

PM Matthew 25:31-46 Come...inherit the kingdom

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[0 : 00] From Matthew's Gospel, it's chapter 25, and a very familiar passage, verses 31 to 46.

The sheep and the goats. Matthew 25, verse 31. 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 he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left. 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.

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.

[1 : 30] I was naked, and you clothed me. I was sick, and you visited me. I was in prison, and you came to me. Then the righteous will answer him, saying, Lord, when did we see you hungry, and feed you, or thirsty, and give you a drink?

And when did we see you, a stranger, and welcome you, or naked, and clothe you? And when did we see you sick, or in prison, and visit you?

And the King will answer them, Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these, my brethren, you did it to me.

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.

For I was hungry, and you gave me no food. I was thirsty, and you gave me no drink. I was a stranger, and you did not welcome me.

[2 : 41] Naked, and you did not clothe me. Sick, and in prison, and you did not visit me. 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?

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.

And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.

May God speak to us through his eternal word. I ask you to turn now to Matthew chapter 25, verses 31 to 46, but in particular, I'll read by way of text, verse 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.

[4 : 06] Over recent months, I've been speaking of some of the great invitations of the Bible. Texts containing the word come.

There are lots of them. We've looked so far at seven. From Isaiah 1, Come and let us reason together, says the Lord.

Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow. From Isaiah 55, Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters.

From Genesis 6, Come into the ark. From Luke 14, Come for all is now ready. From Matthew 28, Come see the place where he lay.

From Psalm 66, Come and hear, and I will tell what he has done for my soul. And from Matthew 14, the simple word come, when Jesus invited Peter to walk on water.

[5 : 20] All of these speak of this present world. But our text tonight takes us beyond that. It takes us to the end of time.

To the last judgment. And to the world to come. It's sometimes called the parable of the sheep and the goats.

Though, strictly speaking, it's not a parable. But a prophecy. In which our Lord likens the last judgment to a shepherd separating the sheep from the goats.

To the sheep he gives this wonderful invitation. Come, inherit the kingdom.

But to the goats he speaks very differently. Verse 41, Depart into eternal fire. Come, or depart.

[6 : 28] There's a world of difference between those two words. All of us, all of us, I hope, want to hear the Lord say to us, come, and not depart.

Well, here is a word of encouragement to all who are his. You will hear the word come.

And a word of warning to any who are not. depart. You will hear the word depart. I want us to consider this passage tonight under two very simple headings.

The great day and the great divide. first though, let's notice the background. These words are spoken on the Mount of Olives, probably on the Wednesday of our Lord's final week.

Glance down into chapter 26, and you'll see that when Jesus had finished these sayings, he said to his disciples, you know that after two days, the Passover is coming, and the Son of Man will be delivered to be crucified.

[7 : 53] The shadow of the cross was already over him and over them. The previous Sunday, he had entered triumphantly into Jerusalem, and he had been acclaimed by the crowds as the Messiah.

But the priests are already plotting to destroy him. And he knows it. This present discourse began way back at the beginning of chapter 24, where the disciples had proudly shown him the stones of the temple.

And Jesus had warned them that all of this would be destroyed. Not one stone will be left standing on another, which indeed happened in AD 70.

He'd gone on to speak of the end of the world and of his own return in glory as the king. And he'd warned them in several parables to be ready for this and to live as faithful servants and to live as faithful servants and faithful servants of the king.

Now, he is speaking of their ultimate reward. He wants to encourage his disciples with the prospect of the kingdom.

[9 : 27] Easy to miss that that is the main thrust of this. We see this great divide and the dark cloud is there and we see those goats being led away to eternal destruction.

Yes, that is part of the message. But the main thrust of it is encouragement to the disciples. The kingdom is yours.

As Calvin says, we must remember Christ's purpose. He wishes his disciples to be content with hope now that they may look forward with patient and quiet minds to the fruition of the heavenly kingdom.

He also wishes them to strive earnestly and not weary of the right path. With this in mind, let's come now to our text.

And first, the great day in verse 31. When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne.

[10 : 44] And it is then that he will say to those on his right, come. We're speaking here of the second coming of Christ.

