

JUDGMENT DAY WORDS – “COME” OR “AWAY”

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Scripture: Matthew 25: 31-46

We have been looking at the 24th and 25th chapters of Matthew, and we are coming to a close. At the end of the 24th chapter of Matthew, we saw that we were exhorted to be faithful with the responsibilities that God had given to us. Then the first 13 verses of Matthew 25 told us that we need to be prepared for His return; that it will come suddenly and we will not be able to predict it. Then last week we looked at the parable of the three servants and we saw that we have to be ready to give an account to the Lord.

Matthew 25: 31-46

Jesus says, “But when the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with him, then He will sit up on His glorious throne. And all the nations will be gathered in His presence; and He will separate the people as the shepherd separates the sheep from the goats; and He will place the sheep at His right hand and the goats at His left.

“Then the King will say to those on His right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by My Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the creation of the world. For I was hungry, and you fed Me. I was thirsty, and you gave Me a drink. I was a stranger, and you invited Me into your home. I was naked, and you gave Me clothing. I was sick, and you cared for Me. I was in prison, and you visited Me.’

“Then the righteous ones will reply, ‘Lord, when did we ever see You hungry and feed You? Or thirsty and give You something to drink? Or a stranger and show You hospitality? Or naked and give You clothing? When did we ever see You sick or in prison and visit You?’

“And the King will say, ‘I tell you the truth, when you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you were doing it to Me!’

“Then the King will turn to those on His left and say, ‘Away with you, you cursed ones, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his demons. For I was hungry, and you didn’t feed Me. I was thirsty, and you didn’t give Me a drink. I was a stranger, and you didn’t invite Me into your home. I was naked, and you didn’t give Me clothing. I was sick and in prison, and you didn’t visit Me.’

“Then they will reply, “Lord, when did we ever see You hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and not help You?’

“And He will answer, ‘I tell you the truth, when you refused to help the least of these My brothers and sisters, you were refusing to help Me.’ And they will go away into the eternal punishment, but the righteous will go into eternal life.”

Strong, strong words from our Lord! Shall we pray?

Lord Jesus, these are Your words and we ask You to help us understand it today in our contexts today, and what it means personally for each one of us, that we may better be able to come with confidence into Your presence Lord. we have followed these instructions of Yours, so help us to understand it. Pour Your Holy Spirit upon us, and into us Lord, in ways that we can understand what we need to as we learn from You. In Your name, Lord Jesus, we pray. Amen.

At the very outset, there is one key point that leaps out at us: there are serious consequences for ignoring the needs of the least of these. There are serious consequences for ignoring the needs of the “least of these my brothers and sisters,” as Jesus said. What is He talking about? What needs must we not ignore? He says, “When I was hungry, when I was thirsty, when I was naked, when I was a stranger, when I was sick, when I was a prisoner, then no help was forthcoming, or help was forthcoming, at that time. There are grave consequences if we ignore those who Jesus refers to as the “least of these,” as they were hungry, as they were thirsty, as they were naked, as they came as strangers and we had the opportunity to invite them and give them hospitality or to care for them when they were sick or to visit them in prisons. These are the needs that Jesus says had to be met – which were met or weren’t met.

So, what will happen on that final judgment day? It seems like when we finally stand and all the nations are gathered together, then the King will look at all the people, and as a shepherd would divide the sheep and the goats, so will the King do to all the people present. The sheep will be placed at His right hand and the goats will be placed at His left. Then, He will tell the sheep that they ministered to Jesus’ needs. They would respond that they weren’t aware that they had, but they did when they ministered to “the least of these my brothers and sisters.” As the consequence of having ministered well, they will hear these words: “Come, be blessed of My favor and inherit the kingdom that has been prepared for you from the very foundations of the earth.” Come!

Those who have been placed to the left, will realize that they didn’t minister to these needs and apparently didn’t know that they hadn’t ministered to Jesus, but were told that it was when they hadn’t met the needs of the least of these, that they had missed the opportunity. The consequences for them? “Away with you, cursed ones. Go into the place that is reserved for the devil and his demons.”

