THE LAST JUDGMENT

Introduction (Text: Matthew 25:31-46)

This depiction of the Last Judgment is especially important because it is the final story in Jesus’ public teaching ministry. This is the teaching Matthew wants imprinted on readers’ consciences as Jesus’ final teaching. Only his Beatitudes at the beginning rival his Last Judgment at the end for importance in Matthew’s gospel.

Matthew, alone of all the Gospels, offers this massive judgment scene at the end of Jesus’ teaching ministry (Sand, 477). Matthew is a master at bringing stories to dramatic high points: we recall how he brought the first half of the Gospel to a climax in Peter’s confession of faith in chap. 16; we know how he will conclude the whole Gospel with the magisterial Great Commission (28:16–20). Now Matthew’s Jesus concludes the Sermon on the End of the World with this awesome Story of World Judgment (Schnackenburg, 2:248).

In the preceding three Parables of Judgment we were taught how to be alert for Jesus’ Return. But all three parables used metaphorical language—“giving the household its food in season” (24:45), bringing oil for lamps (25:1–13), and using entrusted talents (25:14–30). Finally, in our Story of the Last Judgment we are told unmetaphorically how Jesus wants disciples to keep alert for his coming. “Matthew’s Christ does not resolve the problem of waiting for the End by an exercise in the decoding of apocalyptic signs; he recalls his church to the requirement of love” (Marguerat, 502). This story is not a parable (in contrast to the three preceding stories of Servant, Bridesmaids, and Talents); it is a highly stylized and summary depiction of a real future event—the Great Last Judgment of the World.

#1: The Son of Man Comes In Glory (25:31-33)

Jesus’ “first coming was under a [dark] cloud of obscurity; his second will be in a bright cloud of glory” (Henry, 379-Matthew 16:27). When we think with this Gospel, the two greatest future events are the Return and Judgment of the Lord Jesus Christ.
The only parabolic reference in this story is the remark in this verse and a half (vv. 32b, 33; but the “sheep and goats play no part in the main scene,” Dodd, 63n.1), hence we are not dealing with a true parable. This is future history.

Matthew uses the word “glory” twice in one sentence as if to say, “You want glory?—The Return of the Son of Man for Judgment, there’s glory!” The human heart craves the glorious. The epitome of glory will occur at the world’s End. This is the greatest spectacle for which true Christians all over the world and through all history have prepared more than for any other event.

Think about the glory. The text says “All the angels with him.” “All”? The whole heavenly world will also be present at this spectacle—world history’s consummation, examination, and judgment.

Joining all angels from the heavenly world (v. 31) will be “all nations” from the human world, a staggering sight (cf. Isa 66:18 for a comparable prediction). We are to see all human beings of all time assembled in one place. It is the most significant mass meeting of all time.

Two ominous verbs of separation now play counterpoint to the nouns of glory immediately preceding. The Great Divorce. At the end of history waits not only a glorious unification of all things (as in Ephesians and Colossians), but, in Jesus’ teaching particularly, an awful separation of all persons. In Jesus’ vision of the future there is a great fork in the road, where people no longer make decisions—the time for human decisions is over—here decisions are made for them, decisions that determine their destinies forever.

As Palestinian shepherds separated sheep from goats into separate enclosures at night, so the Shepherd Son of Man will separate the unrighteous and the righteous into separate eternities at the Judgment. Just as a good shepherd knows exactly which of his flock are sheep and which goats, so with exactly such sovereignty, assurance, and poise the Son of Man will proceed with people at the Last Judgment (Schlatter, Der Evangelist, 724).
“Come” (deute). The first word addressed to disciples in this Gospel, when Jesus called the fishermen, was also “Come” (deute, 4:19). (The last imperative in the NT is also “Come,” Rev 22:20.) Come to discipleship—First Advent; come to judgment—Second Advent. People who heed Jesus’ first “Come!” and follow him into a life of discipleship are people who will hear Jesus’ final “Come!” into his eternal kingdom. Note: The most important questions of all are whether or not people make the decisions that bring them into God’s kingdom. The nature of these decisions is the focus of the rest of Jesus’ sermon.

The services are all so basic. As Chrysostom first pointed out, we do not hear, “I was sick and you healed me,” or “I was in prison and you liberated me” (79:1:475). Big miracles aren’t happening here; little ministries are. And yet it is precisely in these little ministries that the miracle of the big mystery—eternal salvation—occurs.

Here Jesus opens up the gates of heaven to the simplest people in the world. He makes his kingdom accessible not to the great doers in the world (who may, in fact, be surprised at the Judgment, 7:21–23; 19:30–20:16), but to all the little doers in the world.

1. **Food and drink are the bare, minimum needs of human beings (v. 35a).** Attention to these minimum needs, according to Jesus here, can bring a person salvation, even (or, perhaps, especially) if one does not know what one is doing.

