

turning the world right-side up—Matthew 25:31-46

Theme: Jesus will judge his people—and everyone else—on the basis of whether they've believed his message enough to live it

The final aspect of what it means to actively await Jesus' return is spelled out in this familiar but unsettling story about the judgement.

Those who, like the servants and the wise girls in the preceding parables, are ready for his coming, are those who live according to the values of the revolution he has both lived and preached. The one sign that shows his return is certain is that there's a community who lives in anticipation of his revolution arriving in all its glory by living its values.

Questions:

1. How does this story make us feel?
2. What do we think Jesus is saying about how he'll judge people?
3. Who do we think Jesus is referring to when he says 'the least of these'?
4. How can we avoid the danger of being merely a hearer of Jesus' message and not a doer of it?
5. In what ways do we think this final story in Jesus' final discourse is linked to the Sermon on the Mount?
6. Read Romans 2:6-11 and James 2:14-24: do these passages help us understand what Jesus is saying here?
7. How does what Jesus says about judgement here fit with what we've been taught about justification by faith?
8. How can we as individuals and as a church effectively reach out to those Jesus calls 'the least of these'? What might it cost us?
9. What does this passage say about our hope, what we can be certain of receiving when Jesus comes again?
10. How does this hope affect the way we live our lives now?
11. How can we encourage one another to live the values of the Kingdom that Jesus talks about here?
12. Do we share the surprise of those addressed in this story about the basis of Jesus judgement of them?

Your stories:

Potted summary

The story of the sheep and the goats forms the climax not only of this discourse on the future (24-25), but of all Jesus' teaching in Matthew's gospel. It takes us back to where we began (5-7) by reminding us of the values of the revolution and calling us to be not just hearers of the words of Jesus, but doers of them as well. We will be judged, he says, on the basis not of what we know but of how we've lived our lives in the light of what we know.

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What the passage is about....

The climax of Jesus' long final discourse in Matthew's gospel is a bit of a puzzle.

Many wonder what exactly Jesus is saying about the basis on which folk will be judged. And some ask how this picture of judgement rounds off what Jesus has been saying about our readiness for his return.

Indeed of all the things that Jesus could have chosen to focus on in his last story, he chose this. Why? Because 'the least of these' are at the very heart of his revolution; His whole ministry was about welcoming them into God's kingdom.

The picture painted is universal in scope: 'all the nations' (v32; the same as in 28:19) are called to account before the king (Jesus is on his throne in fulfilment of Daniel 7:13-14). It's a scene derived from the Old Testament: calling the nations to account for their treatment of Israel is a major theme in Joel 3:1-12; seeing God and/or his Messiah as a shepherd is a key theme in Ezekiel 34 and Psalm 23; even more importantly, the Old Testament portrait of God's coming king is of one who will put things right, bring justice, especially for the poor and outcast, and judge fairly between all people on earth (Isaiah 11:1-14; 9:6-7; 42:1-4; Daniel 7:9-27 where the scene is of a court sitting to undo the oppression of empires and give justice to all God's people).

In one sense, the story told in Matthew 25:31-45 is very familiar to readers of the Old Testament. But what Jesus has done is to take that story, put himself at the centre of it and make the focus of judgement not the nations' treatment of Israel but their treatment of the 'least of these'.

So with all this in mind, how might we most helpfully read these verses?

1) coming full circle

The story has both a cosmic scope and a domestic one. It is a scene of judgement where the whole world is being called to account before God's King. But it is also the end of Jesus' discourse to his disciples about how they can be ready for his sudden and unexpected coming. And it is this latter aspect that accounts for the odd twists Jesus adds to the story.

