

“Ministering Mightily”

Background Scripture: Matthew 25 **Devotional Reading:** Matthew 25:14-15, 19-30

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.”

LESSON AIMS

- **Learning Fact:** To summarize Jesus’ description of what will happen at the judgment of the nations.
- **Biblical Principle:** To know that when we serve anyone in need, we are serving Jesus.
- **Daily Application:** To daily serve Jesus by responding to the needs of others around us.

INTRODUCTION

Not for the World

A businessman traveled to India to represent his company at an important meeting. After the day’s sessions ended, the man walked through a part of the city where people with leprosy were being

cared for. He watched as a woman tenderly washed the feet of an older man with leprosy. The businessman watched for a moment, shook his head, and then said, with disdain, “Miss, I wouldn’t do that for the world.” Without looking up, the woman replied, “Mister, for the world, I wouldn’t do it either, not everyone is need.”

To minister to others in Jesus’ name often means going where most others would not. Those who do so may wonder at times whether their efforts are significant. The lesson reveals the answer.

LESSON CONTEXT

The setting of the lesson is during a busy day of teaching during the final week of Jesus’ earthly ministry. As part of His “Olivet Discourse” of Matthew 24:3–25:46, Jesus concluded His prophetic discourse.

The Olivet Discourse was set in motion when the disciples asked Jesus about the sign of His coming and of the end of the world (Matthew 24:3). Jesus began His reply by warning against deceptive signs and predictions of persecution (24:4–26). Then, He shifted to specifying genuine signs (24:27–35). This was followed immediately by a lengthy challenge to be ready to expect the unexpected (24:36–51). Jesus went on to illustrate with two parables all that He had been saying: the parable of the 10 virgins (Matthew 25:1–13) and the parable of the talents (25:14–30).

This chapter closes with today’s lesson (Matthew 25:31–46), a dramatic picture of Jesus’ judgment of the nations. It is a comparison of a shepherd’s separation of “sheep” from “goats.” To avoid confusion, the judgment here takes place before the kingdom is established on earth (the 1,000-year reign of Christ), for the saved are told to “take your inheritance” (Matt. 25:34). The White Throne Judgment will take place after the 1,000-year reign of Christ (Rev. 20:7).

There is another error we must avoid in today’s lesson. We must not force this passage to teach salvation by good works. A superficial reading would give the impression that helping one’s neighbor is sufficient to earn salvation and go to heaven. But this is not the message of this passage. Nobody at any time in the history of the world was ever saved by good works.

The Old Testament saints were saved by faith (Heb. 11); the New Testament saints were saved by faith in Jesus Christ (Eph. 2:8–10). People today are saved the same way. The gospel of “do good” is not a scriptural message. It is right for believers to do good (Gal. 6:10; Heb. 13:16), but this is not the way unbelievers can be saved.

The Judge: Matthew 25:31–33

With the declaration in Matthew 25:31, Jesus was still answering the disciples’ question in Matthew 24:3: “What will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?” Jesus uses the word *when* which reinforces the certainty of His return (compare Matthew 16:27). However, no one except God the Father knew the specific day of Jesus’ return (24:36). But when that day does come, it will be anything but ordinary. Jesus shall come in His own glory and be seated upon a glorious *throne* as Mediator accompanied by not only *all the holy angels* but also by “his saints”—godly people who were Raptured prior to this event (1 Thessalonians 3:13; Jude 14). The *nations* (v. 32 of today’s lesson) are those people living through the Tribulation on earth at the time of Christ return. This is a judgment of separation: *sheep* on His right ...*goats on his left*. To be at a ruler’s *right hand* was to be

in the place of approval and acceptance (compare Psalm 110:1 [quoted in Hebrews 1:13]; Acts 7:55–56). It is in this prominent position that the sheep are placed.

1. What did Jesus say would happen at His return? (Matthew 25:31-33)

The Sheep, Goats, and Brothers and Sisters: Matthew 25:34–40

If we keep in mind the three groups in the account, it will help us to understand who Jesus is talking about: There were *sheep*, *goats*, and *brothers and sisters*. Who are these people that the *King* dares to call “brothers and sisters of mine” (v. 40)? It seems likely that they are the believing Jews from the Tribulation period. These are people who will hear the message of the 144,000 and trust Jesus Christ. Since these believing Jews will not receive the “mark of the beast” (Rev. 13:16-17), they will be unable to buy or sell. How, then, can they survive? Through the loving care of the Gentiles who have trusted Christ and who care for His brethren.

The interesting thing about this judgment is that the sheep individuals are surprised at what they hear. They will not remember having seen the Lord Jesus Christ and ministering to His needs. But just as they lovingly ministered to the believing Jews, they did it to Christ. Their motive was not reward, but sacrificial love. In fact, these Gentiles took their own lives in their hands when they welcomed the homeless Jews and cared for them. “Anyone who welcomes you welcomes me,” Jesus said to His disciples (Matt. 10:40); and surely this would also apply to His brethren.

