

Andrew Maciver: Matthew 25:31-46

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Preacher: Guest Preacher

[0 : 00] Let us turn again to God's word this morning and I'll just read through the passage again. 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 his left.

Then the king will say to those on his right, Come ye who are blessed by my Father and head at 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. Then the righteous will answer them saying, Lord when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink?

And when did we see you as 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 brothers, you did it to me.

[1 : 00] 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? 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. Our passage this morning is one that will be familiar to many of us and one that on the face of it seems to be fairly straightforward.

But as with so much of the Bible, when we dig a little deeper, there's a lot more going on and there's a lot more that God has to say to us through his word. If we're to fully understand and grasp what God is looking to say through his word, then it's important for us to understand the context into which Jesus was speaking when he spoke this message, not only the context of the text itself, but also the cultural context into which he's speaking.

And the mind said of those who would hear or read his words. Every word he spoke was for a purpose. Every word had a reason as with every word in the Bible. And what might seem like a simpler straightforward story to us and something that we can just gloss over because we know it well, can take a deeper significance and a meaning when we understand what that purpose was, what it was that Jesus was speaking to and what he was trying to communicate to his hearers and how they would understand his teaching.

[2 : 32] Here he's teaching his disciples about what will come to them at the end. He's teaching them about the trials and the tribulations that the world will experience before his return, before he brings his kingdom. In chapter 24 of Matthew, Jesus prophesies both the fall of Jerusalem and then his own return that's going to bring about the end of time.

He follows this with three parables and illustrations in chapter 25, each of which points his disciples to what that day of his return will look like. Jesus is preparing them for what lies ahead.

And in particular of them, he's pointing them to the importance of being prepared and being ready for his return. The first parable in chapter 25 of the Ten Virgins warns of the need to be expectant and to be ready for Jesus' arrival because we don't know when it will be.

While the parable of the talents teaches the importance of using what God has given to his glory and making the most of those things, for we don't know again when Jesus will return.

And it's into this teaching and this warning that our passage fits. Jesus here is talking about his return and bringing the kingdom of God and all its fullness.

[3 : 37] It's a day of judgment. It's a final judgment that comes and Jesus makes this clear that it's the day when he will come and all his glory. But as Christians this points to us as the last day, this is the day, the end of time, and it's the last.

It's the judgment that all mankind will face and it's the restoration of all creation. It's a day that we look forward to when Jesus returns. But for the Jews who are listening to Jesus, including his disciples, this meant something different.

Their understanding of the Messiah and the kingdom of God was purely on an earthly level. They understood the kingdom of God as something that was an earthly kingdom. It wasn't heavenly.

They saw the prophecies as pointing to an earthly king who would reestablish Israel as a sovereign nation again, overthrowing the ruling power at the time and leading Israel to their place, ruling over the nations on earth.

And up until the arrival of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost it seems that even the disciples had this understanding. And so as Jesus prophesies here the coming of the Son of Man and all his glory, then it's his earthly kingdom that those listening to him are looking to.

[4 : 41] When that day of judgment comes Jesus is going to separate his people into two groups and he uses this picture of sheep and goats to illustrate his point. In verse 34 he addresses this incredible invitation to his sheep.

He calls him blessed by the Father and invites him to come and take their inheritance in the kingdom of God, to take their place for all eternity in God's presence and to share in the inheritance of Jesus.

This is our hope as Christians. This is what we look to. And this is the day when Christ will bring us to be with himself for all eternity. The hope of our salvation isn't merely to avoid the pedals and pain of this world or the pedals and pain of hell.

It's certainly one of the great benefits of our salvation and it's part of what Jesus brought for us with his death on the cross. But if that's the focus of our salvation then we're looking more to what God is giving us than we are to God himself.

And we are in danger of missing out entirely on the true reason that God has saved us and the true blessings that come from that. And God's purpose in our salvation is to give us himself.

[5 : 42] It's to restore us to himself for all eternity, to restore us to what he created us for and to the core of who we are, that relationship with Jesus that we've been created for so that we can truly enjoy him forever.

It's this hope that gives us the strength to endure through whatever this life throws at us, through the trials that come in this world. And it's this hope that enables us to follow Paul's command later on to rejoice in the Lord and all our circumstances.

It's as we look to this hope that we can endure through whatever the world gives us, whatever challenges and trials and difficulties and dangers the world might throw our way and that might come against us.

It's this hope that we hold to, that we will one day be with Jesus, that we will be restored with God and all the fullness of creation and all that he intended for us.

It was knowing that nothing the world or the enemy could throw at him would take away from that promise of eternity with Christ that allowed Paul to consider the troubles of the world as being light and momentary in comparison to the glory that he would receive in Christ.

