



Active Faith

THE WAY WE TREAT JESUS'S FOLLOWERS REVEALS
THE NATURE OF OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH HIM.

Scripture Passage: Matthew 25:31-46 Memory Verse: Matthew 25:40

To conclude the Olivet Discourse, Jesus prophesied a coming judgment of “sheep” and “goats.” The sheep, called righteous and blessed, will be invited into God’s kingdom. Regardless of gender, ethnicity, or era, God’s sheep will be gathered under the authority and blessing of the ultimate Shepherd. On the other hand, the goats will be cursed and sent into an eternal punishment from which there will be no escape.

In both cases, individuals will be judged by what they did or didn’t do for Jesus’s followers. For sheep, deeds of kindness and charity for God’s people is the same as doing them for Jesus Himself. In contrast, goats who reject His people are rejecting Him at the same time. So, while the focus of the story was on believers’ treatment, the primary point is that everyone will be judged by how they respond to Christ.

As you prepare to lead this session on living an active faith, think about how you respond to those who are suffering and oppressed. What do your actions and attitudes toward “the least of these” say about your relationship with the Messiah? Also, seek to remind adults that everything we do as Christians carries eternal significance.



Weekly Podcast: Group Leader Training

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Annual performance reviews can create both anticipation and anxiety. Many employees experience this year after year. In most cases, managers have a metric or checklist by which they evaluate your work performance. In some unfortunate cases, an employee has no clue what the criterion will be for the review. It is helpful to know the benchmarks we are striving for as we carry out our daily responsibilities. (PSG, p. 106)

What are the advantages of knowing the criteria by which you will be evaluated?

What are the disadvantages of not knowing?



Understand the Context (Matthew 25:1-46)

Matthew 25 concludes Jesus's Olivet Discourse, which He began in chapter 24 in response to His disciples' questions about the end of the age (24:3). Only Matthew recorded all of chapter 25.

Jesus affirmed that one day everyone would see Him return in the clouds with great glory and power (24:30). Then, He told a series of parables to illustrate how His return will occur: the parable of the fig tree (24:32-35), the parable of the servants (24:45-51), the parable of the virgins (25:1-13), and the parable of the talents (25:14-30). With these stories, Jesus stressed the unexpectedness of His return and our need to be prepared for it.

In Matthew 25:31-46 Jesus likened the future judgment to a shepherd separating sheep from goats. Some scholars see this as another parable; however, it is better to interpret the passage as a straightforward prophecy. Jesus's primary emphasis focuses on a coming judgment and the impact His return should have on our lives.

The identity of "the least of these" has prompted discussion over time. Some think Jesus was referring to every brother and sister in the faith. This approach focuses on the universal responsibility believers have toward other disciples. Others believe He was singling out His followers who were suffering or struggling in life. This might include the sacrificial lives of servants like missionaries or itinerant preachers, though some apply it more generally to all needy people.

The word rendered "least" is the superlative form of the word rendered "little ones" (see 10:42; 18:6,10,14) and always refers to Jesus's true disciples. Also, Matthew consistently uses the word brothers for believers (5:21-24,47; 7:3-5; 12:48-50; 18:15,21,35; 23:8; 28:10) or, in some cases, literal siblings. So, it seems Jesus's words specifically refer to His followers who were experiencing trying circumstances.

The repetition of key ideas—hunger, thirst, being a stranger, nakedness, sickness, imprisonment—places great emphasis on situations in which Jesus's followers should take action. However, we also should recognize that the list is representative, not exhaustive. It serves as a reminder that our broken world offers many opportunities to serve the Lord's people and meet their human needs in simple ways—and honor Christ at the same time.

Jesus's followers perform such deeds out of kindness and concern for those who are hurting, not as a way to earn salvation or secure God's favor. They don't seek rewards or recognition. They are merely trying to do what's right by following the example set by Jesus.

Read Matthew 25:31-46 in your Bible. Summarize the difference between the faithful and the unfaithful. (PSG, p. 107)

ENGAGE



PREPARE: On a focal wall, display **Pack Item 7** (Poster: Key Verse: Matthew 25:40). Make copies of **Pack Item 8** (Handout: Matthew Time Line).

READ:

Enlist a volunteer to read the opening paragraph on page 106 of the PSG.

ASK:

What are the advantages of knowing the criteria by which you will be evaluated? What are the disadvantages of not knowing? (PSG, p. 106)

DISCUSS:

Encourage adults to share how they feel about performance reviews at work. Lead a brief discussion on measurements and standards used in various professions for such reviews.

