

DAY OF DESTINY
MATTHEW 25:31-46

What is the ultimate issue of life? What is the *one* thing in life that matters most? I will give you a hint: it is the *same* for every person, no matter what their age, race, gender, class, or any other social distinction. It is the same for Millennials as it is for Baby Boomers. It is the same for a person who lives in a penthouse in Manhattan as it is for a person who lives in the squalor of a third world slum. It is the same for someone who lived 5,000 years ago as it is for someone born in this century.

What is the ultimate issue of life?

Contrary to popular opinion; contrary to the attitudes of the vast majority of people in our culture, the ultimate issue of life is not what kind of a job you have or how much money you make or how many toys are in your garage. It is not how happy or pretty or healthy or athletic you are. It is not how many people like you or how many followers you have on Facebook. It has nothing to do with your personality, your net worth, or your IQ.

The ultimate issue of life is what is going to happen to you on the Day of Judgment. What matters most is what Jesus will say to you on that day about *where* you will spend eternity. Will He assign you to spend eternity with Him in heaven, or will He assign you to spend eternity with the devil and his angels in hell?

And if this is the ultimate issue of life, then it stands to reason that the most important *question* in life, the question about which every person ought to have absolute clarity is: *How can I be prepared for that Day?* For the alternative to heaven, the *only* alternative to heaven, is conscious, eternal suffering and torment in hell.

In our exposition of Matthew's Gospel, we have been studying a passage in which Jesus gave some important instruction just hours before He was arrested and crucified. It was in response to some questions His disciples asked Him about the end of the age; more specifically, about the time when He would begin His reign as the King of God's kingdom on earth.

Jesus told them that a lot of things would happen in the world before the end of the age. He also told them that it was impossible to know the exact time of His coming. But He emphasized that it would be sudden and unexpected, and that it could happen at any time. Therefore, He told them they must always be ready. And throughout this discourse, especially in the four parables, Jesus said that when He does come it will be good for those who are prepared, but devastating for those who are not, a reference to where people will be assigned on the Day of Judgment.

In the passage we are looking at this morning Jesus explicitly talks about this extraordinary Day, the climax of history, and what will happen to every human being at His discretion. Look at **verse 31**. ***31 "When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him, then He will sit on His glorious throne.***

Jesus lived His entire earthly life in humble circumstances. He was born and raised in obscurity and poverty. He was homeless, penniless, and entirely dependent on others. But He declared that His second coming will be strikingly different. He will return "in His glory," a reference to the spectacular manifestation of His *divine* nature and the majesty, splendor, and radiant glory inherent in that nature.

When Jesus comes, He will be accompanied by all the angels of heaven, countless spirit beings who themselves possess and radiate a certain amount of glory. And the first order of business after His coming will be to formally and publicly consummate His role as

the Anointed One (Messiah) and Exalted One (King) in God's grand, eternal program. This is the Day the disciples had been anticipating—the day Jesus literally and physically takes His seat on His throne and is recognized by everyone as the King of kings.

How do I know that He will be recognized by *everyone*? **Verses 32-33.** *³² Before Him will be gathered all the nations, and He will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. ³³ And He will place the sheep on His right, but the goats on the left.*

This is not only the Day of Jesus' Coronation; but the Day of Judgment. The gathering of "*all the nations*" before Jesus and the separation of the people in those nations from one another is a reference to the final judgment of the human race. Here is a picture of all humanity standing before King Jesus awaiting His decrees and directions.

Notice, Jesus likens this separation of individuals on the Day of Judgment to the activity of a shepherd who separates "sheep" and "goats". Just as these two distinct species would often intermingle and graze together until their shepherd separated them to face their respective ends, so also will Jesus separate two distinct classes of people to face their respective ends. He puts the sheep on His right, signifying favored status, while the goats He puts on His left.

