

Christmas Sunday
“Christ’s Advent: Heaven or Hell”

December 25, 2016
Matthew 25:31-46

SI: We’ve spent the four of Sundays of Advent studying Matthew 24 and 25.

Traditional name for these chapter is the Olivet Discourse—
which refers to the Mount of Olives.

Because that’s where Jesus and disciples were sitting when he spoke these words.

On the Mount of Olives, looking across the Kidron Valley at Jeru and temple.
The Olivet Discourse is all about Jesus’ Second Coming.

One of the good traditions of the Christian church is to spend the season
leading up to Christmas studying and thinking about his Second Coming.

As we celebrate his first coming in Bethlehem on Christmas,
we meditate on his second coming in glory at the end of the age.
That anticipation makes us holy and happy people.

Let’s read Jesus’ final words of the discourse.

I’ll read verses 1-3 of chapter 24 to remind you of the setting,
and then I’ll read 25:31-46

INTRO: When I was outlining this sermon series a few months ago, this was the reading that almost made me choose something else. Because I didn't want to preach a Christmas Sunday sermon on a passage of Scripture where Jesus tells people to go to hell. Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. That doesn't sound very Christmas-y.

There's that line in *Silent Night*,
"Round yon virgin mother and child, holy infant so tender and mild."
This doesn't sound like the tender and mild Jesus.
But the self-same Jesus who was born of the virgin in Bethlehem will come again on the clouds of glory and when he comes, he will sit on his judgment seat and tell some people to go to hell.

And he will tell other people to join him in heaven—let's not miss that. Come, you who are blessed of my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.
When Jesus comes again, everyone will stand before him and will go to either eternal punishment or to eternal life.

Throughout the Olivet discourse, the Lord Jesus Christ makes clear that there are two ways of life that lead to two eternal destinies.
All will be revealed at his coming.
Two women at the mill, two men in the field, remember—one taken, the other left. The faithful servants praised when master returns, the wicked cut to pieces. Wise virgins included in the wedding feast, foolish virgins shut out. Servants who invest talents commended, servant who buries talent into darkness. All of those themes come together in the Lord's final words as he describes the Last Judgment as a shepherd separating the sheep from the goats.

So let's look at this passage in more detail, and for you note-takers, we'll do so under three points headings.
Two ways of life, Two eternal destinies, One way to heaven

MP#1 Two ways of life

When Jesus returns, all people will be divided based on how they have treated those Jesus calls “the least of these brothers of mine.”

He gives examples of that treatment—giving water, food, shelter, clothing, visits. Who is Jesus talking about? Who are the least of these brothers of mine? And what does he mean by giving and providing these things?

This passage is often interpreted as referring to all poor and needy people—to anyone who is hungry or thirsty, homeless, unclothed, sick, or imprisoned. Sometimes those who adopt this interpretation take a further step and say poor people equal Jesus. Whenever you see a poor person, you are looking at Jesus. Obviously the Bible tells us to have compassion on the poor, widows and orphans, it tells us to do good to all people—to give even our enemies a drink of water. But in this passage “the least of these brothers of mine” doesn’t refer to poor people in general—it means fellow believers, followers of Christ. We know this because everywhere else in the Gospel of Matthew where Jesus uses the term “my brothers” and the phrase “those who are least” he is referring to his followers.

Which makes sense because that’s the context of the Olivet Discourse.

Jesus’ disciples asked: When are you coming? He didn’t answer that question. Instead he told them how they needed to prepare.

All of Jesus’ instruction in the Olivet Discourse is directed at his disciples.

It’s not instructions for pagans out there in the world.

It’s for professing Christians, for people in the church.

His parables are about servants in the master’s house and virgins invited to the master’s wedding. The Olivet Discourse is for church people.

That’s the context here too. Even though he is describing the final judgment of all nations, which would include people who had never heard of Jesus Christ or who had never met another Christian—they aren’t the focus.

The focus is on people who are part of the flock and who regard Jesus as shepherd.

This one more instruction for people who are in the visible church.

That’s why our treatment of fellow believers is in view.

So what does Jesus mean by giving food, water, clothing, visiting and so forth?

This is the heart of the matter. Gets at the real difference between the two groups. Did you notice that neither those on Jesus right or left recognize the importance of their actions? Both of them think these things Jesus mentions are no big deal. They are so insignificant to them, they don’t even remember.

