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May 17, 2026

ACTIVE FAITH: MATTHEW 25:31-46

Teachers' note: We will spend the bulk of our time in point two and then call people to salvation through point three. Also, this is a theologically dense lesson. I encourage you not to assume your group members believe in salvation *given* by God *based on the atoning work of Christ that provides forgiveness of our sin.*

Introductory Activity 1 (Adapted from ETB LG, 125)

Enlist a volunteer to read the opening paragraph on page 106 of the PSG? –You can also simply share the content of the paragraph. (“Annual performance reviews can create both anticipation and anxiety. Many employees experience this year after year. In most cases, managers have a metric or checklist by which they evaluate your work performance. In some unfortunate cases, an employee has no clue what the criterion will be for the review. It is helpful to know the benchmarks we are striving for as we carry out our daily responsibilities.”)

State and Ask: Even if you do not have to endure the annual performance review, we have all faced something similar. Maybe it is the annual health check-up where you might “fail” when the doctor quizzes you on your food choices or exercise routine. We have also experienced something similar when we were in school. The final exam reveals how much you have learned during the previous semester. **How do you feel about performance reviews?**

Summarize and Transition: In each of these cases, it is important to know the criteria by which we are being judged. The employee handbook or annual sales goal will help the employee. Knowing the guidelines for a diabetic or heart-healthy diet will help the patient. A rubric or learning objectives summary will help the student. In our lesson today, Jesus is going to give us a rubric we can use as we prepare for His return and judgment. Matthew is going to continue in his presentation of Holy Week. We are still on Tuesday of Jesus' last week. Jesus is delivering what we call the Olivet Discourse. This is private teaching time for His disciples given on the Mount of Olives. One preacher calls this “Jesus' Last Sermon.” (Preaching, 747) Let's look at it and see how Jesus wants to prepare us for His return.

Our Explore the Bible curriculum narrows our focus in this lesson. That will be helpful because we could use this passage as a springboard into many different areas related to Christ's return and the Christian life. The curriculum focuses our attention and endeavors to remind us that “**The way we treat Jesus's followers reveals the nature of our relationship with Him.**” (ETB LG, XX)

1. THE JUDGE (MATT. 25:31-33)

Read (or have someone read) Matthew 25:31-33.

Explain: In the Olivet Discourse, Jesus' Last Sermon given just days before His death, the Savior teaches about His return. We concluded last week's lesson with a look at the first of three parables meant to help the disciples, and future Christians, prepare for the second coming. Our passage today continues in that same vein. Some consider this passage related to sheep and goats to be a fourth parable. Others say that Jesus is using a metaphor to describe an actual event. The latter is most likely. First, Jesus' return is a future historical event that will take place in time and space. Second, the designation of the righteous as sheep and the unrighteous as goats is grounded in Old Testament language. Israel, God's holy (set apart) people, is often referred to as

Notes:

This Lesson was created using:

- *Explore the Bible Leader Guide* (ETB LG)
- *Explore the Bible Personal Study Guide* (ETB PSG)
- *Explore the Bible Commentary* (ETBC)
- *Preaching the Word: Matthew* (Preaching)
- *New American Commentary: Matthew* (NAC)
- *Exalting Christ in Matthew* (Exalting)
- *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Matthew 14-28* (ACCS)
- *The King Has Come* (Spurgeon)

sheep. Nevertheless, the passage does have some parable-like elements that will require us to interpret certain characters and events. Before we get to that, we need to understand **Jesus Glorious Return**.

Jesus Glorious Return

In verse 31, Jesus refers to Himself as the Son of Man. This is a phrase often used to refer to Jesus in the New Testament. The phrase appears 84 times in the gospels. In all but one occurrence, the authors place the phrase in Jesus' mouth. The phrase also appears in the Old Testament many times. The most important for our purposes is Daniel chapter 7. This chapter records a vision of Daniel in which four beasts arise. In verses 11-12, the fourth beast is destroyed, and the others are subdued.

Read or have someone read Daniel 7:13. (See Notes Box.)

Jews who studied the book of Daniel understood this to be a reference to the Anointed One or the Messiah. Jesus' application of the title to Himself was telling. He directly applies the Daniel vision to Himself in Matthew 26. There, the high priest asks Jesus if He is the Messiah. Jesus affirms the man's words without directly stating the affirmative. Verse 64 reads, "64 'You have said it,' Jesus told him. 'But I tell you, in the future you will see **the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven.**" Jesus is the Messiah prophesied in the Old Testament, and He will come again. In Revelation chapter 1, John clearly applies such prophecies to Jesus.

Read or have someone read Revelation 1:7 (See Notes Box.)

Explain: The same Jesus who came in humility to a poor couple in a barn will return in glory with "all the angels" (emphasis added) and occupy a throne. The Son of Man does not just descend to rule. He will **Judge Justly**.

