

Matthew 25:31-46 What Jesus expects from us at the Final Judgement

Introduction

These verses from Matthew's Gospel are part parable, part prophecy and part eschatological discourse (teaching about the end of the world). The outward form of the account follows on from the story about wise and foolish young girls scheduled to accompany a bride to her wedding feast and the employees of an employer absent for some time who entrusts his wealth to their care in his absence; all three point beyond the story format to challenge the followers of Jesus to be ready for His unexpected coming; to prepare for His unannounced return, that is in the sense that none of us knows even the approximate date of His return; The message is set in a rural scene in which a shepherd gathers his flock of sheep and goats together and separates them for the night. The sheep in that context were happy to sleep outside with their thicker woolly coats, whereas the goats less well insulated against the cooler air preferred to have a more sheltered place to sleep. However, it needs to be noted that sheep and goats in Israel in Jesus' day were very similar in appearance. To an outsider it was not easy to tell them apart. This is not the case with sheep and goats in the United Kingdom today. The point of this choice of animals is deliberate. We may not know someone else's spiritual state but Jesus does and on the Day of Judgement He will not make any mistakes. He knows those who are His and those who have consciously turned their backs on Him. On that day He will confirm the choices made in this life to follow or to turn away from Him. The teaching of Jesus in this passage not only makes a clear distinction between the saved and the lost, it also draws attention to the rewarding of the saved for their honouring of Jesus in their daily lives. This is a reward unsought and unexpected. It is not a parable teaching salvation by works, but a vivid warning that one day we will stand before King Jesus to give an account of our lives here on earth, good or bad, so be ready to account then for the life we are now living on earth.

1. The lesson Jesus wants to explain (Matthew 25:31-33)

(a) **Who is the Son of Man?** (Daniel 7:13-14) *In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into His presence. ¹⁴ He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshipped Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and His kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.* In popular Christian thought it is often assumed that there are two biblical terms 'Son of God' and 'Son of Man', that point to Jesus' deity and humanity respectively. Although this perception is understandable it is not quite accurate. The title 'Son of Man' was deliberately chosen by Jesus because it was not in common usage in His day and therefore less likely to have been misunderstood and misused by the popular teaching of the Pharisees that the coming Messiah would be a military conqueror who would defeat the Romans and set up another great Jewish kingdom on earth, hopefully in their lifetime. He had to be very careful in speaking to people about being 'the Messiah' or 'the Saviour' because so many of them viewed these terms in a purely earthly way and would have reinterpreted His words to fit in with their agenda, rather than theirs with His. Jesus had a totally different conviction about the nature of His calling as the Servant of the Lord who had come to suffer and die as a substitute for sinners (in line with the prophetic message of Isaiah 52:13-53:12); only in His second and final coming would He come with power and authority to rule over the nations. This title 'Son of Man' was taken from Daniel 7 and refers to someone who had the right to enter the immediate presence of *the Ancient of Days* (God the Father), something no ordinary human being could entertain. In Exodus 33

at the height of his blessing by God, there is a record of an extraordinary encounter with God: *And the Lord said to Moses, I will do the very thing you have asked, because I am pleased with you and I know you by name.*¹⁸ *Then Moses said, now show me Your glory.*¹⁹ *And the Lord said, I will cause all My goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim My name, the Lord, in your presence. I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion.*²⁰ *But, He said, you cannot see My face, for no-one may see Me and live.*²¹ *Then the Lord said, There is a place near me where you may stand on a rock.*²² *When My glory passes by, I will put you in a cleft in the rock and cover you with My hand until I have passed by.* Jesus came in humility to live among us. This is put so clearly in Mark 10:45: *For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many.* The cost of that obedience to His heavenly Father is revealed so clearly in the prophecy of Isaiah, over 700 years before Jesus.³ *He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces He was despised, and we esteemed Him not.*⁴ *Surely He took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered Him stricken by God, smitten by Him, and afflicted.*⁵ *But He was pierced for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon Him, and by His wounds we are healed.*⁶ *We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all.* Was this an accident or did something go seriously wrong with god's plan for Jesus' life? No! Isaiah 53:10-11 states with confidence: ***Yet it was the Lord's will to crush Him and cause Him to suffer, and though the Lord makes His life a guilt offering, He will see His offspring and prolong His days, and the will of the Lord will prosper in His hand.***¹¹ *After the suffering of His soul, He will see the light of life and be satisfied; by His knowledge My righteous servant will justify many, and He will bear their iniquities.* This self-designation of Jesus as the Son of Man is a way of stopping the people of His day to stop and ask what does He mean by that? It would lead to a great many people coming to place their faith in Him once His resurrection was confirmed as a glorious fact of history!