When Jesus says to those on right, I was hungry and you gave me something to eat.

I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, they reply—Really? When? The needs they saw and their meeting of those needs seemed so little and unimportant to them at the time that they don't even remember them.

And when Jesus says to those on left, I was hungry and you didn't feed me.

I was thirsty and you didn't give me a drink, they also reply—Really? When? The needs they saw seemed so little and unimportant at the time that they ignored them and then forgot all about them.

This is often interpreted to mean that little things, little acts of kindness and obedience are more important to God than big things. A preacher put it this way: The evidence of a credible Christian profession is not how many great works have been performed for Jesus, how many churches have been built or sermons preached or millions of dollars given to Christ's cause. The proofs of conversion are not 'great' things at all. They are little things, as most people think of them: sharing food with a brother who is hungry . . . That's true and we need to hear it. We can't ignore the small things.

That is often where our obedience and loyalty to Christ is tested.

But I think the Lord is making a more profound point.

The natural tendency of the human heart is to glorify the self, to worship the self, to look out for and please the self. Will this benefit me?

Why did Eve eat the forbidden fruit? How did she reason with herself?

She saw it was good for food, pleasing to the eye, desirable for gaining wisdom.

This will be good for me, I like it, I want it—so I'm going to do it. The self.

The reason those on his right don't remember what they did for him is not because they were small things, but because they were shielded from thinking that "the self" had done an important thing.

Shielded by what? Shielded by God's grace.

So they do their deeds with a happy, self-forgetful spontaneity that says:

What? I didn't do anything great for God. I love him.

For those on Jesus' left, there is no happy, self-forgetful spontaneity.

I think this is the real significance of Jesus giving examples of small things like a cup of water. The natural self can't be interrupted by small things.

Everything involves calculation about what benefits and glorifies the self. And if something is deemed to be too small or not beneficial or pleasing—then the self cannot be interrupted.

So these are the two ways of life:

A life shielded by the grace of God from the importance of "the self."

So that you accept being interrupted by the small needs of small people—
by things that by natural calculation gain you nothing.
So that you are enabled to do things for God and other people with a happy
spontaneity that is motivated by love.

Or, a life of selfish calculation that will not tolerate being interrupted by
those small things and small people that don't benefit you.
That means you sometimes say: I'm not doing that. It's not worth it to me.
And other times you say: I'll do it because it will benefit me.
But they're really no different one from the other, because both tainted by the self.

That brings us to the second point . . .

MP#2 Two eternal destinies

Heaven or hell. Jesus calls them eternal punishment and eternal life.

I said earlier this doesn't seem very Christmas-y

but heaven and hell are actually part of many of the great Christmas stories.

Take, for example, *A Christmas Carol*, by Charles Dickens—

one of most famous and loved pieces of Christmas literature in English language.

Remember how Marley's ghost appears to Scrooge?

Marley was Scrooge's old business partner who had died.

His spirit appears to Scrooge wrapped in chains.

Scrooge notices the chains are formed from ledger books and cash boxes.

Marley says that these are the chains he forged in life.

In other words, Marley was being punished in the next life for his love of money.

He was getting the real sum of his life of self-righteous calculation.

He warns Scrooge that will be his destiny too.

Where did Dickens get the imagery of chains?

From biblical descriptions of hell in Jude and Revelation.

But how does *A Christmas Carol* end? Scrooge is delivered from the self.

With happy spontaneity he dines with his nephew, spreads Christmas cheer,
gives Bob Cratchit a raise, and becomes like another father to Tiny Tim.

A father, a family, feasting, joy, plenty—it's the Bible's picture of heaven.

Come, you who are blessed of my Father, Jesus says, take your inheritance.

Dickens himself was not an evangelical Christian in any sense, and yet he made the
story of Ebenezer Scrooge a tale of two destinies—hell or heaven.

Another example, the classic Christmas movie *It's A Wonderful Life*.

It's also a story of heaven and hell.

Hell in the movie is Pottersville.

That's the town Bedford Falls would have been if George Bailey never been born.
It's named after the greedy and calculating Mr. Potter.
George is shown a vision of the town by the angel Clarence.
Pottersville is full of seedy bars. It's inhabited by sad, ruined, isolated people.

But how does *It's A Wonderful Life* end?