Judge Justly

Reread Matthew 25:32-33 (See Notes Box.)

Explain: First, we see that the nations will be gathered before Him. We can see here a fulfillment of the Daniel 7 prophecy. Daniel 7:14 tells us that the Messiah will be "given dominion and glory and a kingdom, so that those of every people, nation, and language should serve him." Not only will the nations submit to Him as King and judge, but we also see in Matthew 25 that He will judge the people of the nations individually. As G.B. Howell says, "Although we may come as part of a throng, we will be judged individually, separated 'one from another.'" (ETBC, 112) In order to help His disciples understand, Jesus gives them a word picture. He says the Son of Man, the King, will separate the sheep from the goats. This would be a practice understood by the disciples. Sheep and goats regularly grazed together. From a distance, they look similar, but they had to be separated for things like inventorying and breeding. Jesus is painting the picture of a shepherd dividing the flocks. In this word picture, the sheep and goats represent

Notes:

Daniel 7:13

I continued watching in the night visions, and suddenly one like a son of man was coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was escorted before him.

Revelation 1:7

7 Look, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him. And all the tribes of the earth, will mourn over him. So it is to be. Amen.

Matthew 25:32-33

32 All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate them one from another, just as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. 33 He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on the left."

human beings. We will see which humans they present as we move through the passage. Jesus says these humans will be divided based on a criterion, and in the next passage, Jesus is going to describe the criterion used to judge the humans before Him.

Summarize Transition: We do not yet know what Jesus is trying to teach us, but we can be sure of one truth taught by Jesus in these introductory verses: “We should live our lives knowing we will stand before Jesus one day.” (ETB LG, 127) Let’s now see the criteria Jesus will use for separating the sheep and goats.

2. THE RIGHTEOUS (MATT. 25:34-40)

Read (or have someone read) Matthew **25:34-40**.

Explain: Upon initial reading of this passage, some big questions might arise for students of the Bible and long-time church members. We must carefully read Jesus words in light of His purpose, His audience, and His Word (the Bible). To help us do that, let’s break down the passage into several parts. As I said before, this passage about an actual future event has the hallmarks of a parable. So, let’s do what we have done before and see what it tells us, and then see what it teaches us.

First, we see the **Reward of the Righteous** (v. 34)

We see that Jesus has changed the title He uses for Himself. Previously, He called Himself the Son of Man.

Ask: What title does he use here? (King)

Explain: In John 5:27, Jesus says, “And he [the Father] has granted him [the Son] the right to pass judgment, because he is the Son of Man.” Jesus is the King and has the right to judge the individuals from the nations because He is the Son of Man, the Messiah, the King. Kings have kingdoms. The blessed persons on Jesus’ right will inherit entrance into His Kingdom. It is a Kingdom “prepared for you from the foundation of the world.” God’s plan for the righteous was established at the same time the world was created. He had a plan to deal with sin and a plan to reward the righteous from the very beginning. Entrance into this prepared Kingdom is the Reward of the Righteous. But what is the criterion for entering the Kingdom? Now this is where things get a little interesting for those of us who have spent a little time in the church and in the Word. Let’s look at **The Rule for Judging the Righteous**

The Rule for Judging the Righteous (vv. 35-36)

Explain: Here we see the rule or criteria for judging the worth of someone entering the kingdom. ***It appears*** that entrance into the kingdom is tied to the benevolent actions of one person toward Jesus. ***It appears*** that those entering the Kingdom are those who feed, housed, clothed, and provided companionship to Jesus. Now this might lead to two forms of confusion.

The Confusion of the Righteous (v. 37-39)

The two forms of confusion are practical and theological. Let’s first address the practical confusion. Take a moment and imagine that you are one of the sheep. You lived and died in the 21st century. When the King says that you cared for His practical needs, you might be a little confused because you never did any of those things for Jesus. I mean, Jesus is not walking around the streets of our towns, and He is not in our 21st-century prison system. How did you do that? Confusion arises from the practical reality that you don’t think you ever did

those things. Like those in the passage, you might ask, “^{37b} Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? ³⁸ When did we see you a stranger and take you in, or without clothes and clothe you? ³⁹ When did we see you sick, or in prison, and visit you?” Confusion of the practical nature might be expected. That is why the King next confirms their righteousness. However, for those of us steeped in the Scriptures, there is a theological confusion as well. ***It appears*** that salvation is tied to our actions. To address that issue, we must first see Christ’s confirmation of righteousness and then discuss the setting and language of the passage. Let’s begin by looking at Jesus Confirmation of Righteousness in the passage.

