

7.6.08

Jesus Talks about Judgment

Matthew 25:31-46

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This is the final sermon I am doing to address questions that arose in our Who Is Jesus series in April and May. **One of the most common questions I received had to do with judgment and in particular, what about people who are good, ethical, generous people but not Christians?** What is going to happen to them when they die? What happens to them on judgment day? If they never made a faith commitment to Jesus, do they automatically and without exception go to the less desirable “gated community” that lacks air conditioning and sea breezes regardless of how good a life they led? This is not a new question by any means. In the first century good Jewish and Christian believers were asking the same question of whether righteous Gentiles would be eternally damned. It was apparent to believers then as it is today that despite their idolatry or lack of faith, some pagans are very good, moral, ethical, compassionate people who you would be happy to have as neighbors, co-workers, friends or family members. So today I am going to try to briefly address that question that was on many of your minds as we take a quick look at what Jesus has to say about it in the 25<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Gospel of Matthew.

First, a little background on the context of Matthew chapters 24 - 25:

According to Matthew, Christians will be evaluated regarding our faithfulness to Jesus, our performance of assigned tasks (24:45-51; 25:14-30 using our talents), our avoiding bad behavior like dishonesty, a bad temper, lying, adultery and such as well as on the basis of our good deeds (25:1-13). All the parables in Matthew 25 are part of Jesus' final teaching in that Gospel before his betrayal and arrest. Each of the parables – the ten bridesmaids, the talents, and the sheep and the goats has to do with a time of judgment. Jesus says there will be a time when each person is accountable for the life he or she has led.

The image of the Lord sitting on a throne separating the sheep from the goats was not original with Jesus. It comes from Ezekiel 34:17-22 which we heard earlier in the service. *“As for you, my flock, thus says the Lord God: I shall judge between sheep and sheep, between rams and goats....thus says the Lord God to them: I myself will judge between fat sheep and lean sheep.”* I encourage you to read all of Ezekiel 34 when you get a chance. It is a chapter that had a significant influence on the Gospel writers in terms of the image of Jesus as the shepherd and God's people as the Lord's sheep.

Listen to Matthew 25:31-46, the last words of Jesus' last discourse, in which Jesus talks about judgment:

“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations (Greek - *ethne*) will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, *‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’* Then the righteous will answer him, *‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’* And the king will answer them, **‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’** Then he will say to those at his left hand, *‘You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’* Then they also will answer, *‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?’* Then he will answer them, *‘Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’* **And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”**

One of the most striking aspects of this vision of the last judgment is that **no word is mentioned about the faith of the people involved**. There is nothing that says that those on the “up escalator” had made a commitment to Christ while those on the “down escalator” were only those who did not make a profession of faith in Jesus. **Faith is not mentioned at all**, (which folks who really like the Apostle Paul and Ephesians 2:8-9 sometimes find a little unsettling). However, without getting too technical, it is important to note that the word translated as “nations” in verse 32 (*ethne*) is in Jewish Greek a technical term **referring to non-Jewish individuals and not to all people**. That would be a different word (“all” in Greek is *pantes*). In other words, Jesus is talking

here about the judgment of Gentiles or pagans, folks we would call non-believers, as opposed to Jews, Jewish Christians, and Christians in general, who will be judged according to Matthew based on our response to Jesus and his teaching as given in the Sermon on the Mount and elsewhere.

Paul also talk in Romans 2:1-29 (which is a tremendous chapter) about the idea **that judgment will be different depending on who you are, what you know, and what you have been exposed to** - we will all be accountable for what we have heard and had the chance to respond to. Paul says judgment will be for the Jew first, based on the law and then for those apart from or outside the law. In Romans 2:6-16, Paul writes that God, **“will repay according to each one’s deeds: 7 to those who by patiently doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; 8 while for those who are self-seeking and who obey not the truth but wickedness, there will be wrath and fury. 9 There will be anguish and distress for everyone who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek, 10 but glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek. 11 For God shows no partiality. 12 All who have sinned apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law. 13 For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous in God’s sight, but the doers of the law who will be justified. 14 When Gentiles, who do not possess the law, do instinctively what the law requires, these, though not having the law, are a law to themselves. 15 They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, to which their own conscience also bears witness; and their conflicting thoughts will accuse or perhaps excuse them 16 **on the day when, according to my gospel, God, through Jesus Christ, will judge the secret thoughts of all.”****

Both Romans 2 and Matthew 25 state that from the perspective of the Judge of the Universe, whether one is a pagan or a Jew, a Christian or a non-believer, **it is not just what we do but what we don’t do that can get us into trouble.** Jesus places a high priority on serving the poor and needy. Our life and service in Jesus’ name is a reflection of our personal relationship with Christ. Having experienced God’s transforming grace and love, we desire to share that grace and love with others. Obviously a person doesn’t have to be a Christian to serve others. However, all Christians are to serve others, Jesus will hold even non-believers to the expectation of self-giving love and care for others.

