

## The Final Judgment

Matthew 25:31-46

Michael Felkins

Grand Avenue Baptist Church

Ames, Iowa

January 12, 2025

When was the last time you had an uplifting conversation about judgment? You've probably never started a conversation saying, "*Let's talk about judgment. I think it would be fun to discuss judgment.*" Judgment is not a topic that you begin a conversation with, even among friends and especially among strangers.

Here's an idea. At your next family gathering, instead of talking about politics and religion, talk about the final judgment at the dinner table. Then, have your phone ready to record the facial expressions of everyone sitting there. They will either laugh or look horrified and believe you have lost your mind.

Judgment, like death, is something everyone will one day face. It's an uncomfortable topic but a topic we must take seriously and plan for accordingly because it can't be avoided.

The general idea about the final judgment and hell is that they are reserved for the worst among humans in history, people like Stalin, Hitler, terrorists, mass murderers, and the like. Almost everyone agrees they should be judged and sent to hell. They *deserve* it. On the other hand, everyone else who is even remotely a decent person qualifies for heaven.

There are many people who consider judgment incompatible with Jesus' teachings. Many believe Jesus is all mercy and compassion without a hint of judgment. He simply loves everyone, and in the end, love wins, so there is no need for judgment or hell. Yet, this kind of understanding of Jesus fails to grasp His teachings in the Gospels. Jesus clearly declared and demonstrated the reality of judgment.

Listen, if there is no final judgment, there is no need for the cross. As we saw in our Advent series, Jesus first Advent confirmed the necessity of God's justice being satisfied so that His people could have a place in God's Kingdom. The cross of Christ stands as God's eternal disposition toward sinful men and their need for His justice to be satisfied. In Jesus' death, that satisfaction was met for the glory of God and the eternal good of His people.

With that in mind, we come to Jesus's last recorded teaching in the Olivet Discourse. It is a dynamic description of the final judgment before the King. To make His point, He used symbolic imagery of a *shepherd, sheep, and goats*. This story is unique to Matthew and concludes His teaching on the end times and judgment.

In only three days, Jesus will be arrested by the Jewish leaders and tried on false charges. He will be lied about by his accusers and convicted by the Jewish leaders. He will be horribly beaten and scourged by the Romans. Then, they will execute Him on the cross. Don't miss this—Jesus knew what was waiting for Him.

Now, in vv. 31-46, Jesus brings everything together for His final application. These verses function like an exclamation point on this section of Matthew's Gospel.

Before we get into vv. 31-46, here's what we recently covered. First, we examined the *Parable of the Ten Virgins*, in which Jesus called His disciples to be *vigilant* in the last days. Then, last Sunday, we examined the *Parable of the Talents*. In it, Jesus exhorted His disciples to be *diligent* or *faithful* in the last days.

Now, vv. 31-46 is the shocking conclusion. They don't describe the end times and judgment as a parable but paint a *dynamic picture* of the nations standing before the Judgment Seat of Christ, where Jesus separates the righteous from the unrighteous.

My main point is: *When Jesus returns, all people will stand before Him to be judged, so we must prepare for that day.* I want to ask four questions to help us work through the text. *First, who is the judge? Second, who will be judged? Third, how will we be judged? Fourth, by what standard are we judged?*

I. Who is the Judge? (v. 31)

Throughout this section of Matthew's Gospel, Jesus has been saying He will return, and there will be judgment. In v. 31, He leaves no doubt who the judge is. Verse 31 is more than a transition sentence. It is packed with important doctrinal teaching about the person of Christ.

Look at v. 31 in your Service Guide:

*When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne.*

Jesus is the Son of Man who *comes* in His glory. Verse 34 tells us He is the *King* and He will *return*. He will *return* with His angels. He will *return* in absolute power and glory. He will *return* and sit on His glorious throne to judge the nations. Revelation 1:7-8 says:

*Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. Even so. Amen. <sup>8</sup> "I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, "who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty."*

The prophet Daniel wrote in Daniel 7:13-14,

*I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. <sup>14</sup> And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.*

That such a title was given to Jesus signifies His divinity. He has all of the glory of God because He is God. It also signifies His fulfillment of all righteousness by His sacrifice on the cross as the Incarnate God.

