

Waiting fearfully

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[0 : 0 0] The reading this morning comes from Matthew's Gospel, chapter 25, verses 31 to 40, and that's on page 1002 in the Church Bibles.

Matthew 25, beginning at 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. I was naked, and you clothed me.

[1 : 1 3] 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 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, Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, 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. 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?

[2 : 2 5] 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 internal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life. Do please keep Matthew 25 open, and there's an outline on the back of the service sheet as well.

As we begin, I'm going to lead us in a prayer. Our Father, we pray for your help this morning, that we might see more of the Lord Jesus in your word. We pray that seeing him, we might know him, and knowing him, we might love him, and loving him, we might serve him.

We pray it in Jesus' name. Amen. A government report this week named Chetam Hill in Manchester as the counterfeit capital of the UK.

More fake goods are sought and distributed there than from anywhere else in the country. In raids leading up to Christmas, police seized fake goods worth a million and a half pounds from local shops and homes.

- [3 : 41] Counterfeit goods are an economic menace and a safety hazard, but they're often hard to spot, often hard to identify. How do I know if I've bought the genuine article, the real deal? How can I tell if I've fallen victim to a scam? Our passage this morning is all about separating genuine from fake, distinguishing true from false.
- It's all about identifying the genuine article. But its concern is not with Louis Vuitton handbags or Nike trainers. Its concern is far more significant than that.
- What is the mark of a genuine Christian believer? What is the mark of the authentic follower of Jesus?
- Throughout this section of Matthew's gospel, Jesus has been teaching his disciples about his return and how to live rightly in the light of that coming day.
- [4 : 43] Here in this passage that we've just had read for us, Jesus zooms forward to focus on the day of judgment itself. And he shows us that the day of judgment will bring a stark separation between people, between his true followers and all the rest.
- And he teaches us that as he separates all the people of the world on that final day, he will look for one particular sign of the genuine disciple.
- And he warns us that on that day, many will be surprised by the sign he looks for. And so as we look together at this dramatic scene in Matthew chapter 25, as we step forward into the future and witness ahead of time this great day of judgment, we'll consider each of those in turn.
- Two features of that coming day, a stark separation and a surprising sign. First then, a stark separation. The scene is dramatic, even awe-inspiring.
- The son of man, Jesus himself returns in all of his glory. Verse 31. And his kingly entourage is with him. All the angels are there.
- [5 : 56] He takes his seat on his glorious throne. And gathered before the king on his throne are all the nations of the world. Verse 32. All people who have ever lived.
- Whatever their creed, their color, their language. Whether they acknowledged Jesus in their lifetime or denied his existence. Whether they bowed the knee or nailed him to a cross.
- All are there. Everyone. And without any delay, verse 32, the king executes his judgment. It is swift and it is simple.
- He separates people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. It's an overwhelming scene. Almost too much for us to visualize or conceptualize.
- And so in typical style, Jesus slows down and helps us by adopting an image more familiar to the world of his hearers. This separation, he says, verse 32, will be like what happens when a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.
- [7 : 04] He will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on his left. The idea of separating sheep and goats would be familiar enough to country folk and to farmers in particular.
- Although sheep and goats would often graze together during the day, come the evening, come nightfall, they would need to be separated. Sheep are quite happy in the cool nighttime air, but goats need to be gathered together, I gather, for warmth.
- Any good farmer, any careful farmer, would gather the goats together in one place at the end of the day. And so here the king carries out the separation necessary to his role as king.
- It's as simple as that. A great multitude divided into two very distinct groups. And these groups will have two very different futures. 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. The sheep, those on the right, those who are blessed by the father, well, they have a kingdom ready for them.

[8 : 13] It's a joyful, glorious, unimaginably good future. But the future set before those on the king's left, well, it couldn't be any more different.

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. No blessing, but now a curse.

No kingdom prepared for them, but instead a fire has been prepared. The difference between these two destinations cannot be overstated.

One is bliss. One is agony. One is joy. One is misery. One is heaven. And one is hell. And on that final day, the whole of the world's population, every man, woman, boy, or girl who has ever lived, will go to one or will go to the other.

There is no middle ground. There is no neutral ground. There is no spiritual Switzerland, no cosmic, no man's land. It's either one or the other.

[9 : 24] And so even now, there are only two types of people in the world. There are the sheep and the goats, the righteous and the unrighteous, the blessed of God and the cursed.

Those who belong to Jesus and those who do not. That's the clear teaching of our passage. I wonder if you and I believe that it's true.

If you're newer to Christian things, perhaps you've never heard this before. Perhaps you had been hoping personally to occupy a more neutral territory. Perhaps you would rather like to describe yourself with David Cameron as a committed but vaguely practicing Anglican.

