

Judgment, Justice, and Jesus

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Date: 26 November 2023

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[0 : 00] Well, as we know that many of you were traveling for Thanksgiving and are probably still resting and catching up on sleep and weary from travel and all that's involved in Thanksgiving, we figured we would go ahead and just cover a light topic this morning, how to be prepared for the day of final judgment.

That's what this passage is about. In Matthew 25, it's important that we see this passage in Matthew 25 as part of a coherent whole with the sections that come before it of Jesus' teaching. In chapters 24 and 25, Jesus is talking to his disciples about the end of the age, about what the Old Testament calls the day of the Lord. And he's teaching his disciples how to be ready and prepared for that day.

And so he tells a series of parables in order to do that. He tells the parable of the wise and wicked servant. He tells the parable of the prepared and unprepared bridesmaids.

He tells the parable of the talents. And all of these parables all serve to illustrate the same point, that at the day of judgment, some people will be prepared and some won't be.

[1 : 17] And so as we come to this passage in Matthew 25, we see what Jesus is saying here. Another point about what it means to be prepared on the last day, to be prepared for the day of judgment.

And one of the determining factors is how people treated the weak, how people treated the poor and the vulnerable and the oppressed. And that's what we're going to look at this morning.

We're going to look at the need for judgment, the scales of justice, and the invitation of Jesus. The need for judgment, the scales of justice, and the invitation of Jesus.

So first of all, the need for judgment. Maybe as we read this passage or as we might think about this idea of the final judgment, recognize that there may be some of you here this morning or perhaps some people that you know who hear that and are troubled by it or even offended by it.

This idea that heaven and hell are real places, that people go there, and there's this real eternal separation between them may seem today in our modern culture like a morally regressive, enlightened thing to believe in.

[2 : 26] Many people think that if there is a God, that he would only be a God of love and forgiveness and that all people would some way find themselves into heaven. And I actually want to address this question by pointing us back to two sermons that have been preached recently on this very topic.

The first was a sermon by Pastor Dan a few weeks ago. And in his sermon, Pastor Dan made the point that as we think about the idea of God's judgment, judgment and wrath are basically the other side of love.

Think about how you would feel if you think about the people in your life that you love the most, your family, your friends, people in your life that you love the most, and think about how you would feel if they were threatened.

And think about if they were actually harmed by somebody else. How would you feel? How would you feel if the people that you love the most in life were threatened or harmed by somebody else? What would you feel? You'd feel anger. You'd feel wrath. And so how much more with God? God's wrath and judgment is the other side.

[3 : 41] It's the other side of the coin of his goodness and love. It's because he loves his good creation that he's opposed to anything that threatens to harm it. It's because he loves people made in his image that he must punish those who commit injustice, especially against the weak and the vulnerable.

God has to be a God of judgment because he is a God of love and goodness. The second was Pastor Tommy's sermon a couple weeks ago on Hosea.

And in that sermon, he told the story of a man named Emma from the Democratic Republic of the Congo. And when the country in the 1990s experienced political chaos that erupted into violence and corruption and degradation of the poor and the weak, Emma witnessed unspeakable acts of violence and atrocities committed against his friends and his family.

And as he was telling this story in light of what had all happened, Emma said that the only way that I can cope with the trauma of all of this is if I believe in a God of judgment.

Because I will never get justice in this life for the unspeakable atrocities committed against people who I love, my family and my friends. If God was only a God of love and grace, I couldn't get through it.

[4 : 58] And that God would not be worthy of my worship. Because it would mean that the people who have committed these heinous acts of evil, who I love, would just get away with it. They would never have to be accountable for the actions.

They would never have to face the consequences for their evil actions. And so I understand if, perhaps for some of you, this idea of the final judgment or God being a God of judgment, if it troubles you, I understand that to some degree because we like the idea of God being a God of love and compassion.

But with all due respect, if this idea of a God of judgment offends you or troubles you, it may be because you've never actually experienced true injustice or oppression in your life.

