

International Sunday School Lesson
Study Notes
February 15, 2015

Lesson Text: Matthew 25:31-46

Lesson Title: Serving the Least of His Brethren

Introduction

Jesus' teaching in Matthew 24-25 is commonly known as the Olivet Discourse and is the Lord's personal sermon concerning His Second Coming. It is called that because it was delivered to His disciples on the Mount of Olives (Matthew 24:1-3). The Mount of Olives was located just across the Kidron Valley, to the east of Old Jerusalem. In Jesus' day it was covered with beautiful gardens and fruitful olive groves. It was a beautiful setting for our Lord's last public teaching. It is here that Jesus brought his three-year span of teaching to an end. And the bulk of his final public teaching was in answer to the disciple's question, *"Tell us, when shall these things be? and what shall be the sign of thy coming, and of the end of the world"* (Matthew 24:3). The disciples wanted to know when Jesus would come the second time and establish the kingdom. Jesus' answer is the longest recorded answer to a question in the New Testament.

In Matthew 25:1-13, Jesus stressed the importance of being ready for His Second Coming. No story could have caught the attention of Jesus' hearers more quickly than a story about a marriage. Jesus gave the parable of the wise and foolish virgins which emphasizes the joy of those prepared and the sorrow of the unprepared. This story applies to all people of all times. People will meet God in the condition in which they are at the moment of death or at Christ's return. This is certainly a vital truth as we live in the days prior to our Lord's return.

In Matthew 25:14-30, Jesus tells the parable of a landlord who was traveling abroad and left his servants with talents for which they were responsible. The talents the landlord left were unequally distributed, just as abilities and opportunities for service are unequal among men today. The basis for reward upon the return of the landlord was faithfulness, not success. The truth of Jesus' teaching then and now is that every Christian can do something beneficial with what the Lord has given us.

Our lesson text in Matthew 25:31-46 presents the final judgment on the earth that occurs at the Second Coming of Jesus. This judgment will be for those people who are alive at Jesus' Second Coming. Keep in mind the Second Coming of Christ and the Rapture of the church are two separate events. The rapture of the church will occur when the bride of Christ is complete and before the Tribulation period (1 Thessalonians 4:17; Revelation 4:1). The people

being judged in Matthew 25 are those who have survived the Tribulation. Those who are unsaved when the rapture occurs will be left behind to go through the Tribulation. There will also be children born during the Tribulation who will accept or reject Christ and His salvation. Revelation 7:4 says that the gospel will be preached during the Tribulation and many Jews will be saved. An innumerable number of Gentiles will also be saved during the Tribulation. So at the end of the Tribulation you have saved and unsaved people who survived the Tribulation and the Antichrist. Therefore, when Jesus comes the second time to set up His earthly millennial kingdom, He will make a judgment about who is allowed into His kingdom and who is shut out. Jude writes about this event, *"...Behold, the Lord cometh with ten thousands of his saints, To execute judgment upon all, and to convince all that are ungodly among them of all their ungodly deeds which they have ungodly committed, and of all their hard speeches which ungodly sinners have spoken against him"* (Jude 14-15).

Jesus and His Second Coming (Matthew 25:31)

Verse 31

"When the Son of man shall come in his glory, and all the holy angels with him, then shall he sit upon the throne of his glory:"

Jesus closed His three-year teaching ministry on the Mount of Olives by presenting Himself as the returning King who would sit upon the throne of his glory. But He first refers to Himself as "the Son of man" which is the most used title by Jesus of Himself. It confirms His incarnation and humanity. The One who will "come in his glory" is the One who was born of a virgin and cradled in Bethlehem's manger. By presenting Himself as "the Son of man," He is establishing a great contrast to His later reference to Himself as "the King." Jesus is both "Son of man," humble and lowly and "the King," glorious and sovereign.

"Shall come" is indeed a promise of Jesus' return to this earth. At His ascension, the two angels said, *"Which also said, Ye men of Galilee, why stand ye gazing up into heaven? this same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen him go into heaven"* (Acts 1:11). It is difficult to say exactly what "shall come in his glory" means, but certainly it will include the world-wide recognition of his rulership and authority as king of kings and lord of lords. When Jesus returns He will be accompanied by "all the holy angels" and "then shall he sit upon the throne of his glory." The "angels" were active in Jesus' incarnation, His temptation, His agony in Gethsemane, His resurrection and ascension, and they will accompany him back to earth when He returns.

The “throne of his glory” is most likely speaking about Jerusalem. The prophet Zechariah said, *“And his feet shall stand in that day upon the mount of Olives, which is before Jerusalem on the east, and the mount of Olives shall cleave in the midst thereof toward the east and toward the west, and there shall be a very great valley; and half of the mountain shall remove toward the north, and half of it toward the south”* (Zechariah 14:4).