CONTEXT:

Review this content from Understand the Context (PSG, p. 107) to explain Jesus’s message in the earlier parables:

Beginning in Matthew 24:45, Jesus told three parables about preparedness. The first contrasted the actions of a wise, sensible servant with the actions of a wicked servant while the master was away (24:45-51). The second parable (25:1-13) concerned ten virgins who were part of a wedding celebration. . . . The prepared virgins accompanied the bridegroom to the feast. The unprepared ones failed to be ready and lacked enough oil to light the bridegroom’s way to the marriage feast. . . . The third parable in the Olivet Discourse tells of a master and servants (vv. 14-30). . . . The bottom line is that we are to be prepared and faithfully carrying out the work given to us by our Master.

SHARE:

Note that while Jesus used parables in Matthew 24–25 to explain an eternal “performance review,” this passage should be interpreted as a direct prophecy from Him regarding judgment in the last days.

SAY:

As we dig deeper into this eternal “performance review,” reflect on what your life says about Christ each day.



MATTHEW TIME LINE		
<p>24:45-51 The parable of the wise and foolish servants. A master goes on a journey and leaves his house to his servants, giving them instructions. One servant is wise and prepares for the master's return, while another is foolish and does not.</p>	<p>25:1-13 The parable of the ten virgins. Ten virgins go to a wedding feast, but only five are prepared with oil for their lamps. The others are not and are excluded from the feast.</p>	<p>24:14-30 The parable of the fig tree. A fig tree is planted in a field, and its fruit is a sign of the end of the world. The tree is planted, and its fruit is a sign of the end of the world.</p>

Group Activity Option

Music

Provide copies of “They’ll Know we are Christians” (*Baptist Hymnal* 2008, No. 385). Sing the song together. Lead a brief discussion about how the world gains a clearer understanding of Jesus when His people live out their faith each day.

The Judge (Matt. 25:31-33)

31 “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. **32** All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate them one from another, just as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. **33** He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on the left.”

(v. 31) Jesus’s explanation of this future judgment is largely drawn from Daniel 7:13-14 and Zechariah 14:5. While all of Matthew 25 is unique to Matthew’s Gospel, he also recorded hints of Jesus’s glorious appearing earlier in 13:41,49-50; 16:27; 19:28; and 24:30-31. This prophecy follows a series of parables Jesus told to explain what will happen during the last days.

Previous passages highlighted the need for people to be ready. For example, the parable of the ten virgins (25:1-13) challenges people to be ready when the time comes. Likewise, the parable of the talents (25:14-30) reminds readers that He will reward those who serve Him well in the waiting. The imagery of sheep and goats here focuses on the reality of judgment—and the standard that determines who spends eternity with Christ and who will be separated from Him forever.

Jesus emphasized that **the Son of Man** will be the One returning to earth. In the incarnation, Jesus’s entire life—from His birth in a stable to His entrance into Jerusalem riding a donkey—was marked by humility. While He maintained His deity, He also took on human flesh and lived among His creation (see John 1:10-14; Phil. 2:5-8). However, His return will reveal **his glory**.

The word Matthew used here (*doxa*) refers to the splendor, majesty, power, and authority of Jesus. His second coming will be totally different from His first advent. Along with returning in glory, Jesus **will sit on his glorious throne** (see Matt. 19:28), indicating His position of royalty.

Finally, He will not return alone. Jesus will be accompanied by **all the angels**. Later, Paul affirmed Christ’s return would be marked by the voice of the archangel (1 Thess. 4:16) and the presence of “powerful angels” (2 Thess. 1:7). Jude also noted that He would come with “tens of thousands of his holy ones,” referring to angels (Jude 14).

(v. 32) Bible scholars debate whether **all the nations** refers just to the Gentile nations or whether it is a comprehensive term for the whole

human race, including the Jews. **Will be gathered** is a divine passive, meaning God will gather the nations together for judgment (see Isa. 66:18; Joel 3:2,11-12; Zeph. 3:8; Zech. 12:3; 14:2). Once the nations are gathered, the Son of Man is going to **separate them one from another**. In Greek, the word *nations* is neuter, but *them* is masculine. This suggests that Jesus will separate individuals within the nations. Countries and ethnicities will not matter. He will focus on each person.

Using a common pastoral image, this separation will be **as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats**. In that society, these domesticated animals often were pastured together and may have looked similar from a distance. But sheep were valued more. When evening came, the shepherd would place the goats with thinner hair in a warmer place, while the sheep with heavier wool stayed in the open. Shepherds also separated the goats from sheep for milking and for slaughter. Given the context of judgment, this might fit the setting better.