Jesus completed His mission, thus giving him the right to dominion of an eternal kingdom. Jesus is the Son of Man who forgives sin, suffers death on behalf of others, and returns in power and great glory.

Look at v. 31 again:

*"[He] comes in his glory, and all the angels with him"*

In other words, Heaven will empty itself. All of the Heavenly Host will follow Jesus in a great procession back to Earth. Jesus won't ride in on a donkey this time. When He returns, He will be the Rider on the White Horse, as described in Revelation 19. He will come in the divine glory of Almighty God. Then, He will gather His elect from the four corners of the earth.

*Then [Jesus] will sit on his glorious throne.*

He will assume His right position as the Royal Judge, Divine Priest, and Mediator. He will intercede for His people. Revelation 20:11-15 paints a vivid picture of the scene:

*Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. From his presence earth and sky fled away, and no place was found for them. <sup>12</sup> And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done. <sup>13</sup> And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done. <sup>14</sup> Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of*

*fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire.<sup>15</sup> And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.*

Friends, all power and authority belong to Jesus. Nothing is hidden from His eternal gaze. No one escapes His throne of divine Judgment. No big shots or proud people will stand arrogantly before Him. No one will deceive Him and conceal his sin. No one will make excuses or talk his way out of His sentence. At this point, all will recognize "*His glorious throne*" as perfect in judgment, and His divine sentence will be final and eternal.

There is a hymn we sing quite often called *Behold Our God*. We sang it not long ago. The hymn writers got the essence of v. 31 when they wrote this hymn:

*Behold our king, nothing can compare  
Come, let us adore him*

*Who has given counsel to the Lord?  
Who can question any of his words?  
Who can teach, the one who knows all things?  
Who can fathom all his wondrous deeds?*

*Behold our God, seated on his throne  
Come, let us adore him*

*Who has felt the nails upon his hands?  
Bearing all the guilt of sinful man  
God eternal, humbled to the grave  
Jesus, Savior, risen now to reign*

It is so important to know that Jesus is our Judge. He will judge His people with grace and mercy because He met the requirements of justice for us by His life, death on the cross, and resurrection from the dead. The Law Giver met the requirements of the Law for us because we couldn't and wouldn't, and now, by our faith in Him and repentance of our sin, the Law Giver credits to us His righteousness so that we are declared righteous before Him.

## II. Who will be judged? (v. 32a)

In v. 32a, we learn who will be brought before the judgment seat of Christ and judged.

*"Before him will be gathered all the nations"*

This is an incredible scene. All of heaven was emptied and stood before the throne of Christ. Now, everyone who has ever lived stands before Him. I mean all people of all time (past, present, and future). All are present. No one is missing.

Daniel 7:10 says,

*A stream of fire issued and came out from before him; a thousand thousands served him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him; the court sat in judgment, and the books were opened.*

So, who will be judged that day? All people of all ages from every tribe, nation, and tongue. All will stand before Jesus for judgment. All will give an account of their lives to the King and Judge.

## III. How will they be judged? (vv. 32b-33)

*And he [Jesus] will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. <sup>33</sup> And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left.*

In these verses, Jesus explains the process. The people will be divided into two groups. Jesus illustrates the scene by using the imagery of a shepherd separating sheep from goats.

I grew up on a farm, so I get this imagery. We didn't have sheep and goats, but we had other animals. You may not understand the livestock imagery, but you know what it is like to separate one item from another.

Think about it with this kind of imagery. If you have any financial background, you understand the ledger sheet or a spreadsheet on the computer. You know what debits and credits are. You know how to separate the two on the correct side of the books.

Friends, it will be something like this. The nations are gathered before Jesus (The King and Judge). The Book of Life will be opened before Him, and He will look at the spreadsheet. He will separate from one another.

