

Sermon – November 26, 2023  
“When the Son of Man comes in his glory”  
The Rev. John C. Wright



Text: Matthew 25:31-46

*Pray with me. Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come, visit, fill open hearts, anoint the sharing of these words, and bless your people through them. Jesus, fuel our continuing transformation into your image with these words and lead us out into fruitful labor in your mission right here, right now. Lord, come and astonish us with your word this day. Amen*

The Spirit of Jesus in me greets the Spirit of Jesus in you, in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. I hope that all have been blessed by a time set aside to give thanks to God for the blessings of the past year. I pray we all have been able to give thanks to God and have enjoyed a time of feasting, of table fellowship with Christ invited to our tables. I hope and pray we have been able to pause from our too busy lives and thank God for His steadfast love. Happy Thanksgiving.

Today is Christ the King Sunday. Most of the calendars in our homes will not have this day included on them, but this Sunday is Christ the King Sunday. Our calendars are more likely to have Black Friday sales, Santa, and Frosty than a day to recognize Jesus as the Messiah, the coming King who will judge the nations. Today is the last Sunday of the Christian year. It is a day when we stop and look to Jesus as the fulfillment of God’s promise that there will come a day when the nations will be judged, a time when the in breaking kingdom of God becomes the full kingdom of God. It is a day in the yearly rhythm of the life of the church, the body of Christ,

when we come to the end point of the yearly cycle and stop to recognize that Christ is the King, the fulfillment of all that God has promised. We stop and look forward in time to the return of Jesus in power to judge the living and the dead. We stop and seek to recall all we have experienced together during the cycle of the Christian year and let all of it point us to Jesus Christ, the King of all kings and Lord of all lords. Jesus the King is the fulfillment of all of God's promises. Let us sit before Jesus in this place and allow the past year to rewind in our minds. Remember the passing of the seasons with the events when we have come together and celebrated through worshiping God and thanking Him for His steadfast love. Recall those special Sundays such as Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost, and the many ordinary Sundays when we have simply walked with Jesus and grown in his image. Think back to the transformative moments we have experienced in the past year and then look to Jesus the King who is to come.

In the rhythm of a Christian year, we have come to the end and now are poised to begin a new year, to start anew another cycle of the seasons. Next Sunday morning at 6:45 a.m. we will gather at the Cunninghams and watch the sunrise on the first morning of a new Christian year. We will gather to mark the start of another year marked by times of celebration for what God has done for us through Jesus. We will begin again to learn about Jesus, to seek to be transformed into his image, and to strive to live in obedience to his commands as we are empowered by Holy Spirit. Next Sunday marks a new year. Saturday night would be a good night to stop, pray, give thanks to Jesus for his love for us, and consider all we have learned about him, asking him to transform us to follow him more fully in the coming year.

The scripture text read this morning is the closing text for Jesus' last discourse in the Gospel of Matthew. Jesus is answering a question his disciples asked about when these things will come: the destruction of the temple and his coming in power. Jesus does not tell the disciples when his coming will occur, but that it will occur, and he shares some of what they should know about it. This morning's reading is preceded by a set of parables that all have a theme of judgment and may be familiar to us. They are the parables of the faithful and unfaithful slaves, the ten bridesmaids, and the parable of the talents. All of these parables have a theme of separating those who are faithful from those who are not. For example, the faithful slave who is watching and ready when his master comes is put in charge of all of his master's possessions, but the unfaithful slave is cut into pieces and placed where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. In the parable of the ten bridesmaids, the five who are prepared are taken into the banquet, but for

the five who not prepared, there is no opening of the door when they return and they are left outside. Finally, in the parable of the talents, there is no second chance to use a talent well for the slave who hid his talent in the ground, no opportunity for the unfaithful slave to become faithful. Instead, his talent is taken away and he is thrown into the outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. In all of these parables, the one they wait for comes unexpectedly, judgment occurs, and there is a separation into two groups, the faithful and unfaithful.

