

Matthew 25:31–46

³¹ “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. ³² Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. ³³ And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left. ³⁴ Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. ³⁵ For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶ I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.’ ³⁷ Then the righteous will answer him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? ³⁸ And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? ³⁹ And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?’ ⁴⁰ And the King will answer them, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.’

⁴¹ “Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. ⁴² For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, ⁴³ I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ ⁴⁴ Then they also will answer, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to you?’ ⁴⁵ Then he will answer them, saying, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’ ⁴⁶ And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

Let's Warm Up: Questions to break the ice.

1. What can you tell about someone's character by how they treat restaurant servers?

There's a quote, "If someone is nice to you but rude to the waiter, they are not a nice person." I've seen it attributed to both Dave Barry and Bill Swanson. This idea became "The Waiter Rule" and is used by CEOs to gauge potential hires (<https://www.businessinsider.com/waiter-rule-job-candidates-hiring-2015-11>) and on dates to see potential red flags (<https://www.mic.com/articles/108494/the-person-you-should-be-paying-the-most-attention-to-on-a-date-your-waiter>).

Years ago, when I was still in Atlanta, I had lunch with a church elder and guest speaker at a small Chinese restaurant down the street. A few minutes after being seated, the server/host came out and told us that her husband, the chef, was having a medical emergency. I remember the church elder looked up from the menu and said, "Can we still order?" I was *mortified*. English was his second language, so I was *hoping* he simply misunderstood. Thankfully, the guest speaker was a clown (and, perhaps more importantly, a board-certified medical doctor). He went to the kitchen to check on the chef.

In this week's passage, Jesus tells us that how we treat "the least" indicates who we belong to.

2. How do you feel about nepotism, such as someone getting a job because they're related to the boss?

We've probably all seen unqualified co-workers who only got the position because of their connection to the CEO. How often have you heard of politicians giving government positions or contracts to their family members? If you're into movies, you've probably heard the term "nepo baby", where bad actors keep getting movie roles because their parents are famous in the film industry.

Does it make you angry that qualified people are losing out on opportunities? Are you upset that incompetent people benefit from something they didn't earn? Do you wish you had those same connections?

In this week's passage, the sheep benefit from nepotism because they belong to God.

3. Have you done a good deed with a bigger effect than expected?

Perhaps you saw someone eating alone, so you joined them. You later learn that person was going through a dark time, but your company cheered them up. As adults, our kindness towards children can often shape their life trajectory.

In this week's passage, people realize their actions meant more than they intended.

Let's Get Started: Questions to start thinking about the main themes.

4. Why is it necessary for the church to distinguish people who belong to God from those who don't?

I'm glad we live in a diverse church. Every week, we mingle with people from different language groups, nations of origin, and socioeconomic classes. We don't want to exclude people from our church.

But at the same time, we can't treat everyone equally in every way. "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one **in Christ Jesus**. And **if you are Christ's**, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise." (Galatians 3:28–29). All believers are equally Jesus' and inherit the same promise. But that is only for those who are in Jesus. Those who aren't in Jesus are not equal with us and do not inherit the promise of eternal life.

Different Destinations. We believers can bring up and assure each other of God's promises for hope and eternal life, but we can't do that for those who don't belong to God. We can't say that no matter what happens, they will be with God forever in paradise. They are destined to hell and eternal punishment, so it would be incredibly malicious to make false assurances.

Limited Opportunities. Because they don't believe in Jesus, they can't lead in ways that only Christians can lead, like teaching or leading in worship. It would be hypocritical for them to teach about Jesus when they don't believe in Him. And they can't lead others to worship God when they can't because they don't have access to God through Jesus. They can't participate in the Lord's Supper because they don't belong to the Lord.

Targeted Evangelism. Everyone needs to hear the Gospel regularly, but non-believers especially so. We treat them differently, but we hope they will be part of God's family. We should continue to pray for and find opportunities to let them learn about who Jesus is and what He's done for them.

5. Does accepting Jesus' judgment as authoritative and final give you comfort or anxiety?

Jesus' judgment isn't affected by whether or not we accept it. But our ability to embrace it impacts how we live.