But Jesus says you either belong to him or you don't. And so I wonder, are you clear on where you stand before the Lord Jesus this morning?

If we've been Christians for any length of time, we'll know that there are only two types of people in the world. We'll have heard this teaching before, perhaps many times. But I wonder if it's really shaped the way we view ourselves and view others, too.

[10 : 38] We live in a society that is wonderfully inventive in multiplying distinctions between people. And we live in a culture that takes those distinctions very seriously indeed.

We manage to distinguish between people who come from the North and the South, between people who were privately educated and those who weren't, between people who went to certain universities and those who didn't, those who live in certain postcodes and those who don't, those who get invited to that Sixth Formers party and those who don't get the invitation, those who earn certain levels of income and those who earn rather less.

We even manage to categorize people according to which supermarket they do their shopping at. Are you a waitrose person or a Tesco person, an Ocado person or a little person?

You don't need to answer. I think it's fair to say that no other society in all the world is quite so good at multiplying distinctions. It's a particularly and peculiarly English art.

And the danger for us living in the culture we live in is that we will come to believe that those distinctions really matter. And the danger is that we will behave as though they carry significance.

[12 : 01] If we think that our social standing is of huge significance, we will spend our time, money and energy establishing ourselves socially. If we think that education is the most important thing in all the universe, then making it into that school or that uni or getting our children into that school or that uni, well, that will be the focus of all we do and all we are.

If we think that income and wealth are all important, then work will be our everything. And on and on it goes. But if we really believe that the only distinction that really matters in the final accounting is the distinction between the sheep and the goats, those who belong to Jesus and those who don't, well, then surely our deepest concern for ourselves will be that we know and trust the Savior personally and then live as his people.

Surely our greatest concern for those around us will be that they might know him too. Surely our deepest longing for our children would be that they put their trust in the Lord Jesus for themselves.

The mourning of September 11th, 2001 is a mourning most of us remember well. We probably remember where we were and what we were doing on that fateful day.

For the workers inside the two towers, when they began their mourning that day, there were countless distinctions between them. That mattered a great deal to most of them.

[13 : 35] There was the distinction between those who worked in cleaning and those who worked in maintenance. There was the distinction between those who worked in maintenance and those who worked in security.

There was the distinction between those who worked in security at the desk downstairs and those who worked in the offices upstairs. There was the distinction in the offices between the assistants and the associates.

The distinction between associates and partners. Between junior partners and senior partners. Between senior partners and named partners.

At 8.30 a.m. that morning, those distinctions mattered a great deal. By 10.30, no one cared. There was one distinction that mattered to everyone.

Who got out and who didn't. Jesus says there is a day coming when there will be one distinction that matters.

[14 : 37] And only one. There will be a very stark separation on the day of judgment. But do you and I believe today that that distinction, the distinction between those two groups on that day.

Is in the final accounting the only distinction that matters. Do we believe that that distinction, that separation will determine the eternal future of everyone we know and love.

If we really believe those things with all our hearts, how might you and I live differently in the week ahead? How might we think differently about ourselves and about others?

How might we speak differently to our children and our neighbors and our colleagues? How might there be more of the gospel, more of the Lord Jesus, and perhaps less of other things?

How might we plan and dream differently about the future? How might we spend and invest differently with the resources we have? What will it look like this week for you and me to live believing that this one distinction is the only distinction that matters?

[15 : 57] A stark separation. But a question immediately arises. How do we know whether we ourselves are really sheep or goats?

And how do we know that about other people too? To answer that question, Jesus gives us a sign of his true people. A sign by which he will make that crucial distinction on that final day.

But it's a sign that's quite unexpected. A surprising sign. Notice again the words of Jesus, starting at 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. 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 came to me.

[17 : 01] And then to those on his left, verse 41. 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. And so it continues. Here we are on the day of judgment.

The king is passing his eternal verdict on each one of us. And the evidence he cites in support of his verdict is this. Our treatment of those in need.

I don't know about you, but to me, that comes as a massive surprise. And it's clear from the text itself that it comes as a great surprise to those gathered before the king.

They are surprised. Just notice their response. Verse 37. Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you? Verse 44. 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?

[18 : 03] When did that happen? There are, I think, two ways to misunderstand this passage very badly indeed. These are two easy mistakes to make, and the issues at stake are very significant indeed.

So I think it's worth our while just to slow down for a moment and address each of those possible misunderstandings in turn. The first possible misunderstanding is that Jesus is speaking here about the physical needs of all people, the human population at large.

Many have taken the phrase in verse 40, the least of these my brothers, to refer to every human being in need. Jesus is showing solidarity with the poor and the sick and the needy, they say, and he is challenging his disciples to show compassionate concern to everyone.