But for people like Emma and for thousands and millions of people across the world, the idea of a God of judgment is incredibly good news. Because it means that there's a hope that one day all wrongs will be made right, that the scales of justice across human history will one day be balanced, that both victims and oppressors will all get what they deserve.

And that all the evil and injustice in the world will one day finally be eradicated. This is why we need a God of judgment. And this is why our world needs a final judgment.

[6 : 20] And this is why this scene in Matthew 25 is taking place. This is ultimately about God's goodness and his love and his commitment to the flourishing of his creation.

And so this then raises the question, well, if there is going to be a final judgment, then how exactly is that going to take place? And that's the second thing that we see in this passage is that we see the scales of justice.

And verses 31 and 32, Jesus says, when the son of man comes in his glory and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne.

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. And there are two Old Testament passages in the background of what Jesus is saying here.

The first is from Daniel chapter seven, which is a prophecy about the son of man. And in Daniel chapter seven, we see this scene where one who looks like the son of man approaches the throne of God, approaches the ancient of days.

[7 : 23] And God makes this son of man a king over an everlasting kingdom, a kingdom of all peoples and languages and tribes and nations. The second passage from the Old Testament in the background here is our Old Testament reading this morning, Ezekiel 34, where God is judging Israel's leaders.

And he's judging them for failing to be shepherds of his people. They have failed to seek out the lost. They have failed to bind up the injured. They have failed to strengthen the weak.

And instead, instead of feeding the sheep and caring for the sheep and protecting the sheep, they have fed themselves and serve themselves. And so the Lord says, I myself will be the great shepherd of my people, and I'm going to judge you.

And perhaps an agrarian image from the ancient world helps us understand this separation from the sheep and the goats. In the ancient world, it was very common for shepherds to herd sheep and goats together as a very practical manner.

But sheep are pretty docile, gentle creatures, and goats can be pretty unruly, rambunctious creatures. And so they can very easily upset the sheep in times of feeding and also in times of sleeping, especially at nighttime when they sleep.

[8 : 45] Goats can disturb the sheep from sleeping. And so one of the jobs of a shepherd that shepherded both goats and sheep together, at the very end of the day and in times of feeding, a

shepherd would separate the sheep from the goats so as to not disturb the sheep.

And this is what Jesus says he will do. Both of these passages show us that Jesus is the rightful king and the rightful judge over all the earth.

Daniel chapter 7 shows us that Jesus is the son of man who will receive a kingdom from his father over all the nations. Ezekiel 34 shows us that Jesus is a shepherd who rightly judges between the sheep that he is king over.

The first time that Jesus came to earth, which we will think about and reflect on in the season of Advent and Christmas, the first time Jesus to earth, he came in weakness and fragility and humility, but the second time he comes in power and authority and glory as the rightful king and judge over all the earth.

Starting in verse 33, Jesus separates the sheep from the goats, the righteous from the unrighteous. And the standard that we see here in this passage, the standard of the separation, is whether or not they showed mercy to the weak, whether or not they showed mercy to the poor and the vulnerable. [10:13] Those on his right, the righteous cared for the poor, fed the hungry, clothed the naked, healed the sick, visited those in prison, welcomed the stranger, and those on his left, the unrighteous, did not.

And based on this standard of justice, we see a sobering reality here in this text, that there is an eternal separation. Those on his right go towards everlasting life with God, and those on his left go towards eternal separation from God, away from God's presence.

But then there is a shocking turn. There is a shocking twist in this passage that no one expects, that his disciples don't expect, that we don't expect.

But it's this shocking and surprising twist that is the key to understanding Jesus' standard of justice in the final judgment. In verses 35 and 36, Jesus says, Truly I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.

And this is what I think we need to focus our attention on this morning, that Jesus Christ, the glorious King and Judge of all the earth, at the end of time, in the final judgment, identifies himself with the weak, with the poor, with the vulnerable, with the suffering.