However, people will not be separated based on ethnicity, nationality, geopolitical, religious denominations, political party, language, color, or tribe. Jesus has a different standard He will use to separate the sheep from the goats or the righteous from the unrighteous. This leads us to our fourth and final question.

#### IV. By what standard are we judged? (vv. 34-46)

This is perhaps the biggest question that we must answer in the text. It certainly is the largest block of verses. Let's hear the standard explained in vv. 34-40.

First, look in v. 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.'*

The Greek word "blessed" in this verse is not the usual word for *blessed*. It is not the same word used for *blessed* in the Beatitudes. That Greek word is *makarios*, which means *happy*. This word is "eulogéō," from which we get the word *eulogy*. It means *to be spoken well of*, and in this context, it means *to be spoken well of by God*. It means that God has set His favor on you and spoken His love and grace over you. Ultimately, it means He has called you by name to Himself.

You are blessed because you are His chosen child. The blessing of the Father that is on your life comes to you through the work of the Son. You didn't earn or deserve it. The Son of God secured your redemption from every tongue, tribe, people, and nation by His death on the cross.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, through the person and work of Jesus, the Father secures grace. So that by His grace, He chose you before the foundation of the world. By His grace, the Father sent the Son to satisfy His justice and earn the righteousness you need to stand before God. By His grace, He brought you from death to life. By His grace, He called you to Himself through the proclamation of the gospel. By His grace, He gave you the gift of faith to believe the promises of the gospel in Christ. By His grace, He sanctifies you and shapes you into the image of Jesus until the day you stand in Heavenly perfection in His presence. This is just the tip of the iceberg of the blessing that the Father speaks over you.

Then Jesus lets us in on this sweet, gracious little nugget of truth when He says that we will:

*Inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.*

This is the icing on the cake. God has been working on an eternal plan to save you all along. You're not "Plan B." You're not a mistake. You're not a "do-over." God has been planning to secure your salvation from the very foundation of the earth. Your salvation was and is certain because your name was written in the Book of Life in the blood of Christ.

If you belong to Jesus, then the blessing of God is being *prepared* for you right now. It is being made ready. It is being preserved for you. It is your inheritance, and you will receive it in full.

Then, in vv. 35-36, He gives the proof of those who belong to Him. He says to them:

*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,<sup>36</sup> I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.'*

Jesus goes through a list of activities that describe acts of mercy, kindness, service, and love that are the result of being born again. Those who have been born of the Spirit will, by faith, produce the fruit of the Spirit. None of these acts of mercy and kindness earn salvation but are the result of being saved. They are the natural overflow of conversion. It is saving grace that drives Christians to carry out gracious acts of kindness and love to others. The Christian life is a grace-driven life.

Finally, in vv. 37-40, the ones who heard Jesus say those things about them were surprised, and they responded:

*'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink?<sup>38</sup> And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you?<sup>39</sup> And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?'<sup>40</sup> And 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.'*

They did not remember seeing Jesus and offering Him help. These believers just saw someone hungry or in need of clothing or sick and ministered to them. They had no idea they were actually ministering to the Lord Himself when they carried out these acts of mercy.

Jesus makes a powerful point by showing the depth of His relationship with those who have put their faith in Him. He wants us to understand the depth of His connection with His disciples. He identifies with His churches. He identifies with the brothers and sisters who are in Him.

Friends, to serve one another through these acts of kindness and mercy, Jesus says, is NOT "LIKE" serving Jesus. It is serving Jesus. It is a powerful truth.

Think about it this way. When you sign up for a meal train spot to help a family in need, you are not only serving them, but you are serving Christ. When you visit a sick brother or sister in the hospital, you are not only visiting them, but you are visiting Christ. When we tithe to the church or give to support our brothers and sisters in ministry or on the mission field, we are not only giving to them, but we are giving to Christ.

