

Active Faith

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

Noah Lyles was born in Gainesville, Florida, in 1997. Running was in his blood. His father, Kevin, had been a competitive sprinter in college. He later raced with Team USA in the 1995 World Championships; they won the gold. His mother, Keisha, also competed in track and field while in college. Additionally, Noah's brother, Josephus, ran competitively in high school and beyond. Racing for the United States, Josephus won the bronze in the 200 meters at the North American, Central American, and Caribbean Championships in 2022.

Young Noah had health issues, including asthma. His breathing improved after he had his tonsils removed at age six. Growing up, he enjoyed gymnastics. When he was about twelve, he started running track and field. His strength was as a sprinter.

He and his family moved to Alexandria, Virginia, where he attended middle and high school—and continued running. As a teen, he set records not only for his high school but also for the state. Rather than go to college, Noah decided to run track and field professionally.

Running in the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, Noah brought home the bronze in the 200-meter race; he did the same in the 2024 Olympics in Paris.

The race that everyone still talks about is the 100-meter men's competition in Paris. In the race, Kishane Thomas of Jamaica had maintained a strong lead. Fred Kerley of the United States and Akani Simbine of South Africa closed the gap during the run. Close on their heels came Noah Lyles in the final few meters. When the runners crossed the finish line, the announcer declared that Thomas had won. But had he? The truth was that no one—including the runners—knew for sure.

Olympic Committee members huddled in the booth, scrutinizing the video. Split-second imagery showed that Lyles crossed the finish line first in 9.784 seconds, just five one-thousandths (.005) of a second faster than Thompson. Kerley came in third .02 seconds later. Lyles later said that waiting for the judges' rendering was the longest three minutes of his life!

**UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT**

Matthew 25:1-46

In the Olivet Discourse (Matt. 24–25), Jesus responded to a question the disciples asked about the destruction of the Jerusalem temple and the end of the age (24:3). In response, Jesus put forth a series of parables that warned the disciples about being prepared for His return because they could not know when that would be. In each parable, He contrasted those who would be prepared for His coming with those who would not. One parable examined the difference in being a faithful servant versus an unfaithful one (vv. 45-51). The next contrasted five wise virgins who were ready when the bridegroom came with five who were not prepared and were shut out of the wedding feast (25:1-13). The third contrasted how servants took care of the talents the master had entrusted to them in his absence (vv. 14-30). The final scene (vv. 31-46), which is not a parable, we know as the judgment of the sheep and the goats. This is Jesus’s last major teaching that Matthew recorded in his Gospel.

**EXPLORE THE TEXT**

The Judge (Matt. 25:31-33)

When Jesus returns, angels will be with Him. His glory and authority will be evident as He judges all people from all nations. Jesus will separate the righteous from the faithless.

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.”

Jesus talked to His disciples about taking up their crosses and following Him. He asked, “For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?” (16:26, KJV). Then He said, “For the Son of Man is going to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will reward each according to what he has done” (v. 27). Jesus often mentioned angels in connection with His second coming, the final judgment, and the end of the age (13:41-42,49-50; 16:27; 24:31; 25:31).

Verse 31 introduces the judgment at the end of the age. The previous three parables—the faithful (and then unfaithful) servant, the ten virgins, and the servants who received talents—each alluded to a judgment. Verses 31-46, though, focus solely on judgment. As noted above, this teaching is not a parable. Jesus was describing an actual future event.

Every detail in this verse emphasizes Christ’s glory, authority, and grandeur. **The Son of Man comes**, a phrase that likely means He will return to earth for this judgment. Rather than come in humility and wrapped in swaddling clothes (Luke 2:7, KJV), this time He will come with honor and be clothed with majesty. The humiliation He experienced on the cross is past. Now He will return in power and **glory** (Matt. 24:30).

Angels were involved in the events of Jesus’s birth (Luke 2:8-15). They will again be involved at His return. Angels are divine servants of God; they never seek the spotlight. Instead, they offer a divine message that gives the Lord glory (see Ps. 148:1-2; Rev. 5:11-12). Matthew previously mentioned that angels would be involved in God’s judgment at the end of the age (Matt. 13:36-43,49-50). Jesus did not explain at this point what their role will be; instead, He simply said they will be **with him** (see Zech. 14:5; Jude 14). Hebrews 12:22 talks about “myriads of angels,” which is an innumerable number according to some Bible translations (ESV, KJV). Jesus will bring **all** the angels with Him.