Key Doctrine

Last Things

The unrighteous will be consigned to Hell, the place of everlasting punishment. The righteous in their resurrected and glorified bodies will receive their reward and will dwell forever in Heaven with the Lord. (See 2 Thessalonians 1:9; Revelation 21:8.)

(v. 33) Jesus said the **sheep**, symbolizing His followers, would be put **on his right**. (See Matt. 10:16; John 10:1-18; Acts 20:29.) In Scripture, the *right* hand of a king represents the place of honor (Matt. 22:44; 26:64; see also 1 Kings 2:19; Pss. 45:9; 110:1). Meanwhile, **the goats** will be placed **on the left**, which suggests the position of disfavor or disgrace.



APPLICATION POINT: We should live our lives knowing we will stand before Jesus one day.

READ:

Invite a volunteer to read **Matthew 25:31-33** aloud as the group listens for the terms describing Jesus. Direct attention to **Pack Item 8** (*Handout: Matthew Time Line*). Note that these events would have taken place in the days leading up to Jesus’s trials and crucifixion in AD 33.

ASK:

What do these verses teach about Jesus’s role in the final judgment? (PSG, p. 109)

SHARE:

Jesus referred to Himself as the “Son of Man” (v. 31). While He came humbly to Bethlehem, His return will be marked by glory and majesty. As He judges, He will separate individuals. Things like ethnicity, social status, and birthplace won’t matter. Jesus will judge each person, not countries or nations.

EXPLAIN:

Identify the two groups Jesus mentioned:

Two distinct groups will be formed. Jesus used a metaphor to picture the two groups, sheep and goats. The sheep Jesus put on his right and the goats on the left. Often in the fields of first-century Israel, sheep and goats grazed together. While sheep tend to be obedient, goats can be troublemakers. Because of this, shepherds sometimes separated the sheep and goats. In the same way, a separation will occur at the judgment. (PSG, pp. 108-109)

ASK:

What is the significance of the right hand and the left hand?

TRANSITION:

The right hand refers to a place of honor, while the left hand suggests disgrace. As Creator and King, Jesus has the right to separate the nations, but He also has a standard to determine who goes where.



Group Activity Option

Object Lesson: Crown

Invite two or three volunteers to draw a crown on the board or a large sheet of paper. Compare the crowns they drew. Affirm that whatever a crown looks like, it usually implies royalty and authority. Remind adults that Jesus came as a humble servant in the Gospels, but He will rule and judge everyone when He returns in His glory. Say: *The world didn’t accept Him as King the first time, but they won’t have a choice at His return.*

The Righteous (Matt. 25:34-40)

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. **35** 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 took me in; **36** I was naked and you clothed me; I was sick and you took care of me; I was in prison and you visited me.’ **37** Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? **38** When did we see you a stranger and take you in, or without clothes and clothe you? **39** When did we see you sick, or in prison, and visit you?’ **40** And the King will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’”

(v. 34) The one identified as the Son of Man and sitting on a throne (v. 31) is now directly called **the King**. Matthew’s Gospel emphasizes the kingdom of God, but the Son of Man reigns. John 5:27 explains that the Father has given His Son the authority to judge, and here He demonstrated the power to exercise that right.

The sheep, the true believers **on his right**, are invited to **come** since they stand **blessed by my Father**. The word *blessed* denotes those who enjoy God’s favor (Ps. 118:26; Matt. 21:9; 23:39). The sheep will **inherit the kingdom** because it was **prepared for you**. The Greek wording is in the perfect tense, meaning it always has been prepared and continues to be prepared for them. This has been true since **the foundation of the world**. That is, God’s people inheriting God’s kingdom has always been part of God’s plan of salvation (Matt. 13:35; see also Eph. 1:4; 1 Pet. 1:20).

(vv. 35-36) Jesus then proceeded to name six needs these blessed ones saw and moved to meet. The repetition of **me** in each case indicates an act of kindness toward His people is an act of kindness toward Him.

To the **hungry**, they offered **something to eat**. To the **thirsty**, they gave **something to drink**. When they encountered a **stranger**, they **took me in**. For the **naked**, they provided clothing; and they extended **care** for those who were **sick**. Those **in prison** received similar mercy.

These actions didn’t earn salvation for anyone. The sheep performed these good works simply because their compassion reflected their righteous character. They wanted to do the right thing, especially toward fellow believers who were suffering. And, as Jesus would point out more clearly, their actions really were directed toward Him—even if they didn’t realize it at the time.

(vv. 37-40) With more than a hint of confusion, **the righteous** repeated each of the six items. They wondered aloud, **Lord, when did we see you** in those conditions? They did not deny doing such things for others, but they did not remember showing such mercy and compassion to Jesus. However, using His often repeated “Amen” formula (**Truly I tell you**), He informed the sheep that what they had done **for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me**.