He knows that shortly he must go to the cross and die for our sins. He knows that he will rise from the dead and ascend to heaven, leaving his disciples to preach the gospel.

He would later command them to go and make disciples of all nations, those same nations that are gathered before him here.

He promises to be spiritually with them to the end of the age. But one day he will return in person. The end of the age will come and then the king will return in power and glory. There's no question about that.

[11 : 52] It will happen. Notice how he expresses it here. When the Son of Man comes in his glory. Not if, but when.

Now make no mistake, this is first and foremost his day. We're going to be talking tonight about the sheep and the goats and of course it is an important day for us.

But the real focus is upon him. All eyes will be upon Christ. He is the king.

He is the one who is sitting on the throne. It is his kingdom and this is his day of triumph. But he shares it with us.

Or at least with those who are truly his, which brings us at much more length to our second point. The great divide.

[12:59] In verse 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 and he will place the sheep on the right but the goats on the left.

we are speaking here of the last judgment. All of the nations will be gathered together. Every one of them. Not just Israel but the Gentile nations as well. Britain Russia America China they will all be there.

And I take that to mean the people of those nations. Every one of us. I have come across the eccentric idea to my mind anyway that the nations themselves are being judged here for their treatment of Israel.

But there is nothing at all in the context to suggest that. I notice that the ESV makes it quite clear how they understand these words when it says about the people being separated one from another.

[14:24] We are talking about the entire world's population past present and future. Every one of us gathered together before the judge.

You will be there and I will be there. And the judge will separate us out.

Sheep on the right goats on the left. Now when using this image of the sheep and the goats he may possibly have in mind Ezekiel 34 behold I judge between sheep and sheep between rams and male goats.

It's a well established Old Testament idea. This great separation this great divide the sheep and the goats the righteous and the unrighteous God's people and those who are not God's people the saved and the lost.

Jesus here is the good shepherd separating the sheep from the goats. Now we need to remember that in the Middle East sheep and goats are often very similar.

[15:57] When I think of sheep I think of nice fluffy animals which are very different from goats. there are sheep grazing across the valley from us.

I can see them from my study and there's no way that you could mistake them for goats. But even in the UK that is not always the case. I have photos that I took of the sheep on St.

Kilda and I have great difficulty persuading people that they really are sheep because they look so thin and scraggy like goats.

different breed. In the Middle East they often look very much alike. But a shepherd would have no difficulty in distinguishing them and the shepherd here has no difficulty.

He knows which ones are his. To our eyes they may often look the same. we may say of a person I'm not sure whether it's a Christian or not.

[17:06] But the Lord knows and with no difficulty at all he will separate the sheep from the goats. He speaks first to the sheep in verse 34.

Come you who are blessed by my father inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. What a wonderful promise.

What more could he possibly give them? The kingdom. That was the dream of every godly Jew.

When a great king or emperor wanted to bestow something upon someone who had done something wonderful for him the stock phrase was I will give you whatever you wish up to half the kingdom.

You may remember that Herod said that to Salome. The Lord Jesus is going beyond that here. I will give you the whole kingdom.

Inherit the kingdom which has been prepared for you. Jesus had in fact been preaching the kingdom right from the start of his ministry.

[18:29] Matthew 4 17 Jesus began to preach saying the kingdom of heaven is at hand. He taught his disciples to pray your kingdom come.

He told them to seek first the kingdom of God. He promised them fear not little flock it is your father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.

The kingdom exists already because Christ is the king and as Christians we are citizens of that kingdom but when Christ returns then that kingdom will come in all its fullness and we will be part of it.

