

The Score on Judgment Day

Matthew 25:31-46 (NIV)

³¹ "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. ³² 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. ³³ He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. ³⁴ "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. ³⁵ 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, ³⁶ 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.' ³⁷ "Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? ³⁸ When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? ³⁹ When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?' ⁴⁰ "The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.' ⁴¹ "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. ⁴² For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, ⁴³ 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.' ⁴⁴ "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?' ⁴⁵ "He will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.' ⁴⁶ "Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life."

Last week we used the parable of the wise and foolish virgins to keep us watching and ready for Jesus' return since no one knows the day or the hour when he will. I only briefly touched on this event of Jesus' Second Coming, the day he returns after ascending into heaven, the day when he will end the world and judge all people – both the living and the dead. Today, we get the picture of how that day, the Last Day, Judgment Day, will happen.

Jesus said, "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. 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." (verses 31-33) Unlike the story of the wise and foolish virgins, Jesus is not speaking a parable anymore. He tells us straight out that the Son of Man, himself, will come in all his glory with the angels with him. He will be revealed to all the nations, all people, that he is the King of Kings. Then he will separate everyone into two groups, like a shepherd separating sheep and goats. Final judgment happens to all people without a word spoken.

"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.'" (verse 34) He calls those sheep on his right the righteous. They are blessed and are now about to experience their inheritance of heaven. Why them? Christ the King says, "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." (verses 35-36)

So, should we take away from this separation, this judgment, that if someone does enough good works, then God will take you to heaven? Are good works required to be blessed by God?

That's what many people, even many people who claim to be Christians, think and tell others. Do enough good works and you get to go to heaven. Tip the balance in your favor that you do more good than evil, or at least do enough good that God will forget the bad, that how you get a happily ever after in heaven. But is that what God is saying here, that this is how our final judgment works?

Elsewhere in the Bible, God says, "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. For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do." (Ephesians 2:8-10) So, it can't be that Judgment Day is about us doing enough good works for God to let us into heaven. We aren't saved by our works. This has been God's message to us ever since the Garden of Eden and the fall into sin. So, let's look a little bit more closely to what Jesus is saying here.

Christ the King says to those on his right, the righteous, "Take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world." (verse 34) The kingdom of God, heaven, was prepared for the righteous since the beginning of the world. Christ the King planned on them being there, before anyone had a chance to do any good works. But, you could argue that God knows all things. So, he knew that they would do good works. That's why heaven was prepared for them since the beginning.

But consider this: when God separated the righteous from the cursed, there is no mention whatsoever of anything wrong that they had ever done. You and I both know that nobody is perfect. Even the best person you know is still not perfect and still messes up from time to time – still loses their temper, thinks wicked things that we never even know about.

Why, then, does Christ the King mention only the good things that the righteous had done? It's because they were clothed with Jesus' perfection – his perfect life lived for theirs. They were not right with God because they had fed and clothed a few people. They were right with God because Jesus gave his life to remove their sins from them, to remove our sins from us. Being vacated of all our evil deeds so that God doesn't even mention a single one on Judgment Day, he filled us at the same time with his holiness, his perfection. Every good deed that Jesus had done is now attributed to us. Every time Jesus fed someone who was hungry or gave the thirsty something to drink, every time he invited a stranger in, gave clothes to someone in need, visited people who were sick or in prison - these have been accounted to us. This is what God sees. Christ the King doesn't declare you right with him because you did a decent amount of good works or because you tipped the balance in your favor. He declares you right because you are covered with his perfection. And so there is no mention, no hint of any wrongdoing or any sin that we have ever done. These are forgiven and forgotten by our King.

Here's something more to consider: the ones on Christ the King's right, the righteous, the sheep, they don't even remember doing these good things. "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?'" (verses 37-39) In other words, the righteous were not keeping score.

When you play a game with someone and you say, "Let's not keep score," you're probably saying this for one of two reasons. One is because you know that you are so good at this game and the other person is not, but you want to play, but you don't want them to feel bad. So, to get them to play, you promise not to keep score so that they don't feel bad when they lose...even though you weren't keeping score, right??? The other reason is because you want to play, but you know that you're outmatched and most likely going to lose. So, you say, "Let's not keep score," so that you can protect yourself from the hurt of losing.

Christ the King is telling us that on Judgment Day the righteous will not have "kept score" of all their good deeds. That means that if you are keeping score, putting a notch on your good-works-o-meter, comforting yourself with the good things you do thinking that they outweigh your bad so that God will have to let you into heaven, you're mistaken. The righteous don't keep score. They just do these things because they have been filled with Christ the King's perfection, with his unconditional love. Being so filled, you simply do these good works without thinking about keeping count or of earning anything while you do them.

So, why mention these little good works at all, things that would probably go unnoticed by almost everyone, if we aren't keeping score? Well, even on Judgment Day when Christ returns, none of us are going to be all-knowing as our King is. He sees our hearts. He knows who trusts in his blood shed to remove our sins and his perfection lived for us that now covers our life, but we don't. The King then points out the evidence of our faith in him as expressed by all these little good works that we never kept score of. The evidence proves that his judgment is just – both for the righteous and the wicked who didn't give any evidence that they trusted in Christ's forgiveness or his perfection lived for them. In the end, on the Last Day, God holds every person accountable for their own lives.

When Christ returns bringing Judgment Day upon us, how will he separate you? If you believe that Christ paid for all your sins and has covered you, filled you, with all the perfect deeds he did, then you know you will be separated to the right as one of his sheep. You will be declared righteous because of what he did, not for what you did. On that day, if your trust is in Christ our King, then not a single sin, not a single fault, not a single mistake will ever be mentioned because God has covered you with his perfection.

But that day is not here yet. That means that we keep living each and every day having been cleansed by Christ's forgiveness and filled with his perfection. You keep doing what you're doing. When you make that meal for your kids that they turn their nose up to, when you get that glass of water for your thirsty child at 2:00 am, when you pass along clothes to your friends or other families that they can use and save a few bucks or bring up that load of laundry you folded, when you send that card along with the chicken soup to that person who's sick, when you invite someone in from the cold, when you write to a prison pen pal, these are all the simple things we do that reflect the love that Christ has showed us – his removal of all our sins and his perfection filling us to overflowing.

There are good works that can be done all around us every single day. We won't run out of opportunities, but we also aren't going to keep score. We'll let God keep score. Because we trust his forgiveness graciously given us and his perfection lived for us, we know how our Judgment Day will end. We will go to eternal life with God, to his kingdom prepared for us since the creation of the world. Christ the King is our hope and our confidence for that day when he returns to judge us all. Amen.