Jesus and the Judgment (Matthew 25:32-40)

Verse 32-33

“And before him shall be gathered all nations: and he shall separate them one from another, as a shepherd divideth his sheep from the goats: And he shall set the sheep on his right hand, but the goats on the left.”

These verses do not tell us everything that will happen when Jesus returns to earth at the end of the Tribulation, but the primary focus is on His role as judge of all humanity. “Before him” is speaking of Jesus as judge. John 5:22 says, *“For the Father judgeth no man, but hath committed all judgment unto the Son.”* Jesus is the “Son of man,” the “King,” and He is the Judge. “All nations” should be understood to mean all the Gentile nations. “All” is the Greek word *pas* meaning “all, any, the whole.” “Nations” is the Greek word *ethnos* {eth-nos} and is translated Gentiles and heathen in the Bible. Everybody from everywhere all over the earth that wasn’t raptured with the church and has survived the Tribulation is brought into Jerusalem and Jesus separates one from another.

All humanity will be divided into two groups. To simplify our understanding of this judgment, Jesus compared himself to a shepherd making a normal separation between “sheep” and “goats.” Jesus’ listeners would easily identify with this analogy because it was practiced often in the hills of Palestine. Just as a shepherd stood facing his flock and with his long staff tapped a sheep and moved it to one side, and tapped a goat and moved it to the other, so will Jesus the judge separate the saved from the unsaved.

“Sheep” and “goats” may travel from place to place together but they do not feed well together or rest well together, so the shepherd separates them. “Sheep” are easily led and easily fed. But they are also easily scarred. “Goats” on the other hand are fearless and have a stubborn mind and will of their own. So a separation needs to be made.

In the same manner in which a shepherd would separate “sheep” and “goats,” the Lord will separate believers from unbelievers to be taken into His Kingdom. The “goats” will be kept out of His Kingdom. The “Sheep” will be on the “right” and the “goats” will be on the “left.” That is the pattern of judgment Jesus uses.

The “right” hand symbolizes blessing and honor in the Bible (Genesis 48:18; Exodus 15:6). The “left” obviously is the place of no favor with God. Just as the shepherd knows the difference between a “sheep” and a “goat,” so Christ’s judgment will be fair and without debate.

Verse 34

“Then shall the King say unto them on his right hand, Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world”

First having pictured himself as a shepherd, Jesus next represented himself as “the King” who would decide the destiny of those at his right and left. When Jesus says, “Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world” he is speaking to those who have been saved by God’s grace. “Ye blessed of my Father” literally says “My Father’s blessed ones.” On this Day of Judgment some will enter the kingdom of God because God the Father has redeemed them.

“Inherit” implies something you receive because you are in a family either by birth or purpose. Those who will “inherit the kingdom” will do so because they have been born into God’s kingdom. “Prepared for you from the foundation of the world” means God is the initiator and giver of salvation. Sinners were in the mind and heart of God long before Christ died on the cross. Everything God did in saving man was “for you.” These people going into the kingdom of God are not just people who decided to live differently or turn their lives around. They are people chosen by God “from the foundation of the world” just as believers today were chosen to salvation by God’s amazing grace (Ephesians 1:4; 1 Peter 1:19-20). That is the primary reason they are “sheep” and on the “right” hand and being allowed to enter God’s kingdom.

Verse 35-36

“For I was an hungred, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in: Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me.”

The good deeds mentioned in these verses are not the reason these people will enter God’s kingdom, they are the evidences, the proof that they are God’s children and are allowed to enter His kingdom. These verses show the character of the “blessed.” They describe the kind of life that God’s people live as a result of being saved. The *fact of salvation* is in verse 34. The *fruit of salvation* is in verses 35-36. Works do not save us, but salvation does result in good works (James 2:18-26).

Jesus is teaching that His kingdom is for those who minister to Him because they belong to Him. He mentions six avenues of ministry: hunger, thirst,

stranger, naked, sick, and imprisoned. Jesus said, you ministered to me in those areas. And these areas were important in Jesus' day. These were the things people needed in those days. They needed meat, drink, shelter, clothes, visiting, and deliverance. Jesus said, you demonstrated that you belonged to me by how you ministered to me.

Just as "sheep" can be easily identified by their life style, so can those who are truly children of God. The test of true faith at this judgment is how that faith worked out in deeds of love and kindness.

Verse 37-40

"Then shall the righteous answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee an hungred, and fed thee? or thirsty, and gave thee drink? When saw we thee a stranger, and took thee in? or naked, and clothed thee? Or when saw we thee sick, or in prison, and came unto thee? And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me."

