

A View of Life

Sermon Theme: In this parable of the Last Day, Jesus reveals the mysteries of eternal life.

Text: Matthew 25:31–46

Other Lessons: Ezekiel 34:11–16, 20–24; Psalm 95:1–7a; 1 Corinthians 15:20–28

Goal: That the hearers enter the world assured of their salvation, rejoicing in the hidden blessings of God.

Setting

The end of the Church Year naturally brings to our attention the end of time as we know it. The *Gospel*, our sermon text, pictures Jesus' return in glory for the final judgment (Mt 25:31–46). "Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power" (*Epistle*, 1 Cor 15:24). But this Last Day is also a beginning: "I am the Alpha and the Omega," says our Lord, "the first and the last, the beginning and the end" (Rev 22:13). "But according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells". (2 Pet 3:13 ESV).

For believers, both the end and the new beginning are good news. "The last enemy to be destroyed is death"(1 Cor 15:26). And the new heaven and earth is the home of righteousness.

Sermon

Introduction: In 2006, scientists gazed into the heavens. A spacecraft was returning from a seven-year mission and brought with it particles of comet dust. Having gazed into the heavens, the scientists now gazed through microscopes at the dust of heaven, hoping to discover within this material clues to the mystery of life.

Before science became the final court of meaning, however, artists were busy gazing into the heavens, creating paintings of a different court and of a different day: a day of judgment, when Christ would return and reveal for all people the meaning of life.

Taking a quick glance through paintings of the last judgment, one discovers a common theme. The heavens are torn open as Christ descends on a throne and the earth is breaking apart as the dead rise from their graves.

While the paintings are usually too busy, with many human bodies mixed together with many angels and demons, one factor is fairly consistent. If you look closely, if you stare at the face of just one human being, you'll find on that face a look of discovery. People look as if they're waking from sleep and only beginning to discover the deeper meaning of the world, of their Lord, and of the life that once surrounded them.

Today, we will look closely at Matthew's Gospel, and in it experience for ourselves some of that Last Day's sense of discovery, for

In this Parable of the Last Day, Jesus Reveals the Mysteries of Eternal Life.

I. Discovery of the world God created.

Text: In the parable that is our text, Jesus speaks to his disciples about the end, and yet his words talk about the beginning. Notice how Jesus describes the kingdom of heaven. He says, "Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world" (v 34). In contrast, as Jesus speaks to the wicked, he does not say, "Inherit the punishment prepared for you from the foundation of the world." Instead, he says, "Depart . . . into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels" (v 41).

God never prepared hell for humanity. No, from the very beginning, God's intentions were always that humanity would live in eternal fellowship and blessedness with him. No one was ever predestined to hell. All were created to live with God and to rejoice with him in his creation. Those who go to hell go there by their own choosing, for they have rejected Jesus and God's original design for all people in him.

Application: While some might feel that this parable is about the end of the world, it does not offer us a picture of the world ending at all. Instead, Jesus offers us a discovery of the world, as God intended it. God's original desire was for humanity to live in relationship with him, and the day when Christ returns will be the day when God's dreams for creation finally and fully come true.

People often misunderstand Christianity. They think that it's all about escaping this world in order to live in heaven. For them, Christians stand at a distance from this world, wanting to escape its physical existence so that they can go on, as disembodied souls, to eternal life in heaven. Yet that is not what we believe or what we confess. Every time we confess the faith, we speak of the resurrected body, and we declare our confidence in "the life of the world to come."

The mission of Jesus Christ was to bring all people into God's eternal kingdom. Although we had turned away from God, rejecting his design and falling into sin in the Garden of Eden, God the Father turned toward us, still holding on to his original design. Out of love, he sent his Son, Jesus Christ, to bear our sin and to be our Savior.

When Christ gathers his people, he raises them from the dead, destroying death forever so that nothing may hurt or harm his people again (*Epistle*, 1 Cor 15:20–26). So, for the Christian, the Last Day is not one of fear or anxiety but of great joy, and we eagerly "wait for the day of His return". We have hope because we will inherit the kingdom our Lord has prepared for us before the foundation of the world (Mt 25:34).

Baptized into his death and resurrection, our eternal life with God begins. In him, there will be a new creation, and we will be raised to live in the world as God originally desired it to be. Until that time, we live as stewards. We care for this world as those who have discovered in Jesus what God intended creation to be. We trust in, we live in, and we long for God's new creation in him.

II. Discovery of the Lord.

Text: As Jesus speaks to his disciples about the end, notice how he opens their eyes to the rule of God in him. As one listens closely to the text, one discovers the fullness of God in Jesus. He appears first as the Son of Man, that figure from Daniel (Dan 7:13–14), who now has finished God's work and is therefore seated on his throne (v 31). Then, he appears as a shepherd, with the nations as his flock, now separating the sheep from the goats (v 32). Soon the shepherd becomes a King, who is also the Son of God, the Father. His rule extends over all nations and throughout all time (v 34). This King, however, is hidden in the suffering of this world (vv 35–36), just as Jesus would soon be hidden in the events of his Passion (Matthew 26–27). Jesus claims all who follow him in faith as members of his family ("my brothers" in v 40 and Mt 12:46–50) and, until that Last Day, he is known among them by his Word ("Truly, I say to you . . ." in v 40).

