

Matthew 25:31-46
(Isaiah 61:1-3; James 2:8-26)
“As You Did It to One of the Least of These, You Did It to Me”

Introduction

In Matthew’s gospel, Jesus begins and ends his public ministry with a description of the kind of life that is pleasing to God, and with a warning that how we choose to live our lives has eternal consequences. In his first sermon, Jesus describes as blessed by God those whom the world looks down on – the poor, the meek, the persecuted – and then warns that not everyone who calls him Lord will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only those who do his Father’s will. Here, in his final sermon, Jesus again calls blessed those who have lived counterculturally, valuing what this world despises, and promises life to those who do the Father’s will.

Now we must be honest: If these words did not come from Jesus, if they were not part of the Scripture, most of us evangelicals would reject them as heretical, as promoting a view of salvation by good works rather than by grace through faith in Christ. But since it is Christ who is speaking, we must hear and seek to understand.

If we grasp the message at the heart of this text, the Scriptures will begin to open to us and show us a holistic salvation, one that does not set Paul over against James, but that gives all apostolic teaching equal weight rather than deciding what is of greatest importance and then placing the rest in a subordinate position. What do I mean? Well, just listen to the men who wrote the New Testament:

Paul writes, “For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them” (Ephesians 2:10).

James writes, “For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead” (James 2:26).

Peter writes, “Above all, keep loving each one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins” (1 Peter 4:8).

John writes, “The world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever” (1 John 1:17).

The first key to understanding this passage in a life-giving way, rather than finding ourselves back under the law as a yoke and a burden, is found in verse 34: “Come, you who are blessed by Father.” This little word, “blessed,” is the key to both the Sermon on the Mount, and to this final sermon: In both cases, Jesus is speaking of those who have received God’s grace through faith, and who are being transformed by the work of God within them, loving God and one another, and serving the world around them in response to God’s grace. *Their lives provide the evidence of their salvation.*

Body

- 1. Just as surely as each of us will die one day, so too the end of history is coming for each one of us. There is no escaping it.**
- 2. Jesus will be enthroned in glory as King of the nations, and will separate all of us into two groups: the righteous and the unrighteous.**
- 3. The righteous will be given their inheritance, eternal life in God's kingdom. The unrighteous will be sent away from God's presence into eternal punishment.**
- 4. Here is the key to understanding the scene: Jesus describes the righteous as those who have treated people whom this world values least as people of great worth. He describes the unrighteous as those who have treated people whom this world values least as people of little worth.**

Conclusion

If our experience of salvation begins with Jesus' call, "Come, follow me," then our experience of eternity will begin with the words, "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." "Lord, when did we do these things for you?" "As you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me."

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