(b) **Why is He coming?** (Matthew 25:31-33)³¹ *When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him, He will sit on His throne in heavenly glory.*³² *All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.*³³ *He will put the sheep on His right and the goats on His left.* His coming is to judge the nations. He came the first time in humility as the servant-Messiah; His return will be in power and majesty as the *King of kings and Lord of Lords* (Revelation 19:16). He will give to each person the due reward or punishment for the life here on earth. Earthly rulers make mistakes and issue bad judgements on occasions, leading to 'miscarriages of justice'. King Jesus will make no mistakes as the thoughts and desires of each individual are as visible to Him as information on the pages of a book to us. He will pronounce the eternal destiny of each person, that is, he will confirm the choices already made to follow or reject Him on earth. In Matthew 10:32-33 Jesus declared: *Whoever acknowledges Me before men, I will also acknowledge him before My Father in heaven.*³³ *But whoever disowns Me before men, I will disown him before My Father in heaven.* Where will you be spending eternity? We all make travel plans in this life. It would be insane to miss out on the biggest step we need to take, the choice over our eternal destiny. We will only be in heaven when we 'opt in' to following the pathway God has chosen for us. None of us will do it perfectly, but God accepts the people who will be in heaven because Jesus was perfect. His perfect righteousness is credited to our account and our sin to His was debited on the cross (II Corinthians 5:21). Are you ready for His coming? If not –is it not the most important thing in all the world for you to put your faith and trust in Jesus?

2. **The blessing Jesus expects to provide** (Matthew 25:34-40)

³⁴Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by My Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation 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 invited Me in, ³⁶ I needed clothes and you clothed Me, I was sick and you looked after Me, I was in prison and you came to visit 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 invite You in, or needing clothes and clothe You? ³⁹ When did we see You sick or in prison and go to visit You?' ⁴⁰ The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for Me.'

(a) **The grounds of their acceptance** (Matthew 25:34, 37a) ³⁴Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by My Father; take **your inheritance**, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world... Then **the righteous** will answer Him (i) **Your inheritance** This is a point so often missed when we read this passage. There are two key words in verse 34 **your inheritance**. An inheritance is a gift bestowed upon us by someone else, in this case by God the Father. It is a free gift to us, not something we have earned. His free choice to bless us with this extraordinary privilege is an amazing blessing for us. Romans 6:23 states: *For the wages of sin is death, but the **free gift** of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.* This verse is speaking about our salvation. It is a gift from God, not something we have earned or merit. No-one will have their place in heaven because they have been good enough; instead every human being in heaven, without exception, will be there because Jesus is good enough. When did God plan to give you this gift? *prepared for you since the creation of the world* - before you were born! If human parents pray for their children's conversions before they are born; if other parents start saving for their children's university education before they are born, for example, then such actions only follow on from the planning of our great God and Saviour for His chosen people before they were even conceived in their mother's wombs. There is nothing you can do to earn it; nothing you can do to lose it. It is a gift of God's grace –given at the expense of the sacrificial death of our great Lord and Saviour. If salvation was based on our being good enough, as many people believe in the wider community, then it could so easily be lost when we fall into sin. Taking to people in the town who do not attend church, there are a proportion of them whose reason is along the lines of –'I couldn't keep it up', 'I am not good enough to be in church amongst such good people' – The reason some ministers fail to proclaim God's free unmerited grace is out of a genuine concern that people would start living as they liked, rather than seeking to live holy lives pleasing God. Paul did not share their concern, as he made plain in Romans 6:1-4: *What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning, so that grace may increase? ² **By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?** ³ Or don't you know that all of us who were baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into His death? ⁴ We were therefore buried with Him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.* God deserves all the credit for saving us. All we did was willingly reach out and accept it. Jesus in Matthew 11:27 declared: ²⁵ *At that time Jesus said, I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because You have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children.* ²⁶ *Yes, Father, for this was Your good pleasure.* ²⁷ *All things have been committed to Me by my Father. No-one knows the Son except the Father, and no-one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal Him.* However, what we need to remember is that God does not have any obligation to provide you with more than one opportunity to hear His Word and respond to the Gospel invitation. Even to have one opportunity is a privilege not a right. If God treated us as we deserve and allowed each person to go their own way then no human being would enter heaven. The difficult question for the child of God is this: Why would a holy perfect God allow an imperfect sinner like me in to His heaven? It is not why would a loving God allow people to go to the eternal destination they have freely chosen, by rejecting the

