

Matthew 25:31-46    The Final Judgment  
Ezekiel 18  
Psalm 37:1-22  
[Psalm 37:23-40 after the sermon]

September 13, 2015

What does it mean to be “righteous”?

As Ezekiel puts it so succinctly:  
“he does what is just and right.” (v5)

Now, it should be clear from Ezekiel 18 that righteous people do exist!  
Ezekiel speaks of how a righteous man might have a wicked son.  
And a wicked man might have a righteous son.

And for that matter, if a wicked man repents and does what is right,  
then he becomes righteous.  
And if a righteous man ceases to do what is right,  
then he becomes wicked.

To be “righteous” in Ezekiel’s usage here  
simply means that *at the moment* you are doing what is right.

And the way that you become righteous is twofold:  
repent of whatever wrong you have done,  
and then do what is right!

Now, in the New Testament this is called  
justification  
and sanctification.

But *both* justification and sanctification involve *righteousness*.  
In justification, God forgives our sins and reckons us as righteous in his sight,  
only because of what Jesus has done – because *Jesus* was the righteous one.  
In justification, God forgives our sins and imputes the righteousness of Christ to us.

Sanctification also involves righteousness.  
In sanctification, the dominion – the reign – of sin is destroyed,  
and we are more and more enabled to die unto sin and live unto righteousness.  
In other words, we do what is right.

Hence, the Christian is righteous because of the imputed righteousness of Christ.  
But *also* the Christian is righteous because we do what is right.

Our Psalm of response reflects on the “righteous” and the “wicked.”  
Psalm 37 is the song that Jesus’ quotes when he says that the meek shall inherit the earth.  
We’ll sing the first 6 stanzas now – and then the last 5 after the sermon.

Sing Psalm 37:1-22 (stanzas 1-6)  
Read Matthew 25:31-46

### **Introduction: Faith and Works in the Teaching of Jesus**

Some of you may have wondered last week,  
“What about faith?”

When Jesus tells us that we need to be busy with our master’s work,  
some would want to say that the *really important thing* is faith.  
But that’s *not* what Jesus says!

Jesus says that the *really important thing* is that we be *ready* for his return.  
And the way that we watch – the way that we prepare –  
is by doing what our Master has told us to do!

Now, here’s my question for you:  
as we went through the text last week,  
did it sound like Jesus was giving you a guilt trip?  
Did you come away feeling overwhelmed by the impossibility of it all?

I hope not.  
My goal last week was to convey the same *tone* that I heard in the text:  
You should have come away feeling challenged –  
perhaps feeling convicted! –  
recognizing that we need to do better!  
After all, Jesus is exhorting us to be ready –  
by *doing* what he has told us to do!

But you should have come away from last week with a greater love for Jesus –  
and a longing for his return that made you *want* to do what he says!

Because we’ve seen throughout Matthew’s gospel  
that obedience to God is always a good thing!

The Pharisees do not get in trouble for doing good works.  
On the contrary, the Pharisees are *condemned* by Jesus  
because of their *lack* of justice, mercy, and faithfulness –  
the “weightier matters of the law.” (23:23)

There is a very real danger in the church today that comes from antinomianism.  
Antinomianism means simply “against law.”  
Antinomians rightly believe in justification by faith alone –  
so at first they sound very good and orthodox –  
but as you listen to them for a while,  
you discover that they believe that the law *only* condemns.  
They emphasize the importance of faith –  
but they speak about “good works” in derogatory terms.

They are usually quite right about the doctrine of justification –  
but they seem to think that justification  
is the entirety of the doctrine of “salvation.”

In contrast to Antinomianism, the New Testament teaches that good works are always good.  
Sanctification is just as much a part of our salvation as justification.  
The law is a *means* that God uses in our sanctification –  
to show us how we should “work out our salvation with fear and trembling”

The New Testament teaches that we *are* justified by faith alone –  
to put it more clearly:

“Justification is an act of God’s free grace  
wherein he freely pardons all our sins  
and accepts us as righteous in his sight,  
only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us,  
and received by faith alone.” (SC 33)

God forgives you in Jesus.  
He declares you righteous in his sight –  
because he reckons to your account the righteousness of Christ –  
a righteousness that you can only receive by faith.  
You cannot *do* anything to earn or deserve this.

And we highlight this every week in our declaration of pardon!  
We are reminded week-by-week of that verdict that God declared in Jesus:  
You are forgiven.  
You are declared righteous in God’s sight – because of what Jesus did!