The "sheep," or those on the "right" who are truly saved are called "the righteous." They are called "the righteous" because they are truly right with God. These people have been made "righteous" by the salvation of Jesus Christ. They are the "blessed," the "inheritors of the kingdom," the "righteous."

In response to what Jesus said they had done for him these people ask, "When." When had they ever fed Jesus, gave him a drink, took him in, or put clothes on his back? When did they ever actually do any of these things to Jesus? These people couldn't not remember ever having done any of these six acts of kindness and mercy to Jesus.

"And the King shall answer and say unto them, "Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me." What is Jesus saying? Jesus is saying if you have fed my brethren, gave my brethren drink, took one of my brethren in, clothed my brethren or visited one of my brethren in prison, in essence, you have been merciful and kind to me. That raised the question, who are the "brethren" Jesus is speaking about?

Hebrews 2:11-12 says, "*For both he that sanctifieth and they who are sanctified are all of one: for which cause he is not ashamed to call them brethren, Saying, I will declare thy name unto my brethren, in the midst of the church will I sing praise unto thee.*" "My brethren" is a reference to God's redeemed people. Whatever you do to help meet the needs of God's people, you do it to Christ. What is done to you and for you by a brother or sister in Christ is actually done to Christ as well. Jesus said, "*And whoso shall receive one such little child in my name receiveth me*" (Matthew 18:5).

People who belong to Christ will manifest Christ's love and mercy to others. If you belong to Christ there is going to be a merciful attitude in your heart that will result in merciful actions in your life. The Apostle John said, *"My little children, let us not love in word, neither in tongue; but in deed and in truth"* (1 John 3:18).

Jesus and the Goats (Matthew 25:41-46)

Verse 41-45

"Then shall he say also unto them on the left hand, Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels: For I was an hungred, and ye gave me no meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me no drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me not in: naked, and ye clothed me not: sick, and in prison, and ye visited me not. Then shall they also answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee an hungred, or athirst, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not minister unto thee? Then shall he answer them, saying, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye did it not to one of the least of these, ye did it not to me."

While Jesus' story about the sheep is indeed a blessing, the destiny of the goats, identified as the "cursed" is one of sorrow and eternal tragedy. To the "goats," the unbelieving lost "on the left hand," Jesus the King will say, "Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels." Just as God's kingdom is real, so is the eternal fire. Jesus taught the reality of "everlasting fire" and hell. Both the "kingdom" and the "everlasting fire" were prepared by God. This is part of the Christian message that must be proclaimed.

Hell was originally prepared "for the devil and his angels." If you reject Christ and remain unsaved, you are headed for an eternal place that was not originally prepared for you. The "devil and his angels" were once in the presence of God but through pride they were cast out of God's presence and doomed to eternal destruction. And if you have chosen to identify yourself with the devil and his rebellion against God, you will live eternally with the devil and his angels in torment.

How does someone know if they are going to be like the "goats" on the "left hand" and end up in hell with the devil and his angels? Jesus said, "For I was an hungred, and ye gave me no meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me no drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me not in: naked, and ye clothed me not: sick, and in prison, and ye visited me not." In other words, you never demonstrated the love and mercy of God to me. You never showed any love or concern for my brethren. You never sacrificed or gave yourself to meet the needs of others.

The “goats” could not perceive how they failed, because they did not make the connection that by meeting the needs of “the least of these” equaled personal ministry to the king. Their attitude was, “If we had known it was you, we would gladly have helped. But we never saw the need of helping some common person who was not worthy helping.”

Verse 46

“And these shall go away into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into life eternal.”

This is the final separation. Sheep and goats, righteous and unrighteous, blessed and cursed, will be finally separated at the judgment described here at the end of the Tribulation. Christ, the King, Christ, the Judge, will make the final separation, not us.

The great contrast in this verse is between “these,” a reference to the “goats” or the unsaved and “the righteous,” those who trusted Christ. The punishment for the unsaved is “everlasting.” The “righteous” however will enjoy “eternal life.” If the “punishment” is not “everlasting,” then the “life” is not “eternal.”

Conclusion

Although our lesson text speaks about the judgment of those who lived through the Tribulation period after the rapture of the church, the principles of being ready for the Second Coming of Christ is applicable to everyone. For everyone who is serious about being prepared for judgment, the Bible makes clear that a true relationship with Jesus Christ is known and tested by lives that demonstrate mercy and love.

We enter God’s kingdom not by saying, “*Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works*” (Matthew 7:22). We enter by proving the reality of our relationship to Christ by serving the least of his brethren. Remember, you can’t start serving and earn your way into God’s kingdom. You serve because you have been born again and are already in His kingdom (John 3:3).

Amen.