The townspeople crowd into the Bailey home, it's a home full of love,
and with peals of laughter they pour out their gifts and their gratitude.
The sheriff tears the arrest warrant in half, suddenly there's a commotion
and George's brother appears for a surprise reunion,
and everybody starts singing *Hark, the Herald Angels Sing*—
which has that amazing line—God and sinners reconciled.
All the good things of life are condensed into a wonderful moment
just before the credit start to roll and the movie ends.
It's a little picture of heaven where the love and laughter and gifts
and forgiveness and reunions and reconciliation never cease.

I think one reason these two Christmas stories have so far stood the test of time
is that they both acknowledge the possibility of two destinies—
a destiny of eternal chains and regrets and of isolation and ruin,
as well as a destiny of eternal life.

Having an eternal destiny gives our present life meaning.
It's makes everything we do weighted with tremendous importance.

Eternal life is for those people who have been shielded by God's grace from
the importance of the self. It's a destiny that fits them.
Who are your associates there? Come, you who are blessed of my father, Jesus
says—that means everyone there will be family, brothers and sisters.
What do you have to look forward to there? Your inheritance—
a kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.
Which means there will be lots to do—
an eternity of happy spontaneity motivated by the love of God.

Eternal punishment is for those who have lived by self-righteous calculation.
And it's also a destiny that fits them.

Who are your associates there? The devil and his angels.
The devil is obsessed with himself. He does everything for his own benefit
without regard for God's glory.
It's described as a place of fire and punishment. Fire ruins and destroys.
That means an eternity to work out the true sum of your self-centered life.

Like Marley's ghost in the chains of his love of money—isolated and alone.

It's a terrible destiny. A terrible place.

I don't want to go there. I want to go to heaven.

I want to feast and sing with Ebenezer Scrooge and Tiny Tim and George Bailey and all those blessed of the Father. And I know you do too.

Two ways of life, two eternal destinies. Now we come to the third point

MP#3 One way to heaven

Jesus says, Come you who are blessed of my Father, take your inheritance, and then he says: For I was hungry and you gave me something to drink.

That doesn't mean: You do good things, you give that cup of water, and the Father has to bless you and you get to go to heaven.

That's not Christianity. That's self-righteous religion.

I've done' good, now God, you owe me.

Jesus is saying that if you've been blessed by the Father, then the marks of that blessing, the evidence of that blessing, is the life of the interrupted self we talked about—the life of happy spontaneity motivated by love.

That changed life does good works and you become a person suited for heaven. It becomes your inheritance.

But that still doesn't answer the question—how do you get that blessing?
Where do you appropriate that life-changing grace?

I'll show you. Look at your Bible's again. You need to read this with own eyes. Look again at the first verse of our reading, verse 31.

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory.

Jesus refers to himself with this important title—Son of Man.

It's his most glorious title. Comes from Daniel 7.

It speaks of his glorious personage and reign.

The nations bow at the feet of the Son of Man.

He is the only self who rightly deserves all praise and pleasure and attention.

But now look chapter 26, verse 1.

When Jesus had finished saying all these things, (finished Olivet Discourse) he said to his disciples, As you know, the Passover is two days away—and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified.”

Did you notice, he uses the same title, the same self-designation, Son of Man.

He's just spoken of the Son of Man's greatest glory,
but now what does he say the Son of Man must do?
He must be handed over to be crucified.

The crucifixion was the culmination of Jesus Christ's willing interruption
of himself for small, unworthy people, who have nothing to give him.
He was willing to be interrupted to be born as man on Christmas.
He was willing to be interrupted as he walked the dusty roads of Judea—
interrupted by lepers and paralytics, by sinful women and tax collectors.
He was willing to be interrupted by arrest and ultimately by death . . .

So that you and I could have food and drink for our hungry and thirsty souls.
And so that we could be clothed in white.
And so that we could have, not just shelter, but a home.
So that we could be healed of all our diseases and released from all our prisons.
Our little needs, his glorious self interrupted.
Jesus Christ says: What? It was joy.

And when you trust him, the Holy Spirit unites you with him,
and the blessing of the Father falls on you and in little but real ways you
start to take on the life of the interrupted self—the life of Jesus.
Flex that self. Live it. If you feel the Holy Spirit prompting you. Listen.
And the marks of God's grace will become more evident and you will
be fit for heaven.

Be near me, Lord Jesus, I ask Thee to stay,
Close by me forever, and love me, I pray.
Bless all the dear children in Thy tender care,
And fit us for heaven, to live with Thee there.