

Life in the Kingdom: Blessed in the Kingdom

Matthew 25:31-46

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~Ultimately only those who love God by loving their neighbours are part of Jesus' kingdom~

Occasionally the final words a person says aren't that meaningful.

Playwright and author Oscar Wilde said "My wallpaper and I are fighting a duel to the death. One or the other of us has to go." And H.G. Wells was evidently a bit surprised by death as his last words were "Go away: I'm alright."

But often the last things people say are incredibly insightful:

On his death bed Napoleon Bonaparte is cited as saying "I marvel that where the ambitious dreams of myself and of Alexander and of Caesar... have vanished into thin air, a Judean peasant – Jesus – [is]... able to stretch his hands across the centuries, and control the destinies of men and nations."

And in a great display of inner peace Isaac Watts, the writer of many of the hymns we sing said "It is a great mercy that I have no manner of fear or dread of death. I could, if God please, lay my head back and die without terror this afternoon." And that's what he did.¹

...

In today's text we get the final story in Jesus' teaching ministry, His last teaching words as it were, and it is in this discharge that He leaves His followers with His last major thoughts on the kingdom.

If you've got your Bible please open to Matthew chapter 25. This is on page 702 in the pew Bible.

If you've been with us over the last several weeks you know that we've been in a series titled "Life in the Kingdom." And in this series we've been looking at what Jesus meant when He talked about the gospel. And what we've found is that the gospel for Jesus is not a four step process for how to get saved – it isn't a point form list of things to believe and then a magic prayer to pray that will get you into heaven – instead it is the good news that God's kingdom is breaking into our world and that if, by grace, we change our lives to align with it then we can live in the joy of its reality right now. So heaven for Jesus isn't just "pie in the sky when you die, it's cake on a plate while you wait."

¹ All quotes taken from <https://www.livingwaters.com/witnessingtool/lastwords.shtml> (Accessed June 16, 2016)

Now next week will be the final episode in this series – and we will be having some testimonies from people in our church who have experienced God’s kingdom breaking into their lives. But today is the last sermon in this series and so it’s appropriate that we end with Jesus’ last words on the kingdom.

And today’s text comes immediately after last week’s and is actually the fourth part in Jesus’ “Sermon on the end of the world”² which can be found in Matthew 24 and 25.

In this sermon we read of a foolish and wise servant who’s Master returned unexpectedly. It’s a story about Jesus’ return being sooner than we think so we need to live with a sense of urgency. And then He gives us the parable of the 10 virgins. And the point is that Jesus’ return is going to be later than expected so we are to live with our eye set on perseverance and finishing well. And then we get the parable of the bags of gold. And Jesus’ point is He expects us to use the divine appointments He gives us in conjunction with our abilities to build His kingdom not our own. And then today, in the climax of His “Sermon on the end of the World” Jesus tells us about the dividing of the sheep and the goats. And His point is that **Ultimately only those who love God by loving their neighbours are part of Jesus’ kingdom.**

So let’s jump into the text starting in verse 31.

[Read Matthew 25:31-33]

Now throughout this series most of what we’ve looked at has focused on how the kingdom is already breaking into our world and if we align our lives with Jesus we can live in the power of that kingdom now, but here Jesus makes it absolutely clear that the kingdom we experience while we live now is not the full extent of reality. There is a time coming when the King will return, and with Him will come His kingdom in a way we’ve never experienced it before.

The first time Jesus came it was in a cloud of obscurity, born to utterly common peasants in a barn in a backwater village in rural Israel. God took “redneck” to a whole new level. And with that background those who embraced and accepted Him as the Messiah did so in faith; even with all the miracles, those who gave their lives to Jesus did it in the faith that there was more to Him than met the eye.

And that wasn’t an accident, Jesus refused to prove His divinity even to His closest followers – He refused to remove faith from the equation. And He did this because He wasn’t interested in getting people to pledge their allegiance like conquered people pledge allegiance to their new king – or they die! Instead He wants people to pledge allegiance to Him gambling their lives on the promise that the kingdom they can’t see is worth more than the one they can – that’s faith.

² F.D. Brunner “The Churchbook: Matthew 13-28” (Grand Rapids: WB Eerdmans Pub co), 2004. pg 564.

But as the words of today's text pick up things have changed and faith has been made obsolete. Now you should also know that this passage isn't a parable – at least not most of it. The only parable part is in verse 32 and 33 where Jesus says that He will separate all humanity into two groups like a shepherd separates sheep from goats. Now obviously Jesus is talking about people not farm animals – so this part is a metaphor or parable.