gospel of Jesus Christ. (ii) ***the righteous*** How are we given this status if we could never merit it? II Corinthians 5:21: *God made Him (Jesus) who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God.* This is one of my handful of favourite verses in the Bible. It gives me great joy whenever I read it as I marvel at the amazing grace of God. Jesus on the cross was treated as the sinner, in the place of sinners, so that we might be treated as righteous, as if we possessed in ourselves His perfect standing before the Father. When God looks upon you and me He sees the perfections of Jesus. Because of His extraordinary love for His beloved Son He welcomes you and me with open arms as His sons and daughters into His eternal kingdom. This is what Paul is describing in Galatians 4:4-5: ⁴ *But when the right time came, God sent His Son, born of a woman, subject to the law.* ⁵ *God sent Him to buy freedom for us who were slaves to the law, so that He could adopt us as His very own children.* ⁶ *And because we are His children, God has sent the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, prompting us to call out, "Abba, Father."* ⁷ *Now you are no longer a slave but God's own child. And since you are His child, God has made you His heir* [New Living Version]. Do these words not thrill your heart as they did the apostle Paul? I hope they do. You may in human terms be the child of a human commoner, but in spiritual terms you are the son or daughter of the King of Kings!

(b) **The evidence for their assurance** (Matthew 25:40) *The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for Me.'* Some people can recite accurate theological statements. This is a good thing to know your Bible, but head-knowledge is not enough as James 2:18-19 reminds us: *Now someone may argue, "Some people have faith; others have good deeds." But I say, "How can you show me your faith if you don't have good deeds? I will show you my faith by my good deeds."* ¹⁹ *You say you have faith, for you believe that there is one God. Good for you! Even the demons believe this, and they tremble in terror.* The devil knows the Bible better than any Christian who has ever lived, but he doesn't practice it. A person who claims to have faith but never shows any evidence of it in their daily life calls into question their profession of faith. We all have bad days and make mistakes; we all say words we regret and think thoughts that we are glad only God knows besides ourselves! In addition, we all know some people who lead exemplary lives and make no profession of faith at all. However, here Jesus emphasises a couple of things here that characterises *the righteous* people: Firstly, *whatever you did...* Or in the words of James 2:22: *You see, his faith and his actions worked together. His actions made his faith complete.* Secondly, for whom did the righteous people carry out this work for which Jesus honours them on the Day of Judgement? *You did for one of the least of these **brothers** of mine...* This is a specific term used by Jesus exclusively of fellow believers. Matthew 12:47-50: *Someone told Jesus, "Your mother and your brothers are outside, and they want to speak to You."* ⁴⁸ *Jesus asked, "Who is My mother? Who are My brothers?"* ⁴⁹ *Then he pointed to his disciples and said, "Look, these are My mother and brothers."* ⁵⁰ ***Anyone who does the will of My Father in heaven is My brother and sister and mother!*** This is not denying that we should help other people as we are able and have an opportunity. Galatians 6:10 reminds us of this fact: *Therefore, whenever we have the opportunity, we should do good to everyone—especially to those in the family of faith.* This term, *My brothers*, was also used of believers after His resurrection in Matthew 28:10: *Then Jesus said to them, "Don't be afraid! Go tell **My brothers** to leave for Galilee, and they will see Me there."* There is a clear emphasis in the New Testament that the genuine Christian will show practical evidence of the credibility of their claims to Christian faith. These people honoured in this way by Jesus practised their faith in a natural way and here appear surprised that their service for other Christians was worthy of recognition by the Lord. They showed practical love and care to others because it was the natural thing for them to do, not because they thought I hope God is noticing how good and considerate I am being! Matthew 25:38-39 describes the astonishment of these people to these words of recognition from Jesus: ³⁸ *When did we see You a stranger and invite You in, or needing clothes and clothe You?* ³⁹ *When did we see You sick or in prison and go to visit You?' God is more willing to bless His people*

than we are ready to receive it. However His blessings may not be in the way we had expected. Have you received Jesus as your Lord and Saviour and entered God's kingdom by this step of faith? I trust so! To those who profess faith in Christ Jesus wants to ask you and me- how are you demonstrating the reality of your profession in your daily life? Is there evidence of the transforming grace of God at work, that indicates that your profession and your practice of the faith is genuine?

(c) **The position of those who have never heard of Jesus** (Romans 2:12-16) It is also important to note the situation of the people who have never heard of Jesus. Where do they stand on the Day of Judgement? Paul deals with this situation in Romans 2:12-16: *All who sin apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who sin under the law will be judged by the law.* ¹³ *For it is not those who hear the law who are righteous in God's sight, but it is those who obey the law who will be declared righteous.* ¹⁴ *(Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law.* ¹⁵ *They show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, **their consciences also bearing witness**, and their thoughts sometimes accusing them and at other times even defending them.)* ¹⁶ *This will take place on the day when God judges people's secrets through Jesus Christ, as my gospel declares.* These people will be judged on how they have responded to the God-given promptings in their conscience concerning matters of belief and practice. No-one will be refused entry to heaven for failing to believe something, or in some one, of whom they had no knowledge. God will always be just.