But sanctification is *also* part of our salvation.  
God is making us more and more *like* Jesus.  
“Sanctification is the work of God’s free grace,  
whereby we are renewed in the whole man after the image of God  
and are enabled more and more to die unto and live unto righteousness.” (SC 35)

### **1. When Will the Son of Man Come in His Glory? (25:31-33)**

Today we come to the conclusion of the “Olivet Discourse.”  
Back in chapter 24, verse 3, the disciples had asked first, when will these things be?  
(when will the temple be destroyed)  
And then second, what will be the sign of your parousia and of the close of the age?

And Jesus answers by distinguishing between “those days” (plural) and “that day” (singular).  
“Those days” lead up to the destruction of the temple (24:4-35),  
all of which is laid out clearly – here are the steps so that you can see it coming.  
Everyone can know when *those days* will come!

And the destruction of the temple will be the *sign* of Jesus’ parousia and of the close of the age.  
But the destruction of the temple is *not* the parousia itself.

It is a sign – not the thing signified.  
No one knows – not even the Son knows – *that* day and hour.

So *when will the Son of Man come in his glory?*

I don't know!

It hasn't happened yet – but the destruction of the temple promises us that it will happen.

Now, a lot of people are preoccupied with what the nation of Israel does.

Some have predicted that the Jews will rebuild the temple someday –  
and that this will be a sign of the immanent return of Christ.

The Bible never says that the Jews will rebuild the temple.

Of course, it also never says that they *won't*.

If they ever succeed at rebuilding the temple, it will be a sad day –

because it will demonstrate that they still do not believe in their Messiah!

But in terms of redemptive history, it doesn't necessarily mean anything.

Paul explains in Romans 11 that Israel (the true Israel) is like an olive tree.

Gentiles have been grafted into this olive tree.

Unbelieving Jews have been cut off of this olive tree.

It's not that the Gentile “church” has replaced Israel.

No, Jew and Gentile have been united into one new man in Christ Jesus.

Unbelieving Jews are simply dead branches of the olive tree.

They can be easily grafted back in again – but there is only one people of God.

Listen to how Jesus says it in verses 31-33:

<sup>31</sup> “*When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne.*” <sup>32</sup> *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.* <sup>33</sup> *And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left.*

Indeed, when Jesus gathers all the nations before him on the Day of Judgment,  
there will be only two groups: the sheep and the goats.

Again, as Jesus showed in chapter 24, there will be lots of clear signs  
leading up to the destruction of the temple.

But what will be the sign of the *parousia*?

I have suggested that the destruction of the temple functions as one sign.

But in chapter 25 we have been seeing another sign.

Jesus' disciples will be a people who *watch* –

people who eagerly await the coming of their Lord, their Bridegroom.

We watch by being focused on our master's business.  
But what is our master's business?

The chief sign of the parousia of Jesus is the works of mercy that Jesus gave us to do!  
Remember, the disciples asked  
“what will be the sign of your parousia and of the close of the age?”

Jesus answer is: the destruction of the temple – and your works of mercy.

The church of Jesus – the disciples of Christ –  
will be the place where Jesus builds the new temple.  
The presence of God will be with them by his Holy Spirit,  
and so, in the same way that the temple of old was a place of refuge for the weak,  
even so, the church of Jesus will be a refuge for the weak.

## **2. How to “Inherit the Kingdom” – Righteousness in Action (25:34-40)**

Verse 34 is really important:

<sup>34</sup> *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.*

If you contrast verse 34 with verse 41, you can see that everything starts with God.

“Come you who are blessed by my Father”

vs.

“Depart from me, you cursed.”

The Father's blessing is at the root of the whole passage.  
Either you are blessed by the Father or you are cursed.  
Salvation belongs to the Lord.

And then the King says “inherit the kingdom.”  
By now we are so used to Jesus talking about the kingdom  
that we don't even think about this.

“Inherit the kingdom.”

What does that mean?

Most people would say, “I get to go to heaven!”

But who inherits kingdoms?  
The prince – the son of the king – inherits kingdoms.

The blessed of My Father – those who are placed at the right hand of Jesus –  
will share in the rule – the *kingship* – of Jesus.

And, Jesus says, this was “prepared for you from the foundation of the world.”  
This has been God's purpose for *all of history* –

indeed, even before history began, this kingdom was prepared for you to inherit!

God's purpose for creation – his purpose for humanity –  
was that he might unite humanity to his Son,  
so that humanity might rule creation according to his will.

