

Introduction

One of the most famous speeches given in the twentieth century was delivered by Franklin D. Roosevelt. It began this way—

Yesterday, December 7, 1941, a date which will live in infamy—the United States of America was suddenly and deliberately attacked by naval and air forces of the empire of Japan.

Infamy suggests the idea of a shameful abomination. And it was exactly that kind of day. The Japanese were involved in peace talks with the US while planning and executing the attack on Pearl Harbor. It was an unprovoked attack and came without warning. It was an attack that seized the attention of the world.

Brothers and sisters, today we will be considering a day which will seize the attention of the world to the greatest extent possible. It is a day whose significance will live eternally but NOT in infamy. I speak of the return of Jesus Christ and the corresponding day of reckoning. There is nothing shameful about it. It will occur suddenly and deliberately and it will be surprising even shocking to most, but not because it comes without warning. The shock will be because people did not take the warnings seriously.

We are finishing up our study of Matthew today. It began exactly 5 years ago. If you haven't been here at Grace very long, you might be wondering why we are stopping at chapter 25. Well the fact is that we skipped over several chapters here last year in order to preach on chapters 26-28 leading up to the resurrection on resurrection day. We then came back to where we skipped. It is fitting in some sense that we finish here today as we end with the final judgment. One of a pastor's foremost responsibilities is to prepare his people for that day. Let's study what Jesus tells us through Matthew about the great day of reckoning.

[Read Text and Pray]

Jesus's disciples had come to him desiring to know when the temple would be destroyed and when his coming and the close of the age would be. Jesus's reply may be summed up by saying that he will surely come. He may appear to be delayed, but he will come. The main thing, however, is to be ready. Keep waiting until he comes and be ready. The stress in the parable of the 10 virgins was on having genuine saving faith. The parable of the talents emphasized making the most of the time by working with the assets God has entrusted us. Today the stress is on being ready not only for Christ's coming but for the day of reckoning. Every Christian should see the importance here of serving Christ by serving Christ's people, who are their brothers and sisters.

I. The Judge.

Jesus speaks of himself in the third person here. Clearly HE is the Son of Man who comes in his glory. It is an answer to the question the disciples asked about the sign of HIS coming and the end of the age.

Daniel provides insight into the glory and awe of this scene. He depicts the Lord God, the Ancient of Days, on a throne. His clothing was white as snow and the hair of his head was like pure wool. His throne was fiery flames. A stream of fire issued and came out before him. A thousand thousands served him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him. The court sat in judgment and

the books were opened. And in the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him and to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which will not pass away and his kingdom is one that shall not be destroyed.

Here in Matthew, Jesus declares of himself, "when the Son of Man comes IN HIS GLORY and ALL THE ANGELS WITH HIM, then HE will sit on HIS glorious throne. And before him will be gathered all the nations." Imagine this scene for a moment. What a difference from his first coming. Then he was shut out of a civilized birthplace, had no place to lay his head, was maligned and found unattractive, and finally hated and cursed despite having basically eradicated disease in Galilee and Judea. Now he sits on a glorious throne as King, surrounded by the myriads of angels, and the entire world of people is gathered before him. Jesus Christ is now undeniably seated in the exalted place of which he is worthy. And every knee shall bow.

We do not yet see it. Christ's opponents run rampant in this world. By and large His glory is ignored and resisted and despised now just as it was when he walked the dusty paths of Palestine. But let not your hearts be troubled. Be sustained in your straining toward the upward call of God. Christ is on his throne. He does rule. And the earth will be his footstool. And the nations will stand before him, accountable to him and subject to his sovereign and inescapable dominion. King Jesus will return. He will sit on his glorious throne. He will be accompanied by angels. The world will stand accountable before him. Do not let the chaos and tumult and the seeming endlessness of the day to day lull you to sleep. Do not let them eclipse your hope. Do not let them diminish your fervent worship of and obedience to the soon and coming King.

II. The Nations.

Before King Jesus in his glory seated on his glorious throne surrounded by all the angels will be gathered the people from ALL the nations. The nations and the whole world are mentioned a few times by Matthew. He sees that the gospel has been accomplished through the Jewish Messiah. However, as the prophets indicated, the message of the Jewish King should and would be spread to the entire world. This is "the nations." In the earlier part of this discourse, Jesus had said that the good news of the kingdom would be proclaimed to the entire world as a witness to all nations. The culmination of Matthew is Jesus's great commission to make disciples of all the nations. People from across the world will become disciples of Jesus. But most will reject him. Jesus said that his disciples would be hated by all nations.