It seems that at the end of the last discourse in his gospel, Matthew is taking us back to the first (the Sermon on the Mount) and reminding us what the Kingdom is about and who it is for. At the same time he is rounding off Jesus' teaching on what it means to be ready for his return by reminding us how we are to live while we wait for him to come.

i) the least of these: while it's true that Jesus has used this expression to refer to his followers (notably in 18:6 and 10:42), he has also used similar language with a wider group in view, notably in the beatitudes. The poor, mourning, hungry folk that Jesus has in view are the focus of God's Kingdom. Twice his ministry is summed up as being to those very same vulnerable people (9:35-37; 11:4-6). Such a ministry is the fulfilment of those Old Testament prophecies about the coming king being the one who makes things right for the oppressed and vulnerable (Isaiah 11:1-14; 9:6-7; 42:1-4).

ii) the lovers of the life: not only does this story recall the beatitudes, it also recalls the section of the sermon where Jesus spells out the difference between talking the talk of discipleship and walking the walk, or living the life. In 7:21-23 he speaks of those who claim to follow, but do not do God's will. Here he spells out what that is: a life lived doing the things that Jesus did especially among 'the least of these'.

iii) the left out: Those who don't wait for the returning king by living this way will not be recognised by him when he comes and asks what we've been up to. This is the fate of those who claim to be disciples but don't do God's will in 7:23; the fate shared by the unprepared girls in 25:12; the fate confirmed by the king from his throne here when he says 'depart from me, because...' (25:41-46).

So the call to active discipleship issued in the Sermon on the Mount (5:3-7:27) is reiterated here and made the basis of judgement of those who follow. In this Jesus is the forerunner of Paul in Romans 2:6-11 and James in 2:14-24 of his letter. All three stress that the way we live our lives, the things we do—and in particular what we do to reverse the oppression and injustice that are part and parcel of this fallen world in which we live—show the reality of our faith.

2) calling us to account

Jesus ends this discourse on the future that has focused on answering the disciples' questions of 24:3, with a call to live the life of the Kingdom until he returns, because that will form the basis of the judgement we will each face.

It is also possible that Jesus is saying that the one sign of his certain return is the church itself, the presence of a people who live the values of the Kingdom, whose lives are modelled on and lived in imitation of Jesus' life (this is what Paul has in mind in Philippians 3).

So what happens when Jesus sits on his throne and we stand before him? **i) separation:** people have lived cheek by jowl, indistinguishable from one another in many ways (like the weeds and wheat in 13:29-30 and the prepared and unprepared girls in 25:1-12). Suddenly they'll be split into two groups—one that has lived according to the values of the King and one that hasn't.

Notice that there's no scripture or doctrine exam! Jesus at this point isn't interested in what we know but in how we've lived. He takes it as read that the sheep know who he is because they have based their lifestyles on his; they have lived lives that have embodied his values, often at great cost to themselves: 25:35-36 suggests that these people went to some expense to help others, took risks to mix with those that society shunned, cared that the excluded were included, the loveless were loved. This is shorthand for people who've got the message that Jesus both lived and preached.

No doubt many of the goats knew the bible and even went to church—just like those in 7:21-23. What they lacked was the life to show that they'd taken what they'd heard seriously.

ii) sheep: those who've lived as Jesus did are not so much given a kingdom as made kings. This is a fulfilment of Daniel 7:27: the Son of Man shares his rule with his people. It's what Jesus has already said of the servants in 24:46-47 and 25:21, 23, 28-29. It's a recurring theme in the New Testament (see Matthew 19:28; Luke 12:32; 1 Corinthians 4:8—albeit ironically—Ephesians 2:6; Revelation 1:6; 5:10; 20:6; 22:5). This is a key part of the hope to which we are called as disciples: not only will we share Jesus' resurrection life, we will also share his rule; we shall be restored to the position Adam lost as stewards of God's creation.

iii) surprise! Why would anyone be surprised by this? Anyone who's heard Jesus' message and seen his work will know this is what the Kingdom of God is about. Anyone who has followed him—as the Twelve had—for any length of time will know that this is his agenda. Of course, those who are his disciples will be expected to live this way. So, reference to surprise is irony on Jesus' part to emphasise to all those hearing these words—the disciples, you and me—that this is what Jesus will be looking for in his people when he comes to reign.

The surprise is that anyone would not know this—are we surprised?