

**“The Judgment”**  
Matt. 25:31-46  
November 20, 2005

**Intro.** This is Christ the King Sunday. The focus of our worship is Christ’s triumphant return and reign as King. The subject of the text is the final judgment. Jesus accomplishes this as King

The occasion for our text is Jesus preparing his disciples for his crucifixion and ascension. Our text for this is the last public teaching ministry of Jesus recorded by Matthew. The next two verses following our text are ominous. (Read Mt. 26:1-2.)

Matthew 24 and 25 are about the end of the age. 24 begins with the disciples asking details about Jesus’ return, and Jesus answers them. But he wants to make sure that they realize that there will be an extended period during which he will not be physically present, and faithfulness to him in his absence will be crucial. Matthew 24 underlines the fact that Jesus will return; in Matthew 25 he teaches about how they should live in the time while he is gone.

Bill has preached on some of this. In each of the three previous parables, the principal character is an important person who is away, and whose return is decisive. In the first, the emphasis is on being consistent and faithful while the master is away. In the second, the parable of the ten bridesmaids, the emphasis is on being prepared—being ready when he returns. In the third, the parable of the talents, the emphasis is on faithfully employing what he has entrusted while he is away.

The final scene is Jesus’ return in triumph as king. It is a breathtaking scene. All who ever lived are before him. Our text is Mt. 25:31-46.

(Dramatic Reading)

**Focus** What impact do you think Jesus wanted these words to have on his disciples?... and on us? Let’s approach that question by asking another.

**I. Judgment.** How do you think about the judgment? My guess is that we don’t think about it. At least we talk about it very seldom. It’s the stuff of editorial page cartoons—a well-known figure standing outside the pearly gates, and St. Peter is asking a question that puts them on the spot. If we do think about judgment, it makes us uneasy—or perhaps it fills us with dread.

The fact is, life is filled with judgments, and for the most part, they serve us well.

- If you’re in school, you take tests, and you get grades. We’ve all passed lots more tests than we’ve failed. If we don’t do well, we’re chastened for our laziness, and we work harder. But more likely, we take a test and make a decent grade. We’re rewarded for our work and study.
- At work, we get performance evaluations. After those evaluations, we may well get a raise, and occasionally even a promotion.

- Even when we play, we keep score, and when we work at our game and practice hard, the score goes up, and we are rewarded.

Judgment has a negative connotation, but in fact, judgment often ends in affirmation. The judgment may well be, “Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master’s happiness!” (Mt. 25:21 NIV) I am told that if you add up all the judgment stories in the Bible, there are more affirmations than condemnations.

The fact is that we judge things we take seriously.

- God takes life seriously;
- God takes being God seriously—
- so God judges.

But God is also a God of Grace. And the grace of God is a popular topic with us. Grace is God’s undeserved favor. It was God’s grace that sent Jesus to the cross in our place—precisely because we fall short of God’s holiness. But the grace of God looses its urgency if we ignore his judgment. Our God is holy—separated from sin. God judges, and his judgment makes his grace crucial.

**II. Text.** This morning’s scripture is about the return of Jesus Christ and the final judgment. All the nations are gathered before Jesus, who reigns in total authority as King. He separates the people individually. Using the shepherd image, he places the sheep, the righteous, on his right, and the goats on his left. He first identifies the sheep as “blessed of my father.” Then he invites them to receive what is theirs: “inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.” The impression is that this is the way things were supposed to be from the beginning. When he speaks to those on his left, their destiny is “the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.” Tragically, their destiny is to a place not initially prepared for them.

The reasons for the destinies are the deeds done in life. Jesus gratefully acknowledges the help those on his right have given him in his time of need. He speaks of six different kinds of basic help that made a great deal of difference to him when he needed it. “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 in prison and you visited me.”

The response is striking. Those on his right can’t remember helping Jesus, so they ask when it was that they rendered all that help? Jesus’ answer is equally striking. “Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”

A. Let us notice some things about this exchange. First, *Jesus is identified with his people.* Jesus words are, “As you did this to a member of my family, you did it to me.” We are reminded of the time earlier when Jesus sent the disciples out on a mission. His concluding words to them were, (10:40 NIV) “He who receives you receives me, and he who receives me receives the one who sent me.”

We live in a rationalistic age, and it’s hard for us to grasp the idea that we are in Christ, and Christ is in us, but it is true, and it is the strength for living as a Christian.

B. Second, notice the *lifestyles* of the two groups. The difference was their response to people in need. The sheep couldn't remember giving aid to Jesus. They didn't deny that they had extended themselves to people in compassionate ways. The issue was who they had helped—they couldn't for the life of them remember helping Jesus.

The people on Jesus' right had cultivated a lifestyle of compassion. They routinely helped people in need. If we ask why they did that, presumably it was because they are imitating the compassionate lifestyle of Jesus himself. They wanted to be like him.

They obviously *weren't* doing it to score points to get into heaven. That possibility is never even mentioned. They were trying to be Christlike people, and were surprised by their own good fortune!

C. Those on his left were the mirror image of the sheep. They didn't deny that they had bypassed people in need; they just couldn't remember bypassing Jesus. The fact that they called Jesus "Lord" makes one think that they knew who he was, and didn't expect this response.

D. This brings us to a final question: if Christian faith is about being saved by grace through faith, this judgment seems totally about good works. Faith isn't even mentioned. What's this?

Our observation about lifestyle points to an answer. Remember the remark by the Apostle James, (2:18) "Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith." The issue here is whether what I claim to believe really guides my life. Am I a growing disciple of Jesus? Is my life increasingly producing the fruits of faith—am I responding to opportunities to reach out to people in need? Works are judged as evidence of faith.

**III. Application.** We began by asking what impact Jesus wanted to produce by these words? We can only speculate, but let me offer some thoughts.

Jesus talked a lot about judgment. One scholar has counted the teaching units in Matthew gospel—things like individual parables, and he says that there are 148. He says that 60 of that 148 are in some way concerned with judgment. That means that somewhat less than ½ of Jesus' teaching sections recorded by Matthew concern the judgment. That's a lot.

What impact did Jesus want to produce by these words? I think Jesus knows us well enough to know that we are good at denial, and that a regular heads-up about what's important serves us well. Does this mean that Jesus was trying to scare the hell out of us—or perhaps better trying to scare us out of hell?

He keeps reminding us about the seriousness of life, but I don't think that scaring was his primary intent. Remember the people who were on Jesus' right. They were servants—people who had cultivated a lifestyle of caring about people in need. They were people who were serious about being disciples of Jesus, and becoming more like him.

They were people whose motivation was not trying to make points by being good—they just wanted to serve. They were not people who were trying to avoid hell by being good. They wanted to be Christlike out of thankfulness to him and out of the heartfelt

conviction that his lifestyle was the way they should live, and the way they wanted to live. I'm convinced Jesus wanted to encourage this attitude and commitment towards life.

Jesus told this story to his disciples. We don't think of the disciples as a congregation, but they were a fellowship of people who were following Jesus together. They were a group—like us—who served together, and encouraged one another in service. We do that for one another. We don't make reference to the judgment, but we do encourage one another in these ways. Remember that two weeks ago, Eileen said that we didn't have enough food for the Salvation Army that Friday night—she had only two casseroles promised. Soon she had to tell people to stop volunteering food, because she had too much! As a congregation, we encourage one another in being servants.

What impact did Jesus want to produce by these words? Ultimately, I believe he wanted to encourage what I'll call the “fruits of belief” in us. He wants us—individually and as a congregation—to be people to whom many would say, “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.”

May it be so!