

SESSION 12

Active Faith

MATTHEW 25:31-46

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



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.

WHAT ARE THE ADVANTAGES OF KNOWING THE CRITERIA BY WHICH YOU WILL BE EVALUATED? WHAT ARE THE DISADVANTAGES OF NOT KNOWING?

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

Chapter 25 continues Jesus's Olivet Discourse (Matt. 24–25). He spoke about the preparation needed in anticipation of His return. 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 word *virgin* here refers to young women of marriageable age. Their job was to accompany the bridegroom to the wedding feast. However, the bridegroom was delayed for some unexplained reason. When he finally arrived at an unexpected hour—midnight—these ladies roused from sleep. At that point it was discovered that five of them had prepared their lamps with plenty of oil. 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. They had to go

buy oil, then found themselves locked out of the feast. This was a clear warning that we must always be ready.

The third parable in the Olivet Discourse tells of a master and servants (vv. 14-30). Once again, the master was absent. The time of his return was unknown. He entrusted three of his servants with sums of money. Two wise servants faithfully carried out their duties by investing and earning profit on the master's money. The third servant was driven by fear of the master. As a result, he failed to seize the opportunity to increase the money placed in his stewardship. When the master returned, the first two servants were rewarded for their wisdom. The fearful servant was punished for allowing fear to paralyze him. This servant's penalty corresponds to that of the wicked servant in 24:51. The bottom line is that we are to be prepared and faithfully carrying out the work given to us by our Master.



31 “When the Son of Man comes **in his glory**, **A** and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. **32 All the nations** **B** will be gathered before him, and he will separate them one from another, just as a shepherd separates **the sheep from the goats**. **C** **33** He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on the left. **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** **D** 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** **E** for one of the **least of these** **F** brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’ **41** Then he will also say to those on the left, ‘Depart from me, you who are **cursed**, **G** 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**, **H** but the righteous into eternal life.”

A. At the incarnation, Jesus came in humility. At His second coming, He will come in power and majesty (Matt. 16:27; 24:30).

B. Jesus’s authority has no limits. Every person from every nation and every generation is subject to Him (see Isa. 66:18; Joel 3:2).

C. The sheep symbolize the righteous, while the goats are the unrighteous.

D. While Jesus told His followers to be prepared, He also noted what God had prepared for them. This reward was not spur of the moment, but something made ready from eternity past.

E. The ministry of the sheep was not theoretical. They proved their faith by taking action. This genuine faith based on action is the standard by which the King will judge.

F. Followers of Jesus who are in need, dealing with persecution, or experiencing abuse. These are His “brothers and sisters,” and Jesus shares their suffering.

G. While the sheep (believers) are blessed for their actions, the goats (unbelievers) are condemned for their apathy.

H. Jesus said this “eternal fire” initially was designed for Satan and his demons (v. 41). This stands in stark contrast to the eternal blessings enjoyed by the righteous.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

1. The Judge

(Matt. 25:31-33)

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

- **What do these verses teach about Jesus's role in the final judgment?**
- **What is the significance of the right hand and the left hand?**

2. The Righteous

(Matt. 25:34-40)

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

- **What evidence distinguishes between a righteous and unrighteous person?**
- **What obstacles prevent us from ministering to the needs of others?**

3. The Faithless

(Matt. 25:41-46)

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

- **What are the contrasts between verses 34-40 and 41-46?**
- **What prevents some people in our culture from believing the biblical teaching about hell and eternal life?**

Apply the Text

Within your group, create a list of acts of compassion that you as a group and as individuals have carried out.

- **How do these acts of compassion reflect the condition of your heart?**

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.)

BIBLE SKILL:

Respond emotionally to a principle of doctrine.

Read Matthew 13:40-43,49-50; 18:7-9; and 25:41,46 and record your 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? Spend time talking to God about your level of concern for the lost and how you can see them the way He sees them.

DAILY EXPLORATION



Day 1: Matthew 25:31-33

Underline the words “he will separate them.”

While these verses are preceded by parables about Jesus’s return, the account described in 25:31-46 is not a parable. It is a prophecy about the coming time when Jesus will sit in judgment. “Son of Man” is taken from the messianic prophecy in Daniel 7:13. The words *glory* and *glorious* speak of Jesus’s heavenly splendor, majesty, and radiance. In this picture, the Son of Man is sitting on His throne to bring judgment. The word translated “nations” can mean either people groups or Gentiles. The word case in the Greek implies that it is here referring to individuals rather than nations.

The identity of the ones standing before the throne is impacted by how one interprets the phrase “these brothers and sisters of mine” in verse 40. One interpretation is that these “brothers and sisters” are the down-and-out, the social outcasts, the marginalized. Those around the throne will be judged by how they treated these vulnerable members of society. Another interpretation identifies “these brothers and sisters” as followers of Christ.

