

SERIES: The Good News, as Reported by Matthew

SERMON: **The Least, the Last, and the Lost**

SCRIPTURE: Matthew 25:31-46

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The Olivet Discourse in Matthew 24 and 25 concludes with the Judgment of the Sheep and the Goats. Prophecy experts love to debate this passage. In fact, there are almost as many interpretations as there are interpreters. They argue over whether the sheep and goats are individuals or nations, over when this judgment takes place, over the basis for the judgment, and over every other conceivable issue one could imagine.

But it seems obvious to me that what Jesus is primarily trying to do is to focus our attention on the fact that there is going to be a final judgment and on the nature of the evidence which will be presented at that judgment to justify acquittal or conviction. When we examine that evidence, however, we discover a very disconcerting fact—the basis for judgment isn't what our evangelical theology usually tells us. We're taught that salvation is by grace through faith, not of works, lest anyone should boast. And yet in this passage Jesus seems (at least on the surface) to be telling us that eternal life or eternal punishment depends on how we treat the least, the last, and the lost.

Please give your attention to the reading of God's Word as found in 25:31-46:

*"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.*

*"Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.'*

*"Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?'*

*"The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.'*

*"Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.'*

*"They also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?'*

*"He will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of*

*these, you did not do for me.'*

*"Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life."*

This is the Word of the Lord.

There are a number of passages in Scripture that teach about future judgment. But no one in Scripture spoke more of judgment than Jesus Himself. He spoke of sin that could not be forgiven, of the danger of losing one's soul forever, of spending eternity in the torments of hell, and of existing forever in outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Yet it is extremely important for us to realize that nothing Jesus said or did was inconsistent with His gracious love. You see, one of love's supreme desires is to protect those it loves from harm. Jesus spoke so much of judgment because it was not His wish nor the Father's "for any to perish but for all to come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9). What more loving action could anyone take than warning about the eternal damnation that every human being faces apart from Jesus Christ? He sought to draw people to Himself, not only through the attractiveness of salvation, but also through the horrors of its alternative.<sup>i</sup>

Theologians have tried to make all kinds of distinctions between the various judgments mentioned in Scripture. They point out that there is the Judgment Seat of Christ, the Great White Throne Judgment, the Judgment of the Sheep and the Goats (mentioned only here in Matthew 25), the Judgment of Israel, the Judgment of the Martyrs, the Judgment of Fallen Angels, the Judgment of the Unserved Dead, and perhaps a few others. My own theology professor in seminary listed seven distinct judgments at different periods of time.

However, as I have studied Scripture over the past 35 years, I have come to think (though I would certainly not be dogmatic about this) that most of these passages are addressing not distinct judgments but distinct groups that are judged. It may be that there is really only one final judgment that has two major aspects—the judgment of the saved and the judgment of the unsaved. Granted some passages focus on the judgment of believers, some on Israel, some on the nations, some on the martyrs, some on the angels, etc., but that doesn't necessarily mean they are all separate events. I think the simplest view is that both the judgment of the saved and the judgment of the unsaved happen when Christ returns, though there is a final phase of the judgment of the wicked (called the Great White Throne Judgment), when Satan and his demons and the wicked who participate in the final rebellion at the end of the Millennium are all cast into the lake of fire (Revelation 20).

**When Jesus returns there will be a world-wide separation of people into two camps for the purpose of final judgment. (31-33)**

I want us to consider this proposition by asking five simple questions: When is it? Who is the Judge? Who are the defendants? What is the verdict? And what is the evidence presented?