So, the sheep that ministered to the “least of these,” they heard the word “Come!” and to those who didn’t minister, they heard the word “Away!” A sobering parable – because there are very grave consequences, eternal consequences.

What would be the inferences that we can get from this account? I think there are five inferences and I’m going to put them out to you as we work our way through it.

1. Jesus is in the “least of these;” that when we minister to the least of these, we are actually ministering to Jesus.
2. We need to minister to the least of these – it’s important that we find out who the least of these are and minister to them.
3. We may not be aware that we are ministering or not ministering. It’s possible; as we’ve seen – they asked the Lord, “When did we help you or when did we not help you?” They weren’t aware.
4. There are serious consequences to ignoring the needs of others.
5. The consequences are final.

Let’s probe a little deeper, because it seems as we read this, that the most important people here are the ones who Jesus refers to as “the least of these, my brothers and sisters.” All that He’s expecting to help, to feed, to take care of the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, those in prisons, all of them have to do with the “least of these.”

Who are the “least of these?”

Mark 3:35 helps us understand it a little bit more because it says that “those who belong to Christ and do His will, are His brothers.” Remember Jesus saying, “Whatever you do to the least of these, my brothers and sisters.” So, who are the brothers and sisters of Christ? Jesus says those who belong to Christ and do His will are His brothers. Therefore today, the ones who do the will of God and follow Jesus. It’s the disciples of Jesus, those who follow Him.

Then He goes on to be more specific. Take this group of people who follow after Him, who do His will, and then move all the way down the totem pole to the least of these – the ones at the very bottom. He says that we have to do it to the least of these. Who are these people at the bottom? Jesus has given us the list. These are the ones: followers of Jesus who are hungry, followers or disciples of Jesus who are thirsty, who come in as strangers looking for a place of hospitality, those who are not clothed, who are sick, those who are in prison.

When we feed the hungry, when we give a drink to the thirsty, when we invite the stranger into our home, clothe the ones without the means to buy clothes, take care of the sick and visit the ones in prison, we’re actually doing all of this for Jesus. He is the recipient of all our actions. When we do all of this, we are actually doing it for Jesus and He receives those actions. What we have done for Him is the defining delineation between life in the Kingdom and eternal punishment. Paul says in Colossians, that we need to do everything as unto the Lord, that we see the Lord in the places that we do things. He repeats the same thing in Ephesians as well. So, as we feed the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, this whole list, remember that we do it as if we are doing it for Jesus. He is in the midst of the least of these.

But a question must be surfacing at this point that says: Really? Is Jesus only saying that we need to take care of this group of people who follow Him? What about the others? What about the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger everywhere, all around the world? That is not what is implied. If you look at the whole body of Scripture, we are exhorted and encouraged to help the poor, the sick, the widows, etc. Let me give you a sampling of scripture.

Proverbs 31:8-9

Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy.

James 1:27

Real religion, the kind that passes muster before God the Father, is this: reach out to the homeless and loveless in their plight and guard against corruption from the godless world.

Matthew 19:21

Jesus answered, “If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow Me.”

Luke 14:13

But, when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind.

1 John 3:17-18

If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need, but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.

No! We are expected to look after the poor, the needy, the marginalized and the disenfranchised who are in our midst. But what Jesus is saying is to go beyond that, that our response to His brothers

and sisters, ones to follow Him and obey Him, has dire consequences if they are not helped. We help everybody, but we particularly make sure that the ones who follow after Him are not still hungry and thirsty and destitute and unclothed and lying languishing somewhere. He's saying, "Because I'm there, and I want you to be mindful of that. And I want you to be so mindful that you become aware that there are extremely harsh repercussions if, while you look after everybody else, you forget about the least of these, my brothers and sisters."

What can we do about this particular passage?

I was looking at Facebook this morning and came across a post that was posted by former president of Asbury Seminary, Dr. Jeff Greenway. He was actually talking about taking care of the many pastors who were going through difficult times during these last eight months, and mentioned that there were some 1500 pastors who were giving up and getting out of ministry, actually before the pandemic. That number has increased through the pandemic because they've not got the support they needed, the encouragement or whatever it took to keep going. It made me think that there are so many people out there who desperately need a touch from you and from me.

