

Sunday October 29, 2023

Lesson 9: Who Will You See in Heaven?

Scripture: Matthew 25: 31-46

**Context:**

Today we continue our fall curriculum, “God Provides.” The second unit is titled “Living Water,” with several lessons of how God’s providence comes in the form of water, a simultaneous chaotic and replenishing element. Today’s lesson is the last in the unit and we will go to the gospel of Matthew with the passage usually titled “The Last Judgment.” The focus of today’s lesson will be to offer living water to others in the name of Jesus.

Each of the four gospels tells different narratives of the life of Jesus with a particular focus. In the case of the gospel writer Matthew, there is a focus on how Jesus is a teacher. This helps to present him as the “new Moses,” the one who comes to interpret the law with a twist. Jesus teaches by both a combination of focusing on the law and telling stories to make his point. Both forms provoke and challenge the hearer in how they understand God and what Jesus will do with his life, death, and resurrection.

The passage we read today is often known as “The Last Judgement.” For centuries, the understanding of the passage is to inspire Christians to pay closer attention to their sins of omission instead of concentrating exclusively on sins of commission (adultery, dishonesty, bad temper, lying, etc.)<sup>1</sup> While this interpretation is extremely important, it is also important to note other things before this passage. In Matthew 24:45-51 and 25:14-30, Christians are evaluated on their faithfulness to Christ and their avoidance of bad behavior.<sup>2</sup> Thus, Matthew is not contending good works will be rewarded in the afterlife, as was a belief in the ancient world in religions such as the Egyptians.<sup>3</sup> And finally, the phrase “all the nations,” could mean “everyone,” yet a closer translation focuses the word as Gentiles, excluding the Jews, Jewish Christians, and therefore Christians in general.<sup>4</sup> The phrase thus focuses on pagans who are neither Jewish proselytes nor converts to Christianity.<sup>5</sup> What do Christian missionaries do when pagans will not listen to them? The answer becomes: let the Lord sort them out.

Jesus then describes how he sees people who care for him when they feed the hungry, give water to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, and care for the poor. What Jesus is suggesting is these pagans and their performance of good deeds is not to be treated as

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<sup>1</sup> Hare, Douglas R.A. “Matthew,” *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2009), 288.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 289.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

atoning for their sins, nor as evidence they imitate, God but suggests they have a relationship with Jesus even if they are unaware of it.<sup>6</sup> Christians are thus encouraged to participate in dialogue with members of non-Christian faiths and trust the Lord will work everything else out, leaving God to sit in the judgment seat and us to focus on the mission given unto us.

### **Application**

On my summer holiday, I went to Switzerland, a country which has been on my list for a good while. Imagine my shock and surprise when I went to the Bern Munster, a cathedral built in the 1400s, only to see the front entrance depicting this scripture passage. I had seen pictures of this cathedral in one of my classes in seminary as I remember our look at Jesus' identity and the world. I stood just for fifteen minutes looking at all the figures intricately made, saints and sinners alike coming before the throne of the Lord. It was a site to behold, ushering both in a sense of reverence and joyful trembling of the words of our Lord.

I think all of us shudder a little bit and for good reason when we read this passage. It is a reminder of how the one who holds the keys of eternal life is not us as it is the Lord who sits on the judgment seat. There is the acknowledgment of how the Lord is "watching us" knowing both our sins of commission and omission.

Yet the more I read this passage and think of both the passages around it, I am filled with hope. Jesus throughout the gospel of John tells us who he is with the "I Am" statements. Jesus is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. Jesus is the bread, the mighty shepherd, the Alpha and the Omega. We believe in him and trust him to do all the heavy lifting as he promises to do. In the chapters before this on in Matthew, Jesus talks about the life he offers in following him and has several parables where the people are invited to see the abundant life he offers as the Messiah. It is the gift of grace and the gift of faith.

Even still, we might worry. What do we know about the people who do not follow Jesus? We might try to invite them to church, even encourage them to talk to a pastor, or make a profession of faith. Those are all things we are encouraged to do.

Yet here Jesus also gives us assurance he is watching those things too and he will sort everyone out when they come before him. Jesus is quite good at looking at peoples' hearts and figuring out whether they are goats or sheep. And Jesus is the one who gets the ultimate judgment about where people will land lest we think the throne has our name upon it to declare unto the world who is in and who is out of God's favor and love.

As we read this passage, we also might feel what we call the check engine light come on in our spiritual souls. We may indeed profess Jesus as our Lord and Savior, able to name the faith we have in him. Yet at times we may also fall into the trap of worrying so much about the faith or lack-thereof or moral practices of others, we neglect other things Jesus asked us to do. These are the things he names like feeding the hungry, welcoming those who are strange or different, remembering those imprisoned, and caring for the less fortunate. Those are the things and places the Lord invites us to consider the kingdom work, even daring to join in with those who are different or do not know about the faith. Otherwise, we might find ourselves like the goat, so concerned with ourselves and our piety, we forget of the kingdom work Jesus invited us

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 291.

to join with him.

Some of the places where I have felt the Holy Spirit most profoundly in my life is in my interactions with others, where I learn something or ask deeper questions. I think of how when I serve the hungry of the gratitude and humility I see on the face of others. Or perhaps I remember being welcomed by someone who looks differently than me or believes differently than me, yet they exude hospitality in a way to inspire me. I have people to offer me water after a run with a smile to enjoy as I quench my thirst.

It is in those moments I realize how God gives us the simple things to do in this life which add up to the big things. Jesus sits on the throne, and he is the one to sort everyone out. What he invites me to do is trust in him and join with others in serving in different ways to bring out his goodness. He invites us all to let him be the judge and for us as his sheep to care for our neighbor, whoever they might be. And when it comes to Heaven, I will let Jesus be the one at the pearly gates knowing he has the wisdom and judgment I nor others could ever possess. He will be the one to make all paths straight.

Why do you think Jesus wants us to focus on our faith development and what we believe? How do you interact with people of different faiths or no faiths? What is the danger of believing we have a monopoly on who goes to Heaven and who does not? How can the church focus its mission on doing the things Jesus asks us to do? Who is the Holy Spirit tugging on your heart to support or care for in this time?

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