**When is this judgment?** The answer is clear: "when the Son of man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him." I believe this takes us right back to chapter 24:30-31 and elaborates on what will happen at the Second Coming:

*“At that time the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and all the nations of the earth will mourn (no wonder, when you consider what is coming for the goats). They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory. And he will send his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect (His sheep) from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other.”*

**Who is the Judge?** He is clearly identified as the Son of Man, Jesus Christ. *“He will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate . . . Then the King will say . . .”* Often in Scripture God Himself is portrayed as the Judge, but on the last great day none other than the Messiah will be doing the judging. This fits with John 5:22, where we are told, *“The Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son.”*<sup>ii</sup>

**Who are the defendants?** The answer is that this judgment is universal. It will involve all the nations. Now some have interpreted this as a judgment of governments based upon how they have treated the Jewish people, but there’s nothing in the context to limit it this way. Jesus does speak of *“these brothers of mine”* in verse 40, but I can’t think of any time He uses the term *“brother”* in an ethnic sense. Often, however, He uses it in a spiritual sense.

Do you recall the passage at the end of Matthew 12, when someone told Jesus that his mother and brothers were standing outside wanting to speak to him? He replied, *“Who is my mother and who are my brothers?”* Pointing to his disciples, he said, *“Here are my mother and my brothers.”* And if someone should respond, *“Weren’t His disciples Jewish?”*, I would simply quote the very next words out of His mouth: *“For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother”* (13:48-50). One cannot limit *“brothers”* to the Jewish nation.

Besides, verse 32 makes it clear that this is not a judgment of governments but of the people within these nations. *“He will separate the people . . .”* (Verse 32).

**What is the verdict?** Everyone will be put into one of two groups: the sheep and the goats. There won’t be any hybrids; each person will be deemed either a sheep or a goat. The Sheep will be blessed and granted their inheritance in the Kingdom. The goats will be cursed and assigned to the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.

Why sheep and goats? Why not cats and dogs? Well, clearly these were the two most common domesticated animals in first century Palestine. Of the two the sheep were more highly prized. Also sheep are generally docile and gentle, while goats have a tendency to be unruly and can easily upset the sheep. Because they do not feed or rest well together, shepherds would separate them at night. In a similar way the Lord will separate believers from unbelievers. He will put the believing sheep on His right and the unbelieving goats on His left. What is the significance of this? The right-hand side was generally seen as the more favored side; for example to be at the ruler’s right-hand was to be in the place of highest honor.

**What is the evidence presented at this judgment to justify the respective verdicts?** Jesus focuses on each individual’s use of opportunities to serve the least, the last, and the lost.

But this raises a huge theological problem—not for the liberal mainline church, but for us who are conservative, Bible-believing evangelicals. The liberal church actually loves this passage of Scripture. Finding shelter for the homeless, soup kitchens, universal healthcare—these are the issues they think religious people should care about, rather than proselytizing people or foisting our social views on society. We should be taking care of the poor.

Now I find it interesting that the liberal church has this reputation, but in fact they do far less than conservative churches in actually providing for the poor. When is the last time you heard of a Rescue Mission staffed and funded by liberal churches? How many liberal churches do you think actually took mission trips to help the victims of Katrina?

Nicholas D. Kristof, well-known commentator for the *New York Times*, wrote an op-ed piece the week before Christmas entitled *Bleeding Heart Tightwads*. He wrote,

*This holiday season is a time to examine who's been naughty and who's been nice, but I'm unhappy with my findings. The problem is this: We liberals are personally stingy.*

*Liberals show tremendous compassion in pushing for generous government spending to help the neediest people at home and abroad. Yet when it comes to individual contributions to charitable causes, liberals are cheapskates.*

Google reported that average annual contributions reported by conservatives were almost double those of liberals. Conservatives are also more generous than liberals in nonfinancial ways, according to Kristoff. People in red states are considerably more likely to volunteer for good causes, and conservatives give blood far more often. Now I say that not to be self-congratulating to political conservatives or conservative churches, because clearly even conservatives are not doing enough to help the poor.

