

## Matthew 25:31-46

<sup>31</sup>“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. <sup>32</sup>All the nations will be gathered in his presence, and he will separate them one from another, as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. <sup>33</sup>He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. <sup>34</sup>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. <sup>35</sup>For I was hungry and you gave me food to eat. I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me. <sup>36</sup>I was lacking clothes and you clothed me. I was sick and you took care of me. I was in prison and you visited me.’

<sup>37</sup>“Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you a drink? <sup>38</sup>When did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or lacking clothes and clothe you? <sup>39</sup>When did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?’

<sup>40</sup>“The King will answer them, ‘Amen I tell you: Just as you did it for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it for me.’

<sup>41</sup>“Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire, which is prepared for the Devil and his angels. <sup>42</sup>For I was hungry and you did not give me food to eat. I was thirsty and you did not give me anything to drink. <sup>43</sup>I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, lacking clothes and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not take care of me.’

<sup>44</sup>“Then they will also answer, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or lacking clothes or sick or in prison and did not serve you’

<sup>45</sup>“At that time he will answer them, ‘Amen I tell you: Just as you did not do it for one of the least of these, you did not do it for me.’ <sup>46</sup>And they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.”

## Inherit the Kingdom Prepared for You

### I.

I'm sure you have seen artists' depictions of Judgment Day. There is so much happening on that day that the details get lost in the jumble of activity. Jesus descends from the heavens. There is a mass of humanity. On one side, the people are pictured in the flames of hell or in abject dejection, while those on the other side are in heavenly glory. Here are several examples: John Martin – The Last Judgment – 1854, Michelangelo – The Last Judgment 1536-1541, Stefan Lochner – Last Judgement – circa 1435, Hans Memling – Das Jüngste Gericht – 1467-1471.

Before any artist ever painted a picture of Judgment Day, Jesus painted a picture with his words in our lesson today. He starts out: “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. <sup>32</sup>All the nations will be gathered in his presence, and he will separate them one from another, as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. <sup>33</sup>He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left” (Matthew 25:31-33, EHV).

In Jesus' painting, the mass of humanity is a flock being separated by a shepherd. Goats get funneled off to the left, while sheep go to the right. The sheep are believers, while the unbelievers are the goats.

But the picture doesn't end with a flock being separated into two groups. Jesus speaks about the actions of the group on his right – the sheep: “I was hungry and you gave me food to eat. I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me. <sup>36</sup>I was lacking clothes and you clothed me. I was sick and you took care of me. I was in prison and you visited me” (Matthew 25:35-36, EHV).

Those sorted to the left are the polar opposite: “I was hungry and you did not give me food to

eat. I was thirsty and you did not give me anything to drink. <sup>43</sup>I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, lacking clothes and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not take care of me” (Matthew 25:42-43, EHV).

The sorting seems to have taken place based on the actions of the sheep and goats. The sheep, even though they don’t always recognize it, have done all sorts of things for which they are commended. The goats, on the other hand, don’t understand the reason for their exclusion. “When did we fail to take advantage of an opportunity to serve?” they wonder. “We did all kinds of good things in the world. Why do *those* not count?”

## II.

The sorting does not happen on the basis of action or inaction. Nothing could be further from the truth. Before he ever gets to the laundry list of things the righteous have done and the unrighteous have failed to do, Jesus gives the crucial information. “Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world” (Matthew 25:34, EHV). Jesus calls the sheep. That is the first thing in the sequence. The sheep have done nothing—they are simply called. They are “blessed by my Father” — that is, they receive the Father’s grace. The kingdom is *prepared* before the foundation of the world. Echoing Jesus’ words, the Apostle Paul says: “He chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world” (Ephesians 1:4, EHV). *First* believers are called by God in his grace—called even before the foundations of the world.