Some of us feel uneasy. There are plenty of innocent people wrongfully convicted of terrible crimes and thrown in prison (<https://www.wrongfulconvictions.ca/>), only to be proven innocent later. Who knows how many died before seeing justice? What if Jesus makes the wrong call or misunderstands my situation? Is there a chance for me to appeal His decision or explain my situation?

Living in a pluralistic society has some pros and cons. We're used to choosing what we believe and how we live. What if we don't agree with Jesus' idea of what's right or wrong? "I agree with Jesus' view of THIS, but I don't know about THAT."

Ideally, Christians should feel comfort in knowing that Jesus has the final say. He knows everything about us, so He won't make the wrong call. Some of us may not understand (or have misgivings) about God's actions and standards, but we can acknowledge that His thoughts are way above our own. Do we trust that Jesus knows best and does the best?

Let's Dig In: Questions to discuss the passage and how we can respond.

6. In Jesus' teaching, what are examples of separating people into different categories? Why does He do it?

Pastor Ray listed out several examples.

1. Wheat from the chaff (3:12)

2. Jesus' disciples from hypocrites (6:2, 5, 16)
3. Jesus' disciples from false prophets (7:21-23)
4. Wise builders from foolish builders (7:24-27)
5. Wheat from the weeds (13:30, 40-43)
6. Good fish from bad fish (13:48, 49)
7. Faithful servants from unfaithful servants (25:14-30)

These are all Gospel issues. God is the good and perfect Creator, establishing what is right and wrong. God made us to love Him and love others (Matthew 22:34-40). By fully loving God, people find ultimate fulfillment in a relationship with God. By loving other people, we establish love, peace, and harmony. The world would be a perfect place.

But people naturally rebelled against God. That's called sin. We want to love other things more than God. We want to love ourselves at the expense of others. Since God values justice and sin harms God's good creation, God must punish. Because all people sin, all people deserve God's punishment for sin.

Despite our sinfulness, God still loved us by sending His Son, Jesus, to live a perfect life and die on the cross, taking our punishment (Romans 5:8-11). If we believe in Jesus, our criminal record is replaced with Jesus' perfect record. Jesus' punishment pays for the punishment we deserve.

But not everyone takes on Jesus' way to forgiveness, so they are still guilty of disobeying God. They still need to be punished for their sin. So, God needs to separate those who believe in Jesus and obey Him from those who refuse to believe in Jesus and rebel against Him.

7. Why is it important to talk and teach about eternal punishment?

Who enjoys talking about hell? Unless you run a Halloween theme park, probably not.

About 6 out of 10 Canadians believe there's life after death. Only 4 out of 10 believe that hell exists, whereas 6 out of 10 believe heaven exists (in 2017, <https://angusreid.org/religion-in-canada-150/>). Heaven is easier to talk about than hell.

Because we haven't been talking properly about hell, it's cheapened. Take a look at how casually people use hell. "What the hell?" "Man, waiting in line was hell." "Hell, no!" I had a seminary classmate who graduated from Duke University. Whenever they played a rival school, he would post, "Go to hell, Carolina!" It's even part of Duke's fight song (<https://darrell3.tripod.com/acc.html>).

I don't think they understand that hell isn't just a Home for Infinite Losers. It's where God's infinite, eternal wrath is poured out on evil, whether it's Satan (Revelation 20:10) or those still guilty of sin (Revelation 20:15). It's the scariest place imaginable.

If Christians cheapen hell and eternal punishment, there are major consequences. Here are 7 that Pastor Ray listed. I've elaborated on each of them.

1. **We are not really sinners. Everything is relative.** All sin deserves eternal punishment; therefore, all sins are infinitely bad. If God doesn't care enough about sin to punish it, it's not that big of a deal. And if God

doesn't judge sin, it's up to us to define what counts as sin and how to deal with it. "Since God doesn't punish sin, I figure out what's right and wrong."