3. **The punishment Jesus expects to enforce** (Matthew 25:41-46)

(a) **The grounds of their rejection** (Matthew 25:41-44) ⁴¹*Then He will say to those on His left, 'Depart from Me, you who are cursed, 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 did not invite Me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe Me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after Me.'* ⁴⁴ *They also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help You?'* There is here a clear contrast in the description of these people in verse 41 with the comparable verse concerning *the righteous* in verse 34. A place in heaven (25v34) is prepared by God's sovereign choice of His people, but a place in hell is *prepared for the devil and his angels*. Here is a clear passage that the Bible does not teach a double predestination. Election is of God working for good in the lives of His people bringing them to faith in Himself through the gracious work of the Holy Spirit, so that we might receive all the wonderful blessings He has in store for us as His children. By contrast, no human being was born to be damned against their will. This is very important to grasp. God is a just God. No-one who calls on the name of the Lord will be rejected. No-one who desires to put their trust in our precious Lord and Saviour will be turned away. Jesus, in John 6:37-40, explains this matter clearly: *All those the Father gives Me will come to Me, and whoever comes to Me I will never drive away.* ³⁸ *For I have come down from heaven not to do My will but to do the will of Him who sent Me.* ³⁹ *And this is the will of Him who sent Me, that I shall lose none of all those He has given Me, but raise them up at the last day.* ⁴⁰ *For My Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in Him shall have eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day'* What wonderful and precious words these are from our Lord and Saviour. Notice that these people are not condemned for being murderers, rapists, blasphemers or thieves, or some other obvious acts of sinful conduct. Instead their condemnation is for sins of omission. A person who knows about Jesus and fails to put their faith in Him is by that very act committing the greatest sin of all, by ignoring the sacrifice of the Son of God on Calvary and then failing to live a life of obedience to Christ, the natural outworking of such a faith. Jesus in Matthew 10:32-33 gave a very strong challenge: *"Everyone who acknowledges Me publicly here on*

earth, I will also acknowledge before My Father in heaven. ³³ But everyone who denies Me here on earth, I will also deny before My Father in heaven (NLV). There are many people, I am sure, who will state that they intend to become Christians one day, but not yet. They are too busy with work or too concerned about bringing up their families or enjoying some sinful activities too much just now, but one day I will make that commitment to Jesus. That day may never come II Corinthians 6:2 declares: *For God says, "At just the right time, I heard you. On the day of salvation, I helped you."* Indeed, **the "right time" is now. Today is the day of salvation** (NLV). What a tragedy to 'intend' to get right with God and to spend eternity regretting a failure to take that step of faith. Have you trusted Jesus? If not don't put it off –you may never get another opportunity. Saul of Tarsus who thought he was pleasing God by imprisoning and killing the followers of Jesus got a big shock on the road to Damascus. Luke reported this extraordinary incident in Acts 9:3-6: *As he was approaching Damascus on this mission, a light from heaven suddenly shone down around him. ⁴ He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul! Saul! Why are you persecuting Me?" ⁵ "Who are you, lord?" Saul asked. And the voice replied, "I am Jesus, the One you are persecuting! ⁶ Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do."* (NLV) This is an extraordinary statement that has serious implications concerning the way Christians relate to one another, even apart from how those outside the faith treat us. Jesus is saying: speak to your brother and sister *in Christ* as you would speak to Me. In your conduct act towards your brother and sister as if it was Me physically the recipient of your actions. These people whom Jesus will reject on that day, may have used some right words, but their actions revealed that they were not genuine followers of Jesus. This interpretation of Jesus' words is consistent with His teaching in Matthew 7:21-23: ²¹ *"Not everyone who calls out to Me, 'Lord! Lord!' will enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Only those who actually do the will of My Father in heaven will enter. ²² On judgment day many will say to Me, 'Lord! Lord! We prophesied in Your name and cast out demons in Your name and performed many miracles in Your name.' ²³ But I will reply, 'I never knew you. Get away from Me, you who break God's laws.'* (NLV) These are, to my mind, the most solemn words of all in the Scriptures, and spoken by our Lord Himself.

(b) **The consequences of their action** (Matthew 25:45-46)⁴⁵ *He will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for Me.'* ⁴⁶ *Then they will go away to **eternal punishment**, but the righteous to **eternal life**.* These words are in line with the same emphasis from the Old Testament. Daniel 12:2 states: *Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: **some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt.** ³ Those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever.* The time of the experience of bliss or perdition is the same. It lasts forever. There are some Christians who teach that after a period of time in hell the wicked are annihilated by God. These two verses are abundantly clear and come from the lips of our Lord, who will be the judge on that day. Where are you currently heading if you were to die tonight? This is the most important matter you can ever address. May each one of us put our faith and trust in Jesus and receive eternal life, for Jesus' sake, Amen.