As we look at the needs of the least of these through this passage of scripture, I feel that there are five points that I can leave with you that can make us more aware, and help us to make sure that, on that final day, we will hear the word "Come" rather than "Away."

1. That we are made aware of who it is that needs our help.

We pray and ask God for awareness. Sometimes we get so inoculated against the needs of people. I remember when I was in seminary, and had been out of India for about four years before I came back for a visit. I was going down a road in Mumbai, a road that I had travelled hundreds of times before. But I remember being shocked at the number of people actually living on the pavement. I was appalled until I realized that nothing had changed. I had seen them before when I used to travel that road; I would see them but not 'see' them. But when I came back, I had on new lenses, and suddenly I could see the poverty and the displacement that was there. We need to pray that God would give us fresh new lenses to be able to see the least of these wherever they may be and bring them to our attention, so we can help.

2. That God would unstop our ears so that we can hear their pleas for help.

Sometimes we get so caught up with our own work and our own activities and our own treasures that we are going through, that we really shut out every other noise. And among the noises we shut out could be pleas for help from some of the "least of these." We need to pray and say: Lord, unstop my ears so that I can better hear when I'm asked for help.

3. That we do something to help or to alleviate this need.

So often we know what we need to do, but we don't do it. There is a huge gap between intent to do something and actually doing it, and many a good intention falls within that gap. So, to be able to pray and say: Lord, help me when I know that there is a need, to be able to meet that need or alleviate that pain or suffering or whatever is needed.

4. To make it an integral part of my life.

That a part of me, who I am as a follower of Jesus, must be also that I look with lenses that identify other followers who need help. That just becomes part of my mental makeup – the way I walk through life every day, that my eyes are seeing, my ears are hearing what I need to see and what I need to hear.

5. That we never refuse to help someone who needs help.

This point hit me really hard. Vs. 45 says: And He will answer to the question, “Lord, when did we ever see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger?” And He will answer, “I tell you the truth – when you refused to help the ‘least of these my brothers and sisters,’ you were refusing to help Me.” Refused to help! This means that we had an opportunity to help but turned away, and then to have to one day hear, “Away from me,” because of that refusal.

It hit me so hard, that there are times in our lives when we just refuse to help people and we are actually refusing to help Jesus. That’s going to count against us when we stand before Him one day. So, we pray and say: Lord, don’t let me refuse You. Lord, if there’s ever a time when I’m saying no, and I’m about to turn, turn me back and say “That’s Me! That’s your opportunity to do something for the least of these my brothers and sisters.”

So beloved, five points that we should pray about. I want to wrap it up by looking at these two chapters. As we look at who we are, as we look at one day standing before Him, when our life here is over and we’ve done everything that we could, that we need to be able to stand before Him and know that we have been faithful with our responsibilities, that we have been prepared for His return, that we are ready to give an account, that we are aware of the needs of the least of these and we have met those needs. Amen.

Our closing song is “I walk and I talk with Him in the garden,” and I think there can be no better way for us to be primed to see the least of Jesus’ brothers and sisters than to be able to walk with Him and talk with Him every day and hear Him speak to us and enjoy His company.

In the Garden

I come to the garden alone,
While the dew is still on the roses;
And the voice I hear, falling on my ear,
The Son of God discloses.

And He walks with me, and He talks with me,
And He tells me I am His own,
And the joy we share as we tarry there,
None other has ever known.

He speaks, and the sound of His voice
Is so sweet, the birds hush their singing;
And the melody that He gave to me
Within my heart is ringing.

And He walks with me, and He talks with me,
And He tells me I am His own,
And the joy we share as we tarry there,
None other has ever known.

I’d stay in the garden with Him,
Tho’ the night around me be falling;
But He bids me go; thro’ the voice of woe,
His voice to me is calling.

And He walks with me, and He talks with me,

And He tells me I am His own,
And the joy we share as we tarry there,
None other has ever known.

Would you receive this benediction?

Dearly beloved, and now may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father, and the continuing, enabling, inspiring presence and fellowship of His Holy Spirit, rest and abide with each one of us until the very end of the age. God bless you. Have a wonderful week. Stay safe.