The Confirmation of Righteousness (v. 40)

In answer to the confused question about the practical nature of their righteousness, Jesus answered those on His right. He says, “Oh no. You did not literally feed, clothe, house, or visit me. But when you did those things for ‘the least of these brothers and sisters of mine,’ you were doing it for me.” Ok, while that *kind of* clears things up, we might need to examine the passage a little closer to really get what Jesus is saying.

We see what the passage tells us; now, let’s see what it teaches us. To do that, we will need to ask two questions and then use the Bible to answer them.

1. Who are the least of these?

Our Bibles help us out a little here. It clarifies that the “least of these” are Jesus’ brothers and sisters. We learn from the teachings of the Apostle Paul that believers are coheirs with Christ (Romans 8:15-17). In Romans 8:29, he explicitly states that Christ is the “firstborn among many brothers and sisters.” We also see that the word “brothers” is used throughout the NT to refer to Christians. While we can know this theological truth, it only gets us so far in understanding Jesus words in the book of Matthew. We should consider how Jesus used the word “brother” in the book of Matthew. “The Greek word used here (*adelphon*) technically refers only to male siblings, but it often was used to include both male and female believers. Matthew elsewhere used it to refer to Jesus’s disciples (12:48-49; 28:10).” (ETB LG, 128) In the gospels, the phrase “my brothers” is only used by Jesus to refer to His disciples. Moreover, the word “least” is related to the word “little,” and in Matthew 18 it “refers specifically to those disciples who were often marginalized due to a lack of wealth, health, giftedness, or spiritual maturity.” (cf. Preaching, 753)

So, who are the least of these brothers and sisters? They are Christians who are in need of housing, clothing, food, and companionship. While it is incumbent upon believers to be there for all our neighbors (see the Parable of the Good Samaritan), here Jesus is signaling out the treatment of believers by other believers.

Notes:

Matthew 12:48-49

⁴⁸ He replied to the one who was speaking to him, “Who is my mother and who are my brothers (*adelphon*)?” ⁴⁹ Stretching out his hand toward his disciples, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers (*adelphon*)! ⁵⁰ For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.”

Matthew 28:10

¹⁰ Then Jesus told them, “Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers (*adelphon*) to leave for Galilee, and they will see me there.”

“When prison is mentioned in the New Testament, it is usually Christians behind bars being persecuted for righteousness’ sake (5:10).” (Preaching, 750)

2. Is Jesus teaching a works-based salvation?

To determine the answer to this question, we must look first at the passage and then at other places in Scripture. First, we see that the answer is “no” because of the words in verses 37-39. Now this might seem like an odd place to find this answer, but bear with me. The blessed people in our passage *were not shocked to be on Jesus’ right and inheritors of the Kingdom*. They were not shocked when Jesus said they were saved. Instead, they were shocked that the King mentioned their good deeds. If they had expected to enter the kingdom, to be saved, because of their good deeds, they would not have expressed shock at Jesus’ words. Instead, they would have said, “Oh yes, Jesus. We did those things so that you would notice and allow us to enter into the Kingdom of Heaven.” However, those on His right were shocked that He even noticed those actions. For them, those deeds were second nature and nothing worth mentioning at this moment.

So, in their response, we can see that the deeds were not done to *receive* salvation. However, we still have to contend with the words of Jesus in verse 35. There, He says that they are placed on His right “For (because) I was hungry and you gave...” What are we to do with that? To understand Jesus statement, we must understand the placement of this passage in the Gospel of Matthew. Remember, I said this passage has parable-like aspects. Like the actual parables and other teachings of Jesus, the whole of Christ’s theology is not contained in this one passage. Second, we cannot read a single teaching in the book of Matthew like we would the propositional statements in the writing by someone like Paul. Consider for a moment if I asked the question “What is love?” To answer that question, I could go to I Corinthians 13:4 and following. There, Paul tells me, “Love is...” In the gospel of Matthew, Jesus deals less with propositions and more with pictures. “Matthew nowhere writes, ‘Faith is...’ and then provides a definition. Rather, he shows us what faith *looks like*.” (Preaching, 755 emphasis added) In our current passage, Jesus’ words about benevolent care for other believers *provide a picture of what a sheep looks like*.

We cannot pull this passage out of the entirety of Scripture and say that Christ is teaching a works-based salvation. Instead, we must pair it with the book of Romans that says, “we are all sinners (3:23) that deserve death (6:23) for whom Christ died (5:8).” Likewise, we must remember Hebrews 10:4. There, the author reminds us that the *good deeds* of offering sacrifices were not enough. Then in verse 20, he reminds us that it is through the “flesh” (death) of Christ, not our works, that we enter into the Kingdom. Lastly, we must not forget 2 Corinthians 5:21, in which we are taught that salvation is possible because Christ became our sin on the cross.