Bible students debate what Jesus meant by *the least of these*. The Greek word used (*adelphon*) technically refers only to male siblings, but it often was used to include both male and female believers. Matthew elsewhere used it to refer to Jesus’s disciples (12:48-49; 28:10). Thus, some understand Jesus’s words to refer to the way believers reacted to the condition of some of Jesus’s followers. Alternately some interpret Jesus’s saying as referring to Christian missionaries and itinerant evangelists who went forth to proclaim the good news and suffered for it. Still others take what Jesus said as referring to anyone in need and distress, stressing the social aspect of the gospel.

The second option is too narrow for the context, while the third misses Jesus’s reference to those in need being His brothers and sisters. Thus the first option, highlighting both male and female believers, is best.

Jesus taught that many would have considered people in such needy circumstances of no great importance and not worth bothering with. But the emphasis on *you did for me* stresses His identification with His suffering followers. He also emphasized this principle in Matthew 10:40-42 and 18:5.

EXPLORE Matthew 25:34-40



APPLICATION POINT: We demonstrate our love for God when we minister to other believers.

READ:

Direct the group to read Matthew 25:34-40 silently, underlining every word that describes the struggles people were having and how those needs were met.

ASK:

What evidence distinguishes between a righteous and unrighteous person? (PSG, p. 110)

EXPLAIN:

Lead a brief discussion based on the group's responses to the question. Highlight that once Jesus (the King) separated the sheep and goats, He began to explain His criteria:

The rewards were based on their actions of ministering to the King. In each case, the King was the recipient of the care they had given. A note of caution and clarification is necessary at this point. Although these righteous ones were applauded for their acts of compassion, these acts did not earn them the reward of the kingdom. This account is not teaching salvation by works. The clear teaching of the New Testament is that no one can merit or earn God's gracious gift of salvation. That comes by the grace of God through Christ's achievement on the cross. These actions of compassion by the righteous ones were the outflow and evidence of a right relationship with God (see Eph. 2:8-10). (PSG, pp. 109-110)

ASK:

What obstacles prevent us from ministering to the needs of others? (PSG, p. 110)

EXAMINE:

Encourage adults to work together in teams of three or four. Direct each team to read the passage again and to focus on the ways the sheep ministered to others. Urge each group to identify practical ways believers can provide similar ministry to others today. After a few minutes, allow volunteers to share what they discussed. Record their responses on the board.

CHALLENGE:

Show adults **Pack Item 7** (Poster: Key Verse: Matthew 25:40). Explain that this is the memory verse for this session. Lead the group in reading the verse two or three times aloud. Emphasize that Jesus calls us to be His hands and feet in the world, especially toward other believers. Urge adults to reflect on the list they created and to identify ways they can fulfill one of these ideas in the coming days.



The Faithless (Matt. 25:41-46)

41 “Then he will also say to those on the left, ‘Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels! **42** For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat; I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink; **43** I was a stranger and you didn’t take me in; I was naked and you didn’t clothe me, sick and in prison and you didn’t take care of me.’ **44** Then they too will answer, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry, or thirsty, or a stranger, or without clothes, or sick, or in prison, and not help you?’ **45** Then he will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.’ **46** And they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

(v. 41) *Then* introduces the next movement in the prophecy. It is similar to verses 34-40, but focuses on the goats who stood *on the left*. While this scene may appear repetitive, the contrasts stand out. For the sheep, the invitation was to “come,” while the goats were told to *depart from me*. The sheep were “blessed,” and the goats were *cursed*. The sheep inherited the kingdom, but the goats were sent *into the eternal fire*.

In the Bible, *fire* is a common image for judgment, especially God’s ultimate judgment (Matt. 3:10,12; 5:22; 7:19; 13:40,42,50; 18:8-9). Hell is not a metaphor. It is real place of torment that will serve as the eternal destination of those whose names are not found in the book of life (Rev. 20:15; 21:8).

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus had used *depart* in regard to future judgment (Matt. 7:23). In Greek, the word rendered *cursed* appears in perfect tense, suggesting the goats were living under a curse. Neither Jesus nor Matthew specifically identified who placed the curse on them. Obviously, God placed the curse on them, but the wording also highlights their personal responsibility. They had brought the curse on themselves by rejecting God and His Son.

Jesus also emphasized the difference between God’s mercy and this judgment. On one hand, the sheep learned that God had been preparing a place for them since the world’s foundation. His presence would be their primary experience for eternity. On the other hand, the goats learned that their eternal destination was originally created for *the devil and his angels*. This was literally a matter of spiritual life and death.