In the first century shepherds would graze their animals together during the day, but bed them down separately at night. All the sheep would end up in one pen, and all the goats in another. And for a shepherd there was no question which animals belonged where – people would have got that.

But after this brief illustration Jesus leaves metaphor behind – the sheep and goats are never mentioned again – and instead of parable Jesus gives us a prophetic glimpse into future history – this is what will happen on Judgment Day.

And what Jesus says is that His second coming is going to be like fire and ice in comparison with His first. Verse 31 says the Son of Man is going to come in glory, and then sit on His glorious throne – or some translations say “His throne of glory”. In other words Jesus is saying “Do you want to see glory? This is it!”

All His angels are going to be with Him – all of them. And all the nations will be gathered before Him – there won't be a single person who will say “I would like to attend but I've got something else planned” – there will be nothing else going on! Jesus' point is everyone will stand before Him and be judged.³ And there will be no debate who the king is.

And then in verse 33 we get the great divorce. Jesus says there will be a separation, but it isn't between church attenders and everyone else. Here we see the continuation of His theme from the previous parables. So in the parable of the Talents we saw that the one who received 5 bags of gold and the one who received 2 and the one who received 1 were all living in the master's house and appeared to be working for him. But by the end of the story the master had discovered who actually never intended to be His servant at all.

And in the parable of the Ten Virgins and the lamps, all of the virgins were invited to the party, but only the wise ones who were living lives of perseverance were part of the kingdom in the end. The bridegroom denied knowing the other 5 even though they had been invited.

³ This is not in contradiction with 1 Corinthians 6:2-3 which talks about Christians judging angels and the nations, rather that isn't the judgment this is talking about.

And here no one will be exempt from judgment will be there. Everyone will be divided into two groups, there will be those who will be ushered to Jesus' right, and there will be those who will be ushered to His left, and He will stand as the ultimate judge.

...
 Now obviously the thought that Jesus is the sole authority on truth and the final judge of all humanity flies in the face of everything our culture stands for. We live in a pluralistic, humanistic, atheistic society where people pay lip service to everyone's faith being equal and good for them, but where everyone knows that the only way this could really be true is if there is no God and the world we can touch is the only real one – then everyone's faith would be equally worthless.

But Jesus' truth claim is that His kingdom is reality and everyone in history is moving towards the moment when we will all stand before Him. And what we believe about this moment is utterly irrelevant to it coming to pass. And at that moment real reality will become crystal clear and all the things we have built our lives around and placed our hopes on aside from Christ will be shown for what they really are, a house of cards built on dreams and well wishes and the atheistic lie that "I am the master of my own fate."

And then the judgment will begin. Look at verse 34 and 41

[Read Matthew 25:34 and 41]

This is as stark as it gets. The King of the kingdom, the Son of God, blessed by His Father, speaks to some who are blessed, and some who are cursed. And the outcomes for these two groups of people are eternal and infinite in scope.

Now there are a couple words here that jump out. So in verse 34 the King says "Come, you who are blessed", and in 41 "Depart from Me, you who are cursed." Come and depart.

Now the "come" here is the first word Jesus used to address His disciples. So at the beginning of His ministry we read:

As Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, He saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. "Come, follow Me," Jesus said, "and I will send you out to fish for people." (Matthew 4:18-19)

So at Jesus' first coming He called people to come and be His disciples. "Come and learn what I know and do what I do." And those who respond to Jesus' first invitation and give themselves to living like He lived are the people who will hear Jesus' final "come" and enter into the kingdom He has prepared for them since the creation of the world.

And those who will enter are the blessed. Now the Greek of this line literally reads, “Come, you who *have been being* blessed” and in contrast verse 41 reads, “Depart from Me, you who *have been being* cursed.” We don’t speak like this in English, but the point is that the blessing and cursing that happens in the moment of judgment is actually just the continuation of a blessing and cursing that has been part of their entire lives.

So those who end up in the kingdom are those who have been living in the kingdom all along. And those who end up excluded from the kingdom are those who have been fighting the King’s rule of their lives all along.

Now this is really significant, because without noting this then what follows could easily be misconstrued to have Jesus accepting and rejecting people based solely on their works – works salvation. Those who do the right things go to heaven, and those who do the wrong things go to hell no matter what they believe or not about Jesus. But this isn’t what is being said here. What is said is those on Jesus’ right have by grace, through faith, encountered Christ, and their actions have born witness to this encounter – they’ve lived their lives in the kingdom. But those on Jesus’ left have rejected Christ and their refusal to bring their lives in line with the God of the universe and His plan for the best way for us to live is also evident in their actions – they’ve chosen to be the king of their own kingdom and live by their own set of rules.

So let’s look at how these two competing kingdoms play out in the end. Let’s pick it up in verse 34 again.