Think back to Genesis.

In the beginning God gave *adam* (humanity) dominion over the earth.  
But we have misused that dominion and corrupted the earth and brought evil on creation.

But God's purpose will not be thwarted!  
In Jesus, God has united humanity *personally, hypostatically* to himself.  
And in Christ Jesus, God has now adopted *us*  
and made us partakers of his own nature.

Jesus is saying that we will inherit the kingdom *with him*.  
We are made fellow-heirs together with Christ.

And that is why the judgment on the final day will be based on how we treated *Jesus*.

<sup>35</sup> *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, <sup>36</sup>I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.'*

If you are going to inherit Jesus' kingdom,  
then you should probably treat Jesus pretty well!

<sup>37</sup> *Then the righteous will answer him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? <sup>38</sup>And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? <sup>39</sup>And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?' <sup>40</sup>And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, <sup>[1]</sup> you did it to me.'*

Many have commented on how the righteous seem to be a little surprised  
that they have actually done all this!

That's because Jesus is *not* describing the actual conversation that will happen on judgment day.  
Rather, Jesus is teaching *us* how we *should* think.  
We should think of "the least of these my brothers" as if it was Jesus himself before us.

If you knew that Jesus was coming to town, what would you do?  
You would welcome him!  
You would invite him to come for dinner!  
If it was cold, you would offer him your own coat!

But Jesus says that he is present in "the least of these my brothers."

Would you do it for Jesus?  
Then do it for the least of Jesus' disciples.

Do you want to know how to “watch” – how to “be ready” for the coming of the Bridegroom?  
Feed the hungry.  
Welcome the stranger.  
Clothe the naked.  
Visit the sick and the prisoner.

These are the signs of the parousia.  
You *know* that Jesus will return because his people do works of mercy.

Too often we spend our time discussing policy and procedure.  
We debate the relative merits and demerits of socialism and capitalism.  
We discuss the effects of race, class, and gender on social inequality.

But we are too busy feeding ourselves, welcoming our friends,  
clothing our children, and visiting interesting peoples and places.  
Maybe once or twice a year we might get around to doing what Jesus said.

Maybe.

If we have time.

Christians are not called to create alternative social structures.  
Jesus does not say, “change the economic system of your culture.”  
As Stanley Hauerwas puts it,  
“The problem with trying to create alternatives to capitalism or socialism  
is that we seduce ourselves into believing  
that we are working to feed the hungry, clothe the naked,  
give drink to the thirsty, welcome the stranger,  
care for the sick and those in prison  
*without knowing anyone who is hungry, naked, thirsty, a stranger,  
sick, or in prison.*” (p212, italics added)

Now, it is all good and well that there are people who are working to change society.  
That's fine!  
It is a good thing to devise systemic changes that benefit the poor.

But if that's *all* you do,  
then you are like the marriage counselor who concocts all these wonderful plans  
for how you should love your wife –  
and puts *none* of them into practice with his own wife!

Again, quoting Hauerwas,  
“attempts to create a ‘better world’ without being a people capable of the works of mercy

could not help but betray Jesus's response to his disciples' question  
of what sign will there be of Jesus's coming and the end of the age.  
The sign is that they have the time to feed the hungry, clothe the naked,  
give drink to the thirsty, welcome the stranger,  
care for the sick and those in prison." (212)

We have time!

Yes, *you* have time for these things.  
After all, what better things do you have to do?

We live our lives as though what *really* matters is the latest crisis –  
either personal or social –

Jesus has told us that “wars and rumors of wars” are just business as usual in this age.  
Famines, plagues – earthquakes, tsunamis.  
These are just the birthpangs.

Yes, we *should be* crisis-oriented –  
but the crisis that should orient us is the crisis of the cross.  
Now that Jesus has been raised from the dead,  
we have all the time in the world for the *little things* –  
the regular works of mercy.

Don't tell yourself that you'll get around to it when you're established in your career!  
Don't pretend that you'll have time when the kids are grown!

After all, Jesus is not commanding you to start a program, or do something “big.”  
He's saying that the righteous will care for him when they see him in trouble.

But what if you don't?

### **3. “You Did Not Do It to Me” – How Do We Treat the Least of These? (25:41-46)**

<sup>41</sup> “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. <sup>42</sup> For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, <sup>43</sup> 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.’ <sup>44</sup> 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?’ <sup>45</sup> 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.’ <sup>46</sup> And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

Notice that Jesus is very particular about *who* you do this for:

“as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.”  
Likewise, “as you did *not* do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.”