Verse 34. *³⁴ Then the King will say to those on His right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.*

Incidentally, though Jesus makes several implicit references in the Gospels to His royalty, this is the only time where He explicitly refers to Himself as "the King." Of course, the principal attribute of a king is sovereignty, and Jesus demonstrates this royal attribute in what He does with the sheep on His right and the goats on His left.

To the sheep He says, "*come,*" identifying them as those who are blessed by His Father. This tells us that Jesus' selection and classification of these people as sheep is not an arbitrary or independent decision. They have already been marked and designated by His Father as "blessed."

And the reward of that *blessed* status is participation in the kingdom. Jesus says, "*Come...Inherit the kingdom.*" An inheritance is something of value given to the heirs of an estate, and this particular estate is the most valuable of all. It is the kingdom of God. Specifically, it is their citizenship in that kingdom with all the rights and privileges that accompany it, the greatest of which is to literally, physically, and eternally be in the presence of the King.

And this kingdom and their participation in it is no afterthought; it is something that has been prepared for them before the foundation of the world. Which suggests that this King, this kingdom, and those who will inherit it is the consummation of God's ultimate, eternal plans and purposes.

And *why* do these "sheep" get to inherit the kingdom? **Verses 35-36.** *³⁵ For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶ I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.'*

Jesus is clearly making a correlation between the sheep's blessing and their good behavior. He identifies some of the things they have done in their lives on this earth, but He is careful to say that what distinguishes these things and makes them so consequential is that they were done for Him. He says, "*I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink...*" Hunger and thirst are the two most basic human needs. We have all been hungry or thirsty to varying degrees, and so we know how important it is to satiate these

needs and how crucial it is to our health and well-being. But even though we know how important it is, not everybody addresses those needs when they see hunger and thirst in others. We might feel bad or sorry for such people, but it's easy to move on and not do anything about it. What distinguishes these sheep is that they did not move on or ignore it. They acted upon their compassion and gave food and drink to satisfy the hunger and thirst.

Jesus also says, *"I was a stranger and you welcomed me..."* *Stranger* refers to someone who is on a journey who must spend the night in a strange town when it is too dark to travel any further. In those days, darkness prevented people from travelling at night, and because hotels, restaurants, and public restrooms were non-existent, travelers were entirely dependent on the hospitality of generous townsfolk. Jesus had experienced such generosity in His earthly ministry and knew how beneficial it was, and He identifies it as one of the principal traits of those who inherit the kingdom.

But that's not all. **Verse 36a**, *"I was naked and you clothed me..."* This is the third of the three basic human needs—food, shelter, and *clothing*. Nakedness in first-century Palestine was rare, but it was evidence of extreme poverty, mental illness, or in some cases demonic possession. And so, providing clothing for those suffering such debilitating conditions was an expression of genuine kindness and compassion.

Verse 36b. *"I was sick and you visited me..."* In those days, remedies and medicines for sick people were not as prevalent as they are today, and neither was accessibility to doctors or those with medical skills. So, one of the only ways a person could express their care and sympathy for a sick person was by paying them a visit. But it was not without risk. The illness might be contagious, or the sick person might need to be bathed or fed or some other kind of TLC. One of the things that distinguished these "sheep" was their willingness to take such risks for the sake of the person who was ill.

Visiting those in prison had similar risks. First-century prisons were squalid, filthy, and harsh. Prisoners were typically treated as animals. Conditions were so inhospitable that people rarely visited those who were incarcerated. By making such visits, these sheep were expressing selfless kindness and compassion.

But when Jesus commends the sheep for these things, they are surprised. **Verses 37-38**. *³⁷ Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? ³⁸ And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? ³⁹ And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?'*

Notice, Jesus now identifies the "sheep" as "the righteous." The major interpretive question in this passage is 'Why are they righteous?' Are they righteous *because* they fed the hungry, clothed the naked, visited the sick, etc. (In other words, are they righteous because they earned it through their good works?) Or were these acts of kindness an *expression* of their righteousness? I will address this a bit later. But I want to encourage you to look for clues that might help discern the answer in the rest of the passage.

