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Grace and peace to you from him who is, and who was, and who is to come!

Matthew 25:31-46

"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. "Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. 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 invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.' "Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?' "The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.' "Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.' "They also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?' "He will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.' "Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life."

May the words of my mouth, and the meditation of our hearts be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer!

Dear friends, who will be gathered before the Son of Man, our Lord Jesus on Judgment Day;

Many people have a fear of flying in a plane, and this is understandable. Even before the plane takes off, the stewardess is up in front, informing everyone of emergency precautions, what to do in case of a loss of cabin pressure, and so on. Then as the engines rev up, and the plane takes off down the runway, just about every passenger has a bit of an uneasy feeling. Once that plane takes off, everyone knows that any problem could mean disaster. When you're in a car, the engine can stall, and it's no big deal; but in a

plane, it's another story. In a car, you can run out of fuel, and get frustrated because you have to walk for a couple miles. But when you run out of fuel in a plane, as you go down, you're not thinking about how far it is to the next station!

When pilots fly across an ocean, then especially, they watch that fuel gauge closely. They are very much aware of the point of no return, when that fuel gauge dips below the halfway mark. From then on, they know that they cannot turn around and go back. From that point on, it's an either-or situation; either they make it to their destination, or they crash. There's no in-between.

This morning we hear about another point of no return, the one on Judgment Day. On that day there will be no going back, no second chance. It will be an either/or situation; either you will be among the sheep, or the goats; either Jesus will say to you "Come!" or "Depart!" This is the absolute and final point of no return.

"Of that day or hour knows no man." We don't know when Judgment Day will come, but it could be any time. Suddenly the Son of Man will come; Jesus, who is true man as well as God. He will come for the second time, but he will not come as he came before, not as a lowly baby, lying in a manger, with a few shepherds looking on. This time he will come with all the glory of God, glory that we cannot even begin to comprehend. The angel hosts will accompany him, and he will sit on his heavenly throne as judge of all. This time everyone will see him. People will not say, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened." People will not follow a star and ask, "Where is he that is born King of the Jews?" Everyone will be gathered before him; you, I, and every person who has ever lived.

"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left." It's the point of no return, when Jesus separates the sheep from the goats.

It was a common picture. When the sheep were out in the pasture, the goats from the area would come and graze along with them, but when it came time for the sheep to go into the pen, the shepherd would stand at the gate and let the sheep go through, but push the worthless goats off to the side. The sheep would be on his right, the goats on his left. The right side was always regarded as the side of honor.

So on the last day, Jesus will separate people, one from another. The Bible clearly tells us on what basis Jesus will judge. "Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned." (Mark 16:16) "A man is justified by faith apart from observing the law." (Romans 3:28) "A man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ...by observing the law no one will be justified." (Galatians 2:16) "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith -- and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God: Not by works, so that no one can boast." (Ephesians 2:8,9) Jesus will look into people's hearts, and judge them on the basis of whether or not they have trusted in him as their Savior.

This is the point of no return. It's either/or. Either you're on the right, or on the left. There's no second chance, and there's no in-between. There's no place for half-sheep. There's no place for half-Christians, because there is no such thing. Any real shepherd knows the difference between sheep and goats. He doesn't get mixed up and make mistakes. So there will be no mistakes on the last day, because Jesus knows all

people perfectly. Each person will be put on the side where he or she belongs.

"Then the king [Jesus] will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. 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 invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.'

"Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?'

"The king will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.'"

Sometimes when people don't read these verses carefully enough, they mistakenly get the impression that salvation is something that must be earned by doing good works. But we know that the Bible clearly tells us that we can't earn salvation by our deeds. Just a minute ago we heard a few of those passages that tell us that we are saved by grace through faith, not by works. These verses say nothing different from that.

"Come, you who are blessed by my Father." We don't earn God's blessings. If we did, they wouldn't be blessings, they'd be payments. "Take your inheritance." You don't earn an inheritance. It's given to you because you're "children of God through faith in Christ Jesus," as God's word says. "The kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world." How ridiculous to think that people could have earned salvation before they were even born! Rather, it's prepared for you. From eternity, God prepared our salvation in Christ. "He chose us in Christ before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight," as Ephesians 1:4 tells us. And when the fullness of time was come, God sent forth his son to win our salvation fully and freely, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life. And it is only by God's grace that the Holy Spirit has worked faith in our hearts through God's word and caused us to believe. God has done it all. We have done nothing.

Then Jesus points to the deeds that faith has done. "I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, thirsty and you gave me something to drink," and so on, "Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me." Before speaking these words, Jesus has already judged all people and put them on his right or left on the basis of their faith or unbelief, and now he makes that judgment public and evident for everyone to see by pointing to the works that faith does. It would not do for Jesus to say, "See, these people over here on the right have faith," because people can't see into the hearts of others and recognize faith or unbelief, but we can see the good deeds that faith does. That is why, when speaking to all people gathered before him, Jesus justifies his putting some on the right by pointing to their good works. Their works prove that they love Jesus their Savior, that they have faith, and thus are worthy of salvation in Christ.

Notice also the humility of those on the right. They realize they have earned nothing. "When did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink," and so on. It was just such a natural thing for their faith to serve Jesus with deeds of love that they weren't even fully aware of it, and now they are astonished when those works are praised. It was God who had worked in them to will and to do according

to his good pleasure.

Jesus has won our salvation fully and freely. What an inheritance; what a treasure that is. Now what a privilege it is that Jesus, our King, our very Lord and Savior, gives us the opportunity to help him and serve him. Just think about it; we can feed him, give him drink, clothe him, visit him, care for him by caring for his people here on earth. Let us make good use of our opportunities to help our fellow believers here and around the world. Now is the time to love Jesus by loving others, to serve our Lord and Savior by serving others. The point of no return is coming, and then it will be too late to go back and make use of those opportunities we neglected.

But what about those on the left? "Then he [Jesus] will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.'

"They also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?'

"He will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.'"

Unbelievers cannot do truly good works. Apart from faith it is impossible to please God. Unbelievers may perform deeds that look good on the outside, but these deeds are not done out of love for Christ. On the last day, their deeds will be shown for what they are, worthless. They have rejected Christ the King and Savior, so in their own wickedness, they will be condemned.

Jesus will say to them, "Depart from me!" It's the point of no return, no return to God, but an eternity of torment in hell. Some people wonder, "How can a loving God be so cruel as to damn people to hell." But they forget that God has abundantly exercised his love toward the unrighteous. God does not delight in the death of the wicked. God our Savior would have all men to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth. But unbelievers have persistently rejected that love and trampled it under foot. They want nothing to do with their Savior and his love. What else can God do but let them go with their leader the devil, into the eternal fire prepared for him?

Right now the sheep and goats are together here on earth, and they can change. Sheep can change to goats. Goats can change to sheep. But the point of no return is coming. Then sheep will be sheep for all eternity, and goats will be goats for all eternity. Now is the time to trust in Jesus alone for salvation. Now is the time to love him by loving others. Now is the time to reach out with his saving gospel to others, that they might have eternal life. Now is the time to serve our Lord by serving his people, because he has loved you. He has served you. A perfect life he lived for you. A bitter death on the cross he died for you, so that you can stand holy and blameless on that day, clothed in his righteousness. Eternal life in heaven he won for you!

Amen.

May he who began a good work in you carry it on to completion until the day of Jesus Christ. Amen.