

One day Jesus will return. Alleluia! But what are we supposed to be doing between now and then, between now and eternity? That's what I want to talk about this morning.

OPENING PRAYER

READ Matthew 25:31-46

"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. 32 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. 33 And he will place the sheep on his right, but 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 from the foundation of the world. 35 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, 36 I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me. ' 37 Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? 38 And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? 39 And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you? ' 40 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. '

41 "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. 42 For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, 43 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. ' 44 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? ' 45 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. ' 46 And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

Here's a Bible study tip: When you want to study a particular subject, begin by looking in the same book of the Bible where your question was first raised for similar passages. So for example, we've just read about the 2nd Coming in Matthew 25. What else does the Lord say in Matthew about this subject?

In **Matthew 13:49** we read, **“(Jesus said,) So it will be at the end of the age: The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous.”**

And in **Matthew 16:27** we read, **“(Jesus said,) the Son of Man is going to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay each person according to what he has done.”**

One day, Jesus will return with His angels in glory with judgment. But let's take a moment to consider the contrast between Christ's return and His first advent: The first time He came to us, Jesus came as a babe in a manger—a humble setting. The first time He came, He preached a message of repentance and mercy, forgiveness and hope. The first time He came to us, He came to suffer and die for our sins.

But one day Jesus will return. But this time He will not come in humility, but with glory as the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. He will not come with a message of repentance, for the time for repenting will be spent. No, but He will come with the sword of judgment. Indeed, the Lord Jesus will not come to suffer again, but He will come to inflict God's wrath on all evil.

From this teaching the thing that strikes me as being of great importance is how the Lord will judge people, distinguishing us one from another.

As we heard, Jesus said, **Matthew 25:32**, **“the Son of Man...will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.”**

About the sheep, he said, **Matthew 25:35**, **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, 36 I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.... 40 (For) as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.**

And about the goats, it was the opposite: **Matthew 25:45: “as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.”**

This is a difficult teaching. I struggle with it, just as I’m sure you do.

Some preachers say that Jesus was trying to scare us into repentance. For we all know that, in truth, we are all goats: we don’t love enough, we don’t serve enough, we don’t have enough compassion. So we hear His words, we examine ourselves, and we repent for our inability to do what He said we should be doing, like feed the hungry and clothe the naked. But, alas, there is no evidence in the Scripture that this was the Lord’s purpose with His teaching.

Other preachers say that this passage is evidence that we must serve as Jesus tells us, for we will be judged just as he says. So we better get busy! On the other hand St. Paul wrote, **Ephesians 2:8-9, “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, 9 not a result of works, so that no one may boast.”**

Let’s take a moment to reflect on what we know about our salvation and God’s work in our lives: Firstly, the very foundation of our faith is that Jesus died for our sins and rose from the grave, overcoming sin, death, and the devil on our behalf. And secondly, we know that this gift belongs to us personally as individuals through Holy Baptism for therein we are clothed with Christ’s righteousness (Galatians 3:27). We know that we are forgiven our sins with the proclamation of absolution in the name of Christ (Matthew 16:19). And we know that when we receive the Lord’s Supper (Matthew 26:27-28) we are also forgiven for our sins as we receive Christ’s body and blood into our own bodies. Indeed, every time we gather for worship we’re filled with assurance of salvation and our hearts are renewed through the preaching and teaching of God’s Word.

I think what Jesus said about how He’ll judge people according to their acts of service, distinguishing us as a shepherd distinguishes between sheep and goats, goes back to what He’s taught us all along: We are sheep, His sheep, and as such, we act like sheep, following our Shepherd for nourishment, protection, and guidance.

Indeed, our Shepherd, the Good Shepherd, is nothing if He's not compassionate, loving, generous, and kind, fulfilling His own words, feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, welcoming the stranger, clothing the naked, and visiting the sick and imprisoned.

Indeed, I was once hungry for God's Word, and He fed me. I was thirsty for His Spirit, and He filled me with Living Water, that is, His own life. I was a stranger to God, but He welcomed me into God's house as a son of God. I was once stripped of all those things that I thought made life meaningful. When pride is melted away we see that we are naked, that we are nothing but flesh and bones in need of a Savior. And so the Lord clothed me with the righteousness of His Son, Jesus. I was sick in my heart, but the Lord healed me with His sweet balm of forgiveness. And I was once imprisoned in the darkness of my own flesh, but Jesus set me free. **"For if the Son has set you free, you are free indeed!" (John 8:36)**

So you see, our Lord gave us a command which He has already fulfilled in our own lives, lifting us up out of the darkness into His light. The Good Shepherd has bestowed on His sheep—you and me—everything we need to follow after Him.

This where we start, with a thorough understand of Christ's compassionate, unconditional love for us. Nothing in heaven or on earth can take that away from you and me.

After St. Paul said that we were saved by grace through faith and not because of works, he said, **Ephesian 2:10, "we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them."**

The acts of service Jesus listed in the Gospel are expressions of our faith. In other words, when you receive God's grace, you receive Jesus, who gives you His heart and the will to be like himself.

Jesus makes faith real by making it tactile and touchable, physical and concrete. So first He did everything Himself, in our hearts, and then He commanded us to do the same for one another, following in His stead, such as,

- Feeding the hungry
- Giving drink to the thirsty
- Showing hospitality to strangers

- Clothing the naked, and
- Visiting the sick & the imprisoned

This is SHEEP-LIKE FAITH. Sheep are simple creatures, and so Jesus explained what faith looks like so simply mere sheep could understand it.

One of the huge benefits of belonging to a church is that it provides a staging ground for performing acts of faith and service. We have organizational tools here at our disposal which we can use to make a difference in the community around us, living in obedience to our Lord Jesus.

And consider how the King calls those who are in need—the naked, hungry, thirsty, imprisoned—his BROTHERS. He doesn't beat around the bush, using euphemisms like the clothing-challenged for the naked! But they are his brothers. So too they are our brothers (and sisters).

Friends in Christ, this week may you begin to think of the Lord's work in your heart according to the illustrations He has given us, that you were once hungry, thirsty, naked, and imprisoned, and He cared for you.

This week may you have an opportunity to express your faith through an act of service for another person, for they are your brother or sister, feeding them, giving them drink, providing clothing, and visiting them. We should understand these acts of service literally and spiritually. Serve the Lord according to your gifts.

And this week, brothers and sisters in the Lord, when you serve your brother or sister may you be filled with joy for having served your Lord Jesus himself. Amen.