

Active Faith

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

Matthew 25:31-46

31 “When the Son of Man **comes in his glory**, **A** and all the **angels** **B** with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. **32 All the nations** **C** will be gathered before him, and he will separate them one from another, just as a shepherd separates the **sheep from the goats**. **D** **33** He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on the left. **34** Then **the King** **E** will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; inherit the kingdom **prepared for you** **F** from the foundation of the world. **35** For **I was hungry** **G** 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** **H** for one of the **least of these** **I** 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**, **J** 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**, **K** but the righteous into eternal life.”

Exploring Key Words

- A** At the incarnation, Jesus came in humility. At His second coming, though, He will come in power and majesty (Matt. 16:27; 24:30).
- B** Jesus is often described as being accompanied by angels at His return (Matt. 16:27; 24:31; 1 Thess. 4:16).
- C** 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).
- D** Similar to the master’s distinction between the faithful servant and the wicked servant in Matthew 24:45-51. The sheep symbolize the righteous, while the goats are the unrighteous.
- E** The imagery shifts from a discerning shepherd to a righteous King executing justice.
- F** 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.
- G** The repeated first-person pronoun indicates how closely Jesus relates to His people in need.
- H** 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.
- I** Followers of Jesus who are in need, dealing with persecution, or experiencing abuse. These are His “brothers and sisters,” and Jesus shares their suffering.
- J** While the sheep (believers) are blessed for their actions, the goats (unbelievers) are condemned for their apathy.
- K** 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.



The Judge (Matt. 25:31-33)

- Matthew 25 continues what has been called the “Olivet Discourse.” Jesus shared more with His disciples about the end of the age and how they should be ready for His return.
- 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.

The Righteous (Matt. 25:34-40)

- Referring to righteous people (the sheep), 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 the sheep had acted with compassion toward the physical needs of Jesus’s brothers and sisters, the “least of these.” These included 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 also ministering to Him.

The Faithless (Matt. 25:41-46)

- Jesus then addressed the faithless people (the goats). They will suffer eternal punishment and separation from God.
- Jesus then noted the same physical needs and stated that the goats 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.

Summary Statements

The way we treat Jesus’s followers reveals the nature of our relationship with Him.

- 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.

Memory Verse

Matthew 25:40

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.)



For additional commentary, see the Leader Guide or Adult Commentary, available for purchase at goExploreTheBible.com.

ENGAGE

Bonus: What are some things that are judged? What is the criteria used for each one?

- 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? (PSG, p. 106)

EXPLORE

THE JUDGE (MATT. 25:31-33)

Bonus: What is the difference between a parable and a prophecy?

- While these verses are preceded by parables about Jesus's return, Matthew 25:31-46 is not a parable. It is a prophecy about the coming time when the "Son of Man" will sit in judgment. The words "glory" and "glorious" speak of Jesus's heavenly splendor, majesty, and radiance.
- Jesus will separate the nations into two groups. He compared it to separating sheep from goats. In first-century Israel, sheep and goats often grazed together. While sheep tend to be obedient, goats can be troublemakers. Because of this, shepherds sometimes separated the sheep and goats.

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

THE RIGHTEOUS (MATT. 25:34-40)

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

- The right side of a throne was seen as the place of honor. To those put in this place of honor, Jesus said "come," meaning they would be rewarded. He added that this group was "blessed by my Father."
- The reward was based on the sheep's ministry to the King. In each case, the King received the care they had provided. While they were rewarded for their works, these acts of mercy did not save them. Their actions were an outflow of a relationship with God that existed already.
- Thanks to their selfless motivation, the sheep (the righteous) in the prophecy expressed great surprise at the King's praise. They wondered when they had experienced the privilege of helping Him.

- The King shared that when they ministered to His "brothers and sisters" they also were ministering to Him. The sheep were honored for their positive response to the gospel, both in accepting it themselves and in living it out for others to see.

Bonus: How should these verses affect the way we see ministry toward others?

THE FAITHLESS (MATT. 25:41-46)

Bonus: How should the prospect of eternal judgment influence the way we respond to those who don't know Christ?

- Just as He had commended the sheep, the King condemned the goats. The judgment mirrors the words spoken to those at His right hand. However, instead of *come*, the King said "depart." Instead of *blessed*, they were "cursed." Instead of a kingdom prepared there was "eternal fire prepared."
- Originally, this fire was not created for the wicked but "for the devil and his angels." Still, they were sent to a place of "eternal punishment" because they rejected Jesus. They demonstrated this lack of faith in the way they treated His people.
- This corresponds to the "weeping and gnashing of teeth" described in Matthew 24:51. It is a place of eternal punishment and eternal separation from God.

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

CHALLENGE

Within your group, create a list of compassionate acts that the group or individuals could carry out.

How do these acts of compassion reflect the condition of your heart? (PSG, p. 113)

Challenge adults to spend time evaluating how their lives demonstrate compassion toward others.

Consider ways you can engage in acts of compassion this week. Analyze your motive for wanting to extend merciful treatment to others. (PSG, p. 113)

FURTHER DISCUSSION



Scan here for additional discussion questions for this week's study.

BIBLE SKILL (PSG, P. 112)

Respond emotionally to a principle or 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.

Encourage adults to complete the Bible Skill activity on page 112 of the PSG. Urge them to pay special attention to the questions in the activity. After a few minutes, allow them to respond to those questions. Provide time for silent prayer, giving adults an opportunity to talk with God about their attitudes toward the lost and what adjustments He might want them to make.

OBJECT LESSON: CROWN

Write the word “king” on the board or on a large sheet of paper. Allow the group to suggest things that come to their minds when they think of a king. If it’s not mentioned, highlight that most kings have a crown.

Invite two or three volunteers to draw a crown on the board or on the sheet of paper. Compare the crowns they drew. Affirm that crowns come in all kinds of styles. (If possible, print several pictures of crowns and show them to the group.) Note that whatever a crown looks like, it usually implies majesty and a certain level of 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 CHURCH’S MISSION

Matthew 25:31-46, taken alongside James 2:14-26 and Ephesians 2:8-9, reminds us that works cannot save us. However, saving faith does produce good works. Interestingly, this tension between gospel and good works can also be seen in how we understand the mission of the church. Is the mission of the church primarily defined by proclaiming the gospel or by social action?

A helpful way to think about the church’s mission is to filter it through the Great Commission (Matt. 28:18-20) and the Great Commandments (22:34-40). These directives—making disciples, loving God, and loving our neighbors—are not opposed to each other. Rather, they go hand in hand. Making disciples means moving toward the lost and proclaiming the gospel so they can come to know and follow Jesus. Our good works are meant to commend the gospel (Matt. 5:16; Titus 2:10; 1 Pet. 2:12) and give evidence of saving faith (Jas. 2:14-17).

While the Great Commandments are not at odds with the Great Commission, we must not neglect our responsibility to keep the main thing the main thing. Jesus’s marching orders for His people make one thing clear: We are sent into the world to proclaim the gospel and make disciples:

- “Go . . . and make disciples” (Matt. 28:18-20).
- “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation” (Mark 16:15).
- “Repentance for forgiveness of sins will be proclaimed in his name to all nations. . . . You are my witnesses of these things” (Luke 24:47-48).
- “As the Father has sent me, I also send you” (John 20:21).

This focus is also clear in the book of Acts (see 1:8; 6:7; 9:31; 12:23-24; 19:20; 28:30-31). This biblical emphasis leads us to hold together both evangelism and social action, while keeping His call to proclaim the gospel and make disciples our highest priority.