When Jesus tells the "sheep" that they have performed these loving deeds for Him, they express surprise. They go through the list of six things, one by one, inquiring *when* they did each of them for Him.

In response, **verse 40**. *⁴⁰ ...the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.'*

These acts of kindness and compassion done for needy individuals are acts done for Jesus Himself. And I think it may be noteworthy that Jesus specifically says, *"as you did it to one of the least..."* Jesus is emphasizing their attentiveness to *individuals* and their personal needs.

Mother Teresa, who devoted her life to caring for impoverished people in the slums of Calcutta, was asked what motivated her to spend her days at the bedsides of diseased and dying people, dabbing their sores and wiping their tears. She replied, "When I look into their eyes, I see Jesus."

Notice, Jesus identifies the needy as "*the least of these my brothers.*" Brothers in this Gospel when not referring to literal, biological siblings, always means *spiritual kin*. And so, Jesus is specifically referring to deeds of kindness and compassion done for His followers. Earlier in the Gospel Jesus said that receiving one of His disciples is the same as receiving Jesus Himself (Matt. 10:40). Likewise, when Saul was on His way to Damascus to persecute the Church, He was accosted by Jesus who said, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute *me*?"

Jesus so identifies with His followers that treatment of them is the same as treatment of Him. And since how a person treats Him is *the* most important, consequential thing in his/her life, it is not difficult to understand why Jesus places such great importance on how a person treats His followers.

That goes both ways. Look at **verses 41-45**. ⁴¹ "*Then He will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.* ⁴² *For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, ⁴³ I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.'* ⁴⁴ *Then they also will answer, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to you?'* ⁴⁵ *Then He will answer them, saying, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.'*

Whereas the King summoned those on the right to "come" to Him, He admonishes those on His left to "depart" from Him, and He identifies them as "cursed". The manifestation of their status as "cursed ones" is their designated destination. They are sent into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. Whereas the blessed enter into the kingdom prepared for them before the foundation of the world, the cursed enter into a fire prepared, not for them, but for the devil and his angels.

In Revelation 20 we are introduced to John's vision of a lake of fire into which the devil is thrown at the end of the age, together with the beast and the false prophet (Rev. 20:10). This is also to be the habitation of everyone whose name is not written in the book of life (Rev. 20:15).

Why do they go there? Jesus says that they encountered Him in the exact same ways the sheep had encountered Him, but instead of responding by meeting His needs, they moved on and did nothing at all. When He was hungry, they did not feed Him, when He was thirsty, they gave Him nothing to drink, and so on. These saw the needs, but who did not act upon what they saw.

And, notice, the goats are just as surprised as the sheep. They are not conscious of ever refusing to give food to Jesus when He was hungry or water when He was thirsty, or clothes when He was naked. But Jesus says again that what they failed to do for "the least of these," they failed to do for Him, reminding us that how a person treats Him is *the* most important, consequential thing in his/her life, and that treatment of His followers is the same as treatment of Him.

Please note that their condemnation (like that of the foolish girls in the preceding parable) is expressed not in terms of their having done some awful crime, but in terms of their failure to do what is right.

Verse 46. *46 And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."*

The Day of Judgment will conclude by Jesus sending the sheep and the goats to their respective eternal destinations, and it is especially sobering to consider the eternal destination of those on His left. As you know, many in our day reject the doctrine of eternal punishment because they cannot reconcile it with God's love. This is one of the reasons why the doctrine of Purgatory was devised. It envisages a season of punishment for sins but allows for redemption and restoration in the end.

Others offer a doctrine of annihilation, where an unregenerate person ceases to exist or be conscious, and thus, does not suffer. But, as one Bible scholar aptly pointed out, "The net result of the elimination of the teaching of eternal punishment from the Bible would be the loss of the Gospel. Not too many people would be overly upset at the alternatives of eternal life and annihilation.... So to eliminate eternal punishment is to extract the teeth of the Law and its presentation of a holy God. The blessing of the Gospel can be retained only if the Law is seen as the completely serious will of the holy God, to whom sin is grievous rebellion, requiring his punishment if it is not forgiven" (Hamann, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 256–7).

