

## Judgement Day

A sermon preached by Dr. John Clayton at Covenant Presbyterian Church of Fort Smith, Arkansas on January 24, 2021.

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 the left. 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. 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 him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a 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.’ “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 (Matthew 25:31–46).<sup>1</sup>

According to a recent national survey,<sup>2</sup> 65% of Americans agree that “Everyone sins a little, but most people are good by nature.” Relevant to this, 54% disagreed that “Even the smallest sin deserves eternal damnation.” In the minds of many, good people do good things and go to heaven, and bad people do bad things and go to hell, and most people are good (except people we don’t like...). Goodness then is conditional, and our eternal destiny is contingent upon the good we do. Welcome to American Christianity: We are good and do good, so life is good.

What then is made of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ? How is Christianity’s claim that eternal life is inherited only through faith in Christ? According to the survey, only 33% agree that “God counts a person as righteous not because of one’s works but only because of one’s faith in Jesus Christ.” In other words, 67% of Americans don’t know or disagree with justification by faith.

It should not surprise us then that our passage today is often misinterpreted and misunderstood. Are the sheep and the goats determined by their acts of mercy to “the least of these”? Is eternal punishment or eternal life conditioned upon what one does in this life? And if so, how much

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<sup>1</sup> Unless referenced otherwise, all Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2001).

<sup>2</sup> “The State of Theology,” The State of Theology, accessed January 22, 2021, <https://thestateoftheology.com/>.

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good is necessary for eternal life? If you give food and drink to the hungry and thirsty, if you welcome the immigrant and give clothes to the naked but fail to visit the sick or imprisoned, have you failed to earn eternal life? Is life merely an ongoing scorecard to be tallied on Judgment Day? If this is the case, let's be honest with one another: Our eternal destiny is doomed.

How then are we to understand this passage? Who is this King? Who are the sheep? Who are the goats? What are the eternal consequences for both? In order to answer these questions and understand this passage, let us start, as we should, with the King of kings.

### **Jesus: King and Judge**

Even outside the church, people will refer to Judgment Day. Often in tandem with an apocalypse, it is the day where all people will be called to account. In the popular imagination it is the appointed day to tell your Creator all the good you have done to merit heaven. It is often viewed through a very personal and subjective lens. But is this how Scripture depicts it?

Daniel prophesied, "I saw in the night visions and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed" (Dan. 7:13-14). Alluding to this prophecy, Jesus says, "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..." Note the borrowed language ("Son of Man," "glory," "all...nations"), note the scene ("dominion and glory and a kingdom" are given to the "Son of Man"), and note the supremacy of this King. What Daniel prophesied Jesus fulfills as the King upon his glorious throne.

This King is also the one who stands in the presence of his listening disciples, indeed a son of man and the Son of God, humbly living before them but to be exalted. Paul captures this contrast perfectly writing, "though he was in the form of God, [he] did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Phil. 2:6-11). According to the authority bestowed by God the Father, when King Jesus comes there will not be one single person in doubt who is the King of heaven and earth. Indeed, saint and sinner alike will bow the knee and confess that Jesus is Lord.

What will the King upon his glorious throne do first? He will, as the psalmist declares, "execute judgment among the nations" (Ps. 110:6). But the commencement of his judgment is not a one-by-one assessment of performance, contrary to popular opinion. Today, in our age of worshiping the individual, we employ a myriad of classifications, some good and some bad, but on Judgment Day there will be only two classifications, each with eternal consequence. Employing the simile of a shepherd, Jesus says that 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 the left."

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Today, sheep and goats are intermixed throughout the world, living, working, and playing together, but on Judgment Day everything will change.

### **Sheep: Righteous and Rewarded**

The separation from one to two flocks happens before a word is spoken. The sheep are placed at the King's right hand, connoting favor, and then he says to them, "Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world." It is a statement of command, "Come," but also description, "you who are blessed." What separates the sheep from the goats?

First, they are blessed by God the Father. The word translated "blessed" describes a state of favor, not earned but bestowed. Their blessedness is not a response *from* the Father but *by* the Father. Second, they receive an inheritance. It is not a worker's wages earned, but a child's inheritance received. Third, the inheritance connotes royalty, a kingdom or a kingship. They are separated from those who do not have the blood of the King, as it were. Fourth, that which is bestowed by God the Father has been foreordained. With purpose the Father has prepared this inheritance for those blessed before the creation of the world.

But Jesus also refers to those blessed as righteous. Given that Scripture tells us that there is none righteous (Rom. 3:10) and all of our righteous deeds are like filthy rags before a holy God (Isa. 64:6), we are left with only one possible explanation for the righteousness of those blessed by God the Father. Paul explains that God the Father made Christ "to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor. 5:21). It is only through the imputed righteousness of Christ that anyone may be called righteous before God. And we may only receive Christ's righteousness through faith in him.