(vv. 42-45) Jesus repeated the same six situations found in verses 35-40, except this time in the negative. While the sheep were diligent to

meet the needs of those around them, the goats willfully ignored these opportunities: *you gave me nothing to eat . . . you gave me nothing to drink . . . you didn’t take me in . . . you didn’t clothe me . . . you didn’t take care of me*.

Like the righteous sheep, the goats responded in disbelief. Addressing King Jesus as *Lord*, they wondered aloud *when did we see you . . . and not help you?* The goats condensed the conditions into a single response rather than mentioning each corresponding act of kindness and care. This could be another indication of their ambivalence and apathy toward the suffering of others.

And, as before, Jesus called attention to His announcement with the solemn “Amen” formula of *truly I tell you*. His reply to the wicked is the same as to the righteous, but in the negative: *Whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me*.

The goats failed to perceive that neglecting Jesus’s followers was a rejection of Jesus Himself. Their unrighteous character was revealed by their sins of omission. They were shown to be unrighteous not by committing some horrific or terrible sin but by what they neglected to do.

(v. 46) Verse 46 is a summary of how the two eternal destinies of the sheep and the goats will diverge. The separation was not just for the purposes of judgment in the moment. It determined judgment for eternity. The lost *will go away into eternal punishment*, while God’s people will experience *eternal life* in His presence.

This punishment is a divine act. Entering the kingdom (v. 34) equals eternal life and is only available to those declared righteous by God. Both of these eternal states are never-ending, and there will be no second chances at redemption.



APPLICATION POINT: We should recognize that unbelievers will be eternally separated from God and will face everlasting punishment.

READ:

Invite a volunteer to read Matthew 25:41-46 aloud as the group considers the similarities and differences between these verses and Matthew 25:34-40.

ASK:

What are the contrasts between these two sets of verses?

SHARE:

Allow adults to share their observations about verses 34-40 and verses 41-46. Contrast the situations faced by the two groups:

The words of this condemnation mirror the words spoken to those on the right. However, instead of “come,” the King said “depart from me.” Instead of blessed, they were cursed. Instead of a kingdom prepared there was eternal fire prepared. . . . The King read the indictment against these wicked ones for their indifference to the “least of these.” As before, the hearts of those gathered before the throne were weighed by their compassionate care for others. In this case, this group lacked the compassion for others, which came about as a result of rejection of the message of Jesus. (PSG, p. 111)

SAY:

Jesus made it clear that eternal punishment in a place of torment is real. Hell is not a metaphor or philosophical idea. As believers, we should recognize that those who reject Jesus will spend eternity in hell—and we should do all we can to convince them to turn to Christ before it’s too late.

ASK:

What prevents some people in our culture from believing the biblical teaching about hell and eternal life? (PSG, p. 112)

Group Activity Option

Bible Skill

Encourage adults to read Matthew 13:40-43,49-50; 18:7-9; and 25:41,46 and to record their thoughts about the eternal destiny of the lost. **What is their prospect? How is it described? How long will it last? Is there any reprieve? How should knowing the destiny of the lost impel believers to share the gospel with others?** Urge them to spend time praying about their personal level of concern for the lost and how they can see unbelievers as Jesus sees them.

CHALLENGE

SUMMARIZE:

Review these points from Apply the Text on page 113 of the *Personal Study Guide*, considering how these truths should shape our relationships and our ministries:

- *We should live our lives knowing we will stand before Jesus one day.*
- *We demonstrate our love for God when we minister to other believers.*
- *We should recognize that unbelievers will be eternally separated from God and will face everlasting punishment.*

DISCUSS:

Direct a volunteer to read the first set of questions on page 113 of the PSG. Allow the group to suggest ways they have shown compassion in the past and how they could again in the future. Stress that the root of today's focal passage reminds us that Christ looks at the heart. Draw attention to **Pack Item 7** (*Poster: Key Verse: Matthew 25:40*). Encourage the group to read the verse again and commit to looking for ways to be the hands and feet of Jesus this week.

PRAY:

Lead adults to reflect silently on the second set of questions on page 113 of the PSG. Urge them to identify ways they can demonstrate the love of Christ and encourage others to move toward Him. Allow them to spend a few minutes in silent prayer, talking to God about how He wants to work in their lives. Close in prayer, asking God to give each adult a clear vision for showing mercy to other believers and showing grace to the world.

AFTER THE SESSION

Send a group email or text to the adults in your Bible study, reminding them of Matthew 25:40. Encourage anyone who has had a chance to minister to the “least of these” to share their stories. Challenge adults to consider writing out their testimony as a way to share their faith journey with someone who needs to hear it this week.

LEADER BLOG



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