[11:56] And the implication from this passage is fairly clear and straightforward, and yet it's incredibly challenging. If Jesus, the King and the Judge of all, does this, then so should his people.

To know and worship and follow Jesus is to have a deep connection with the poor, the sick, the orphaned, the refugee, and the imprisoned. And this shows us the historic Christian teaching of solidarity with the poor, of solidarity with the poor, this social principle that has been around for centuries.

Solidarity is this idea that we are all connected as part of one human family across dividing lines of race, ethnicity, nationality, and class.

But not just that we're connected, but because we are connected that we actively work for the good of all, especially those most poor and vulnerable among us, those who are most overlooked and marginalized.

But solidarity doesn't just see the poor and the weak as people in need, as if we are the people who go to help them. Solidarity means a deep self-identification with the poor.

[13:18] It's looking at the poor and the needy and vulnerable and saying, that's me.

That's us. We are called to solidarity with the poor and the weak and the vulnerable, not because it maps onto anybody's social or political agenda, but because of what we see here in this text, because Jesus himself identifies with the poor and the weak.

And it's passages like this that show why we are committed to living out this solidarity with the poor as a church. It's why we have a ministry to refugees in our city.

It's why we're committed to partnering with DC 127, an organization committed to serving families on the margins and reducing the foster care list in DC.

It's why we want to prayerfully ask God how we can continue to live out this vision of solidarity with the poor in our new locations, that we can go beyond what we are already doing and live this out in new and broader and deeper ways.

[14:31] But this all raises a question for us. Because it's the scene of final judgment, and some people might look at this and say, well, this is all well and good.

Solidarity with the poor, serving the poor and the weak is all well and good. But if what separates the righteous from the unrighteous in the final judgment is acts of charity and mercy, then isn't this

passage teaching salvation by works?

And doesn't this contradict what we believe about the gospel, that we're only saved by grace through faith with Christ? If the standard in final judgment is those who cared for the poor and those who didn't, doesn't this contradict the gospel?

That's a valid question from this passage, and that's what we're going to look at in our third point, which is the invitation of Jesus. The invitation of Jesus. Does this passage teach salvation through acts of mercy?

One of the clearest places we see the relationship between faith and works comes from Ephesians 2, 8 through 10, which says, So we can look at a passage like this.

[16:06] On one hand, we can say it's clear we're not ultimately saved by our own good works, that God looks at our own good works and improves of us and saves us because of them, but we're saved by faith in what Christ has done for us.

Ephesians 2 goes even so far as to say, even the faith that we have to believe in Christ, even that is not something that we produce in ourselves, but even that is a gift from God.

So it's clear we're not saved because of our good works, and yet, it's a very important distinction here, we're not saved by our good works, but we are saved for good works.

God saves us by grace in order to transform us into people who are full of acts of love and mercy and charity. And these are works, Ephesians 2 says, that God has prepared in advance for us to do.

Another way to say it is this. Good works are not the root of the gospel, but they are the fruit of the gospel.

[17:16] Good works are not the root of the gospel, but they are the fruit of the gospel. It's having Jesus' righteousness alone, it's being saved by grace, that leads to true righteousness in our lives.

And we see this play out in this text. Did you notice the great irony here in this passage? There's a great irony, and the irony is that it's only those who think of themselves as unrighteous, it's only those who think of themselves as unmerciful who are actually those who are righteous.

Verses 37 and 38, those on Jesus' right side say to him, Lord, when were we merciful to you? We weren't merciful to you. We didn't see you hungry or sick or imprisoned.

We're the spiritually bankrupt ones. We're the ones who are unrighteous. We are the ones who are unmerciful. No, Jesus, we don't deserve to be invited into your kingdom.

We're the ones who are poor. We're the ones who are sick. We're the ones who are prisoners. It's the people who know they're unrighteous, who know they're spiritually bankrupt. They're the ones who have true righteousness because they understand how much they need mercy.