This is evidenced by the description that Jesus gives, how they have received "the least of these my brothers" for the sake of Christ. Because that which Jesus describes matches the biblical accounts of the ministry of the disciples and apostles in advancing the gospel of Jesus Christ, how one receives that which Christ has commissioned through his church has eternal consequences. Consider how ridiculous all of the things that distracted you from eternal things will seem on that day. What worried you will seem so frivolous. What kept you up at night will seem so insignificant. What you feared will seem so impotent. But how you responded to Christ and his gospel message and what you did for Christ's sake will move to the forefront of your thoughts, as it should today.

For Christians, whatever we do is to be done to the glory of God, but this is not always so obvious. By God's grace through the power of his indwelling Spirit, what we do whether great or small reveals whose we are, as the blessedly righteous. As such, we fulfill our calling not as the brazen and brash but as the grateful and gracious, in the end even as king, "Lord, when did we do these things?" Such a question is akin to a question most of us ask when contemplating God's grace bestowed upon us through the gospel of Christ: Lord, why me? Consider the humility of the one who knows his eternal destiny is according to the unmerited favor of God. Consider the meekness of the one who sees that her righteousness is not her own but the perfect righteousness of Christ. Consider the gracious works of mercy of those who realize that it is God who works in

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us “both to will and to work for his good pleasure” (Phil. 2:13). Consider the gospel revealed through us as God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them” (Eph. 2:8-10). And as these works reveal, there is an eternal separation between the righteous and rewarded and the cursed and cast away.

### **Goats: Cursed and Cast Away**

In contrast to the blessed sheep, the goats are not welcomed but commanded to depart. They are not blessed by the Father but are cursed. They are unworthy apart from the worthiness of Christ and cast away, unknown. The destiny that awaits them is the same as “the devil and his angels,” who receive not an inheritance of eternal life but eternal punishment.

Interestingly, how they encountered Christ in this life is similar to the sheep but without the filial reference of “brothers” or sisters. It is through Christ’s church that the gospel advances, but it does not advance where it is rejected. The Apostle Paul asks, “How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!” (Rom. 10:14-15). The gospel is advanced through the means of God’s appointment, messengers of Christ’s Great Commission, but just as the world rejected Christ so they will reject those he sends. As Jesus said to his disciples, “whoever receives you receives me” (Matt. 10:40a). There is an indivisible union between God’s work in our redemption and the means by which it is accomplished. Therefore, the goats are classified not by a lack of good works but whom they have rejected, the gospel of Christ through his appointed means.

It is not that the goats did not amass enough good works. In fact, those apart from Christ do many things good, some even in the name of Christ. Those cursed are not without their merits; they are without Christ. For Christ’s disciples did come and were rejected, and so Christ was rejected. Such is the integral relationship between Christ and his church and the gospel, and the eternal consequences for rejecting Christ are severe. J.C. Ryle asks, “Who shall describe the misery of eternal punishment? It is something utterly indescribable and inconceivable. The eternal pain of body; the eternal sting of an accusing conscience; the eternal society of none but the wicked, the devil and his angels; the eternal remembrance of opportunities neglected and Christ despised; the eternal prospect of a weary, hopeless future, --all this is misery indeed: it is enough to make our ears tingle, and our blood run cold. And yet this picture is nothing, compared to reality.”<sup>3</sup>

After the separation and judgment declared on Judgment Day, I would imagine that if an international survey were taken, 100% would disagree that “most people are good by nature.” I would guess that 100% would agree that “Even the smallest sin deserves eternal damnation.” And 100% would agree that “God counts a person as righteous not because of one’s works but only because of one’s faith in Jesus Christ.” Because on Judgment Day the King of kings and Lord of lords will judge the living and the dead from his glorious throne. To his right will be separated those justified as righteous by God’s grace through faith in Christ, revealed through their works for Christ’s sake, and rewarded their inheritance to eternal life. To his left will be

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<sup>3</sup> J.C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on Matthew* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2012), 276.

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separated those cursed according to their rejection of those sent to them for Christ's sake, of the gospel of Christ, of Christ himself; and they will be cast away into eternal punishment.

Judgment Day is coming. Will you be found righteous and rewarded in Christ, revealed in your life lived for him? Or, will you be found cursed apart from Christ, where even your good deeds demand not reward but eternal punishment. Will you be cast away from Christ forever? It is time to answer these questions. "For this is the way God loved the world: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world should be saved through him. The one who believes in him is not condemned. The one who does not believe has been condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the one and only Son of God" (John 3:16-18 NET).