The fact is that we evangelicals have an obligation to wrestle with the teaching of Jesus here. Is He saying that the very basis of the final judgment will be whether or not we feed the hungry, house the homeless, clothe the naked, and visit the prisoners? No, I don't think He is. I want to offer a quote from one of the finest commentaries on the book of Matthew, one by Dr. Leon Morris, who first states the problem and then proceeds to respond to it:

*The passage deals only with works, which are seen as the test of whether one is saved or not; nothing is said here about grace or faith or Christ's atoning work. But we must bear in mind that this picture of Judgment Day does not give us a full account of everything that has to do with salvation; it does not include, for example, the fact that from the beginning of his Gospel Matthew has been writing about one who will "save his people from their sins" (1:21; cf. also 11:25-30; 20:28). This passage deals with the evidence on which people will be judged, not the cause of salvation or damnation. That grace is not part of the present picture does not mean that it is any the less significant. We must bear in mind that it is common to the whole scriptural picture that we are saved by grace and judged by works. The works we do are the evidence either of the grace of God at work in us or of our rejection of that grace.*

I think this is very important to grasp. Otherwise it would be very easy to conclude from the account of the sheep and the goats that the way to earn your way to heaven is to take care of the least of these. It is not. Nevertheless, taking care of the least of these is obviously an extremely important issue to Christ.

Now I think we are ready to look at the two sets of defendants at this final judgment: the sheep and the goats. With each of these I want us to consider the judgment rendered, the evidence enumerated, the shock expressed, and the justification offered.

### **The Sheep are blessed and granted their inheritance in the Kingdom. (34-40)**

The King pronounces His judgment first and then gives the evidence—in both the case of the sheep and the goats.

**The judgment rendered (34).** For the sheep the judgment is enormously positive: “Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.” By the way, here are two more arguments for the view that Jesus is presenting the evidence rather than the root cause of their eternal destiny. First, when Jesus commends the sheep, He offers them an inheritance. A child does not earn an inheritance but receives it on the basis of his being in the family. So also, the believer does not earn his way into the kingdom of God but receives it as his rightful inheritance as a child of God and a fellow heir with Jesus Christ (Rom. 8:16-17).

Second, the inheritance is one “prepared for you since the creation of the world.” The kingdom cannot be something they have earned because it was prepared for them by God before they were ever born! We should not miss the implication that they are God’s elect, which, of course, is exactly what Jesus called them in 24:31. They have been saved by grace, not by works, and the good deeds commended here in Matthew 25 are the fruit, not the root, of salvation. Nevertheless, the genuinely righteous deeds Jesus mentions here are measurable evidence of salvation.

#### **The evidence enumerated.** Verses 35-36:

*“For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.”*

Isn’t it interesting that when Jesus states the evidence, everything He presents deals with common, everyday needs. There is no mention of monumental works of faith or spectacular accomplishments—preaching before thousands or performing miracles or speaking in tongues. He speaks only of routine acts of kindness that help meet the needs of the least, the last, and the lost.

**The shock expressed.** Verse 37: “Lord, when did we see you hungry and give you something . . ., when did we see you a stranger and invite you in . . ., when did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?” Their surprise is not unimportant to the account, for it shows clearly that they had not done these things in order to merit salvation; it was just the way they

lived in response to what Christ had done in them and for them. It never crossed their minds that they were doing these things to earn favor with Him.

**The justification offered (40).** The King explains His decision in verse 40, as He replies, “I tell you the truth.” Whenever Jesus uses this phrase He is making a solemn and important pronouncement that must be heeded. “I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.” A most important question is “Who are ‘the least’ Jesus is talking about here?” Is this tantamount to the story of the Good Samaritan, where Jesus seemed to be defining “neighbor” as anyone in need with whom we happen to come into contact? I don’t think so. I think He chooses His words carefully here as He speaks of “one of the least of *these brothers* of mine.” He is talking about His followers. To receive and help a needy disciple of Jesus is to receive and help Jesus Himself.

