was exposed and alone, clothing when He was naked, visited Him when He was sick and in prison (v. 36). When the sheep ask when they did any of these things, the King replies “Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me” (v. 40). Jesus referred to “the least of these” when speaking of giving a cup of cold water to one of them in the name of a disciple (Matt. 10:42). To receive a disciple, He said, is to receive Him (10:40). He said to stumble one of “these little ones” who believe in Him is worse than drowning (18:6), and to be sure not to “despise one of these little ones, for I say to you that in heaven their angels always see the face of My Father who is in heaven” (18:10). He is talking about children in His kingdom, both young but also old because children generally aren’t in prison. These are “the least”, those who seem unimportant in His kingdom. These works are both simple and vast. Some wonder if Jesus did them all in His life on earth since we don’t learn in Scripture that He did. As the Church we ought to set our sights on these things together but also must challenge ourselves individually. Jesus identifies with the poor as God always has: “He who has pity on the poor lends to the Lord, and He will pay back what he has given” (Prov. 19:17); “Whoever shuts his ears to the cry of the poor will also cry himself and not be heard” (Prov. 21:13). How do you treat Jesus? Do you have any time for Him in your schedule and budget? Do you see caring for His people as part of your responsibility? The goats on His left are like Cain who defensively asked if he’s his brother’s keeper (v. 44). He was. We long to see Jesus, to serve and thank Him, but now is the time to do it. God promised to bless those who blessed Abraham and chastise those who cursed him (Gen. 12:3). Jesus is the greater Abraham and all of human history from now until the final judgment centers on Him and His people. Call on Him in faith and be blessed by the Father and walk in the good works He has prepared for you.