But on the day of reckoning, all the nations—every human being who ever lived from every corner of the world—will stand before the King for him to judge and sentence. No one will escape. I will not escape and you will not escape. The Apostle Paul will be gathered as will Peter and Andrew, James and John. Herod will be there, so will Pilate and every Caesar who ever lived. Napoleon Bonaparte will be there as will Donald Trump and Joe Biden. Billy Graham will be there along with Paul Washer, Oprah Winfrey, and Sandra Bullock. Atheists and agnostics, Catholics and Lutherans, Baptists and Presbyterians will appear before Christ's throne. Americans will be gathered. So will Asians, Africans, Russians, Chinese, and Australians—red, yellow, black, and white. No one's privilege, philosophy, or religion will allow them to miss that great day. When we are there, will you be able to look back and remember the day we studied this text together? I hope it will not be a memory of regret but of gratitude. I hope you will be prepared. For it is a day at the end of which there will be unceasing exuberance or unending pain and despair. The Judge will divide the nations into two groups. Your destiny all depends on which classification is yours.

III. The Classifications.

There are two. Jesus will divide all the nations into two categories and will separate the groups from one another. Says Jesus, it is like when a shepherd separates and divides the sheep from the goats.

I have to tell you a Titus story. The other evening we were up in Sheboygan hanging out. Titus wanted me to play some make-believe with him. He had a stick horse and he wanted me join him and go through the house in search of his lost "Jeeps." I said, "Surely your jeep isn't lost. How bout we look for your cows or your alligators or something?" He said, "No! My jeeps." I said, "Titus, I do not know what you are saying, but surely it is not your jeep." With a resigned look on his face and tone in his voice, he said, "My GOATS are missing. Let's go find my goats." He brought me a donkey to hold so we both took off galloping down the hallway on a mission to find his missing goats. It was a little later on our ride home that a smile came across my face and I said to Melissa, "It wasn't lost jeeps but lost sheeps that Titus had been talking about!" Since he couldn't make me understand that he was saying sheep, he chose the next closest thing.

On the day of reckoning, it will be apparent that the sheep and the goats have a lot in common. They graze in the field together during the day. They share the same streams. They mix and mingle through out the day, but at the end of the day, the shepherd would separate one group from the other. So will it be on the day of reckoning. People who will have spent their lives in each others midst will now be separated and distinguished from one another into sheep and goats.

The distinction between the two classifications begins with their placement. The sheep go to the right and the goats to the left. The right is the place of honor. Three additional aspects distinguish the sheep from the goats—their nature, their destiny, and their works.

A. The sheep come first. Their nature is that they are righteous. Look down to verse 37. When the sheep ask the Lord when did they see him needy, they are referred to as "the righteous." This is their nature. But why are they righteous? How can they meet God's holy standard? For all have sinned and come short of the glory of God. There is none righteous not even one. The answer to how the sheep become righteous appears in the way Jesus addresses them when he calls them to come. Look in verse 34. The King says to those on his right, "Come, you who are blessed by my Father." The righteous are righteous ultimately because of God's blessing. It is by grace that human beings are saved. It is by grace alone that human beings are declared righteous. Dead in trespasses and sins, children of wrath by nature, just like everybody else, but God. He has mercy on whom he has mercy. And when he has mercy, he brings the dead to life. He replaces a heart of stone with a heart of flesh. He grants faith and by faith, he justifies the sinner, declares him righteous and he washes away their sins. The sheep are righteous because of God's blessing, because of God's grace.

Meanwhile we also see the nature of the goats. Their nature is evil; it is wicked. We know it to be the case because they share in the destiny of the devil and his angels. We also know it because ever since the fall of man this is the condition into which human beings are conceived and born. Without the blessing of God to counteract our deadness, we are children of wrath. The nature of the goats is evil. And why? Because they are cursed. God has turned them over to their nature. They are justly cursed because of their sin.

The point that arises wonderfully through this comparison is the amazing nature of God's grace. All would be justly and rightly cursed. When we see the condition of the goats, when we see their evil and that they are cursed, we see what every human deserves. Why, O why, does God love any sinner? Why does he bless any sinner? Why does he have mercy on anyone who will not seek him,

who exchanges the glory of God for the creature? Because of his own goodness and purpose. That is why. You recipients of his grace, give thanks! Be amazed God has blessed you! Give thanks and praise his name. Have you not received God's grace? Do you desire to be a recipient of it? Then you should come humbly to him because he is gracious. You should cast yourself on him for his grace. You should come and turn from your sins and trust completely in Jesus that you may be justified, declared righteous and become a sheep by the grace of God.

B. We have seen the nature of the sheep and of the goats. Let's look next at their destiny. The destiny of the sheep is incomparably wonderful: "inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world." According to verse 46, the sheep enter eternal life. Clarifying details emerge in Revelation. This is the new heaven and earth. The dwelling place of God is with man. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death will be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain any more. No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it and his servants will worship him. They will see his face." Eternal life is to know and enjoy God. This is the destiny of the sheep.