Do we, therefore, get a pass when it comes to the homeless in San Francisco, or the prostitutes in Bangkok, or the hungry in Rwanda, or even the poor in Hilltop? No, for two reasons. First, we do not always know who is a follower of Jesus and who isn’t. But second, there are ample Scriptures which indicate that we have widening circles of responsibility: family first, fellow-believers second, everyone else third. Our first and highest responsibility is to our own family. Paul states that anyone who does not do so “has denied the faith and is worse than an infidel”(1 Tim. 5:8).

It’s also critical to provide for fellow Christians. Consider Galatians 6:10: “Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.” Yet that same verse tells us we have not discharged our duty when we have provided for family and church. To the extent possible we should do good to everyone.

Here is the primary point of the judgment of the sheep: to serve Christ’s people is to serve Him, and to serve Him is to prove one belongs to Him. Interestingly, the other judgment—that of the goats—is worded almost identically, except opposite.

### **The goats will be cursed and assigned to the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. (41-46)**

**The judgment rendered.** Instead of “come” it is “go.” Verse 41: “Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.” Isn’t it interesting that while the sheep are granted an inheritance prepared for them since the creation of the world, the goats are consigned to a place not prepared for them at all but rather for the devil and his angels. God never created mankind for condemnation but for salvation. That’s what John 3:17 says: “For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.”

But still much of the world ends up being condemned. Is that God’s fault? No, for the very next verse says, “Whoever believes in Jesus is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son.” He is

not condemned because he lacked opportunity, or because he made some inadvertent mistake, or because he committed some horrendous sin. He is condemned because he refused to believe in the One came to give him life, and whose fingerprints are found all over His universe!

**The evidence enumerated.** Essentially the same words are used by Jesus that He used with the sheep on his right, except that this time He claims they failed to do all the same things for the hungry, thirsty, homeless, naked, the sick and the prisoners.

**The shock expressed.** I can just hear them: “What do you mean? When did we see You hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison and fail to help you?” They are not conscious of ever refusing to give food to Jesus, or water, or clothes, etc. After all, Jesus is a pretty popular figure, even among the non-religious, to say nothing of those who are part of the professing church. Had they recognized Him they would surely have helped Him.

**The justification offered** for their judgment is again spoken with solemnity: “I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.” Their condemnation is expressed not in terms of their having done some awful crime, but in terms of their failure to do what is right. Sins of omission can be as serious as those committed.<sup>iii</sup> I don’t think it will count for much when they object,

*“But I gave to the United Way!*

*I put my change in the Salvation Army bucket!*

*I voted for universal health care!*

*I was in favor of saving the Tutsis from ethnic cleansing!”*

I think Jesus will ask,

*“What individual follower of mine did you help?*

*When did you go out of your way to visit a shut-in from your church?*

*Did you support any missionaries so that they could spread the Gospel?*

*How often did you give something sacrificial to the benevolence fund so that needy people in your own spiritual family would be provided for?”*

### **The sentence is carried out. (46)**

Verse 46" “Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.” By the way, there are many, even some in the evangelical camp, who are today questioning the doctrine of eternal punishment in hell. They argue that it is barbaric to think that God would allow people who only lived a few decades on earth to spend the rest of eternity in hell. If they don’t actually promote universalism (the view that everyone eventually will go to heaven) they prefer to think of unbelievers just going out of existence. They call it “annihilationism.”

Well, frankly, I prefer to think that too, but can’t, because the Bible doesn’t allow it. I don’t have time to preach the doctrine of hell this morning, but I point out just one simple fact here: the word “eternal” that is used of punishment is the same word that is used in the same verse of eternal life. If hell is not forever, then heaven must not be either.