If that's right, if that reading is correct, then this passage is a great rallying call to the church for generalized social action.

If so, if that's right, you and I need to roll up our sleeves and get to work because there are lots of sick and hungry people in London, and as a church we do relatively little to meet their physical needs.

[19 : 23] But is that right? Is Jesus saying here in this passage that his primary concern on the day of judgment will be that we have met the needs of the poor and hungry throughout our world?

Is that his point in these verses? Well, what does Jesus mean when he refers to someone as his brother, as he does here in verse 40? That's actually the crucial question that decides the matter for us.

And to answer it, we need to look back a few pages to Jesus' earlier teaching in Matthew. If you could keep a finger in Matthew 25, please just turn with me back to chapter 12, where Jesus provides a definition for us of what it means to be his brother.

Here in chapter 12, Jesus' family are waiting for him outside where he's speaking. And when he is told that his family are outside, he says this in verse 48 of chapter 12.

Who is my mother? And who are my brothers? And stretching out his hand toward his disciples, he said, Here are my mother and my brothers.

[20 : 32] For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother. The disciples of Jesus, the brothers of Jesus, rather, are the disciples of Jesus.

And his concern in chapter 25, and we can go back there now, is not with social action generally, not with our treatment of the poor and needy in general, but in particular, our treatment of brothers and sisters, fellow believers in need.

He is concerned with how we care for fellow Christian believers. Now, that's not to say, of course, that Jesus is unconcerned about the poor and the needy in our world.

Part of loving our neighbor and being faithful to the teaching of the Lord Jesus will be to show concern for those in need around us, whoever they may be. And to care for the poor and needy in our world is a commendable, good, right, and godly thing to do.

It is good to do good. And showing compassion to all people as we have opportunity is a right and God-honoring thing. That's not being denied.

[21 : 44] But throughout the New Testament, the great emphasis is on the church's care, first and foremost, for the people of God. We have a primary family responsibility to one another to care for each other.

It's important to underline this point because at various stages in church history, Christians have misunderstood this point and taken the view that the church is required to meet the physical and social needs of society at large.

Now, if we took that view and carried it through to its logical conclusion, we would have to spend all our time and all our energy and all our resources on social work.

After all, the need is endless. And gospel proclamation would have to end up on the back burner. That would be the natural and necessary results.

Well, that's the first possible misunderstanding. The second is this. We might read this passage and think that judgment will be made on the basis of our good works.

[22 : 50] Good works will earn us a place in the kingdom. On one level, it kind of looks like that's what's happening here. The king looks back at the life history of all the people gathered before his throne.

Some have a track record of loving, welcoming, and caring for the needy, for his people, and they're welcomed into heaven. Some, on the other hand, have shown no care or compassion for his people, and they're excluded.

It's judgment on the basis of works, surely. It's salvation by good deeds, surely. But hold on a second. Is that what's really going on here?

Is that what Jesus is really saying? Notice again whose needs are in view. Verse 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. And on and on it goes. I, I, I. It's all about the king. It's all about the Lord Jesus himself.

[23 : 54] The people before the king are confused. How can that be? We never remember seeing you in need, and we never remember doing these things for you. When did we do all these things?

Verse 40. 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. I wonder if you've ever had the experience of being treated well because of your relationship to someone else.

When I was a student, I went on a road trip to America with a few of my uni friends. We drove down the east coast, something we wouldn't manage today in all the snow, but it was summer then.

We drove down the east coast, stopping in the big cities and seeing the sights. Washington, D.C. was on the itinerary, of course. And we were keen to see what we could of the major tourist attractions there.

In many ways, the most interesting building in D.C. is, of course, the White House. But that would not normally be on the tourist list. Access is restricted, and for very good reason.

[25 : 00] But happily, my brother-in-law used to work at the White House. And when he heard that we were making the trip to D.C., he said, let me put in a call and see if I could get you in for a visit.

Although he worked for the previous administration a few years before, he still had one or two friends there. And sure enough, we were told, show up at a certain gate at a certain time, and you'll be allowed in.

We wandered rather smugly past all the tourists milling outside the gate, and we wandered up and were buzzed in. We were directed to a particular door, and we were greeted inside.

We were given a personal tour by one of the White House staffers, and shown parts of the building we would never normally see. Now, we were three scruffy students from another country.

No one in the White House knew who we were, I can guarantee that. And normally, we wouldn't have made it past the outer gate. They didn't know us, but they knew my brother-in-law.

[26 : 01] And we were given the royal treatment for his sake. The staff welcomed us out of friendship to him. We were treated with kindness because of him.

Verse 40 is, I think, a remarkable verse. Here, Jesus is identifying himself so closely with his people in need that anything done for them, he says, is done for him personally.