Notice how Jesus tells us he will come. He will come as the Son of Man in his glory with all of the angels to sit on the throne of his glory. There is no mention of a warning. There is no sign offered to alert us to his coming. His arrival time is unknown but will be sudden and complete. Those who are to be judged will have no time to prepare. There will be no time to run and find a church, repent, and be baptized, and to take care of all we might have put off to a later time. Jesus will come in his glory to sit on the throne of judgment with the angel army present to carry out his decrees. Jesus tells us the end will come suddenly at an unexpected time and it will come upon all of the nations. It does not begin in New York and work its way to other places over time. When Jesus comes, it is the end of the age and the nations are judged. The Old Testament prophets such as Daniel spoke to the coming judgment of God at the end of time. Jesus tells us he is the fulfillment of those prophecies. Jesus, the Son of Man, will come to completely fulfill the scriptures. Jesus will come as God to sit on the throne of his glory and judge the nations. All will be judged. No one will be immune. No one can pull rank, bribe the judge, or resist. The King of kings is in control.

Jesus uses the concept of a shepherd separating the sheep and the goats, a familiar action his disciples would have known well, to explain how the judgment occurs. While this action might have been understood by those Jesus was speaking to when he gave this discourse, we don't understand the necessity of separating sheep and goats by a shepherd today. Let me share with you my understanding of the separation of sheep and goats. Below is a picture of two 4-H animals our youngest daughter raised one year, a sheep and a goat.



I don't remember the name of the sheep, just that she did sheep things and was pretty easy to work with and train. The goat's name I do remember. Her name was Ginger. Ginger never learned to be led by a leash, to stay in the pen, to walk with us, to stand to be judged, or to do anything other than find a new way to irritate me. She would escape the pen on a regular basis and then yell until someone came and put her back in so she could escape again. She would not get her feet wet but would leap over puddles and pull whoever was walking with her into them. She would randomly refuse to walk and would instead brace all four hooves so she could dig in and have to be dragged along. I assure you that I can identify which of these two animals is the goat in the picture not by the way she looks but by how she acted. The sheep in the picture by comparison learned to be led, to stand, and to stay in the pen. She was a delight to walk and was pleasant to deal with. She was trainable and did what she was taught. I don't ever recall her escaping the pen or having any bad behavior. She was the model sheep. My point is that I could separate these two, not by how they look, but how they behave.

Jesus uses the example of a shepherd separating the two groups. It is not clear what the application of separating sheep and goats in the everyday life of a first century shepherd was, but the idea is that Jesus as King will be able to separate the two groups of people he judges based on what he knows of each person, what is in their hearts. Notice when Jesus speaks of himself as

king he speaks not to *a* king, but to *the* king. Not a coming king but the king who came first as a humble carpenter to die on the cross for our sins that all might find forgiveness through belief in him. A humble king who was resurrected from the dead and ascended to heaven in bodily form now comes in power to sit on the throne of his glory and judge the nations. This is Christ the King who comes unexpectedly at the end of time to separate the people, one from another. The people of the nations have been living together until this point, the righteous with the unrighteous. Now the righteous judge King Jesus comes to separate the two. Notice Jesus gives the criteria for how he will judge the two groups of people of the nations, sorting them into only two groups. There is no middle ground, no centrist group that claims some of each group and stays in the middle. There are only sheep and goats, the righteous and the unrighteous. The sheep Jesus will place at his right hand, the place of honor, inviting those that are blessed by his Father to inherit the kingdom. The time of the inbreaking kingdom we live in today has ended and the kingdom of God is now completely established. Jesus, as king, separates the nations into those who are part of the kingdom of God and those who are not. Jesus tells us the criteria he will use. Those who have love and mercy are included in his kingdom. Jesus tells us that love and mercy are expressed as those feeding the hungry, giving water to the thirsty, welcoming strangers, caring for the sick, clothing those in need of clothing, and visiting those in prison. We may struggle with these criteria as they do not mention belief in Jesus. Jesus' criteria for separation of these two groups is not a statement about salvation but about how Jesus will judge those who believe in him. The sheep will be those who are prepared and using their gifts for the kingdom, which is the action of those who follow Jesus. They will be those whose hearts have been transformed by belief in Jesus into those whose lives are marked by love and mercy for others, especially the least of these among their brothers and sisters. Notice the pronoun Jesus uses as he gives the criteria. He uses the pronoun "I." He puts himself in the place of those with needs. He tells those he has placed at his right hand that as they have shown love and mercy to the least of their brothers and sisters, they have shown love and mercy to him. Doing these acts of love and mercy for the least among us is doing them for Jesus. To extend love and mercy to the least among us is to extend love and mercy to Jesus. Notice that those at Jesus' right hand are surprised at what he has told them. They are surprised that what they have done out of a heart filled with the love and mercy from a transformed life has been done to Jesus. They are surprised because they did not see Jesus when they did these things but saw a brother or sister in need and

responded by extending love and mercy. Those at Jesus' right hand learn that giving love and mercy to the least among them is also extending love and mercy to Jesus.