2. **There is no absolute Truth to which we submit. We live by our own truths.** God is truth, and whether we live by that truth determines our eternal outcome. But, if there is no eternal punishment, one can live however they want without consequences. "Hey, all roads lead to Rome. I do me. You do you."
3. **There is no standard for holiness.** God sets His standard of holiness. Whatever doesn't meet that standard falls short (Romans 3:23) and deserves punishment (Romans 6:23). If God doesn't treat right and wrong differently, there are no rules for what's holy. Holiness is just a suggestion. That's like setting up a speed limit but never giving anyone a speeding ticket. "I don't need to be holy because there's no reason to be."
4. **We have no need of a Saviour. We have no need to be forgiven and reconciled with God.** There are only two options: (A) eternal life with God or (B) eternal separation from God, experiencing His wrath. Since our sin harms our relationship with God and separates us from Him, we are headed to option B by default. That's why we need a Savior to bring us forgiveness and reconciliation. But if there's no punishment, we're not in danger. And if we're not in danger, we don't need saving. If there are no consequences for being separated from God, there's no need to be forgiven and reconciled. That would be like dialing 911 when you're feeling healthy and safe. "I don't need Jesus to save me because there's nothing to save me from."
5. **Jesus' life, death, and resurrection were unnecessary.** We deserve God's punishment, so Jesus came to live a perfect life to fulfill the law, died to take on our eternal punishment, and was resurrected to prove that we'll have eternal life. If there's no eternal punishment, then Jesus didn't need to die to take on our punishment. "Let me tell you about Jesus. He came to live, die, and come back from the dead ... because ... uh ... reasons."
6. **In the end, there will be no justice.** Although evil seems to flourish on earth, God promises to punish evil in the end. And His punishment will be severe. If evil never gets punished, there is no justice. Vengeance does not belong to the Lord, and He won't judge (Hebrews 10:30). Evil wins.
7. **In the end, there will be no reward for Jesus' disciples. No eternal life.** Eternal life is amazing, *especially* since the alternative is eternal punishment. If there's no eternal punishment, then either there's no eternal anything (annihilationism, <https://www.gotquestions.org/annihilationism.html>) or everyone gets eternal life no matter what they do (universalism, <https://www.gotquestions.org/universalism.html>). If either of these is true, eternal life isn't such a big deal. "If you believe in Jesus, you'll be rewarded with everything that everyone else gets whether or not they believe in Jesus."

If we remove hell or eternal punishment, everything falls apart. Our need for Jesus as a savior only makes sense in light of God's wrath toward evil.

8. What are the implications of inheriting the kingdom versus earning the kingdom?

As Pastor Ray said,

"The kingdom is something they inherit. Something inherited comes to them as a gift, by grace, through relationship, not as a result of their own merit. The sheep are blessed by the Father with their eternal inheritance (the consummated kingdom). They are "blessed" because of their RELATIONSHIP WITH THE FATHER AND THE SON. They belong to Father and Son."

It's important to note that they didn't earn God's kingdom or blessings through their actions. Also, goats can't turn into sheep by acting like sheep. Rather, sheep act like sheep because they're sheep. Goats act like goats because they're goats. Since the people who act like God's children are (already) God's children, they inherit what God's children inherit.

This inheritance wasn't an afterthought but something God prepared before the world was created. He didn't wait for us goats to become sheep and then prepare the kingdom.

The sheep didn't expect to get the kingdom through their actions because they're surprised by the king's statement. As Pastor Ray said, "They have simply been living in response to what the King has done for them."

Humility. We have to be humble and appreciative. We didn't earn the kingdom, just like we didn't earn our parents. This was ultimately out of our control.

Peace. Since we inherit the kingdom, we don't need to worry about losing it. Yes, obey Jesus and love other Christians, but don't do it to earn God's kingdom. Do it because you already have it.

Praise. If we had to work to inherit the kingdom, we would praise ourselves. Since we're sheep only by God's grace, we can praise and thank Him.

9. Why were both sheep and goats surprised at Jesus' judgment?

Both groups are confused when Jesus makes a big deal of their seemingly small actions. Neither side expected those actions to reveal who they truly are. Those who belong to Jesus receive Jesus' love and therefore will love like Jesus. Those who don't, won't.

They also don't realize that how they treat other Christians is how they treat Jesus. God's blessed me with many people who have helped care for me over the years. While in seminary, a few church moms frequently made food for my brother and me. I remember my mom meeting these women and crying. By caring for her son, it was as if they took care of her. She was so grateful. On the flipside, some people treated me poorly. My dad would be furious, even more than if they had mistreated him. Whenever I was treated well or poorly, my parents felt like it was done to them.

Likewise, Jesus sees us as His sheep and family. Whether we're loved or hated, Jesus takes it personally (Acts 9:4-5).