Any act of compassion or kindness shown to any of the least of Jesus' brothers is an act of compassion shown to him personally. He cares so much for you and for me.

He identifies himself so closely with you and with me that any kindness shown to us is kindness shown to him.

How people treat you and how people treat me, well, he takes that very personally indeed. Food and clothing given to you are, in a real sense, given to Jesus.

[27 : 02] A welcome given to you is a welcome given to Jesus. A visit to you in a time of distress and need is a visit to the Lord Jesus himself.

A visit to you in a time of distress and need to be a friend of mine.

A visit to you in a time of distress and need to be a friend of mine.

■' name. The queen's secretary of state, respectfully, requests and requires others to welcome us and to protect us, to show us kindness. And that's required in the queen's name.

Foreign officials in other countries won't know who we are, but they'll know who the queen is, and they're called upon to treat us well for her sake. The point that Jesus is making is this.

[28 : 42] The way in which you and I treat his people reveals our heart attitude to him. Our treatment of his people, either good or bad, will not be the basis of our salvation.

The only basis of anyone's salvation, the Bible is crystal clear, is the death and resurrection of Jesus. And we could hardly forget that fact at this point in Matthew's gospel.

Just notice what comes next at the very start of chapter 26. When Jesus had finished all 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 up to be crucified.

This is all in the shadow of the cross, that great saving act. That's the basis of our salvation, a believing trust in the work of Christ at the cross, his death in my place for my sins.

But at the final day, Jesus will be looking for solid evidence that we know him and that we trust him. Those who truly know him, those who truly love him, those who truly trust him, will demonstrate their love for him by loving his people.

[29 : 53] And those who have no regard for the Lord Jesus, no love for him, well, they'll demonstrate their disdain for him through their disregard of his people.

That will be the evidence that King Jesus uses on that final day. It will substantiate his verdict on your life and my life. I wonder how you might have imagined that the day of judgment might go.

I wonder what questions you might have imagined the Lord Jesus would ask you on that day. Perhaps we might have expected a doctrinal examination, a list of basic points of theology that he'd want to be sure that we're clear on.

Perhaps some of us might have anticipated that Jesus would look back for evidence in our lives that we knew him and trusted him. Perhaps he'd check that we'd given up certain types of sin.

Perhaps he'd look back in the records to see how well we'd served and how generously we'd given. Perhaps he'd have a look back in his book to see how many people we'd share the gospel with.

[30 : 59] But I reckon that this is the last thing we would expect him to check. Have we shown practical love, compassion, and concern for needy Christians?

One of the truly wonderful things about Grace Church Dulwich is this church's zeal for evangelism. As a family, we noticed that right away when we first joined three and a half years ago.

And that feature of church life here has been an amazing encouragement and challenge to us. I trust we never lose that zeal as a church.

But I wonder if that godly zeal could carry a danger with it that we need to be aware of. The danger could be that we could become so outwardly focused that we fail to care for one another as we should.

Perhaps the danger is that we could become so focused on our mission here in Dulwich, so task-oriented in that, that when one of the church's family falls into need or distress, we could fail to notice.

[32 : 07] Or if we did notice, we might think that stopping to help or to visit or to listen, well, maybe it's a distraction from the things I've got to do. Now, I've actually seen amazing love and care shown by church family members here to those in distress.

So I don't think that's where we are. But I guess it could be a danger for us. As a church plant with a busy program, with lots of things on, we all tend to be pretty busy in serving.

We've got our rotas. We know our jobs. And there's a wonderfully active culture, I think, of sacrificial service in this church family. And I think that's something for which to give thanks.

That's a mark of godliness. That's a mark of the work of the Spirit, I believe. But our busyness in service, well, it could just carry a danger for us.

The danger is that we might just fail to see when one of us is unwell. We might fail to pick up on it if one of us is in financial needs.

[33 : 15] We might be so busy serving on a Sunday that we fail to notice the visitor in our midst. And if that's the case, the Lord Jesus would tell us that our busyness and our service mean nothing to him if we fail to express our love for him through practical love for one another.

When it comes to that final day, what will the Lord Jesus make of the evidence of my life and of your life? Will my love for people prove beyond all doubt my love for him?

Will my concern and my care for the needs of his people, for your needs, will it demonstrate my honor of him and my reverence for him?

Two features of that final day. A stark separation. Well, do we believe it? And a surprising sign. What's the evidence of my life? And what's the evidence of yours?

Let's be quiet for a moment and then pray as we finish. 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.

[34 : 30] Our Father, we pray that we would know the Lord Jesus in such a way that we might love his people. And so hear those words at the final day. For we pray it in Jesus' name.

Amen.