

February 9, 2020

“The Final Judgment” Matthew 25:31-46

FCF: Reality of denial with “Final Judgment”

PROPOSITION: (anchor) Jesus is returning and He will bring the Final Judgment.
(magnet) We must live in light of that.

SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION:

Denial is dangerous. It’s true for dating (you really should pay heed to character flaws). It’s true for cars (you really should get that rattle checked). It’s true for addicts. It’s true for nations. A headline from last week, “Whistleblower Dies from Coronavirus” ([READ quote](#)):

In early December, China reprimanded Li Wenliang and seven other doctors for warning friends on social media about the growing threat of the new coronavirus. On Friday, Li died of the virus at the Wuhan Central Hospital, where he worked as an ophthalmologist. He was 34.

How are people responding? Li’s death fueled growing frustration over the Chinese government’s initial attempt to hide the outbreak. “There should be more openness and transparency,” Li had told *The New York Times*. Hundreds of thousands of users left messages under Li’s last post on the Chinese microblogging site Weibo, but government censors quickly deleted some of the more critical posts.

Understandably, many are blaming the Chinese government’s slow reaction and attempts to suppress initial information about the virus. It’s hardly surprising. But denial is dangerous.

And all the more so regarding the subject of our text this morning - the Final Judgment.

SCRIPTURE READING: Matthew 25:31-46

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

SERMON INTRODUCTION:

Let’s be honest. The idea of a Final Judgment is a barrier for many, an obstacle to faith, a “defeater belief.” That is, “How can God be full of love and wrath at the same time? How can God send good people to hell? In this day and age, how can you speak of a Final Judgment?” The pressure of such questions is so great that some have given up and turned to universalism - the idea that, in the end, God will redeem all human beings, maybe even Satan and the demons.

But let’s roll this out. Consider the implications. Imagine a God who never puts an end to evil, who never quarantines those determined to commit evil, a God who never tells school shooters, dictators, rapists, and gossips who refuse to accept His authority or help, “Enough is enough.” Where does that leave us? With no checks or warnings. With no comfort or assurance to victims. With no ability to refuse to take vengeance into our hands and wait for true justice.

This text is part of the Olivet Discourse. Throughout this teaching, Jesus has been giving an overview of future events near and far. He has told a series of parables, making clear the need for us to be prepared for His return and what that means. He has alluded to a Final Judgment. Now, towards the end, He presses in to unpack it further. Jesus is returning and He will bring the Final Judgment. He is returning and will bring the Final Judgment. We must live in light of that.

Especially as we consider these two things - the reality and criterion of His judgment.

I. THE REALITY OF JUDGMENT

First, the reality of judgment. Much is said as to how Jesus was a great teacher. And though He is more, that is true. Well, this great teacher is serious. And must take Him seriously.

A) Ancient Images

Jesus uses images here that would have been easily recognizable to His hearers.

1. Mixed flock

Shepherds in the 1st c. Middle East allowed the sheep and goats to graze together during the day.

2. Division of the flock

It was a mixed flock. But with evening came a division of the flock. The goats need to be kept warm and brought inside. The sheep, on the other hand, prefer to be out in the open air. And it's this practice that Jesus is appealing to here as an image, very much like one of His parables.

B) Final Judgment

All of which is meant to convey to us a vivid picture of the Final Judgment.

1. An ultimate division

A judgment in which we will see the ultimate separation, an eternal determination and division.

2. No middle ground

There will be but two groups, one sent to the right and one to the left. With no middle ground.

(READ Matthew 25:31-33) Those who were once mixed together will be separated out.

Application:

We must be careful as to where we get our ideas about what is to come. It's not safe to rely on *The View*, *The Good Life*, *Lucifer*, or *The Good Omen*. Which is simply to say this. We are not all going in the same direction by different roads. We are going in different directions by different roads. And only one of them has a good end. Now that's not a popular message. We are told to be more tolerant. But that is often said by those who are intolerant in their tolerance.

Illustration:

And they insist we should all live together accordingly. But is that possible? Is that even desirable? Think with me here. Clearly, we all have our own perspective on the truth. But that doesn't mean that all perspectives are equally valid or valuable. A neurosurgeon's perspective on the gray matter inside your head is different than mine. But which of us would you rather have performing brain surgery on you? If it really doesn't matter, why have specialists of any kind?

Jesus is reminding us here that there is such a thing as objective truth, good and evil, right and wrong, heaven and hell. And, hard as this may be for us to hear, the reality of a judgment.

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II. THE CRITERION OF JUDGMENT

And living in light of the criterion of judgment as well. It's worth asking, isn't it? What is the standard? What is He looking for? What sends one group to the right and one to the left?

A) What Jesus Has in Mind

1. The meeting of basic human needs

What does Jesus have in mind? Well, obviously the meeting of basic human needs is a part of this – our offering food, clothing, and companionship. Keep in mind that back then and in too

many places still today, hunger was commonplace. Water was scarce. Travel was difficult and dangerous. Clothing was expensive. Medical care was spotty. Prisons were dark and dismal.

