

*Matthew 25:31 [Jesus said,] “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. <sup>32</sup>All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people 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; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. <sup>35</sup>For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, <sup>36</sup>I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit 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 something to drink? <sup>38</sup>When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? <sup>39</sup>When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’ <sup>40</sup>The King will reply, ‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did 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 prepared for the devil and his angels. <sup>42</sup>For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, <sup>43</sup>I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.’ <sup>44</sup>They also will answer, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?’ <sup>45</sup>He will reply, ‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.’ <sup>46</sup>“Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.”*

Dear Friends in Christ,

### **JESUS’ LAST SERMON**

“I shall return,” said General Douglas MacArthur as he left the Philippines in 1942. Under a lightning fast Japanese attack which had superiority on land, at sea and in the air, he was forced to retreat to Australia. But from that moment he was determined to liberate what was then still a United States possession, the Philippine Islands. “I shall return,” he said. He wanted his last words to the Philipinos to be a forward-looking message of hope.

Last words can be very powerful. Perhaps you have been there for someone’s last words: someone who had time to think about their last words and wanted to say something important to you. Maybe those last words inspire you, maybe they haunt you. Whichever way, last words have a way of sticking with you.

Jesus knew that. He knew that. And what we have in our reading today are Jesus’ last public words, his last sermon. Oh, Jesus would say more to the Twelve in the upper room—but privately. Jesus would speak to Pilate and the high priest and on the cross—but as a prisoner. Jesus’ last words to the people of Judea, to the masses of this world, his last words as God’s ultimate and greatest prophet were the words of our text this morning.

Jesus wanted his last words to inspire those who believed in him. And he wanted his last words to haunt and wake up those who had rejected him. Jesus clearly teaches about the final judgment in Matthew 25, his last sermon.

## I. Jesus' Second Glorious Arrival

The picture that Jesus paints for us is a picture in purple, orange and gold, one of majesty and glory, ***“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory.”*** What an outrageous claim Jesus is making! Jesus had frequently called himself the “Son of Man.” And so when he says, ***“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him... All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people...”*** Right there in front of crowds of fellow Jews, Jesus is making outrageous claims. He is saying that back there in our Old Testament reading in Daniel 6, Jesus is saying, “That is me!” He is telling his disciples and the crowds to look at him as he stands there wearing sandals, feet dirty from the dusty pavement, hair that needed to be combed every morning or whatever they did two thousand years ago, a man showing his 33 years of age with wrinkles beginning to crease his face, this very human Jesus of Nazareth, son of Mary, brother of James, Judas and Simon, he says, “I and my angels are going to come and judge every single one of you.”

It was an outrageous claim. But these last words were what he wanted ringing in their ears even after he left them. “A time of judgment will come, and I will be the divine judge!”

Jesus' claims about his final judgment sound just as outrageous in our day. Increasingly many people take an atheistic look at the world. They simply refuse to believe that there is a God who will judge us. And increasingly those who *are* religious refuse to believe that Jesus would come back to actually condemn people to the eternal torments of hell. “Jesus would never do that!” they assert. Jesus says, “Yes, I will.” That was, in fact, his last sermon!

Though never so plainly as this last day, Jesus had often talked about this last judgment. Many times he said that there will indeed be one. When people assert that hell is only for the really, really bad, they are contradicting Jesus' clear words. Jesus said, ***“Wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it”*** (Mt 7:13-14). Jesus also said, ***“Many are invited, but few are chosen.”*** (22:14). If you think most people are going to heaven, Jesus says most people will not be in heaven, they will be in the other place.

Now if this seems too terrible to believe, then each doubter needs to humble himself before God and submit his mind to God's Word. God doesn't change his plan for the universe just because a few people whine that it doesn't seem fair. God does not change, nor do his plans. Jesus knew that, so in love he warned people with his last words: Judgement Day will come, a day of Doom for most.

On the other hand, for those who know Jesus, who humble themselves before him, who ask God's forgiveness in Christ Jesus for their sins of thought, word and deed, Jesus assures them that Judgment Day holds no fear.

## II. Separated

***“All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left”*** (32-33).

Goats to the left... Over in Africa, the Tonga people got really interested when we would get to this Bible reading. You see, many of them kept goats, but none of them kept sheep. So they were always wondering if maybe goats were somehow connected in some mysterious way with the devil, because goats were put on the left, and those on the left were condemned. Jesus' comparison isn't so much a comparison to sheep and goats as to a shepherd. The point of what Jesus is saying is that he will judge clearly and unerringly. No career military man would ever confuse the uniforms of the navy and the army. In the same way no shepherd could ever confuse sheep and goats.