The destiny of the goats is incomparably horrific and dreadful. "Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels." Depart. Rather than being in the presence of the glory of God, the goats will be shut out of the glories of the kingdom. They will miss out on all the joys and delights of God's presence. They are shut out of the feast. They are further consigned to the eternal fire prepared for Satan. It is a place of painful burning. The devil and his demons will be there. There is weeping; sorrow and mourning are removed from the kingdom but they permeate hell. There is gnashing of teeth as the citizens of hell writhe under unceasing torment without rest or pause ever for all time. Moreover, it is dark there. It is the outer darkness. The kingdom is filled with light, but the darkness of hell engulfs all hope and sucks all hope of contentment right out of the air. Take pain and add to it multiplied depression but without any escape ever. Talk to people who have experienced depression. It is a dark place, and all one wants to do it escape. Such is the darkness of hell.

Denying hell's existence does not eliminate its existence. The denial of hell is an excuse for human beings to continue to live according to the lusts of the flesh. The devil loves it. His goal is to max out the capacity of the place and human beings are content to join him there with the belief it does not exist. The reason hell exists is because God is holy and he must punish sin. He is just and his punishment of it reflects the heinous nature of sin.

I must warn, and Christians, we must warn the world of the danger. We must urge the world to flee to Christ so that they can escape the horror and pain and agony and despair of what has been prepared for the devil. If you are not believing in Christ you rest under the just condemnation of God. Hell is what is ahead for you forever. The warning comes now and there will not be another chance later. I plead with you to flee to Christ today. If you were in a burning building, you would cry out for someone to come and save you from the flames. And the truth is that unless you are in Christ, you are within moments of being eternally trapped in a burning building for all eternity without any escape ever. Come to Christ Jesus now that you might be saved from the conflagration of God's eternal wrath.

C. Finally, we see the works of the sheep and the goats. The division between the sheep and the goats is made upon the basis of their works. Now, there is a difference between being saved by works and being judged on the basis of works. No human being can be saved by his or her works. Our righteousness is filthy rags. However, where there is true faith, the faith by which we trust in

the saving work of Christ, there are deeds that arise as fruit of that faith. Therefore, we can be judged according to our works even though we are not redeemed by those works. The criterion here for the judgment of Jesus, the separation he makes between the sheep and the goats, is works. He demonstrates in this text that salvation comes by grace, the blessing of God. And from that blessing deeds arise that manifest God's gracious and effectual work in the lives of those he saves by grace.

Jesus draws attention to the works of the sheep. In particular, he singles out the seemingly little things done to his disciples to relieve their distress. He counts them as being done unto him. "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." These are little things. But they demonstrate loving care.

Now the sheep say, "When did we see you like that and minister to you?" And Jesus says, "inasmuch as you did it to the least of these my brothers, you did it to me."

Meanwhile Jesus indicts the goats because they DID NOT do these things to him. They also want to know, "when?" When did they see Jesus in distress but refuse to assist or comfort him? The same thing, they did not do these things for his brothers and thus did not do them for him.

The truth at the heart of these works or lack of works is the fact that Jesus identifies with his people. If you harm his people, you harm him. If you love and minister to his people, you love and minister to him. Now while it is good to do good to all people, it is particularly characteristic of Christ's disciples that they care deeply for one another because of their union in Christ.

"One of the least of these" refers specifically to Christ's brothers. That is his brothers and sisters. Matthew has brought several instances to our attention so that we might know Jesus is talking about his disciples here. In Matthew 12 there was the incident of a crowded house in which Jesus was teaching. A man informed Jesus that his mother and brothers were outside wanting to speak with him, and he stretched out his hand toward his disciples and said, "Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother." When Jesus rose from the dead, he told the women to go and speak to his "brothers." Doing good to anyone is always in order, but the world does good things to people in distress. What God's people do that the world does not do is do good to people especially BECAUSE they are Christ's people.

And when they do good to the family of faith, they do it to Jesus. When Saul the Pharisee was on his way to persecute and arrest Christians, Jesus met him on the road and said to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" When you persecute Christ's people, you persecute Christ. When you neglect Christ's people, you neglect Christ. The world shows its disdain for Jesus by neglecting his disciples. The church demonstrates its love for Christ as it lovingly cares for his disciples at all times and especially in distress.

Hear the word from 1 John. "We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers. Whoever does not love abides in death. By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? If you do not love your brother you cannot love God.

Conclusion

I have a couple concluding exhortations.

1. You dare not take lightly God or his judgment. You have been warned. Please realize. This scripture today is NOT a parable. It is the truth. Jesus will one day soon sit on his throne and separate the sheep from the goats. If he were to do it today, in which group would you be? If you know yourself today to be a goat, would you consider repenting of your sin and trusting in the King? Please do.

2. Christ followers, take seriously your ministry to other believers. Christ is honored by even the smallest things done to his people, particularly when they are suffering distress. Let us care for one another earnestly. In caring for one another, we are demonstrating our love and care for Christ. If we do it to the LEAST of the brothers, we have done it to him.