Now our Lord makes it very clear that this is entirely by grace. first they are blessed by the father it is the father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom this is a father's gift to his children secondly

they are to receive it as an inheritance now an inheritance is a gift it doesn't have to be earned I received an inheritance when my father died four years ago I received it simply because I was his son no other reason there's another parallel here with Deuteronomy 31 by the way which we looked at this morning in that passage in Deuteronomy all the Israelites were gathered together on the borders of the promised land which the Bible describes as Israel's inheritance and the Lord was saying to them you've arrived now go in and take possession of your inheritance likewise these people these sheep they are gathered on the very borders of heaven and the king is inviting them come and enter into possession of your inheritance the difference of course is that the Israelites still had battles to fight for these people the battle is over they've fought the good fight they've finished the race they've kept the faith and henceforth there is laid up for them the crown of glory but it's theirs by inheritance theirs by grace thirdly he says it was prepared for them before the foundation of the world long before they ever did anything good or evil long before they were even born

[21 : 39] God had planned all this for them as Paul says in Ephesians God has chosen us in Christ before the foundation of the world and Paul goes on to say in that same chapter that in Christ we have an inheritance so quite clearly it is all of grace and yet he goes on to speak of works in verses 35 and 36 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 I was naked and you clothed me I was sick and you visited me I was in prison and you visited me now what's going on here is he suddenly going back on himself and saying that they have earned their place in heaven after all no he is simply describing what these people are like it's a question of identification not justification what marks these people out as sheep sheep there are clear marks that identify

Christians just as there are clear marks that identify sheep so that you can tell them apart from the goats how do you tell the difference between sheep and goats well I'm amongst experts here so I must be careful what I say but according to the internet there are six obvious differences sheep have wool goats have hair sheep's tails hang down and goats tails go up sheep graze and goats browse sheep flock together and goats tend to be more independent and if sheep have horns as they do sometimes then they tend to curl round alongside the side of their head whereas goats horns are upward and going backwards and apparently sheep have a groove on the upper lip whereas goats don't

I've never been that close to a sheep to notice but those are marks that the internet tells me will enable you if you're not an expert and I'm not an expert would enable even me to tell the difference between a sheep and a goat likewise spiritually you can think of many ways in which you can distinguish a Christian from a non-Christian the Christian worships Christ they trust in Christ they love Christ and so on in addition to that we could say that just as a shepherd will often put a mark upon his own sheep so the Lord has put his own mark upon us namely the seal of the Holy Spirit but here in this passage he focuses upon one particular distinguishing mark their behavior and in particular their kindness as

Jesus says elsewhere by their fruits you shall know them these people here have served Christ they have shown kindness to him so he says but when and how the righteous as they are now called are surprised in verse 37 Lord when did we see you hungry and feed you or do any of these deeds that you have spoken of to you it's not I think that they were unaware of ever having done any good though Christians often are unaware of how much good they've done because they're not doing it to be seen and they're not keeping accounts it's not that they're unaware of having done anything good the point is rather that they're unaware of having done anything like this for Christ and so the king explains in verse 40 in as much as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers you did it to me now what is our Lord talking about here there are many who interpret this as simply kindness shown to other people they speak about the brotherhood of man and they say that kindness to anyone is kindness to

Christ I visited Kilmarnock recently and in the churchyard there there is what at first sight appears to be a tramp lying on a bench but when you get up closer you discover that actually it's an artwork it's entitled the homeless Christ and the plaque describing it quotes Matthew 25 and the message is simply that helping the homeless is helping Christ now a good case could be made for that interpretation we are all children of Adam and in that sense we are all brothers and sisters and it is obviously right to help all mankind that is the second commandment of the law you shall love your neighbor as yourself and in the parable of the good

[28 : 29] Samaritan Jesus makes it clear that your neighbor is anyone in need as it happens here in this church we do seek to help the homeless hosting the drop in every Wednesday and that help is given to all regardless of who they are as the old song puts it the creed and the color and the name won't matter I'll be there we've been given the opportunity to show kindness to these Ukrainian ladies and it's a good thing that we're able to do that for them there are people in need and we must give thanks to God that he's given us the opportunity to show kindness we ought to show kindness to everyone and that is one of the marks of a

Christian but I'm not sure that that is precisely what the Lord is saying here he says notice one of the least of these my brothers not your brothers but my brothers who did the Lord regard as his brothers well we have a clue in Matthew 12 when his mother and brothers came to speak to him and he stretched out his hand toward the disciples and said here are my mother and my brothers again in Matthew 23 verse 8 that very week possibly that very day he had actually said to his disciples you all are brothers in