[Read Matthew 25:34-40]

On Judgment Day the verdict will be **ultimately only those who love God by loving their neighbours are part of Jesus’ kingdom.**

Now did you notice that the commended acts Jesus lists here are incredibly unspectacular? I mean He isn’t separating the miracle workers, prophets and pastors from the rest you less spiritual folk, the service the King cares about are things that grandmas and grandpas and children and the sick and the poor and the disabled can pull off. And Jesus says His kingdom has been evident in the least spectacular acts imaginable.

The opposite side of the same coin can be found in the last words in the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus says:

Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of My Father who is in heaven. Many will say to Me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name and in Your name drive out demons and in Your name perform many miracles?’ Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you.’ (Matthew 7:21-23)

So life in the kingdom isn't about extravagant acts of service or miracles. Don't spend your life searching for sensationalism – the kingdom is more subtle than that. Jesus' kingdom is about people being conformed into His likeness. That's the miracle. And it happens when *people* are willing to die to themselves and make their lives about serving those around them.

So the kingdom breaks into marriages when one spouse chooses to serve the other even though their needs aren't being met. It breaks into families when fathers and mothers don't just teach their children about Jesus, but reflect His grace and truth to them so that they meet Jesus in their mom and dad – that's the kingdom! And the kingdom breaks into churches when people from different ages and stages of life with different needs and different preferences for music and format and programs decided that instead of fighting for what they want they will follow Christ's example and die to themselves in an effort to prefer each other. These are the main miracles of the kingdom. And these are the kinds of people who will find themselves on Jesus' right.

They will be those who, because of their encounter with Christ, have given themselves to the mundane service of others. Instead of always focusing on their wants they've just given food and water to some hungry people, they've just offered hospitality to the lonely; they've just provided clothing for the poor and company to the imprisoned. And Jesus says on Judgment Day they will find out that while there was nothing special about what they had done, they had inadvertently done these things to Jesus in disguise.

Now don't miss the significance here, this is where the gospel enters this story. Jesus is not saying that the difference between those who will spend eternity in heaven and those who will spend eternity in hell is kindness. Jesus is saying that the difference between these two groups is that one has been transformed by His grace and as a result has spent their lives serving Him and the other has done anything else.

So there are lots of "great" people in the world who spend their lives and money doing good. Bill Gates has given away 28 Billion dollars to date,⁴ but Jesus isn't looking for a billion dollars, He is looking for people who will serve Him. And so Martin Luther was convinced that "only a believer can live in the way this text directs."⁵ Only a believer can live their life to the glory of God.

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If you are my age or older you undoubtedly know about the nun who gave her life to serving the destitute and diseased in Calcutta India. Mother Teresa is one of my heroes. And as I was researching for this sermon I came across an exchange that included her:

⁴ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/bill-gates/9812672/Bill-Gates-interview-I-have-no-use-for-money.-This-is-Gods-work.html> (Accessed June 16, 2016)

⁵ Brunner, 576.

Once a Hindu gentleman – I don't know whether this was Mahatma Gandhi or not – approached Mother Teresa and pointed out that while both he and she had dedicated their lives to social work, the difference was that he and his coworkers were doing their work for something – it was the right thing to do – while Mother Teresa was doing hers for someone. Deep in her bones she was motivated by a desire to serve Jesus because He loved her.⁶ Service and love are synonymous.

And Matthew 25 was one of Mother Teresa's favorite texts, and it wasn't a pious metaphor for her. When people would ask what empowered her to keep up her tireless toil for the sick and poor she loved to grasp their hand and wiggle her boney little fingers one at a time. For her you could count the gospel on five fingers. "You gave Me something to eat. You gave Me something to drink. You invited Me in. You clothed Me. You visited Me."

Mother Teresa had learned the secret of seeing Jesus in the people she served and so the effort disappeared from her service. I mean every day she looked out her window and there was Jesus languishing in the gutter – which of us wouldn't run to Jesus if we saw Him suffering?

...

Of course Jesus' point in this text is that He is just outside – Jesus is sitting on the curb in the Seymour subdivision right now. Jesus is lying on the sidewalk in the city of Prince George right now. But He doesn't have His nametag on.

And His disciples are those who because their lives have been transformed by Him, are living with their feet in His kingdom already; they find their hearts breaking with the things that broke Jesus' heart. And so instead of demanding their rights they make themselves nothing, taking on the very nature of servants and humbling themselves they take up their cross like Jesus took up His⁷ and alleviate the pains of the poor and the sick and the lonely and those around them who languish in any way. And miraculously they find themselves ministering not to people, but to Christ.

...