The word **throne** is a transliteration of the Greek term *thronos*. In Scripture, it often refers to a seat in the divine realm which is reserved for the Lord (Matt. 5:34; 23:22; Acts 7:49; Heb. 1:8; 12:2; Rev. 1:4; 3:21; 4:2-11; 5:1,6,13; 22:1-3).

Jesus did not explain how His *glory* would be manifest. He did not describe the *angels* or His *glorious throne*. Our curious minds likely wonder about what all of this will look like. But these details were not the focus of this verse. The fact that the Son of Man is returning is the sole focus; this alone is what ultimately matters.

VERSE 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.”

All humanity, Jews and Gentiles, people of all creeds and ages, will **be gathered before him**, meaning Christ, on this judgment day. Although we may come as part of a throng, we will be judged individually, separated **one from another**. This will be “so that *each* [singular] may be repaid for what *he* [singular] has done” (2 Cor. 5:10, emphasis added).

The Old Testament referred to God’s people as **sheep** or collectively as a “flock” (1 Kings 22:17; Ezek. 36:37-38). Old Testament texts also depict God as a **shepherd** (Ps. 23:1; Jer. 31:10). The task of separating the sheep from the goats echoes the principle in Jesus’s parable about separating the wheat from the tares (Matt. 13:24-30,36-43) and the good fish from the bad (vv. 47-50). These teach that the Lord will separate the good from the bad; the good will be rewarded and the bad will be punished. This separation of sheep and goats also alludes to Ezekiel 34:17-24.

VERSE 33

“He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on the left.”

Throughout the Middle East, sheep and goats were commonly kept together for grazing, but workers would separate them at night or for inventorying, milking, or breeding. Thus, Jesus’s hearers could easily have visualized what He was saying.

The text does not say “right hand” or “left hand,” but rather simply refers to Christ’s **right** or **left**. Throughout history, most people have been right-handed. For most people, the right hand is the stronger of the two. The Bible describes God’s power as being in His right hand (Ex. 15:6). Ancient statues and wall-carvings show that people in Middle Eastern cultures received rewards or favors with the right hand. Those depicted on a leader’s right hand were the favored ones. Further emphasizing the importance of the right hand, after Jesus ascended, He took His place at the right hand of the throne of God (Heb. 8:1; also Acts 7:55). The right hand, then, is the place of honor and power.

This verse also shows that Jesus has no problem separating sheep from goats. He is not ambivalent or indecisive. He knows automatically which is which. Our culture does not typically make that distinction concerning someone who passes away. Even if this person never lived a Christ-centered, godly life, loved ones will still say, “I know they are in heaven.” Jesus’s teaching stands in opposition to that thinking.

Explore Further

Post your memory verse (Matt. 25:40) in a conspicuous place so you can read it several times this week. Ask the Lord to help you see “the least of these” and pray for His guidance in how you can minister to them.

The Righteous (Matt. 25:34-40)

Addressing the righteous people, Jesus described them as blessed by the Father. They will inherit the kingdom God has prepared for them. He went on to describe the ways they had acted with compassion to meet His physical needs—hunger, thirst, alienation, nakedness, sickness, and imprisonment. The righteous questioned Him wondering when these events happened. Jesus explained that anyone who met the need of any Christian was ministering to Him.

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.’”

Having gathered the nations and separated the sheep from the goats, the Son of Man would now render His judgment. The title **King** should not be surprising, as Jesus had already mentioned sitting on His throne (v. 31). Jewish texts often refer to God as “King” (Ps. 24:10; Isa. 33:22; Zech. 14:9). Here, the title refers to Christ.

Announcing the coming Messiah, the angel Gabriel told Mary, “The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and his kingdom will have no end” (Luke 1:32-33). After Jesus’s birth, wise men came to Jerusalem, looking for the “king of the Jews” (Matt. 2:2). Although He was revealed to be the “KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS,” Jesus typically did not use this title for Himself (Rev. 19:16). The Jews were expecting One to come, a Messiah who would rule as David had done. However, at His first coming Jesus did not come to be that kind of king, Messiah, or ruler.