2. Repetition > emphasis

Note how Jesus is not afraid of repetition in His teaching. Notice how He lists these six acts of service and then repeats them four times each. Why? Likely because repetition lets the list sink in. Jesus is calling attention to a ready willingness of the righteous, the blessed, to look after those with such needs. And He is also speaking strongly to the sins of omission by the cursed.

B) Who Jesus Has in Mind

Okay, so we see what Jesus has in mind. But who does He have in mind?

1. Mistaken views

By that, I mean who are to be the recipients of these acts of kindness? Some go too far, saying this refers to all who are hungry and distressed, obligating us to care for all in any need. But some don't go far enough, saying this refers only to apostles and missionaries and stopping there.

2. True view

The better view is to see that Jesus is speaking of acts of kindness done to His followers. A quick qualifier here. Scripture surely does teach some level of responsibility to the poor of any and all backgrounds. Just think in terms of the Parable of the Good Samaritan. That said, we are to care most especially for our fellow Christians of all backgrounds ([READ Galatians 6:10](#)).

Note the King's response to the questions ([READ Matthew 25:37-40, 44-45](#)). When Jesus uses the word "brothers," He is not referring to the "brotherhood of man" but to those with a spiritual bond. And we should add that in Matthew's Gospel, "the least of these" is always a reference to Jesus' followers. All of which is to say that those who Jesus has in mind are clearly disciples.

C) Why Jesus Has This in Mind

So that's the criterion for judgment. Who goes to the right and left is driven by how they treated Jesus' followers. But why? Why this special focus on the saints, His people, His own?

1. His identification with His own

Because of His identification with His own. This is made clear earlier in Matthew's Gospel ([READ Matthew 10:40-42](#)). Here's the idea. Jesus is speaking of a welcome for the messengers that reflects a welcome and an acceptance of the message. Which is to say that how we do or do not respond to His own and their needs reflects our response to Him and the gospel itself.

2. Our actions communicate what we truly believe

Another way to look at this is to say that our lives communicate what we truly believe. Our actions prove our faith. Or disprove it. Now some will protest at this point, "*How can salvation by grace and justification through faith coexist with the thought that Jesus inspects our works on Judgment Day?*" Good question. Here's the answer. Works are the evidence, not the ground, of salvation. Time and again, we read this in the Scriptures. By their fruit you will know them.

So where are we? Pulling all this together, here's what we can say. Such actions, such works of kindness and mercy, are not only works of compassion and righteousness but reflect where we stand in relation to the kingdom and to the King. So that's the criterion of judgment.

Illustration:

Think of the conversion of the Apostle Paul (**READ Acts 9:1-6**). Jesus refers to Saul's persecuting Him. That is how closely Jesus identifies with His followers. To oppose His own is to oppose Him. To persecute His own is to persecute Him. It's just what we see in Matthew 25.

Application:

How does this play out? Let's start at 10,000 feet and then bring it closer to home. Let's start with the global church. When we hear news of Christians suffering, persecuted for their faith in China, North Korea, in the Middle East or Africa, how does that impact you? When we hear reports of ancient Christian communities in Iraq and Syria, displaced and holding on by a thread, or Nigerian pastors kidnapped and executed by Boko Haram, what is our response? Jesus says they are "the least of these" and His brothers (and sisters). What of us? What do we say?

That's the big picture. Now let's bring this closer to home and consider the state of our relationships one with another. Here we're not talking about mercy and the provision of physical aid and comfort but mercy and the extension of forgiveness, absorbing the debt of what was done, of loving when it's tough, when it's truly hard. Now I know that's a big topic and there are nuances to consider. But let's not nuance this to death. Jesus says that on Judgment Day, the criterion He will use will be how His own were treated. That's the measure. So here's the question. How are His own treating one another? Does a rift with anyone in this room come to mind? Or someone at home - a spouse, a child, a sibling? How seriously will we take this?

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CONCLUSION:

This is better news than we know. And it is not so hard to envision. Love and wrath are not always incompatible. We know this from our everyday experience. Think with me. There is a correlation between how deeply we love someone and the extent of our anger. Out of love, we might get angry for them. Think of a mother's love for her child. Will she stand for shoddy attention from the pediatrician? Hardly. Out of love, we might get angry for someone we love.

And out of love, we might get angry with someone we love. Think of a sibling or close friend enmeshed in some self-destructive lifestyle or addiction that is ruining his life. Would you just sit idly by? Hardly. You'd be angry at him and confront him. You wouldn't worry about passing judgment on his behavior or offending him. Out of love, we might get angry with someone we love. There can be a correlation between the depth of our love and our anger. That's what Jesus is speaking of - anger born of love. That's why a Final Judgment is coming.

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