Now in verse 40 the King replies, "whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of Mine, you did for Me." And so in this text we see that the extension of mercy that Jesus is specifically speaking of is aimed at the brothers and sisters of Jesus – this is not all people. So in Matthew 12 we read:

Pointing to His disciples, [Jesus] said, "Here are My mother and My brothers. For whoever does the will of My Father in heaven is My brother and sister and mother." (Matthew 12:49-50)

So here Jesus commends His followers for serving His (and their) brothers and sisters in the faith – He is talking about meeting the needs of fellow disciples. This is how we demonstrate our citizenship in His kingdom. So Jesus said:

⁶ <http://www.wordonfire.org/resources/blog/jesus-in-his-most-distressing-disguise/4479/>
(Accessed June 16, 2016)

⁷ Philippians 2:6-8

By this everyone will know that you are My disciples, if you love one another.
(John 13:35)

Of course there is another side to this coin. There are lots of texts that also emphasize our responsibility to extend the love of Christ to those outside our circle with the hope that as they receive our mercy they will encounter our Lord. So in Luke we read:

Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.... Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back.... and you will be children of the Most High, because He is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. (Luke 6:27-36)

So most assuredly we have a duty to reflect Christ to both those within and without the church, but in today's text the point is that the way we serve Jesus' brothers and sisters is the way we love Him.

And so the future history continues. Look at verse 41

[Read Matthew 25:41-46]

Friends, the Jesus of Scripture is both more loving and gracious than we can imagine and much scarier than we are comfortable with. We emphasize the love He has for humanity, after all He died for us, but then we shy away from texts like this. But the reality is there was and is no place in Jesus' heart for those who do not give 100% of themselves to Him. Friends, Jesus will be our God, or He will have nothing to do with us at all. Everyone will stand or fall on this standard.

...

So on Jesus' left, along side the wicked of the world who have spent their lives reviling Him, will be those within the church who believe all the right things about Him but haven't conformed their lives to the reality of His kingdom rule. Instead of giving up their own comfort to invest in the kingdom they couldn't see they invested in their own kingdoms. And the loving Creator of the cosmos tells people like this "Depart from Me, get out of my sight."

...

Now friends I don't say this to get a rise out of you, or to be controversial – Jesus is serious, these are the last words of His teaching ministry. When the King arrives there won't be any congregational government in effect; He won't pole the audience and ask for suggestions for how to proceed. He will simply usher those who have been transformed by their encounter with Him to the right. And the evidence of their transformation will be that they spent their lives loving God by serving their neighbours. And everyone who has not repented, who has not changed their life to align with His kingdom, He will cast into eternal punishment.

...

Let me sum this up with what I hope will be a practical “take away” from this.

When it comes to service there are two kinds of people in the church. There are those who are generous with people they like and who are like them, but who make excuses about serving the poor and the broken and the unlovely. And there are those who are looking for any chance they can get to serve Jesus.

Friends Jesus is here. He’s in this room. He’s sitting beside you. He’s in your family. He’s in your workplace. He’s among your friends. He is certainly in our neighbourhood and in our city. He is anywhere one of His brothers or sisters is.

But He’s in disguise. He’s dressed as the ornery, the immature, the angry, the lonely, the smelly, the lazy, the crazy, the disabled, the poor, the weak the imprisoned (rightly or wrongly), the homeless, the thankless, the parentless, the childless, and every other weak form we would never imagine Him to take. So don’t serve because it’s the right thing to do, serve because it’s Jesus – you’re blessed, you get to serve Jesus! And the passage is clear, **ultimately only those who love God by loving their neighbours are part of Jesus’ kingdom.**

...

We are going to end today a little differently than we usually do. I’m going to pray and the music team is going to come up. But before we join them in singing our final song they are going to play a bit, and as they play think about where Jesus might be hiding out in your life. He’ll take the form of someone difficult.

Maybe it’s someone here at church, maybe it’s someone at home or at work. Maybe it’s someone you are married to, or a parent to, or a child to. But He’ll take the form of someone not like you. But He’s there.

Think about who that is. And as the music team plays if you’re married and your spouse is here – and they aren’t the one you are thinking of – then maybe lean over and whisper the name of that someone to them. And decide together that you are going to work to see Jesus, and serve Jesus in that difficult person.

I will leave you with a brief story:

The president of Whitworth College, Dr. Bill Robinson, tells of one of the most important lessons he ever learned while at the state penitentiary in Minnesota. When he arrived to begin regular work with inmates, ‘the chaplain took [him] aside and said, ‘Don’t forget, Bill. If Matthew 25... is right, you didn’t come to bring Jesus to these guys; you came to find him.’⁸

⁸ Brunner, 575.