



## *Active Faith*

THE WAY WE TREAT JESUS'S FOLLOWERS REVEALS  
THE NATURE OF OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH HIM.

### **MATTHEW 25:31-46**

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.

 **What are the advantages of knowing the criteria by which you will be evaluated? What are the disadvantages of not knowing?**

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# UNDERSTAND **THE CONTEXT**

## **MATTHEW 25:1-46**

Chapter 25 continues Jesus’s Olivet Discourse (chaps. 24–25). He spoke about the preparation needed in anticipation of His return. Beginning in Matthew 24:45, Jesus told three parables about preparedness. The first contrasted the actions of a wise, sensible servant with the actions of a wicked servant while the master was away (24:45–51). The second parable (25:1–13) concerned ten virgins who were part of a wedding celebration. The word *virgin* here refers to young women of marriageable age. Their job was to accompany the bridegroom to the wedding feast. However, the bridegroom was delayed for some unexplained reason. When he finally arrived at an unexpected hour—midnight—these ladies roused from sleep. At that point it was discovered that five of them had prepared their lamps with plenty of oil. The prepared virgins accompanied the bridegroom to the feast. The unprepared ones failed to be ready and lacked enough oil to light the bridegroom’s way to the marriage feast. They had to go buy oil, then found themselves locked out of the feast. This was a clear warning that we must always be ready.

The third parable in the Olivet Discourse tells of a master and servants (vv. 14–30). Once again, the master was absent. The time of his return was unknown. He entrusted three of his servants with sums of money. Two wise servants faithfully carried out their duties by investing and earning profit on the master’s money. The third servant was driven by fear of the master. As a result, he failed to seize the opportunity to increase the money placed in his stewardship. When the master returned, the first two servants were rewarded for their wisdom. The fearful servant was punished for allowing fear to paralyze him. This servant’s penalty corresponds to that of the wicked servant in 24:51. The bottom line is that we are to be prepared and faithfully carrying out the work given to us by our Master.



**Read Matthew 25:31–46 in your Bible. Summarize the difference between the faithful and the unfaithful.**

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# EXPLORE THE TEXT

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

<sup>31</sup> “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. <sup>32</sup> 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. <sup>33</sup> He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on the left.”

### VERSES 31-33

While these verses are preceded by parables about Jesus’s return, the account described in 25:31-46 is not a parable. It is a prophecy about the coming time when the **Son of Man** will sit in judgment. *Son of Man* is taken from the messianic prophecy in Daniel 7:13. The words **glory** and **glorious** speak of Jesus’s heavenly splendor, majesty, and radiance. The picture echoes the one in Daniel 7:9-10.

In this picture, the Son of Man is sitting on His throne to bring judgment. The word translated **nations** can mean either people groups or Gentiles. The word case in the Greek implies that it is here referring to individuals rather than nations.

Several interpretations have been offered concerning the identity of the ones standing before the throne. Their identity is impacted by how one interprets the phrase “these brothers and sisters of mine” in verse 40. One view sees “these brothers and sisters” as a reference to the Jewish people, with the thought that *the nations* of the earth will be judged by their treatment of the Jews. Another interpretation is that these “brothers and sisters” are the down-and-out, the social outcasts, the marginalized. Those around the throne will be judged by how they treated these vulnerable members of society. Still another interpretation identifies “these brothers and sisters” as followers of Christ. We will wait until verse 40 to determine which interpretation is more in keeping with what Jesus was saying.

These nations or people will be separated **one from another**. Two distinct groups will be formed. Jesus used a metaphor to picture the two groups, **sheep** and **goats**. The sheep Jesus put on **his right** and the goats on **the left**. Often in the fields of first-century Israel, sheep and goats grazed together. While sheep tend to be obedient, goats can be troublemakers. Because of this, shepherds sometimes separated the sheep and goats. In the same way,

a separation will occur at the judgment. The basis for this separation will be plainly stated in the following verses.

 **What do these verses teach about Jesus's role in the final judgment?**

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

<sup>34</sup> “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 foundation of the world. <sup>35</sup> For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat; I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink; I was a stranger and you took me in; <sup>36</sup> I was naked and you clothed me; I was sick and you took care of me; I was in prison and you visited me.’ <sup>37</sup> Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? <sup>38</sup> When did we see you a stranger and take you in, or without clothes and clothe you? <sup>39</sup> When did we see you sick, or in prison, and visit you?’ <sup>40</sup> And the King will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’”

### VERSES 34-40

The *right* side of a throne was seen as the place of honor. To those put in this place of honor, Jesus says *come*, meaning come to the reward *prepared* for you. Jesus said this group was *blessed by my Father*. They enjoyed the Father's favor. For them, God had prepared a reward *from the foundation of the world*. (See Eph. 1:4.) That reward will be a *kingdom* where the righteous will live and reign with Christ (2 Tim. 2:12).