When we understand our acts of service in this way, it changes everything. Our acts of service and mercy are elevated up to Christ in heaven. Our small acts of kindness have great value in the kingdom of God. Acts of kindness like babysitting for a family in need suddenly go from a duty to a delight when we understand we are not only serving them, but we are serving our very Savior.

One more observation. The righteous in this text did not serve to get attention. They didn't even know they had done some of these things. Their service was an overflow of who they were. They didn't even think about it.

So, they weren't surprised to get into heaven. They were surprised that Jesus listed all their acts of kindness as if they had served Him. It was just who they were. It was the natural overflow of someone who has been born again.

The final section, vv. 41-46 drives a stake through the hearts of the unrighteous. Again, we hear the authority of the Judge and King in v. 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.'*

The King has the authority to command the unrighteous to *depart*. He has the authority to cast them into the eternal fire that has been *prepared* for the devil and his angels. So, instead of being “*blessed*,” they are “*cursed*.”

Friends, the worst thing about hell is not the fire or the darkness or the anguishing cries of its doomed residents, as bad as that is. The worst thing is that those in hell will never even know the *common grace* of God, much less have the opportunity to experience the *special grace* of God.

They won’t have the possibility to experience the tender mercy and kindness of Christ. They will never feel the warmth of His mercy that shines like the morning sun. It will be the complete and final absence of any hope of repentance and redemption because it will be too late.

Jonathan Edwards said,

*“Those who are sent to hell never will have paid the whole of the debt which they owe to God, nor indeed a part which bears any proportion to the whole . . . Justice therefore never can be actually satisfied in your damnation; but [the good news is that] it is actually satisfied in Christ”<sup>1</sup>*

However, when you hear this message right now, you hear Christ's gracious offer in the gospel. Jesus Christ has satisfied God's justice and paid the entire debt you owe for your rebellion and sin. He calls you to repent of your sins and trust in Him.

Here’s the offer Jesus makes to sinners. You can pay your debt forever in “*the eternal fire . . . eternal punishment*,” or you can trust in Christ and that He paid for your sin on the cross. That is the kindness that underlies such an alarming warning!

Finally, in vv. 42-46, Jesus explains what the unrighteous failed to do:

*For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink,<sup>43</sup> 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.’<sup>44</sup> Then they also will answer, ‘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?’<sup>45</sup> 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.’<sup>46</sup> And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”*

Just as acts of mercy and kindness reveal the Christian’s true character, so the unrighteous are revealed by their lack of mercy and kindness *toward Jesus’ followers*. They have committed the sin of omission by failing to care for Christ Himself. Their actions revealed the condition of their hearts.

Friends, when you hear of Jesus' disciples being persecuted, imprisoned, beaten, or treated badly, remember what Jesus said in these verses. Justice may not be given in this life, but it will be given in the next.

Those who treat Christ’s disciples this way are treating Christ this way. It is evidence of their enmity with Him. Unless they repent as the Apostle Paul did, they will spend eternity in the same place of wrath that has been prepared for Satan and his angels.

Conclusion: Friends, let me be very clear. We are not saved by our works but by faith alone. The biblical principle is that we are saved by faith alone, but faith that saves is never alone. The Apostle James writes in James 2:14-17,

*What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him?<sup>15</sup> If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and*

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<sup>1</sup> The Works of Jonathan Edwards, vol. 2, 89.

*lacking in daily food,<sup>16</sup> and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled," without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that?<sup>17</sup> So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.*

Brothers and sisters, if our faith in Christ is genuine, it will be substantiated by our acts of kindness and mercy in Jesus' name and for His glory. We should never separate our faith in Christ from works done in His name and for His glory. Those who are truly saved demonstrate their faith by reaching out to those in need and ministering to the basic needs of food, shelter, and visitation. As Galatians 6:10 says, we do good to all people as we have opportunity, but *especially* to those who belong to the household of faith.

So, what side of the King are you on? Will you be with the sheep on His right hand or with the goats on His left? Let the warning in this message wake you up to the mercy being offered to you in Christ. Talk to someone today about what it means for you to commit your life to Christ.