[6 : 49] And it's that same hope and assurance that enables us to face the trials that come out away with joy. And it's what enables us to walk out in obedience to God regardless of the circumstances or the places to which he calls us.

It's what enables us to move out of our comfort zone since take the gospel into the hardest and the darkest places. Whatever God calls us to we can step out in obedience because there's nothing in the world that can scare us or take that assurance away from us.

Even if we do face death we can do so knowing that we have this glorious promise awaiting us in Christ. And in the parallel passage in verse 41 Jesus then addresses the other group, the goats, and their experience is a stark contrast to the promise that he gives to God's sheep.

Jesus calls them cursed and he commands them away from him and into the eternal fire, into the eternal punishment of God's wrath. Notice there's no middle ground here.

There's no sitting on the fence and hoping to avoid the issue. There's no ignoring it and hoping that it will go away. Every single person will stand before Jesus and face that judgment and face that.

[7 : 56] That separation and will fall into one group or the other. We will either receive the kingdom of heaven and will receive our inheritance in glory with Christ or we will suffer the wrath of God and the internal fire of his judgment.

If we're not yet saved and we're not yet under the promises of God's grace and mercy then we must recognise the urgency of this issue and the importance of our response to the gospel. It isn't an option for us to make no decision or to make no stand and to think that there's no need for us to do so.

It's not an option for us to think that by not making a decision that means we just, it's not that we just miss out on the blessings of God. It doesn't mean that we simply cease to be and disappear into nothing.

To make no decision means that we land firmly on the side of the goats and that we suffer as Jesus warns that they will suffer. For those of us who are Christians it's a sobering reminder of indeed what God has saved us from.

It's a reminder to us of our sinful nature and of God's grace and his mercy to us in spite of our sinfulness. It makes the need for evangelism and for fulfilling Jesus' great commission to make disciples all that more pressing.

[9 : 06] It will not do for us to sit in the security of our own salvation while others are plodding aimlessly and obliviously into a lost eternity not knowing what awaits them while we have the answer to that, while we have the answer to that predicament in our hearts and in our lives.

The work of the gospel is not for a select few who are called to full time ministry but it's the work of all the saints and of every one of us who professes to be a Christian. If we profess our faith in Christ then with that comes a requirement of obedience to God's commands.

This includes fulfilling the great commission. The command to make disciples of all nations, obedience to God is about more than just changing our own behaviour and getting rid of the sin that's in our lives.

It's about living our lives in a way that impacts others and shows them the love of God. In both the Old and New Testaments we have the Law summed up in two commandments.

To love the Lord with all our heart, soul and mind and to love our neighbour as ourselves. Jesus goes on from this to give those who are part of each group the reasons that they are receiving this incredible invitation or this warning.

[10 : 15] If we look at the sheep again, he lists for them why it is that they've been blessed by God the Father and why they're receiving that inheritance in the kingdom of God.

I think it's important for us here to notice what it is that he's rewarding them for, what it is that he's telling them they are receiving the blessings and inheriting the kingdom for.

It's their actions and their deeds. Jesus here doesn't make mention of faith and he doesn't make mention of their belief in him or even of their obedience to the law and to keep him in the commandments.

Instead he commends them for their treatment of him during his time of need and equating that to how they treat others during time of need. They fed him, they gave them a drink, they clothed him and showed him hospitality, they visited them when there was a need.

And similarly for those who are condemned to the eternal judgment, it's their failure to act. It's their failure to recognise the needs and meet them that leaves them condemned and cast out from his presence.

[11 : 13] Now before we jump to the conclusion that we can earn our salvation and that we are saved by our deeds, it's clear that this is not the case. We know elsewhere in scripture that that's not what Jesus is teaching.

If we look at Matthew 7 verses 21 to 23, Jesus says this, not everyone who says to me, Lord, Lord, will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who's in heaven, on that day many will say to me, Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?

And then it will declare to them, I never knew you, depart from me workers of lawlessness. We see a parallel in this passage. Here too Jesus speaks of the final judgment and he's bringing a warning again that not all who presume to be his children and not all who call him Lord are actually that. They will not actually enter the kingdom of heaven. They will be those who come declaring their works and their deeds, declaring all that they've done in his name, even miraculous works, but that will not be enough.

That will not be what saves them and they will be met with a similar warning and a similar command that the goats receive in this passage. Depart from me workers of lawlessness.

[12:23] Jesus singles out those who point to their miraculous works, but they could just have easily been appealing to their more human actions, to the things that they have done to save them, the things that they have done that point to a salvation in Jesus or the things that they have done that point to serving him.

But the result would have been the same. Jesus is clear that it is not by their deeds that they're saved. It's not by actions or anything else.