Jesus is *not* saying that the church needs to establish a social welfare system for society.  
If you fast-forward to the book of Acts,  
you do not see the early church establishing social welfare programs.  
You see the church taking up collections for the care of those in need –  
first in their own congregations,  
and then for Christians around the world.

The early church grew like wildfire –  
in part because they took care of the poor!  
And yes, there were lots of poor people who joined the church  
*because* the church took care of her poor!

Some people might object that if people are joining the church only for their own selfish gain  
that is not good.

But what will you say to Abraham:  
God told him “leave your father’s house and go to a land that I will give you.”  
God offered Abraham material gain.  
Abraham responded properly:  
he believed God – and then he did what God said.

In the same way there are material promises made to the people of God.  
Like Abraham, you may have to leave everything to follow Jesus –  
but then, when you follow him, you gain Jesus –  
and you gain a community of Jesus’ people,  
who are committed to taking care of you.

I read about a fascinating example in Germany.  
There is an evangelical church that will help Muslims seek asylum in Germany –  
but only if they convert to Christianity.  
They must go through three months of catechetical training,  
and then they must be baptized and become part of the congregation.  
Hundreds of Muslims have joined the church.  
Most seem to be quite sincere.

Sure, some will probably turn out to be frauds –  
and they will need to be excommunicated.  
But in the meantime, that church is helping hundreds of Iranians  
to become disciples of Jesus.

Think about it this way:  
if someone is a fraud, and we help him, then we have helped an impostor.  
That’s too bad.  
But if someone is truly one of Jesus’ brothers, and we do *not* help him –  
then Jesus will say to us, “as you did not do it to one of the least of these,  
you did not do it to me.”

You might say, “But pastor, I don’t know anyone in these situations.”

Open your eyes!

They are all around you!

Many are in this room!

Others are in your neighborhood – at your workplace – in the stores and shops.

You hear about them on the Forum – and in conversation.

So then what?

Then *do what Jesus said*.

Do you know someone who is sick or in prison?

Visit them.

Do you know of someone who is hungry?

Bring them food.

Do you know of a stranger?

Welcome them – bring them into your home for a meal, at least!

### **Conclusion: A Judgment According to Works?**

Now none of this is new.

God had called Israel to do all these things before.

Moses

The Prophets

Over and over again.

Why does Jesus seem to think that it will be different this time?!

Because of what Jesus himself will do!

Jesus has such resounding confidence that this *is* what his church will look like,  
because Jesus himself is doing three things:

he pays for our sins with his precious blood,  
he triumphs over his and our enemies in his death and resurrection,  
and he not only gives us an *example* of what to do,  
but he gives us the *power to do it* by his Holy Spirit.

As we’ve seen throughout Matthew’s gospel,

Jesus is convinced that *this time it will be different!*

Because Jesus himself will *make sure* that it is different!

God is not dependent on some earthly king to win victories.

Jesus has come with glory to the right hand of the Father,

and now is sitting on the throne of David!

Therefore, at the final judgment,  
Jesus says that the criterion will be whether you *did* what he commanded.

The rest of scripture has exactly the same view of the final judgment.

Listen to the following passages:

2 Corinthians 5:10 -- "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ,  
so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body,  
whether good or evil."

Romans 2:6-8 -- "He will render to each one according to his works:  
to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality,  
he will give eternal life;  
but for those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth,  
but obey unrighteousness, there will be wrath and fury."

John 5:28-29 -- "Do not marvel at this,  
for an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs  
will hear his voice and come out,  
those who have done good to the resurrection of life,  
and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment."

Revelation 20:12 -- "And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne,  
and books were opened.  
Then another book was opened, which is the book of life.  
And the dead were judged by what was written in the books,  
according to what they had done."

Paul, John, and Jesus all agree that at the final judgment,  
we will be judged according to what we have done.

Of course, this judgment will line up exactly with the decree of justification  
Those who are justified are also glorified –  
*because they strove "for peace with everyone  
and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord" (Hebrews 12:14).*

And the *order* is important.  
You cannot become right with God by works.  
No matter how hard you try, you simply cannot be good enough.  
But *once you are right with God by faith*  
then you will do good works because that is who Christ has made you to be.

And so therefore, those who are declared righteous because of their justification  
will also do righteousness because of their sanctification,  
and thus "the righteous will enter into eternal life."