Jesus will know with 100% accuracy who his people are, and who are not. For the person who is

just faking it, just claiming Christianity because his wife won't leave him alone, or to network at church, or whatever other hypocritical reason—Jesus will know. And every meek Christian who deeply feels his own sinfulness and reliance on Christ's forgiveness—Jesus will know. He will read the hearts of all clearly, and there will be two groups. There will be no maybes and no "second chance" group. Only two.

Have you ever been separated into two groups? Remember back in PE class when the teacher would have you count off, "1-2-1-2-1-2" and then you wondered who was on your team?

One man told me of a far more serious separation that he experienced. Back in the early, early 70's he was drafted. On the last day of boot camp the soldiers were divided into two groups. Group One was given their various assignments. Group Two was told that in hours they would be beginning a journey to Vietnam and the war. And there was sorrow. And you feel something right here (*point to heart*), don't you?

Jesus, the Judge, will divide all humanity who has ever lived, all the billions of people. For one group it will be infinitely better than the cushiest assignment, and the other group will find out that, contrary to popular opinion, hell is worse than war. And there will be sorrow. And you feel something right here (*point to heart*), don't you? Makes you want to tell them.

Now some people might think that pastors enjoy saying things like that. That pastors love to shoot off heavy ordinance to put the fear of God into people, make them shake right down to their boots. Maybe some pastors do. Me not so much. But these were Jesus' words, and they were his last words, and he has told his church to speak them. Jesus wants us to speak words of hope to his people and words of judgment to warn as many as possible. Shouldn't we?

### III. So Which Side Are You On

Meanwhile we naturally ask ourselves, "Am I in the '*Come, you who are blessed*' group, or the '*Depart, you who are cursed*' group?"

***"Come, you who are blessed by my Father... for I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink... Depart from me, you who are cursed... For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink."***

I don't know about you, but I feel uneasy about these words. It sounds like getting to heaven depends on me being a nice guy. It makes me uneasy because Jesus the Judge seemingly praises people who have done only good things, and I have not done only good things. And he condemns people who have apparently done bad things, and I have done bad things.

This is one place where we need to do the Lutheran thing, to look at the whole of the Scriptures and let "Scripture interpret Scripture." Which is to say, we don't go looking for other words from the Bible to contradict words we don't like. But we look elsewhere in the Bible to make these words clear. And this is not difficult.

The Bible clearly tells us that we are saved only by faith, not because of the good things we do. (Ephesians 2). And this Bible says, when introducing the purpose of Jesus coming into the world said, "[Mary] will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save *his people from their sins.*" (1:21). This same Bible tells us that true faith in God will *always* produce good works (James 2). Clearly God's people are not saved by doing good things. Instead, because they are God's saved people they do good things.

On the other side, this same Bible tells us that "*without faith it is impossible to please God.*" (Hebrews 11:6) And it tells us that, "*The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent*" (John 6:29). In other words, for the believer, all sins are forgiven and forgotten and good deeds counted as good. For unbelievers, no sins are forgiven and nothing is counted as acceptable.

There are many comparisons we could make. Think of a child who gets good grades, helps around the house, but refuses to follow the house rules for times of going to sleep and making the bed. All the good things are negated by a basic unwillingness to honor and obey in small things. And so it is with God. A refusal to honor Jesus as Lord and Savior negates giving millions to charity, feeding the poor, visiting the sick. None of it is good in God's eyes if someone does not submit himself to God's plan of salvation.

And now it starts to make sense. Those on the right, under God's favor, are shocked because they *know* that they didn't only do good things. In fact, they know that many of the good things they should have done they did not, and what looked good wasn't always done with a pure heart. But in Jesus, they are made pure and acceptable.

Likewise those on the left are shocked when Jesus speaks of all the things they did not do. And they wonder because they know they helped the poor and visited the sick. But Jesus says that none of it counts because they refused to honor Jesus as God's chosen Savior.

And then Jesus says, ***"Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life."*** Note how carefully Jesus sets these up in parallel. "Eternal" punishment and "eternal" life. Please listen to these last words of Jesus' last sermon. It is forever.

It is always a pastor's duty, his sacred trust from God, to encourage God's people to be more heavenly minded. I do not say this to be a scold. I repeat what Jesus' felt important enough to be his last sermon: after this life there will be two unalterable paths. Jesus would have us consider what that means in our life, in the lives of our family, in the lives of our co-workers and neighbors.

That was Jesus' last sermon. Amen.