Jesus is not preaching a works-based salvation. Instead, He is saying that the sheep on His right demonstrated their salvation through their works, particularly their love toward other followers of Jesus. As D. A. Carson said, “Good deeds done to Jesus’ followers, even the least of them, are not only works of compassion and morality but reflect *where people stand in relation to the kingdom and to Jesus himself*. Jesus identifies himself with the fate of his followers and makes compassion for them equivalent to compassion for himself.” (Preaching, 754 emphasis added)

Summarize and Transition: I know that was a lot to say about just a few verses. However, we must understand a few key truths. First, Christ is aware of how we treat one another on earth, and our actions are important. Second, Christians are to lovingly care for one another. In John 13:25 Jesus says, “³⁵By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” Third, Jesus does not expect us to be superhuman or extravagant in our care. The acts listed by Jesus are “democratic. That is, most people--unless there is a major physical or mental impairment--can feed the hungry, welcome the stranger, or visit the sick. the rich can; the poor can; the learned can; the unlearned can; men can; women; can; Jews can; Gentiles can.” (Preaching, 751)

Ok, enough about the sheep, what about the goats?

3. THE FAITHLESS (MATT. 25:41-46)

Read (or have someone read) Matthew **25:41-46**.

Explain: After our detailed look at the actions of the sheep and the meaning of the passage, we do not have to spend a lot of time on the inaction of the goats. Instead, I want to look at Jesus’ words at the conclusion of the passage.

Reread verse 46. (See Notes Box.)

Explain: As 21st-century Westerners, we do not like to think about the reality expressed in the passage. I personally do not like to think about the reality of Jesus’ statement here. Nevertheless, the Bible teaches that there are only two types of people in the world: sheep and goats. Moreover, there are only two eternal destinations: eternal life with God and eternal punishment without Him.

Direct and Read: Direct the group to page 111 of their Personal Study Guide and read the “Key Doctrine” near the middle of the page. (See Notes Box)

Read or have someone read the passage listed there (2 Thess. 1:9 and Rev. 21:8—See Notes Box.)

Explain: Again, these are difficult words, but the reality of separation from God is clearly established in Scripture. I honestly do not know what those who experience this “punishment” will experience. Remember, before I said Jesus leaned more toward the picture than propositions. I do not know if there will be a literal fire (Read that as I do not know, not as I doubt there will be.). However, let’s imagine that Jesus, Paul, and John were trying to explain something that we can’t comprehend with our limited understanding. If they *were* using a word picture as terrible as eternal fire, then what they are seeing must be something much worse than we can imagine. It is “a reality of which you’d just as well not have a realistic view. [As Bruner says,] ‘Eternal fire may indeed be metaphorical, but it is a metaphor for the awful.’” (Preaching, 752)

Notes:

Matthew 25:46

⁴⁶ And they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

“Last Things

The unrighteous will be consigned to Hell, the place of everlasting punishment. The righteous in their resurrected and glorified bodies will receive their reward and will dwell forever in Heaven with the Lord.” (ETB PSG, 111)

2 Thessalonians 1:9

They will pay the penalty of eternal destruction from the Lord’s presence and from his glorious strength

Revelation 21:8

But the cowards, faithless, detestable, murderers, sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars—their share will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death.

Bruner--“Our churches need the restoration of God’s judgment message *for the sake of* the message of God’s grace.” (Preaching, 757) That is why Christ is teaching His disciples what will happen to those who are not disciples. He does so to keep them motivated towards gospel work.

Summarize and Transition: So, where does this leave us?

First, we should take the reality of sin seriously. One of the reasons we do not like the idea of hell is that we think too little of the reality of sin. "Today the church is plagued with a high view of the goodness of man and a low view of the holiness of God...To even ask the questions, does this sin or that sin really deserve damnation? shows that the sinfulness of sin is not so sinful to us." (Preaching, 756)

Second, we should take the reality of separation seriously. At the moment described in Matthew 25, there is no chance for a goat to repent of sin and become a sheep. Thankfully, we have not gotten to that point in history yet. We all know goats. We should share the reality of sin, judgment, sacrifice, and salvation with them.

CONCLUDE

(Teacher, you probably do not have time, but if you do, take a moment to present the gospel. You might think that you do not need to do so because everyone in your class seems to be saved. However, this lesson might have caused some to realize they are not.)

Direct and lead: Direct the group to the inside cover of their Personal Study Guide. Encourage them to take their book home or take a picture of the page with their phone so they can read the little article later this week.

Draw their attention to the three points at the bottom of the page (Admit, By Faith Receive, and Confess) and read them to the group. When you finish, ask the group to silently consider if they have ever done that. Then ask them if they are living like the sheep in the passage. Ask them to ask the Spirit if they are truly sheep. After a moment of silent prayer, close the group time and remind anyone that you or a pastor is available to talk if they feel the need.