So what is it that Jesus is saying here? If everything he said was deliberate on purposeful and there's a reason for everything, there's a meaning and a purpose behind everything that he says and every word that he says.

What is his reason here? As Christians and knowing the entirety of the Bible, knowing the overall narrative of the Bible, it is our understanding of Jesus' invitation of verse 34 that helps us to understand the rest, the commands or the rewards of verses 35 to 40.

It's our understanding first of who the righteous are, of who are counted among the sheep. Which our understanding of that, based on the rest of Scripture and based on Jesus' other teaching, that enable us to understand what he means when he talks about the deeds that are pointing to their salvation.

[13:41] We know that Jesus is talking to those who are saved and that it is only by God's grace that they're considered righteous. So the deeds they're being rewarded for, the deeds that he's commending them for, are not themselves the reason for their reward, but they're rather the evidence of the faith that's being rewarded.

It is their faith that they're being rewarded for, it's their faith that they're receiving the blessings and the promise of. But their actions and their deeds are the evidence of that faith that they profess. It's the proof that their faith is genuine and that their lives have been and are being transformed by God working through them.

But for the Jews, that process was the other way round. And actually in understanding how the Jews interpreted this gives us something else that Jesus was getting at.

For the Jews, it is Jesus' teaching of verses 35 to 40 that actually opens up for them exactly what or who he is talking about in verse 34.

From a Jewish perspective, as far as they were concerned, the kingdom of God belonged to them. It was theirs, there was no question of that. They had the promises of Abraham, of Moses, of David, the covenants of the Old Testament.

[14:50] And for them, they were God's people. That was it, it was sealed and God coming in his kingdom meant that they would be with him. He would bring them to him. And so for the Jews hearing him speak verse 34 and say to them that and to call those who are blessed and to inherit the kingdom, that for them would undoubtedly be them that he was talking about.

They wouldn't even question it. And so as he goes on to tell them why they're inheriting the kingdom, it's then that that opens up for them exactly what he's talking about. As he lists the criteria for why they are considered either righteous or cursed, he's highlighting to the Jews that actually the kingdom of God is not what they think it is.

It doesn't look like what they think it looked like. He redefines for them what actually it means to be part of God's kingdom, to be part of God's people and what's required and necessary to be part of the kingdom of God.

He's telling them that it's not based on their heritage or on their ancestry and it's not based on the promises of the past, but it's based on the fruit of their lives and the evidence of faith in their lives. It's the evidence of God working in his life.

Just as Jesus warns in Matthew 7 that not all who think that we'll be in the kingdom of God will actually be there, he says the same thing here to the Jews, although it's much more subtle and it's only an understanding of how the Jews would understand it that we can see the fullness of that.

[16:11] But what does this mean for us? I think Jesus warning to the Jews is just as relevant and as timely for us today as it was for them.

We're not in the place where we don't have that understanding of God's kingdom that the Jews had or anything like that. We understand that, but I think it's still a very real danger for us to see God in a certain way and to see our faith even in a certain way and to be complacent or lax about our faith and think that we are there.

To think that we are there. It's a very real danger that we can fall into that trap of thinking that we are part of God's kingdom, that thinking that we're going to receive that promised inheritance, but actually we might not.

We can misunderstand the Gospel or we can be blinded to some of the reality of it and actually think that what we're doing is saving us and it's a dangerous position for us to be in.

And so just as there's a pressing need for unbelievers to recognise the need to respond to the Gospel. And we as Christians need to recognise that the call to be ready for Jesus' return is aimed at us.

[17:20] As Jesus calls his disciples here to be prepared for his return, to be ready, and he speaks this into that context, then it's aimed at us. He's calling us to look at ourselves, to assess our own faith and to look at where we are with him.

It's not that he's calling us to strive, to save ourselves or anything like that, but it's to look at where we are in our faith and to see whether our lives do reflect the faith that we profess.

It's easy for us and it happens to us all that the troubles and the trials of the world kind of overtake us and it can be hard to then, to continue in that joy and that service and to continue to live in that truth and we can rely on just doing things that we've always done, doing things the way we've always done them or doing things for the sake of doing them.

But it's important for us to look as Christians at where our hearts are. Are we doing things because we think that's what will save us? Are we doing things because we think we have to do them and we're doing them out of a sense of duty and obligation?

Or are we living out of a sense of who God is and out of God's grace and out of what he has done for us and recognising that our actions and our deeds are a reflection of that?

[18:50] Jesus is calling us to assess our own lives and our faith and he gives us our criteria to do that so that we're not deceived into thinking we're saved when we are not.

