

*“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. <sup>32</sup> All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. <sup>33</sup> He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.*

*<sup>34</sup> “Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. <sup>35</sup> For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, <sup>36</sup> I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’*

*<sup>37</sup> “Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? <sup>38</sup> When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? <sup>39</sup> When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’*

*<sup>40</sup> “The King will reply, ‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.’*

*<sup>41</sup> “Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. <sup>42</sup> For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, <sup>43</sup> I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.’*

*<sup>44</sup> “They also will answer, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?’*

*<sup>45</sup> “He will reply, ‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.’*

*<sup>46</sup> “Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.” (Matthew 25:31-46)*

### **When Jesus Comes Again**

What is Christianity really about? I read an article this week about a poll in Great Britain. In a country that has an official Christian church, 60% of the people surveyed said that they were not religious at all. 55% percent said that religion does not make you a better person. Now, they were lumping all religions together. But the question they asked reflects the attitude many people have: Christianity is supposed to make you a better person. Is that what our faith is really about? Is it about solving problems here, like homelessness and hunger or keeping our kids off drugs? When you first read through the gospel lesson for today, you might reach that kind of a conclusion. But if you do, you’ve missed the point of what Jesus said. Christianity is first and foremost about our standing before God – about being on Jesus’ right hand instead of his left when the Judgment comes. It’s about knowing Christ and his love and what that means for the life to come and how that then impacts our lives here. Today, we’re looking forward to the return of Christ, because that return shows us what our faith is really about.

#### **I.**

What do we see? **When Jesus comes again, he will come in glory.** In just a few weeks, we’re going to be surrounded by manger scenes and Christmas carols. At their best, those things remind us that when the Son of God came to save us, he humbled himself. He was born in a stable. If the angels hadn’t told the shepherds that their Savior had been born, they wouldn’t have known. Even if they had stumbled into that stable, all they would’ve seen was a poor family trying to keep their newborn baby warm by wrapping him in strips of cloth. In spite of what centuries of Christian art have depicted, there were no halos around Jesus or the Virgin Mary to mark them as something special. The rest of Jesus’ life on this earth pretty much followed that pattern. The Son of God hid his glory and his power and looked like an ordinary Jewish man.

That Christmas holiday is so different from what we’re celebrating today – the day when Jesus comes again. He said, **“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory.”** He had no obvious glory when he said these words. In fact, he said them just a few days before he was scourged and stripped and nailed to a cross. He said these words knowing the mockery that the Romans soldiers would engage in when they jammed a crown of thrones on his head and pretended to

kneel down before him. Jesus could hear their laughter that hadn't happened yet. But the same power that allowed him to see the end of that week also allowed him to see and know what would happen at least two thousand years later when he returns. There will be no humility. There will be no stable and no cross. There will be no mockery of his claims because everyone on earth will see at once that this is the Son of God returned to judge the world.

Jesus will come in glory, at the head of the army of the angels, and he will take his seat on his throne. He won't need missionaries to tell the world what's happening. Everyone will see and know. Everyone living at that time will be gathered before him along with everyone who has ever lived. All the dead will rise and appear before him. His glory as the King and the Judge will be greater than any glory ever seen on this earth. The beauty for you and me is that the glory of Christ, the glory of victory over sin, death and the power of the devil, that will be our glory, too. Jesus said that we will take our inheritance, the kingdom prepared for us since the foundation of the world. We will live and reign with him.

## II.

So Jesus told a parable to help us understand what would happen on that day. That parable teaches us that life we live now is temporary. The real life is the one that's coming when Jesus returns. But what that life will be like is determined by what happens in this life. That's the lesson of "the sheep and goats judgment."

### **When Jesus comes again he will come to judge.**

We could spend a lot of time this morning talking about the differences between sheep and goats and which was more valuable to the people of Jesus' day. But the point is simple: a shepherd separates two kinds of animals just as Jesus will separate two kinds of people on Judgment Day. To the sheep, the people on his right, Jesus has the King say, "**Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.**" That is his invitation to eternal life. Notice where it comes from. They are blessed by their Father. Before he gets into all that "works" sounding language, Jesus points out that even for the best person who ever lives, eternal life is still a blessing that has to come from our Father in heaven. For us who are blessed, eternal life is our inheritance. The point is not that our Father died to give it to us. Rather, the point is that a child shares what his Father has. God has adopted us and made us his heirs. We have an inheritance waiting for us and we will finally get what God has always planned to give us.