The fact is, the same adjective, *eternal*, is applied to both the punishment of the wicked and the reward of the righteous. So, if eternal life means life in the presence of Jesus forever and ever, then eternal punishment means life in the lake of fire, living in conscious, continuous suffering and torment forever and ever.

I began this message by telling you that the ultimate issue of life—the one thing in life that matters most—is what is going to happen to you on the Day of Judgment. More specifically, what will Jesus say to you about where you will spend eternity. That Day is the climax of history. That Day will be the consummation of God's eternal plans and purposes and will determine where every single person who has ever lived will spend eternity.

If that is true then we ought to spend our earthly lives preparing for that Day, and we ought to be absolutely certain that we know *how* to be ready.

Please, don't leave here today thinking that in order to be prepared for that day you must rearrange your priorities and schedules so that you can feed the hungry, welcome strangers, clothe the naked, or visit sick people and prisoners. Jesus did not say that this is how you earn eternal life, or this is *how* you inherit the kingdom, and if He had said this it would have contradicted everything else He said in the Gospels about how to have eternal life.

When describing eternal life Jesus said, *"Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent"* (John 17:3). And when Jesus was specifically asked what works God required them to do in order to have eternal life, Jesus did not reply, "You must feed the hungry, welcome strangers, clothe the naked, and visit the sick...." He replied, *"the work of God is this; to believe in the One he sent"* (John 6:29). And of course He said, *"For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life"* (John 3:16).

The picture of Judgment Day that we looked at today "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" (Morris).

And so, in this passage Jesus is not saying that the “sheep” are people whose good lives have earned them eternal life. He is saying that their demonstrations of love for needy people are evidence that they belong to the kingdom. The Apostle John said, “...*Love is from God and everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love*” (1 John 4:7-8).

The sheep who loved the hungry, the naked, the sick, and prisoners were validating that they had been born of God. The goats who did not love were simply validating that they had they been born of God. If they had, they would have loved these needy people, because that is what people who are born of God do. That love is the evidence that they belong to God.

Day of Destiny Matthew 24:31-46

Main Idea: When King Jesus comes, He will exercise His sovereignty by separating the “blessed,” who will inherit the kingdom, from the “cursed,” whom He will send to hell.

The Day of Coronation (31)

Jesus returns, accompanied by His angels (31a)

Jesus is seated on His glorious throne (31b)

The Day of Judgment (32-46)

All the nations are gathered before Him (32a)

Jesus separates people from one another (32b-46)
As a shepherd separates sheep and goats (32b)

The sheep are on Jesus’ right, the goats on His left (33)

Jesus addresses the sheep (34-39)

He summons them to inherit the kingdom (34)

He explains the reason for their inheritance (35-36)

They fed Him when he was hungry

They satisfied His thirst

They provided hospitality for Him

They clothed His nakedness

They visited Him when He was sick and in prison

They inquire when they did these things for Jesus (37-39)

He answers their questions (40)

He identifies Himself with “the least”

The identity of “these brothers of mine”

Jesus addresses the goats (41-45)

He identifies them as “cursed” (41a)

He condemns them to hell (41b)

Hell is identified as eternal fire

Hell is the assigned destination of the devil and his angels

He explains the reason for their condemnation (42-43)

They did not feed Him when He was hungry

They did not satisfy His thirst

They did not provide hospitality for Him

They did not cloth His nakedness

They did not visit Him when He was sick or in prison

They question *when* they did not do these things for Him (44)

He answers their questions (45)

Jesus sends sheep and goats to their respective destinations (46)

The wicked (goats) “go away to eternal punishment”

The righteous (sheep) go “into eternal life”