Now King Jesus turns to those at his left and passes judgment on them. Those on his left are sent to the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. This group is also surprised as they did not see Jesus in the least of those around them and hold that they would have responded with love and mercy if they had seen him. They have seen those who were hungry, a stranger, naked, sick, or in prison, but they were not seeing them as Jesus and have not responded to their needs. When they did not do so to the least of these among them, they did not do so for Jesus.

Let me state that the criteria laid out here is not directly about salvation. Matthew is not developing a judgment criteria that leads to eternal life based on works. Matthew's words are not a statement made to drive us to doing works to get ourselves into the kingdom of God. That is not the context of these statements by Jesus. Salvation is a gift given to us by God through Jesus's death on the cross, confirmed by his resurrection and current position seated in heaven at the right hand of God. So, we ask, what is Jesus telling us? Jesus is speaking to our heart condition. Those who have believed in Jesus, who have received the free gift of salvation, have hearts transformed into hearts that are sources of acts of mercy and love especially for the least around them. What Jesus is teaching in the discourse is a statement about what should be found in our hearts as we live as Jesus' followers. We are to respond with the love and mercy a Christ follower should have for all, especially the least of these. We who follow Jesus are those who, while we look for Jesus' return in glory, should have hearts filled with gratitude, and as a result, are at work in the in breaking kingdom, showing love and mercy to the least of these. These acts of love and mercy Jesus describes are what proceed from our transformed hearts. The criteria of acts of love and mercy to be judged worthy to enter the kingdom of God bring to our minds the question, "Are we living as those with transformed hearts?" We should be asking ourselves, "Are our hearts pouring forth acts of love and mercy to the least of these in our community and wherever we have awareness of needs in the least of these?" These are questions we need to ask ourselves as we look at our hearts and the actions we do or don't do for the least of these around us. Often, we find our response to needs is to send a donation and let others be those on the front line of actions with those in need. John Wesley would not let the early Methodists respond that way. He insisted on their going to the least, those in need in their communities, visiting them in person, getting to know them, and interacting with them, so that they might better understand

them and show them the love and mercy Christ seeks to find in his disciples. There is a rather famous letter written in response to a letter to Wesley from a wealthy woman who insisted that giving her funds was a far better and more appropriate response for her due to her wealth and position. Wesley disagreed and insisted that she go in person to visit people even in the most difficult places. We also are to be those who have personal involvement with the least of these around us. The acts of the apostles we have walked through over the last fourteen weeks have taught us to pray, fast, and witness. Matthew tells us that Jesus taught that those who are judged worthy to be part of the kingdom of God have the attributes of love and mercy found as actions extended to the least of these around them.

Our thoughts should turn to how we are seeking to live out our faith. Yes, we need to grow in our knowledge of Jesus, worship him, and dwell together in God's word, but the least of these in the world wait for a follower of Jesus with a truly transformed heart to come in his name and show them love and mercy. We are to help feed those who are hungry, give a drink to the thirsty, welcome those whom we do not know, clothe those who lack basic needs, care for the sick, and visit those in prison. How are we doing? What is our response to the least of these in our community? Where is God stirring our hearts? Who is God placing in our paths? What do we have in our hand that can meet needs in our community? Where are we to go and visit the sick and those in prison? These questions are the topics we are seeking to lift up in prayer during Advent at noon on Wednesdays as we gather to ask Jesus to show us how to reach out into this community or any place where he is seeking to have us show the least of these love and mercy. Let me encourage us to come and join in a time of prayer and be open to where God is asking us to show love and mercy to the least of these. Let me close with Paul's words from the Letter to the Galatians: "Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers"<sup>1</sup>

*Pray with me. Jesus, we come before you as those who dare to ask if there are enough acts of love and mercy in our lives to find us at your right hand when you come in glory. We confess that we have doubts and humbly ask that you would work in our hearts to transform us into those who are looking for your return while we use the gifts you have given us to show love and mercy to the least of these around us. Open our eyes, transform our hearts, and guide us. We pray in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen*

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<sup>1</sup> (Gal. 6:10).