These people will be separated “one from another.” This separation will occur at the judgment. The basis for this separation will be plainly stated in the following verses.

What do these verses teach about Jesus’s role in the final judgment?



Day 2: Matthew 25:34-36

Notice the recipient of the actions in these verses.

The one identified as the Son of Man and sitting on a throne (v. 31) is now called “the King.” John 5:27 explains that the Father has given His Son the authority to judge, and here Christ demonstrated the power to exercise that right.

The “right” side of a throne was seen as the place of honor. To those put in this place of honor, Jesus says “come,” meaning come to the reward “prepared” for you. Jesus said this group was “blessed by my Father.” Their reward will be a “kingdom” where the righteous will live and reign with Christ (2 Tim. 2:12). The reason for the reward is introduced by the word “for” (v. 35). 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 a salvation by works. The clear teaching of the New Testament is that no one can merit or earn God’s gracious gift of salvation. Salvation 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).

What are the implications of Jesus being “the King”?



Day 3: Matthew 25:37-40

Identify the “brothers and sisters of mine.”

Jesus used the word “righteous” to identify the sheep. They expressed great surprise that their acts of compassion were done for the King. Their question is understandable, “When did we have opportunity to do this?” The surprise of the righteous points to the fact that their deeds of compassion were carried out selflessly.

The key to understanding the identity of “these brothers and sisters of mine” may be found in the phrase “the least of these.” This phrase has appeared in Matthew’s Gospel several times as an identifier for followers of Jesus (see Matt. 10:42; 18:6,10,14). In Matthew 12:50, Jesus identified those who followed Him as disciples and did the will of the Father as “my brother and sister and mother.” Thus, these acts of compassion were ways in which the righteous responded to followers of Jesus. Some Bible scholars see these least ones as Christian missionaries and evangelists. Therefore, the response of the righteous was a positive response to the gospel message. The basis, then, for inheriting the kingdom was an acceptance of the good news of Jesus. Out of that relationship with Christ, these righteous ones ministered to the needs of others and, in doing so, they were caring for Jesus as well.

What evidence distinguishes between a righteous and unrighteous person?

What prevents you from ministering to the needs of others?



Day 4: Matthew 25:41-45

Note the similarities and differences between these verses and verses 34-40.

Once again, the King made a pronouncement. This time, however, it was a condemnation of those who had been separated from the righteous. The words of this condemnation mirror the words spoken in verse 34. 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.”

Notice that this fire was not prepared from the foundation of the world (compare v. 41 to v. 34). Eternal punishment was not part of God’s original plan. It was put in place after the rebellion against God by both the fallen angels and sinful mankind. In addition, the wicked enter this eternal punishment of their own choice by their rejection of Jesus.

The King read the indictment against these wicked ones for their indifference to “the least of these.” This group lacked compassion for others as a result of their rejection of the message of Jesus. By their failure to love and serve the least of these, the wicked ones revealed their rejection of Jesus and His gift of salvation. The bad fruit of their life spoke to the bad condition of their heart.

Those who did not show compassion expressed surprise as they were confronted with their failure to do so. These actions are the same as those expressed in verses 37-39 but are listed in shortened form.

How does James 2:14-19 shed light on these verses?



Day 5: Matthew 25:46

Compare verse 46 to Revelation 20:7-15.

Verse 46 sets forth the eternal contrast between the two groups. Separation was not just for the purposes of judgment in the moment. It determined judgment for eternity. The ones who failed to trust in Christ and demonstrate that through serving others were sent away “into eternal punishment.” In verse 41, Jesus said that they were cast into “the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels!” For the righteous, their final destination is that of “eternal life.” As *eternal life* speaks of life that will last for eternity, so the words *eternal punishment* speak of punishment that lasts eternally.

Earlier in Matthew’s Gospel, John the Baptist had declared that God’s wrath was coming. Those who face that wrath “will burn with fire that never goes out” (3:7-12). This theme continues throughout Matthew. At the conclusion of His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus stated that those who did not obey His words would face destruction (7:13-27). In His parables on the kingdom of heaven, Jesus said that those who cause evil will be thrown “into the blazing furnace where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (13:42,50). After telling Peter that he should forgive seventy times seven (18:22), Jesus said that God the Father would be angry and show no mercy to those who refuse to forgive a brother or sister from the heart (vv. 32-35).

What prevents some people from believing the biblical teaching about hell and eternal life?

APPLY THE TEXT

Spend time evaluating how much you show compassion and ministry to others. Consider ways you can engage in acts of compassion this week. Analyze your motive for wanting to extend merciful treatment to others.

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