The King will give two imperatives: “**Come**” and “**inherit.**” These are words of invitation, grace, and abundance. Writing to his “brothers and sisters” in Christ, Simon Peter said, “entry into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ will be richly provided for you” (2 Pet. 1:10,11). What words of welcome and abundance!

Inheriting **the kingdom** involves inheriting eternal life (Matt. 19:29). This was God’s plan from the beginning. Here, Jesus looked both backward and forward. Those on His right were to inherit a blessing that had been prepared for them **from the foundation of the world**—meaning since creation. From eternity past, this was God’s plan. Looking forward, Jesus promised that the inherited blessing of the righteous would last for all eternity. The righteous are promised “a building

from God, an *eternal* dwelling in the heavens, not made with hands” (2 Cor. 5:1, emphasis added).

VERSES 35-36

“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; I was naked and you clothed me; I was sick and you took care of me; I was in prison and you visited me.”

The conjunction **For** connects what came before with what follows. It signaled that Jesus was about to explain why those on the King’s right would be blessed and welcomed into the kingdom.

These two verses introduce six acts of kindness that alleviate suffering. It is the first of four times this list will be given in verses 35-44. The four uses include the six acts that were done or not done and the question of when. What were the areas of suffering?

Hunger was a common plight of the poorest in Jesus’s day. Thirst was as well. People living in the biblical world struggled to find water in the arid climate and desert terrain. This was not a temporary inconvenience; it was life-threatening. The Greek term translated *stranger* typically refers to a foreigner (Eph. 2:12,19) and at times travelers.

Among the ancient Greeks, nakedness was common. Men in ancient Greece exercised and competed athletically in the nude. The Jews, however, strongly condemned public nudity. Most people in the first century were unclear about what caused sickness. Some sought relief from medicine and doctors; others depended on magic, superstition, or the so-called gods of healing.

Ancient prisons were often underground, which explains why Daniel was “brought up from the [lions’] den” (Dan. 6:23). The prison where Paul was held in Rome, the Tullianum, was accessed through a hole in the ceiling. It was dark, unsanitary, humid, and foul-smelling. Prisoners of higher rank were often lowered into open-air quarries, where they were forced to work.

Those on the King’s right gave according to each need. They gave food, water, housing, clothing, care, and time. They performed acts of self-denial, compassion, and pity. For this, they heard “come . . . inherit” (Matt. 25:34). Why were the sheep lavished with such a great reward for what seems to be relatively minor acts of compassion? They were acts of love that had taken root in and grown from a heart and life that mirrored the Lord’s grace and care.

VERSES 37-39

“Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and take you in, or without clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick, or in prison, and visit you?’”

Jesus called those who had responded with compassion and self-denial **righteous**. The Greek term conveys a sense of being upright and virtuous; this describes someone who lives an ethical life by keeping God’s commands. Earlier in His teaching, Jesus stated the righteous would be rewarded (Matt. 10:41-42; 13:36-43). Here, He echoed that thought.

The question of **when?** indicated surprise. Although surprised, those on the King’s right did not argue or say He was wrong. Instead, they asked *when?* Also, showing respect, they referred to the King as **“Lord.”** In the context of the Lord being on His glorious throne, the righteous were affirming His divine authority.

These righteous ones said they didn’t remember seeing the King hungry or thirsty, without clothes or lodging, sick, or imprisoned. **“When did we see you”** with a need and respond? The verb translated *see* conveys perceiving and understanding a situation.

VERSE 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.’”

“Truly I tell you” emphasizes the truth and importance of what is about to be said. This verse radically transforms the focus of acts of kindness, grace, and charity. Those who gave help believed they were relieving **the least of these**—meaning the hurting, vulnerable, and abandoned; they in no way realized they were dealing with Christ.