[18:35] And their lives, knowing that they were in need of mercy, their lives have actually become full of the fruit of good works of mercy to others. And yet it's those on the left who say the same thing, but they say it with a different motivation.

They say it coming from a different place. They say, Jesus, we didn't see you hungry or thirsty or naked or sick or imprisoned. But of course, if we did, we would have cared for you.

We would have welcomed you. We would have clothed you. We would have fed you because we are merciful and we are righteous. We're the good people. We would have done it and we would have seen you, but we didn't see you. This group is demanding their rights before the king of heaven and earth.

They are litigating their righteousness. Up until the very end, even in final judgment, they are trying to litigate their righteousness before God.

And it's those people, it's that group that end up being cast out. This difference between true and false righteousness, it may sound subtle, but it's, I think, clearly seen in a story told by the great preacher Charles Spurgeon.

[19:45] And Charles Spurgeon told the story about a gardener who once grew a giant carrot in his garden. And this gardener grew this giant carrot and it was the largest and most beautiful carrot that he had ever grown.

And he brought it before the king and he laid it at the king's feet. And he said, oh king, I want you to have this carrot. It's the largest and most beautiful carrot I've ever grown.

And because you're such a wise king, because you're such a good king, because you're such a merciful king, I want you to have it. I want to honor you with this gift. And the king was so honored that he took the carrot and in return, he gave the gardener a huge plot of land as a gift in return.

But there was a savvy nobleman who was watching this scene play out in the king's court. And he saw this scene happen and he thought to himself, well, if this gardener gave the king a carrot and got a huge plot of land, what would I get if I gave the king one of my best horses, one of my finest horses?

And so the nobleman goes out and he gets one of his finest, most strongest horses. And he takes it before the king and he says, oh king, I want you to have this horse. It's the strongest, finest, most beautiful horse I've ever had.

[21 : 11] And the king looks at the nobleman and he looks at the horse and he says, thank you. Thank you for the horse. But the nobleman looked confused and angry and he said, well, aren't you gonna give me anything in return?

I saw the gardener bring a carrot and you gave him a huge plot of land. You're not gonna give me anything in return for my horse? Obviously a better gift than a carrot.

And the wise king looked at the nobleman and said, the gardener gave me the carrot, but you gave yourself the horse.

And this gets at the difference in motivation between true righteousness and false righteousness. I think if we're honest, if we look at our own hearts, when it comes to serving the poor or the weak or needy or the refugees, I think all of us, if we're honest, we can have mixed motivations, especially in a place like Washington, D.C., especially when many of our careers and work intersect on these things, I think all of us can have mixed motivations when it comes to acts of mercy because there's lots of ways in which we might actually be serving ourselves.

Maybe it's building a social reputation of being a justice and mercy person. Maybe it's because we feel guilty about our relative level of wealth and we wanna assuage our own sense of guilt or shame.

[22 : 45] Maybe we think, as many people do, that the scales of justice are really about our good actions outweighing our bad actions. And if our good actions outweigh our bad actions, then God will approve of us in the end.

But I think a question that we have to ask ourselves is when we look at serving the weak, serving the poor, serving the vulnerable, are we giving Jesus the carrot or are we giving ourselves the horse?

And the difference, although it may seem subtle, the difference lies in where you locate yourself in this scene. Are you the one who litigates your case before God and says, because of these acts of mercy, because I did these things, therefore you should consider me righteous?

Or are you one who cries out for mercy? Are you one who sees yourself as unmerciful? How can you know the difference? How can we know the difference in our own lives?

Well, when you see yourself, if your own vision of yourself is one who is spiritually poor and bankrupt, with nothing to offer God, with a debt that you could never repay, and yet you see Jesus, who was infinitely rich, and yet became poor, materially and spiritually poor, and paid your debt on the cross so that he could give you the glorious riches of his inheritance that Paul talks about in Ephesians 1, when you've seen that you were spiritually bankrupt, and yet Jesus paid your debt, it changes how you see the poor.