The individuals designated goats were judged because they did not trust Jesus Christ and give evidence of that faith by caring for His brethren. They apparently received the mark of the beast and took care of themselves and their own, but they had no time for the Jewish remnant that was suffering on earth (Rev. 12:17). There are sins of omission as well as sins of commission (James 4:17). Not doing good is the moral equivalent of doing evil.

2. What will be Jesus’ pronouncement for the sheep on His right hand? (Matthew 25:34-40)

What Do You Think?

How might our faith today be strengthened if we think of our ministry to others as being directed to Jesus himself?

Digging Deeper

What are some “roadblocks” that prevent you from ministering to others, and how will you address these things?

The Rejection: Matthew 25:41–46

Next, Jesus will address the goats, those on His *left*. Note how the command to this group is exactly the opposite of that given to the group on Jesus’ right. The sheep will be invited to “come”; the goats

will be ordered to *depart*. The sheep will be called “blessed”; the goats will be called *cursed*. One group will inherit a kingdom; the other will be sent *into everlasting fire*.

Unlike the sheep, the goats won’t be sent to a place that has been prepared just for them. Instead, the goats are to be sent to the place *prepared for the devil and his angels* (compare Revelation 20:10, 14–15; 21:8).

3. What order will be given to the goats on Jesus’ left? (Matthew 25:41)

King Jesus will confront the goats with the fact of having faced the same groups in need that the sheep faced. But whereas the sheep are pictured as having helped people in need, the goats chose to ignore those people. It is rather sobering to consider that the goats are not accused of doing anything evil—like murder, adultery, or theft. Rather, they are condemned for doing nothing. They had opportunities to meet needs, just as the sheep had. But the goats chose to look the other way. Again, sins of commission and sins of omission can both be sins (James 4:17)!

4. How were the goat’s actions compared to those of the sheep? (Matthew 25:42–43)

The goats will react with the same surprise that the sheep exhibited. The sheep will be astonished to be considered as having helped Jesus when they helped those in need; the goats no doubt will reason that had they realized the danger of their lack of action, they would have been more than eager to help. However, such logic is flawed, as it is circular. The goats will have no excuse (compare 1 John 3:17).

The failure of the goats to address the needs of others is a failure to serve Jesus as we read in James 4:17. This is an image reversed from that of the sheep.

5. What will be the reaction exhibited by the goats? (Matthew 25:44–45)

It is virtually impossible to imagine a greater contrast between *the eternal punishment that awaits the goats and the eternal life* that awaits the sheep (Galatians 6:8–10). The goats’ endless punishment will be where “the fire is not quenched” (Mark 9:48, quoting Isaiah 66:24). Hell is a place of unspeakable torment.

In contrast, eternal life awaits those numbered among the sheep (compare and contrast Daniel 12:2; John 5:29). Nothing is said in the passage about this life other than it is eternal. But other portions of Scripture provide insights concerning it. The book of Revelation describes a heavenly city, eternally bright, inhabited by only the redeemed. It is a place where “the old order of things has passed away” (Revelation 21:4)—everything associated with a sin-cursed, broken world. God will be with His people, and they will be with Him—forever.

6. What eternal verdict awaits the goats and sheep? (Matthew 25:46)

What Do You Think?

How would you respond to the claim that a loving God would not allow a person to experience everlasting punishment?

Digging Deeper

What Scriptures come to mind supporting your answer?

POINTS TO PONDER

In the passage, Jesus holds three positions: the *king* on His glorious throne (Matthew 25:31, 34), a *shepherd* dividing sheep from goats, and the *judge* determining the eternal destinies of those gathered before Him. We must keep in mind the unique way Jesus exercised each of these roles. He is no ordinary king, shepherd, or judge. Jesus is righteous in all that He does!

Jesus also makes it clear in the passage that whenever we serve anyone in need, we are serving Him. Christians often see themselves as being the hands, feet, and voice of Jesus to other people, and rightly so. But Jesus is also seen in the needs of others around us. Do you have eyes to “see Him” in such situations?

PRAYER

Heavenly Father, there is so much brokenness and need in our world. Refresh and revive us when we feel overwhelmed. Help us not to become callous or indifferent to the hurting people around us. Clear up our spiritual vision so that we see not only others through the eyes of Jesus but also ourselves serving Jesus as we respond to needs. May we never forget that faith without works is still dead. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER

Be there for Jesus.

ANTICIPATING THE NEXT LESSON

Next week’s lesson is “**A Kingdom of Priests, A Holy Nation**” and summarizes God’s expectations as expressed through Moses regarding the responsibilities that fall upon people whom God chooses and redeems. Study Exodus 19.