2. **Clothing and hospitality are the next step up the hierarchy of needs (v. 35b),** and so gifts of shelter are honored with salvation, too, even if people do not realize that in providing clothes or opening homes they are accepting Christ. Klostermann, 206, translates our verse as “you brought me into your family circle, you took me into your family.” One thinks of foster parents, caregiving, and comparable acts of hospitality.

3. **Finally, visiting hurting people, going to see them in their confinement**—when they are not in productive circulation or
attractive or strategic, indeed, when they are socially shamed or peripheral—is a ministry awarded as commitment to Christ.

**Chrysostom, 79:1–2:475–76**, stresses how easy Jesus’ teaching is here: “And mark how easy are His injunctions.... For no costly table did He seek, but what is needful only, ... He, being gracious, requires only what is within our power, or rather even less than what is within our power, leaving to us to exert our generosity in doing more.”

These services—the celebrated six works of mercy—are illustrative, not exhaustive (cf. Jeremias, *Par.*, 207; Schnackenburg, 2:250–51). There are as many human needs as there are human beings. Every person we meet is dying for a drop of love. Basic help for each person’s need is what Jesus seeks here. Jesus deflects his disciples’ goals one last time from great plans for personal success and redirects them to little deeds in other people’s service. The church has always seen in this great text Jesus’ major mandate for social work.

“I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave something to drink.” May we add, in contemporary witness, “I was a fetus and you brought me to term, I was conceived and you brought me to birth”? Without entering into the difficult and honorably argued debate about civil law and abortion, most Christians are conscious that we in the church must encourage others to cherish the life God has given in conception and not to abort. The life of the mother is precious, too. In fact, all human life is sacred.

**#3: The Surprise of the Righteous (10:37-40)**

This passage reminds that as Jesus and Paul says there is an evil righteousness (legalism) that trusts in its own righteousness as meriting God; there is a blessed righteousness, praised by Jesus, that is surprised that it is ever called righteous. Bad righteousness expects to be called good and is surprised when it isn’t (v. 44); good righteousness sees little righteousness in itself and is surprised when it is considered righteous at all.
The surprise of the righteous in our text accomplishes a rupture with legalism, for a legalistic system is always imperiled in any teaching where people cannot have an exact knowledge of the worth of their works in order, in turn, to nourish their righteousness in self-consciousness. The Last Judgment will see the crash of all false securities. Jesus’ initial words of public ministry remain true even at the Last Judgment: “Blessed are the poor in spirit” (5:3).

25:40: “Truly, I tell you,” is always emphatic in Jesus’ teaching and introduces the most important truth in a story. “One.” The individualism of the text surprises. Surely one needy person isn’t all that important in a world of needy persons! Jesus says, think again. And it is not just a single person helped, it is “the least significant” such person. We can imagine this “least significant” as unimpressive or unattractive or low on any significance scale. Thus Jesus’ “one of the least” can teach us to be especially alert when a person is insignificant, lest we miss the incarnation.

This is Jesus’ final explicit discussion of a final question—what is human responsibility? And the answer is love (recall his discussion of the Great Commandment, 22:34–40). Thus disciples know their major responsibility in life; they also know where to seek this responsibility’s power.

As we consider this, let’s make sure we keep a balance here with what Paul says in Ephesians 2:8-10. We are saved by grace to do good works. God’s Spirit within us will make us sensitive to the needs of others (Galatians 5:22-24).

#4: Jesus Speaks to Those On His Left (25:41-46)

Jesus seems repelled by heartlessness. We must regain the courage to say this (cf. Psalm 5:4–6). The teaching that “Jesus will accept everybody as they are” cannot be supported by Scripture. Repentance must at least follow (not precede or earn) God’s saving visits. God is holy love. The adjective must not be lost in the noun. “Get out of my sight,” “I never knew you,” and the like are parts of Jesus’ vocabulary and so should reenter ours.
A kingdom has been being prepared for the righteous since creation (v. 34), and so has a fire for the devil and his angels. From the beginning, Jesus teaches, world history has been structured with a split ending in view. History ends in either heaven or hell. Wherever the church has believed Jesus’ (and the apostles’) teaching of hell, her love for the world has been rekindled and Christian mission and evangelism flourished. Wherever Jesus’ teaching on judgment has been for all practical purposes disbelieved, there has been a flagging of zeal to do mission or practice mercy in the world.

It is not murder, adultery, lying, blasphemy, or idolatry that Jesus condemns here, any more than it was heroic virtues that he commended in the sheep (vv. 35–36; Beare, 495). Nor are other good deeds weighed in a balance. These people may have been faithful at church. But it is what they neglected to do to that mysteriously “insignificant other” that indicts. Cf. Schweizer, 478; Bonnard, 366.

Jesus’ depiction of the Last Judgment began with two glories (v. 31); it ends with two eternities—one of punishment, the other of life. Is the mere failure of service so evil it deserves eternal punishment? Matthew’s Jesus seems to believe it is (cf. Luke 16:19-31). Are human beings that responsible for other human beings? Matthew’s Jesus teaches they are. The Great Divorce at God’s Final Judgment will show that the way people treated other people affects God—and us—profoundly.