Application: While some might feel this parable places Jesus at a distance, descending from heaven at the end of time, it actually reveals him as very close to us—today.

He is the Lord of all nations. God the Father has chosen him to rule over all things and to bring to fulfillment his desire to save all people. For this reason, he has fulfilled prophecy. He came in our midst to bring about the forgiving, saving rule of God in his life, death, and resurrection. Though ascended into heaven, Jesus continues to speak among us now through his Word, claiming as his family all who believe in him and shepherding them like a flock, until that day when he returns to divide those who trust in him for righteousness from those who do not and to give to the faithful the long-standing desire of God, namely, the gift of eternal life. Jesus has not left us on our own in this world, but rather comes to us in his Word and Sacraments and continues to rule in our midst, proclaiming to you the forgiveness of sins and this everlasting gift of eternal life in him.

III. Discovery of life.

Text: This parable ends the five discourses of Jesus in Matthew, but if you listen closely, you'll hear how it takes you back to the very first discourse, the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7). There, in the blessings of Jesus (Mt 5:3–12), we see the people God has called his own in this world. Though rejected,

persecuted, mourning, hungering and thirsting for righteousness, these people are God's own and receive his eternal blessing.

Now, at the end of his ministry, Jesus reveals again a people, "blessed by my Father" (v 34). These people, already made "righteous" (v 37) in God's sight by faith in Jesus, are found yet again among those suffering in this world. Only this time, they are sharing God's mercy with those who suffer. Their merciful acts of faith come as a shock to them when Jesus reveals these good works (vv 37–39). In an even more amazing revelation, Jesus unveils his hidden presence among those "my brothers," who were hungering, thirsting, strangers, naked, sick, and imprisoned in this world (vv 35–40).

Application: When you look at paintings of the last judgment, the faces of the people are filled with wonder and awe. Artists have captured their discovery of the majesty of Christ when he returns to rule. Yet Christ paints an even more astounding picture in this parable. For you, who have been made righteous by faith in Christ, there will be an even more astounding wonder on that day. God will reveal the good that you have done and his presence in your life in ways that exceed your understanding.

Like the righteous in this parable, God's people will never know the depth and the breadth of the good works they have done during their lifetime. On that Last Day, however, our Lord will reveal to the faithful his good works of mercy performed through their lives in this world. In addition, he will also reveal that he was present in those hidden moments of ministry, graciously receiving from our hands the mercy we didn't even know we were giving. So his kingdom, prepared from the foundation of the world, is also yours (vv 34).

Our Lord tells us that he prepared a kingdom for us to comfort us. We need not fear his return. Because he has forgiven all your sins, you will be found at his right hand. You will receive the kingdom that he has prepared for you. And he loved you so much that he planned your salvation and your reward before the foundation of the world. You are a guest your Lord has been waiting to receive for a long time, in fact, before time began.

Illustration:

In painting Christ's return at the last judgment, artists have struggled with how to paint the faces of people raised from the dead and being judged by Christ. Do they paint faces you can recognize? Should they dare to paint their own?

In his *Last Judgment*, painted on a wall of the Sistine Chapel, Michelangelo places a powerful papal critic of his work as far away from Christ as possible, making him the judge of the underworld. Then he paints his own face on the flayed skin of St. Bartholomew and has himself gazed on by Christ.

What a blessing it is for us not to have to rely on authors or artists to depict our eternal destiny. Instead, Jesus Christ, the author of life, has painted our picture in the kingdom of heaven. In his parable of the sheep and the goats (Mt 25:31–33), Jesus opens our eyes to discover our place by grace in his kingdom and the wonders of his gracious life-giving work in this world and the next.

Conclusion: In 1304, Giotto di Bondone began working on a series of frescoes in the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua. At the very back of the chapel is the largest scene, the last judgment. It is a fresco, which means that Giotto and his assistants painted it on wet plaster. By necessity, the painting was done quickly, but the image they produced is eternal. Christ returns in judgment. The scene covers the whole wall, with those raised to eternal life on Christ's right and those raised to eternal punishment on Christ's left. At the bottom of the image, underneath the cross, is the doorway by which worshipers would return to the world. The last image worshipers see as they enter the world is Christ returning in glory. Imagine what that would be like.

Although we have no such image over our doors as we walk out of this church, we do have this Gospel. Our Lord offers us an image of the last judgment to shape your life in this world today. As you walk through the door, opened by the cross, you enter God's world with deeper understanding. You see things differently: the creation of this world, your Lord, even your life of service. Assured of your salvation, you now rejoice in these hidden blessings of God, this vision of life, present and eternal.