Those chosen by God’s grace—those who have been called—have been given an inheritance. By definition “inherit” indicates a gift, not something that has been earned. An inheritance is given because of who someone *is*, not because of what they have *done*. If you want your wages, Paul says: “The wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23, EHV). We don’t want what we have *earned*—what we have earned brings only death. Instead of what we have *earned*, God graciously gives us the inheritance he has provided for us in Jesus.

## III.

Back to the comprehensive panorama of our inheritance: “Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world” (Matthew 25:34, EHV). From the very foundation of the world, God the Father *intended* us to be in his kingdom. Notice that the King in the illustration does *not* say to the wicked: “inherit the punishment prepared for you from the foundation of the world.” What he says is: “depart... into the eternal fire, which is prepared for the Devil and his angels” (Matthew 25:41, EHV).

Looking carefully at Jesus’ picture, you see that when God created the world, he intended that mankind would always live with him in perfect happiness and perfect righteousness. Adam and Eve were created in his image — that is, holy and without sin. Even *after* the fall into sin, God did not predestine *anyone* to hell. His whole plan of salvation was developed to assure that every human being would have the perfection they need to get to heaven. Those who go to hell go there by their own choice. They have rejected God’s original plan for them.

Jesus painted this beautiful picture of Judgment Day during Holy Week. Just a few days later Jesus would illustrate very vividly the wages of sin. He took our sins—even our sins of inaction and lack of love—on himself. He accepted *our* wages. By his perfect holiness and his innocent death he earned what he now gives as an inheritance to us. “The wages of sin is death, but the undeserved gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 6:23, EHV).

## IV.

Far too many see the list of actions Jesus identifies with the righteous as merely a call for the Christian to do works of charity. Some even see these works of charity as a means to *participate* in their own salvation. “Jesus got the ball rolling with his death on the cross,” they think, “now I have to finish the job for myself on my own.”

To do that would turn the inheritance back into wages. No matter how hard a person tries, the efforts we make to feed the hungry or clothe the needy or take care of the sick will be tainted by our sinful human nature. They would never be good enough, not even to *assist* in our salvation.

So how can Jesus identify all these good things in the righteous? These so-called good deeds are not the *cause* of salvation, but the *result*. They are what Jesus calls elsewhere “fruits” of our faith. By their fruits you will know them.

“Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you a drink? <sup>38</sup>When did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or lacking clothes and clothe you? <sup>39</sup>When did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?’” (Matthew 25:37-39, EHV). These fruits of faith are not complicated. You don’t really have to plan them out, they will just naturally occur.

“The King will answer them, ‘Amen I tell you: Just as you did it for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it for me’” (Matthew 25:40, EHV). Most of the time, the righteous won’t even notice they are doing things for which they will be praised.

And who are “the least of these brothers of mine”? Earlier in his ministry Jesus was told that his mother and brothers were waiting for him outside the place he was teaching. “Jesus replied to the one who told him, ‘Who is my mother? And who are my brothers?’ <sup>49</sup> He reached out his hand toward his disciples and said, ‘See, my mother and my brothers! <sup>50</sup> For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother’” (Matthew 12:48-50, EHV). Jesus identifies those to whom our charity should be concentrated: fellow believers. Paul says the same thing to the Galatians: “So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, and especially to those who belong to the household of faith” (Galatians 6:10, EHV).

Those acts of love, especially directed at fellow believers, are not just material—providing food or clothing. They can be very simple acts of kindness and love—visiting someone who could really use a friendly face. Sitting at the bedside of a fellow believer who is sick. Visiting one who is shut in.

“Amen I tell you: Just as you did it for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it for me” (Matthew 25:40, EHV).

It is by grace alone through faith in Christ alone that we have been blessed by the Father. On that last great day, on the day of Last Judgment, we won’t have to look at an artist’s conception any more. Every eye will see the Lord Jesus. Every knee will bow. Every tongue will have to admit that Jesus is the Lord of all—some grudgingly, others with the great joy of knowing that heaven is our eternal home with him.

Come soon, Lord Jesus, to bring us to our eternal inheritance. Amen.