

Hidden Jesus, Unlikely Judge **Matthew 25:31-46**

The Gospel of Matthew has a lot of great material in it—the wise men, the Beatitudes, the Sermon on the Mount. But when we read the Gospel of Matthew, we might think the author had a burr under his saddle. It is from Matthew that we get images of eternal fire and being cast into the outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. And as one professor said, for those who have no teeth, teeth will be provided.

Matthew wants to emphasize that we are to put our money where our mouths are—if we say we are Christians, then our lives should show. Matthew wants us to be as prepared as Boy Scouts and as vigilant as the Marines. Our vigilance is aimed at living compassionate, faithful, loving lives—returning good for evil, forgiving one another, reaching out to the hungry, the thirsty, the poor, the stranger, the sick, and the prisoner.

Our text in Matthew is the only judgment scene in the Bible in which we see what the final exam will be:

³¹⁻³³"When he finally arrives, blazing in beauty and all his angels with him, the Son of Man will take his place on his glorious throne. Then all the nations will be arranged before him and he will sort the people out, much as a shepherd sorts out sheep and goats, putting sheep to his right and goats to his left.

³⁴⁻³⁶"Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Enter, you who are blessed by my Father! Take what's coming to you in this kingdom. It's been ready for you since the world's foundation. And here's why:

*I was hungry and you fed me,
I was thirsty and you gave me a drink,
I was homeless and you gave me a room,
I was shivering and you gave me clothes,
I was sick and you stopped to visit,
I was in prison and you came to me.'*

The Message, by Eugene Peterson

Jesus will come to judge the quick and the dead. That is what we affirm in the Apostles' Creed. The "quick" are not those who can run away the fastest. The quick are the living. So Jesus will come again to judge the living and the dead.

It is a disturbing scene on many levels. First off, we don't want to think about Jesus as Judge. We like Jesus in the manger. We prefer Jesus as Emmanuel, God with us. We rely on Jesus dying for our sins and stake our lives on the fact that we don't have to earn God's grace. This scripture seems to set grace on its head.

But in the Bible, the loving, immeasurable grace of God never means that our actions don't matter. Instead, our actions matter more, because in Matthew we are to be the light of the world, showing God's love so that others are drawn to God.

Jesus is a gracious judge. In Matthew, he gives us the final exam as a take-home. We get the questions in advance. But it is more than a written exam. We get a road text as well to see how well we have applied the Book to the road of life.

Jesus the Judge comes with our test scores, and he tells us that all the things by which we measure ourselves and others just don't count in the final assessment. Education, power, money, right belief, denomination, political party—all are out the window when Jesus comes again to judge the nations. It means that a whole bunch of us will end up as a bunch of damned goats if we failed to minister to one of the least, the last, or the lost.

Americans, every year, spend \$450 billion on Christmas presents. It would take just \$20 billion to provide clean water for the world. (“The Advent Conspiracy,” YouTube). One percent of the world's population controls 48% of the world's resources. World-wide, one billion people live on \$2.00 or less a day. The priorities of the world and our culture's priorities don't match up with God's priorities as seen in Jesus. There are going to be lots of damned goats when the judgment comes.

Most of us want a closer relationship with God. The surprise in this text is that if we want to see Jesus, we will find him hidden among the poor, the sick, the strangers, and those in prison. The amazing thing is that we really do get to see God at work when we are involved with the sick, the poor, the prisoner. We get the antidote to the evening news—joy and hope.

Deacon Laura Wright, in a faith-sharing moment, said that she never expected to be called to ministry with the poor. She was terrified the first time that she went to help with CARITAS, thinking “What in the world do I say to a homeless person?” Now Laura is deeply committed to our Clean Water Ministry, and she said that she has found her heart and her joy in working with people in Haiti.

Another member of our church has been deeply involved with CARITAS for years, as are many of you; this elder commented recently that he has found that participating in deeds of mercy gets easier with time, and the more he does that, the more he wants to do it, and the more he sees the kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven, the more he sees King Jesus at work among us.

What would our church be like, what would our world be like, if Christians really lived by Matthew 25? The stranger would be welcomed as if welcoming Jesus himself. People at church would be sliding over to give people room on the pew and sitting by people they didn't know just to have a little conversation. We'd be inviting new members to dinner. The sick would not suffer alone and would have prayers showered upon them. The homeless and the poor would have affordable housing and good education. The thirsty would have clean water. The lives of the poor would be transformed. Those in prison would know the incredible transforming power of those who care for them. There would be less crime, and neighborhoods would be safer. The barriers between the poor and the rich would be broken down, and we would care what happens to people on the other side of town. There would be more laughter and more hope.

All this may seem like pie in the sky—impractical and a whole lot of work. But in following King Jesus, we are called to obedience. In Jesus' kingdom, compassion reigns, and love runs loose. In Jesus' kingdom, the poor and the humble are blessed. In Jesus' kingdom, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness will be filled.

Feed the hungry.
Get the water flowing.

House the homeless.
Clothe the naked.
Visit the sick.
Hang out with those in prison.

When we do those things, we will see Jesus there, and we will have no reason to fear the final exam.

Rosalind Banbury
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Christ the King Sunday