Who exactly were *the least of these*? Throughout church history, interpretations have differed. First, some have believed that the phrase refers to the nation of Israel, which is small geographically. According to this view, nations would be judged for how they treated and supported Israel. Second, some believe *the least of these* refers to all needy individuals. Third, some have interpreted this to refer to all Christians who are in need. Those holding this view cite Paul’s words about doing good work, “especially for those who belong to the household of faith” (Gal. 6:10). Fourth, some believe the phrase refers to Christian missionaries; those

holding this view stress giving even a cup of water in Jesus’s name (Matt. 10:40-42). Other scholars have offered different interpretations. Of the options, the third is the most likely since Jesus referred to them as **“brothers and sisters of mine.”**

The righteous do not earn entrance into the kingdom because of their good works (Eph. 2:8-9). Their acts of kindness are external evidence of an internal faith, devotion, and commitment. Further, they are unaware that they were doing these charitable deeds to Jesus.

Explore Further

Read “King, Christ as” on pages 962–963 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. What does this article add to the concept of Jesus as King—beyond what is included in Matthew 25?

The Faithless (Matt. 25:41-46)

Jesus then addressed the faithless people. They will endure eternal punishment and separation from God. He then noted the same physical needs and stated that they had neglected to meet the needs of those around them. By neglecting these needy persons, they had neglected Him. The unrighteous will experience eternal punishment and the righteous will experience eternal life.

VERSE 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!’”

Having pronounced His blessing for those on His right, the King was ready to render judgment to those on His left. **“Depart from me, you who are cursed.”** In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said those who disobeyed the Father’s will would hear this same mandate, “Depart from me, you lawbreakers!” (7:23). Heaven is a place of welcome and of long-awaited and joy-filled reunions. Hell is the exact opposite. It’s a place of remorse and abandonment. How those words *“Depart from me”* will ring in the ears of the unrighteous for all of eternity!

The word *cursed* carries the idea of pronouncing doom. Jesus explained what the state of doom would be for those on His left; they would be in an **eternal fire**. The New Testament commonly speaks of the eternal fire of hell (Matt. 3:12; Rev. 14:10-11; 21:8). This was the fate of the rich man who refused to share with Lazarus the crumbs from his table. From Hades, the rich man begged Abraham, “Have mercy on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this flame!” (Luke 16:24).

Jesus said this fire was **“for the devil and his angels.”** Among the Gospel writers, Matthew alone mentioned the devil’s *angels*. These fallen angels, like Satan, rebelled against God and were cast from the Lord’s presence (Rev. 12:3-9; see Isa. 14:12-15; Ezek. 28:11-19). The fall of Satan and his angels made this place of torment a necessity.

VERSES 42-43

“For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat; I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink; 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.”

The list of opportunities in these verses are almost identical to the list in verses 35-36. Those on the King’s left had the same opportunities as those on His right. Rather than respond to people in need with charity and compassion, those on the King’s left did nothing.

VERSE 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?’”

This is the fourth and final time the list of deeds appears in this story. This time, we have the fewest details. Scholars have offered a couple of explanations for the shortened list. First, Jesus was using a common teaching method among first-century rabbis. Jesus’s listeners had firmly established the elements in their minds; thus, He used an abbreviated list of details. Second, those on the King’s left did not want to call attention to what they had not done. Thus, their question was, **“Lord, when did we see you . . . and not help you?”** Their response completely omitted what actions they could have taken. Maybe they were ashamed, or possibly, they did not care about those in need.

VERSE 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.’”

This verse reminds us that we cannot separate our care and compassion for others from our relationship with Christ (Jas. 2:15-17). This verse also teaches us that if we are not doing anything for others, we are not doing anything for Christ: **“you did not do it for me.”** We serve Christ by serving others—by showing compassion and tending to people’s needs.

VERSE 46

“And they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

Early in his Gospel, Matthew wrote of punishment and judgment. 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 his Gospel. 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).

Jesus could have concluded His public teaching with any subject. His topic of choice was a warning and a promise. He left His followers and all people with clear options. His words echo Moses’s from centuries earlier, near the end of his life. He said, “I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live” (Deut. 30:19). May we do the same. Eternity is at stake.

Explore Further

Look up Matthew 5:3-12; 6:19-21,25-34; 10:40-42; 11:28-30; 19:27-30; 25:14-30. As you think of Jesus’s teachings, do you tend to

- focus more on rewards or punishments? Why do you think that is?