[24 : 26] Because you don't just see the poor as people who are in need, you look at the poor with solidarity, and you say, that's me. That's me, and yet Jesus made me rich.

When you see yourself as one who was an orphan, or a refugee, or a stranger to God's family, and you see at infinite cost to himself, Jesus welcomed you in, and he gave you a seat at his table, and he made you a son and a daughter of the kingdom, and he made you a fellow citizen in the kingdom of heaven.

When you've experienced the hospitality of Jesus, it changes how you think about immigrants. It changes how you think about refugees and strangers, people who you don't know.

Because you know what it feels like to be on the outside. You know what it feels like to be on the outside looking in. And then you know what it feels like to be invited in, and to be invited into the king's table.

When you see yourself as one who was a prisoner, enslaved and bound by the chains of sin and guilt and shame, and then you see Jesus who came to earth to liberate you, who unlocked your jail cell with his key and opened the door wide open so that you could go free, and then exchanged places with you, and then stepped inside your jail cell and locked it from the inside so that he could be condemned in your place and so that you could go free.

[26 : 01] When you've experienced the liberating power of Jesus, it changes how you look at those who are in prison. Because you don't just see somebody in prison as somebody who deserves to be there.

You see those in prison, and you say, that's me. Apart from the grace and mercy of God, that's me, and yet Jesus set me free. And this is why showing mercy to the weak and to the vulnerable and to the poor is the dividing line and the final judgment between where true righteousness and false righteousness is.

Because it is the ultimate litmus test. It's the ultimate litmus test if the root of the gospel of mercy, free mercy alone, has actually taken root in your life and transformed you into be a person of good works and mercy and charity.

The difference between these two groups in Matthew 25, between those who are prepared for the final judgment and those who are not, is between those who litigate their case before God, who litigate their righteousness before God, and those who cry out for mercy.

And it's those who cry out for mercy who objectively end up being those whose lives are full of mercy. So how can we be prepared for the day of final judgment?

[27 : 29] Well, the invitation of this passage is twofold. It's twofold. The first is to locate ourselves not as those who litigate and demand their rights before Jesus, but with those who know they're spiritually bankrupt, who know they're unrighteous, who know they're unmerciful.

With those who, apart from the mercy of Jesus, that we're the ones who are poor. We're the ones who are imprisoned. We're the strangers. We're the sick. It's by knowing that we need mercy that we become people of mercy.

It's by knowing that we are poor that we become people who care for the poor and have solidarity with them. The second part of the invitation this morning is to locate the face of Jesus, to locate the face of Jesus in the face of the poor, of the refugee, of the imprisoned, and of the orphan.

Because it's in him that we find true righteousness. It's in Jesus that we find true mercy. In his incarnation, Jesus is the one who became poor. He emptied himself of all his heavenly glory and took on human frailty and weakness.

Jesus became a stranger and an outcast and a refugee, outcast from the presence of God on the cross. Jesus became a prisoner. He was bound in chains.

[28 : 49] He was given an unjust trial. He was condemned a criminal's death so that we could go free. And friends, that's the root.

That's the root of the gospel. And if you let the root of the gospel plant deeply within you, if that becomes the center of your life, it'll transform you.

It'll transform you to the kind of person whose lives are full of good works, whose lives are full of solidarity with the poor, whose lives are full of mercy. And that's one of the ways that Jesus says that we can be prepared for the final judgment if we let the root of the gospel produce the fruit of mercy and justice in our lives.

And one day, Jesus, the king and the judge of all, will say to you, come, you who are blessed by my father, take your inheritance.

The kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. let's pray. Our father in heaven, we do identify ourselves with the unrighteous, with the unmerciful, with those who are bankrupt and poor and needy.

[30 : 08] And we cry out to you for mercy. And we pray that the saving power of your gospel would so free us and transform us and liberate us that we might be people who live lives of solidarity with the poor and the weak and vulnerable around us.

Lord, we pray these things for your sake. Amen.