What will we have? A kingdom. God is going to sit us on thrones next to Christ and we will reign with him. Now, what that's really going to mean in the new heavens and the new earth, I can't say. But it's going to be the total opposite of what we so often are here. The Bible often uses words like "meek" and "oppressed" and "poor" to describe us here. Jesus' church is a gathering of people who usually appear to be nobodies. But when the Lord returns, we will take the place that God has prepared for us next to Jesus and we will reign with him for all eternity. And that place has been prepared for us since the creation of the world. Before God said, "Let there be light," he chose us to have faith. He elected us to live with him forever. So when he created the earth, he also created heaven. He prepared eternal life for us and he has kept it all these thousands of years for that moment when he will at last present it to you and me.

But the King has different words for those on his left: "**Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.**" The worst part of the curse is being thrown out of Jesus' presence. Instead they face the eternal fires prepared for the devil and his angels. You could think of hell as a furnace that's all fired up and ready to go. When the time comes, the unbelievers will be cast into it. Now, some people today have a problem with that. They argue that it just isn't fair for God to punish people in hell forever for sins that only lasted for 80 or 90 years. They point out that Jesus called the fire eternal, not the punishment. So they argue that the fire may never go out, but the punishment only lasts until the evildoer is burned up. But at the end of the parable, Jesus says, "**They will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.**" The punishment is just as eternal as the life is. That's why it's so important that we know our Savior in this life. Our mission is sharing the good news of Christ to rescue sinners from hell.

In the parable, Jesus explains the verdicts of heaven and hell. To the righteous, the believers, he says, "**Come, [into] ... the kingdom prepared for you ... For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.**" And he tells the others to depart because they didn't do all those things. So is this what Christianity is really about? Are we supposed to earn our way into heaven by doing all these things?

I hope that everyone here understands that the answer is no. Jesus is telling a parable here and we can't make it say something that contradicts what the rest of Scripture teaches. The Bible is absolutely clear: we are sinners and we are saved by trusting in Christ. He died. He rose. He washed our sins away. He gave us the very faith that trusts in him. So why does Jesus point to works here? Because real faith always makes a difference. The Bible never stops making that point. If you really are a Christian, it's not something that you only observe here on Sunday morning. It's something that marks you all through the week. It's something that radiates out from you in mercy and generosity every day of your life.

When Jesus pointed to all these works, the Christians were surprised. "Lord when did we see you and do all those things for you?" they asked. Jesus answered, "**Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.**" When we're living our faith, we aren't always thinking, "I'm doing this for Jesus." Rather, faith changes who we are. We show love and compassion because faith fills us with love and compassion, not because we're following some formula. When that faith is genuine, Jesus has no problem pointing to all the things it did for the people around us. But if that faith isn't real, it does nothing. The unbelievers were just as surprised. "When did we see you needing all those things, Jesus?" they ask. Not all those who are sent to hell are all consciously evil people. They aren't villains from cheap TV shows. Most of them think of themselves as good people. But they have no faith, so they have no genuine good works. Even the things that they would point to and say, "But look at this, Jesus!" he won't count because they do not come from a heart that trusts in him

So where does that leave us, then? What will Jesus have to point to in our lives when he comes back? Will he have our service to others? Have we helped the poor and the needy? Have we shown compassion to the sick and the elderly? Who in our lives needs us? While it's great to do things like help out in soup kitchens or package meals for the poor, these works belong to our everyday life. Jesus isn't looking for a token day of volunteering. He's looking for a life that is different, a life that isn't focused on me, but on the hurts and needs of the people around me.

So where are you? Does this passage make you just a little uncomfortable? It should. Part of it is law, plain and simple. Jesus is challenging us to think about our commitment to living a new life here while we wait for our real life there. If that commitment is so weak that it's unworthy of Jesus, we deserve the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. But this parable isn't all law, because faith is a gift of God. It trusts in Jesus who alone showed perfect compassion for the hurting here. God gives us credit for Jesus' love. Jesus died for all the failures in our faith. He paid for all the times we didn't visit the sick or feed the hungry or show compassion to the people we knew are hurting. Jesus died because sometimes we're blind to the hurt right next to us – sometimes we even cause it. His blood washes all that hurt away.

But being forgiven in Christ is not a license to stop worrying about stuff like this. Being forgiven in Christ is power to take it seriously. It's the very power of God to change our lives and to be a force for God's love in a broken world. We will never eradicate sin and pain here. But day by day, quietly and anonymously, we can reflect the love of Christ in our own lives. Every day, the good news about Jesus changes us and renews us. Jesus lived true compassion. He now lives in us by faith. He powers a revolution in our thinking and in our living. You are a forgiven child of God. Live that revolution.

What is Christianity truly about? It's about Christ. It's about Christ living and dying and rising again so that God sees us as perfect. And it's about Christ working in our hearts and changing us so that we have the joy of knowing we are going to heaven, the assurance that on Judgment Day, we will be on the right hand of Christ. And because of that wonderful gift, each morning, we start over a life of love and service to God by serving each other. True service to God always includes love for each other. Trust in your Savior and show that love, today and every day until you see Jesus. Amen.