In 2 Corinthians 5:10 the apostle Paul wrote, *“For all of us must appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what has been done in the body, whether good or evil.”* Some people think love and judgment are incompatible. However, when we hear of a tremendous wrong against another person – as we do in the news each week – we innately feel that if there is to be justice for the victim, there must be consequences for the offender. In Matthew 25, the offenders in the parable Jesus tells are not criminals, some of the victims are in prison, rather the offenders, those who are guilty in the eyes of Christ are those who fail to see and serve Jesus in the least of those in their community – it doesn’t matter whether these people are Jews, Christians, or non-believers. When we respond to human need or fail to respond, we are in fact responding or failing to respond to Jesus. In the vision of the judgment, this turns out to be a surprise to both groups. Those who provide food, drink, clothing, shelter for the needy and visit the sick and imprisoned are surprised to learn at the judgment that there was a deeper dimension to their acts of compassion. In their deeds of love and mercy they were serving Christ.

Jesus says we are to see our Creator in hurting people all around us. Looking past the external conditions of a person’s life such as her clothes or his appearance, we see Christ in others and reach out to them for who is on the inside, not what we see on the outside.

A young boy was walking home through a park after attending Sunday School. He couldn’t stop thinking about the lesson for that day on Jesus’ parable of the last judgment. What impressed him most was when the teacher said, when you give something to another person, you’re really giving it to Jesus.

As he continued through the park, he noticed an older woman sitting on a park bench. She looked lonely and hungry. So he sat down next to her, took from his pocket a chocolate bar he had been saving, and offered some to her. She accepted with a smile. He liked her smile so much that after she had eaten the piece of chocolate he gave her more. This time they exchanged smiles and, for a while, they sat together in silence, just smiling at each other.

Finally the boy got up to leave. As he began to walk away, he turned, ran back to the bench, and gave the woman a big hug. And she gave him her very best smile. When he arrived home, his mother saw the big smile on his face and asked, *“What made you so happy today?”* He said, *“I shared my chocolate bar with Jesus. And she has a great smile.”*

Meanwhile the older woman returned to the little apartment where she lived with her sister. *“You’re all smiles,”* said the sister. *“What made you so happy today?”* The woman replied, *“I was sitting in the park, eating a chocolate bar with Jesus. And you know, he looks a lot younger than I expected.”*

Matthew, Paul and James all tell us, that faith without works is dead, it is useless, it is mere self-deception. If we have been touched by grace, our love for Jesus will be revealed in our treatment of others especially the poor, the neglected, the down trodden. The parable of the sheep and the goats teaches us that when the final Day of Judgment arrives, the verdict will already be in – there will be no exam to take, no questions to answer. God will already who belongs in heaven and we can trust God to do what is right for non-believer, Jew, and Christian alike. In Matthew 25, the only scene with any details picturing the last judgment in the New Testament, we are left with a word that is surprising to some of us – Jesus says in this passage that the most important criterion of judgment is not confession of faith in Christ, grace, justification, or the forgiveness of sins. What counts is whether one has acted with loving care for needy people. Jesus says those who will be rewarded are not necessarily the most biblically knowledgeable or those who make the strongest verbal claim to faith, but those, whoever they are, who have been diligent in serving the least of the Lord’s family in our midst. The Lord will know who is in by the way we treated Jesus when we encountered him in disguise in one another.

Prayer by Thomas a Kempis

“Grant me, O Lord, to know what I ought to know,  
To love what I ought to love.  
To praise what delights thee most,  
To value what is precious in thy sight,  
To hate what is offensive to thee.  
Do not suffer me to judge according to the sight of my eyes,  
Nor to pass sentence according to the hearing of the ears of ignorant men;  
But to discern with a true judgment between things visible and spiritual,  
And above all, always to inquire what is the good pleasure of thy will.”