The reason for the reward is introduced by the word *for* (v. 35). The rewards were based on their actions of ministering to the King. In each case, the King was the recipient of the care they had given. A note of caution and clarification is necessary at this point. Although these righteous ones were applauded for their acts of compassion, these acts did not earn them the reward of the kingdom. This account is not teaching salvation by works. The clear teaching of the New Testament is that no one can merit or earn

God’s gracious gift of salvation. That comes by the grace of God through Christ’s achievement on the cross. These actions of compassion by the righteous ones were the outflow and evidence of a right relationship with God (see Eph. 2:8-10).

Jesus used the word *righteous* to identify the sheep. They will express great surprise that their acts of compassion were done for the King. Their question is understandable, “When did we have opportunity to do this?” The surprise of the righteous points to the fact that their deeds of compassion were carried out selflessly.

The key to understanding the identity of *these brothers and sisters of mine* may be found in the phrase *the least of these*. This phrase has appeared in Matthew’s Gospel several times as an identifier for followers of Jesus (see Matt. 10:42; 18:6,10,14). In Matthew 12:50, Jesus identified those who followed Him as disciples and did the will of the Father as “my brother and sister and mother.” Thus, these acts of compassion were ways in which the righteous responded to followers of Jesus. Some Bible scholars see these least ones as Christian missionaries and evangelists. Therefore, the response of the righteous was a positive response to the gospel message. The basis, then, for inheriting the kingdom was an acceptance of the good news of Jesus. Out of that relationship with Christ, these righteous ones ministered to the needs of others and, in doing so, they were caring for Jesus as well.

 **What evidence distinguishes between a righteous and unrighteous person?**

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 **What obstacles prevent us from ministering to the needs of others?**

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## **THE FAITHLESS (MATT. 25:41-46)**

<sup>41</sup> **“Then he will also say to those on the left, ‘Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels!’** <sup>42</sup> **For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat; I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink;** <sup>43</sup> **I was**

a stranger and you didn't take me in; I was naked and you didn't clothe me, sick and in prison and you didn't take care of me.'<sup>44</sup> Then they too will answer, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry, or thirsty, or a stranger, or without clothes, or sick, or in prison, and not help you?'<sup>45</sup> Then he will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.'<sup>46</sup> And they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

#### VERSES 41-46

The action now turned to the *left* side of the throne. Once again, the King made a pronouncement. This time, however, it was a condemnation of those who had been separated from the righteous. The words of this condemnation mirror the words spoken to those on the right. However, instead of *come*, the King said *depart from me*. Instead of *blessed*, they were *cursed*. Instead of a kingdom prepared there was *eternal fire prepared*. Notice that this fire was not for the wicked but *for the devil and his angels*. Nor is this fire prepared from the foundation of the world. Eternal punishment was not part of God's original plan for His created ones. It was put in place after the open rebellion against God by both the fallen angels and sinful mankind. In addition, the wicked enter this eternal punishment of their own choice by their rejection of Jesus.



#### KEY DOCTRINE: *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. (See 2 Thessalonians 1:9; Revelation 21:8.)

The King read the indictment against these wicked ones for their indifference to *the least of these*. As before, the hearts of those gathered before the throne were weighed by their compassionate care for others. In this case, this group lacked the compassion for others, which came about as a result of rejection of the message of Jesus. That rejection rendered them unable to show compassion to others, especially to those who are followers of Christ. None of the basic human needs mentioned in these verses were met by those who failed to respond to the message of Jesus.

Those who did not show compassion expressed surprise as they were confronted with their failure to do so. These actions are the same as those expressed in verses 37-39 but are listed in shortened form. In fact, the entire dialogue of the King with this group (vv. 41-46) is a summary of the same dialogue between the King and the righteous (vv. 34-40).

By their failure to love and serve *the least of these*, the wicked ones revealed their rejection of Jesus Christ and His gift of salvation. The bad fruit of their life spoke to the bad condition of their heart.

Verse 46 sets forth the eternal contrast between the two groups. The ones who failed to trust in Christ and demonstrate that through serving others were sent away *into eternal punishment*. For the righteous, their final destination is that of *eternal life*. As *eternal life* speaks of life that will last for eternity, so the words *eternal punishment* no doubt speak of punishment that lasts eternally.



**What prevents some people in our culture from believing the biblical teaching about hell and eternal life?**



**BIBLE SKILL:** Respond emotionally to a principle of doctrine

Read Matthew 13:40-43,49-50; 18:7-9; and 25:41,46 and record your thoughts about the eternal destiny of the lost. What is their prospect? How is it described? How long will it last? Is there any reprieve? How should knowing the destiny of the lost impel believers to share the gospel with others? Spend time talking to God about your level of concern for the lost and how you can see them the way He sees them.

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# APPLY THE TEXT

- + We should live our lives knowing we will stand before Jesus one day.
- + We demonstrate our love for God when we minister to other believers.
- + We should recognize that unbelievers will be eternally separated from God and will face everlasting punishment.



**Within your group, create a list of acts of compassion that you as a group and as individuals have carried out. How do these acts of compassion reflect the condition of your heart?**

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**Spend time evaluating how much you show compassion and ministry to others. Consider ways you can engage in acts of compassion this week. Analyze your motive for wanting to extend merciful treatment to others.**

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**Memorize Matthew 25:40.**

*Prayer Needs*

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