Frankly, the elimination of eternal punishment from the Bible ultimately means the loss of the Gospel. It extracts the teeth of the Law and diminishes the holiness of God. To me the wonder is not that Jesus will one day come in glory to judge the world but that He first came in humility to save sinners. The marvel is not that God promises to condemn sinners to hell for their sin but that He first offers to deliver them from their sins and allow them to spend eternity with Him.<sup>iv</sup>

**Conclusion:** I suspect we are going to be faced with more opportunity over the next year or two to be obedient on this matter of responding to “the least of these brothers of mine” than we have ever had in most of our lifetimes. If the economy continues to tank there will be many believers who are threatened with loss of their jobs and maybe their homes. Our staff and Trustees have worked very hard to pare over \$150,000 out of the budget we presented at the Annual Meeting in October, not because we are in financial trouble as a church; in fact, we ended the year in the black, we have no debt, and we have the strongest reserves we have ever had. Rather it’s because we want to be in a position to fulfill our responsibility to our own families and others in case of dire emergency, in addition to meeting the basic needs of the church.

But there is another application I want to make of this sermon, and it’s regarding our outreach to the unbelieving community.

On February 4, 1994 Mother Teresa was invited to speak at the National Prayer Breakfast in Washington, D.C. President Clinton and his wife were sitting on the front row, and many cabinet members and political leaders from the Clinton administration were present.

There were a number of topics Mother Teresa could have addressed that would have generated accolades from the powers that be—she could have spoken of the power of prayer or the need to love one another or the goodness of America—everyone would have eaten that up. But instead she focused her remarks on the least of these. Standing before political leaders who had done more to make abortion legal and acceptable than any before them in history, she spoke with power and conviction:

*I feel that the greatest destroyer of peace today is abortion, because it is a war against the child, a direct killing of the innocent child, murder by the mother herself. And if we accept that a mother can kill even her own child, how can we tell other people not to kill one another? Please don’t kill the child. I want the child. Please give me the child. I am willing to accept any child who would be aborted and to give that child to a married couple who will love the child and be loved by the child. From our children’s home in Calcutta alone, we have saved over 3000 children from abortion. These children have brought such love and joy to their adopting parents and have grown up so full of love and joy.*

That, friends, is an amazing example of the kind of attitude Jesus is talking about in Matthew 25. But even more important than being compassionate toward babies facing abortion is the need to be compassionate toward lost people all around us and to proclaim the Good News that Jesus is the Way to God. Our culture doesn’t want to hear that, but it needs to hear it. It needs to hear that sins are forgiven only at the Cross.

One of the most powerful ways to gain a hearing for the Gospel is to meet the basic human needs of the least, the last, and the lost. I'm not saying that we should reach out to them only in order to gain a hearing for the Gospel; rather we reach out to them because God loves them, and when we do we automatically gain a hearing for the Gospel.

We often fault the liberal church for its activism toward the poor while failing to share the Gospel with them. But it is just as wrong and ultimately as demeaning to them to preach the Gospel without trying to meet their basic needs. May God enable us to hear and respond to these words of Jesus: "I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me."

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i. John MacArthur, *Matthew 24-28*, 111.

ii. Interestingly this is the only passage in Scripture in which Jesus refers to himself as King, though in 27:11, when Pilate asks Him if He is king of the Jews, He responds, "Yes, it is as you say."

iii. Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 641.

iv. Some are confused that the millennium is mentioned here in verse 46. Remember, the judgment we have been considering occurs "when the Son of Man comes in his glory." But isn't He supposed to reign for a thousand years on earth before the Eternal State is inaugurated? Yes, I believe He will. But every prophetic Scripture passage doesn't present us with a detailed timeline. Often the writer telescopes things in such a way that things near and far and sit next to one another. It is quite possible that the sheep and the goats receive their acquittals and convictions, respectively, at the Second Coming, but the carrying out of their sentences may await the culmination of the millennial kingdom. After all, the "then" of verse 46 indicates sequence, but it doesn't necessarily mean "immediately after." Dr. Grant Osborne, a professor at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, wrote in a personal email, "I think the phrase is a general time reference that covers the events of the Second Coming, millennium, and Great White Throne judgment."