



## **“What Does Judgment Look Like?”**

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### **Scripture (NRSV):**

#### **Matthew 25:31-46**

##### The Judgment of the Nations

<sup>31</sup> “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. <sup>32</sup> All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, <sup>33</sup> and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. <sup>34</sup> Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; <sup>35</sup> for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, <sup>36</sup> I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ <sup>37</sup> Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? <sup>38</sup> And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? <sup>39</sup> And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ <sup>40</sup> And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family,<sup>[a]</sup> you did it to me.’ <sup>41</sup> Then he will say to those at his left hand, ‘You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; <sup>42</sup> for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, <sup>43</sup> I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ <sup>44</sup> Then they also will answer, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?’ <sup>45</sup> Then he will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’ <sup>46</sup> And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

## **Sermon:**

By the time we have finished with these two chapters in Matthew, I admit I am pretty tired of the whole judgment thing.

There have been multiple images of those who did right, and those who lost out. The smart and clever servants with their bags of money, and the scaredy cat one who buried his money.

The wise young girls waiting for the bridegroom, and the ones who forgot to plan ahead.

Now, here are the sheep and the goats? On the left and on the right of the king, sitting on his throne, with his army of angels all around him.

And I want to say, what the heck did goats ever do to get the blame all the time? And what did left-handed people ever do to get this bum rap?

We know, according to this passage that all the nations, all the peoples, (not just the Christians who are waiting for the return of Jesus) all of them, get to be judged when the Lord of all Creation returns and sits on the throne of glory. We hear that both those who did well, and those who did not do well...both are surprised.

They all ask variations on the same question: when was it you? We didn't recognize you...but we took care of the naked, the sick, the imprisoned, the hungry, and the thirsty, anyway.

And surprise, there was Christ in the midst of those ones.

But it surprises the other group, too: When did we miss you? Where were you that we missed you?

Well, the returning Lord says, when there were naked, hungry, thirsty, sick, imprisoned ones, that you overlooked. I was there in the midst of them.

It really sucks that among all the peoples of the world there were those who weren't looking carefully. They didn't even know Jesus, so how were they to wait for his return and do good?

It doesn't seem at all fair. But that is Matthew.

And I think I am "over Matthew", if you will forgive me for saying it.

I'm grateful that in Scripture we have more than just Matthew and his angry fire for the accursed. A lot more than the eternal punishment of the condemned and the eternal life of the blessed.

- We have Jesus' words in other gospels, who tells us that God blesses all humanity with the sweet, life-giving rain, whether they are good or bad humans.
- Jesus tells us of God as parent, who gives to the children of the earth what they need, even if human parents aren't good enough to give their children what they need.
- Even when parents forget their young, scripture tells us, God does not.
- Even if someone gives just a cup of cool water to another in need, it will not be forgotten, Jesus says.
- Jesus tells us that God as the lord of the harvest gives a blessed gift to every worker who is called, not just to the ones who work all day, but to every worker; more than enough.
- Jesus sits down not only with the righteous and the holy, but with the tax collectors, the prostitutes, the sick and the lame, the haunted and the unclean.
- Jesus seeks out and heals both the Roman soldier's servant, and the Syro-phoenician woman's daughter. And make no mistake about it, they are Outsiders, both of them.
- Jesus assures us that God is like the doting father of the prodigal and ungrateful son, who runs to that child, and throws a party for that child, and welcomes that child back home.

So enough of dire warnings and fearful stories.

We know already that we are not as good as we could be.

We know already that we are in need of mercy because we are foolish and we are violent, we are addicted, and sick, and envious, and vengeful.

Enough already.

I know this, too, from the stories of our sacred book and from the depth of my study, and my experience as a human being, broken and pathetic:

Mercy is greater.

Judgment is real.

But mercy is greater.

If we can bear the weight of the forgiveness and mercy that I learned about when I heard Jesus speak it from the cross... "Father, forgive them" ...if we can accept this... knowing what we are... yet gifted with such mercy...

Then we may indeed approach the throne of the King on judgment day, in awe but not fear.

For, love is greater.

And I believe that the doors of hell are closed, but as C. S. Lewis said, they are closed on the inside.

No one is ever denied the love and mercy of God except they that want to refuse it. The only eternal punishment is the lacerating self-hate that denies we are any good at all. That refuses to see any good in anyone or anything, or any good in God.

Then, indeed, there is torment. But there is no such thing as eternal torment. Sorry Matthew!

Even the rather grim early medieval church went beyond Matt to imagine mercy and grace abounding!

There is a concept, an idea, from as early as the 4<sup>th</sup> century, called the "harrowing of hell." The church fathers decided that while Jesus was waiting to be resurrected on the third day, he actually was busy in hell. He went to Hell, and there, he emptied it.

That is the "harrowing of hell".

To quote one commentator, "Christ entered not as victim but as victor. **He came to raze the place.** There in the realm of the dead, Christ blasted through Satan's gates like a battering ram."

If you look in the back of our hymnbook you will see it right there in your Apostles Creed.

You see, Matthew maybe knew a lot, but he didn't know it all.

And his own vision was as limited as his understanding, his human understanding with all his prejudices, limitations, cultural biases, and just plain old ignorance.

So, we need more than just Matthew when we celebrate our Christ.

When we discuss the end of the world.

When we ponder the end of all days.

Or the end of our days.

We need the great Teacher of mercy and grace known in **many** gospels and through **many** voices. We need the prophets, of consolation and covenant renewal. The poets of hope.

We need the promise of the new creation, and the New Human Being who will step forward and bring that new creation to birth, who will call us to participate in seeing it come to birth.

These words I read as my mother lay dying, and I trust in them still:

“Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. <sup>2</sup> And I saw the holy city, the New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. <sup>3</sup> And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “See, the home<sup>[a]</sup> of God is among mortals. He will dwell<sup>[b]</sup> with them; they will be his peoples,<sup>[c]</sup> and God himself will be with them;<sup>[d]</sup> <sup>4</sup> he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.” <sup>5</sup> And the one who was seated on the throne said, “**See, I am making all things new.**”

Alleluia, and Amen.