Hebrews 2 and verse 11 it says he is not ashamed to call them brothers who is it referring to well you can read the context and then means Christians in Acts 28 and verse 14 we find the New Testament describing Christians generally as brethren Paul is on his way to Rome as a prisoner they come to Puteoli and it says there we found brothers and were invited to stay with them seven days I would suggest to you then that in Matthew 25 Jesus is speaking here of kindness shown to Christians even to the very least of them and

Acts 28 is a wonderful example of that Paul the prisoner being invited to stay for seven days they could get into trouble for that and it would be a lot of hard work for them but they did precisely that because they loved Paul as a brother and in doing so according to our Lord's teaching here they were inviting Christ to stay for seven days I doubt if they thought of it in those terms but that's what they were doing because here was Paul one of Christ's brothers spiritually but it doesn't have to be something as extravagant as Acts 28 inviting someone to come and stay with you for seven days Jesus says elsewhere that even just a cup of cold water given to a disciple because he is a disciple will not lose its reward you see love for the brethren is a defining mark of the

Christian John says we know that we have passed from darkness to light we have passed from death to life because we love the brethren there are kind people out there helping mankind and we thank God for them but only Christians really care about Christians Paul sums it up in Galatians 6 and verse 10 as we have opportunity let us do good to everyone but especially to those who are of the household of faith these people have shown their love for the brethren and they've shown it in practical ways they don't just say that they love them they've proved it and that proves that they are the heirs of the kingdom those six acts of kindness that are described here are also reflective of the character of

[34 : 10] Christ himself we're saying earlier from Psalm 146 he gives food to the hungry he relieves the prisoner and the oppressed that's what God is like and as the children of God we should be like him so what about the goats well the rest of the chapter makes painful reading doesn't it in verse 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 and he brings as evidence against them their failure to do any of these things that he had commended in the righteous I was hungry and you gave me no food thirsty and you gave me no drink and so on they too are surprised when did we fail to help you

Lord and he will reply in verse 45 truly I say to you as you did not do it to one of the least of these pointing presumably to the sheep you did not do it to me they're not condemned here notice for sins like lying or theft or adultery they may well have been guilty of those sins as well but our Lord focuses here just on sins of omission what they didn't do was enough to prove that they were goats and the great divide is confirmed in verse 46 these will go away into eternal punishment but the righteous into eternal life we may find the idea of eternal punishment uncomfortable but there's no escaping it this is our Lord speaking and just as eternal life is forever so eternal punishment is forever it is the same

Greek word it's a terrifying prospect and all the more terrifying when we're told that this is the fire prepared for the devil and his angels eternity with God or eternity with the devil the contrast couldn't be more stark I pointed out earlier the comparison with Deuteronomy Deuteronomy 28 lists the blessings and the curses of the law but here too in the gospel there's a blessing and a curse a blessing for the sheep and a curse for the goats which are you that is the all important question here where will you be in eternity do you have these marks of a sheep that our

Lord describes here grace always leads to works a complete absence of works suggests an absence of grace trust in Christ and he will cleanse you from every sin sins of omission as well as sins of commission his blood covers every failure to do good as well as every evil that you may have done and his spirit will enable you to follow the good shepherd and to live a life of love and kindness but if you are his press on in those good works in Matthew 25 that is your calling as a Christian remember what Calvin says we must not be weary in the right path many Christians do grow weary in well doing many grow worldly and begin to look more like goats than sheep Christ wants his people to be zealous for good works and we need therefore to look out for opportunities to do good to God's people those opportunities are not always obvious because people don't always tell you their needs you have to get to know them sometimes you may have to help them quietly so as not to embarrass them but look out for those opportunities and if you don't find very many opportunities amongst the Christians you know locally look further abroad and you'll find plenty of opportunities there are millions of Christians around the world who are hungry there are probably millions who are in prison persecuted for their faith and maybe there are some even on our very doorstep who are in need of practical help or perhaps even just a visit notice in those lists of the mercies that these people had shown to some people he just said you visited me even that can be an act of kindness which the

[40 : 11] Lord is delighted in remember what you do for the brethren you do for Christ may the Lord help us all to serve the King and may we all hear him say to us come Amen and let go to