There's a danger that we can be like the Jews and trust in past promises and actions to save us that we look to the things that we've done in the past or we look to the things that we do and the things that we check off.

Are we attending church? Are we doing what we think are the obligations that we have to fulfil? Are we doing the bare minimum thinking this is what I need to do to be righteous?

This is what God requires of me. This is the minimum he requires of me and I'm just going to go through and do that. If we're going through that and if we're doing that then we risk missing out on what God really has for us and we risk being in that place where actually we will find out that there is a danger that we will find out that like the Jews the kingdom of God is not what we thought it was. Are we living even off God's promises to others or the faith of others and trusting that God will deliver us because of those things? The obedience by which Jesus judges the faith of the righteous isn't their own personal piety or their individual righteousness.

[20:07] It's by their actions to others and specifically to those in need. A real and active faith is shown by obedience to God. Jesus lists the two greatest commandments as to love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and to love your neighbour as yourself.

Here he shows us what that looks like. It's not enough for us as Christians to be nice moral people that are plenty in the world who can do that.

Our love for God and our love for others is shown in how we treat others and it's in our willingness to meet the needs that we with what we ourselves have. Love is benefiting others at our own expense and it's laying aside our own needs and desires to meet the needs of others.

But this must be accompanied by faith and by a transformation by God's grace. Without faith it is just empty works but if our faith doesn't lead us to serve others regardless of the cost to ourselves then it is an empty faith.

Jesus gives us the grace and the mercy and the strength to walk in obedience to him and to live out the life that he has called us to and to be his people.

[21 : 11] As he brings this warning here and as he speaks to his disciples of being ready and being prepared for his return, whether that be by his actual return or whether that be when they die and go to that day of judgement, he's calling them to be ready to look at their own lives and to examine their lives and to see where they will stand, where they have that assurance of faith.

Our assurance of faith is in Christ alone, it is only in God that we have that assurance, it's in his grace. But we have these criteria and he gives us this list so that we can do a self-assessment so that we can look at whether we are living in that grace and whether we are living in that strength that God is giving us or are we just doing things by our own ways and by our own abilities, are we just doing what we think we need to do in order to be saved or in order to avoid the pain of hell. It is by Jesus' grace and by his strength that we are able to do any of these things, that we are able to walk out in obedience to him and he calls us to constantly seek him and to live day by day in his strength and in his grace, to live each and every day seeking him and living in that because it's when we start to trust in ourselves and do things our own way that we fall into just doing things out of duty and out of responsibility.

And so Jesus' warning for us today and his encouragement for us today I think is that we would see his grace, that we would see these warnings and that we would use them to make an honest assessment of ourselves and to look to our own faith and to look to where we are at and to seek what it is that he's calling us to do.

Our lives as Christians aren't just about being comfortable or having things easier or things going well for us but we're called as Christians to serve and to be a light to the world.

[23 : 17] It's not just in ourselves, we are all called to minister to those around us. We're all called to, the work of the Gospel ministry isn't just for those who are called to ministry or to missions, it's for everyone of us and it's as we live this out, it's as we look at ourselves in light of Jesus' warning here and Jesus' warning with the judgment here that we are then able to serve those around us and to show them what it actually means to be with Jesus, what it actually means to have Jesus in our lives and it's that reaching out to others out of our faith and out of the grace that we've received that others will experience and know the grace of God in their own lives and God will use that.

Let us pray. Father, we thank You for Your grace and Your mercy, we thank You that You've given us everything, that You surrendered everything for us to bring us to You and we thank You for the glorious gift of salvation through Jesus, Lord.

We thank You for what that means for us and for what that means for us in terms of living our lives in this world, that we're not living for this world, that we're not living for ourselves here but that we're looking to eternity with You, we're looking to that and to that hopeful day when we will be joined with You and when we'll hear those words, come, You who are blessed by my Father, receive the inheritance prepared for You from the foundation of the world.

Father, we thank You that You've given us that and Lord, I pray that You would strengthen each of us and speak to each of us through this, give us the strength and the grace to serve You as You've called us to do, that we wouldn't seek our own comforts, that we wouldn't seek our own ease or anything else, Lord, but that we would look to serve You and that we would look to love on others in ways that are going to impact them and that are going to show them the love that You have for them and the love that You have for us would flow out of us.

God, You gave everything of Yourself to show Your love for us and help us to do the same, give us the grace and the strength to do the same for others, that we might bring them the truth of Your gospel and that they might see what it is to live with You and to have You in their lives.

[25 : 43] So, God, I just thank You that we can have this time to worship. Thank You for Your Word and for Your goodness to us throughout, Lord.

Would You bless it to our hearts? Would You bless all that You've said and all that You've spoken to our hearts as we go? In Jesus' name. Amen.