10. Who are the "least of these" that God has placed in your life? What are some concrete steps you can take to love them?

I want to remind everyone that we do not serve in order to be saved/enter the kingdom/earn God's love/etc. We serve *because* Jesus saved us, made us part of His kingdom, blessed us with God's favor, and more. If you want those things, please ask your Life Group to share the Gospel of Jesus with you.

Jesus' brothers and sisters (and, by extension, our brothers and sisters) are those who follow Jesus (Matthew 12:46-50). We are called to love all people, but we make sure we don't leave out our fellow believers (Galatians 6:10).

Some of us are already aware of those in need in our lives and are currently serving them. That's great! If you are unaware and/or aren't serving, now is a perfect time to start.

Here are some suggestions, not restrictions. If God is calling you to serve in other areas, go for it! You can serve either as an individual or as a Life Group. (I'm using stats from our 2024 Annual Report:

<https://willingdon.org/annual-report/>.)

Provide Necessities. Most of us here can provide for our basic necessities, like food and shelter. But many can't. Last year, our food pantry served 500 people. Our Russian Language Ministry has also supported (XXXX) Ukrainian Refugees.

Volunteer or donate at our monthly food drive (<https://willingdon.org/events/food-drive/>) or give to our benevolence fund (<https://willingdon.org/benevolence>). We also support House of Omeed, a refugee ministry for Persians (<https://houseofomeed.ca/>). They have a food bank with food catered to people from the Middle East.

If you love to sew, we have a small army of dedicated women who come every Tuesday to make quilts, school kits, and dolls to give to people in need (<https://willingdon.org/volunteer/mission-circle>). I was told of a woman in her 90s who is unable to leave her home, but that didn't stop her. She made 200 bags for the Mission Circle!

Provide hospitality. We had 1,284 first-time visitors last year! And that's only the ones who made themselves known to our First Impressions Ministries. I'm 100% sure we had way more. Being welcoming could be as easy as helping someone who looks lost. Every few weeks, I tell someone where the washrooms or sanctuary are. Play a part in turning newcomers into members by volunteering with our First Impressions Ministries: <https://willingdon.org/first-impressions-volunteer/>.

Our church family includes 12 language groups, literally people from all over the world. That includes many new immigrants who are struggling to adapt to a new culture, language, and way of life. Help them feel welcome in their new home (<https://willingdon.org/ilm/>).

Provide care. People are hurt and suffering. They need love.

One of the best ways to care for people is to direct them to God, and prayer is key. We have a prayer center with volunteers every Sunday and a prayer team that reaches out to pray for those who submit prayer requests (<https://willingdon.org/prayer/>). We also go out to visit and care for people outside of our church, including people who are bedridden or ill (<https://willingdon.org/visitation>).

Something I appreciate about our mission trips is that we don't just come up with ways to serve. We have long-term missionaries all over the world, and they tell us what kind of support they need. Being on the mission field can be lonely and difficult, so sending out teams to support them is a way to care (<https://willingdon.org/events/stm2025/>).

I can't list everything, so please take a look at some opportunities we have: both at our church (<https://willingdon.org/ministries/#volunteer>) and in the community (<https://willingdon.org/local-outreach>).

11. How can we warn the goats in our church?

The goats didn't belong to the king, but they thought they did. That's a frightening thought. In our church of thousands, there are many in that state. They *think* they're headed to eternal life because they come every Sunday, they're part of a Life Group, or they regularly read their Bibles. But they aren't saved and are headed to eternal punishment because they haven't given their lives to Jesus.

Ask them what they believe. Don't interrogate them. "Share the Gospel in 30 seconds!" "Do you believe in Jesus? ... LIAR!" Share testimonies and ask them to share theirs.

Talk about the Gospel. Study *What is the Gospel* by Greg Gilbert. Tie sermons and life events to Jesus' work. Keep bringing up the Gospel.

Demonstrate Jesus' love. Don't just talk about it; live it out. Sheep love the least of these. Go out and serve and love because Jesus served and loved you.

Pray for God's work. Unless you're a wizard able to cast a 4th level transmutation spell, you can't polymorph a goat into a sheep. You also can't argue someone into realizing their sin and believing in Jesus. Goats are only born again by God's Holy Spirit (John 3:5-8).