

Separate Ways

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[0 : 00] When the Son of Man comes in his glory and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him he will be gathered in all nations, and he will separate people from one another as a shepherd separates his sheep from the goats.

He will place his sheep on the right, but the goats on the left. Then the king will say to those on the right, Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.

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. I was naked, and you clothed me. I was sick, and you visited me. I was in prison, and you came to me.

Then the righteous will answer him, saying, Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see his train and drink welcome you, or naked and clothe you? When did you see you sick or in prison and visit you?

Then the king will answer them, Truly I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these brothers, you did it to me. Then you will say to those on the left, Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire, prepared for the devil and his angels.

[1 : 06] For I was hungry, and you gave me food. Then I was thirsty, and you gave me no drink. 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. 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?

Then he will answer them, saying, Truly I say to you, as you did not do to one of the least of these, you did not do to me. And these will go away into eternal punishment, but they are just into eternal life.

Thank you. You can open your Bible to Matthew chapter 25, and we'll be starting in verse 31 today. Matthew 25 and verse 31.

Should we pray together? Good Father, we are grateful to be here. We're grateful to have your word. We're grateful to be among brothers and sisters, friends who love us and care for us.

Would you please help us as we turn our attention to the preaching of your word? Would you please help us to be focused on those things that you want to say to us this morning, and not on those things that perhaps we carried into this worship gathering this morning.

[2 : 29] We all have them. We all have things that are on our minds, things that are weighing us down, things that are important to us, things that matter. We would ask that during this time of worship, as we are together this morning, singing, sitting under the preaching of your word, spending time listening to what you have to say to us, celebrating the Lord's Supper together, fellowshiping with one another, that we could be present, that we could be in tune with what you are saying, that we could be focused and centered on you and what you have done, and that we could trust you to give us grace for the things that are awaiting us when we leave this time of worship together.

We ask that you would do this. For your glory and our good, we confess that we need you. We ask that your will would be done, as we have already sang together.

It is in Jesus' name that we pray. Amen. Amen. Sometimes, we all start out in one big crowd, and then for one reason or another, we go separate ways.

I noticed this this week. Lois and I went on a date to the Red Hawks game, and as we were coming up to the stairs with a group of people, the signs at the bottom of the stairs directed some people to go to the right, if you had a ticket, and some people to the left, if you needed to purchase a ticket.

There was a separation. A similar separation happens when you board an airplane. Everybody's all together at the gate, right? And then that announcement comes.

[4 : 28] If you're first class, or diamond elite, or a military, or a veteran, or whatever, you get to go in first, and there's a separation that occurs.

Some make their way into the plane, and then the rest of us are hanging around, waiting for our turn outside. Maybe you could think about the end of a school day.

At first, everyone is together, gathered around in all the hallways, and there's lots of hustle and bustle and things that are happening there. And then there's a separation that occurs. Some people go out this way to go and get on the bus.

Some people go out that way to go and get picked up. Maybe some people go and ride their bikes or walk home. This happens with laundry, too.

All of the clothes, the dirty clothes, are gathered together in front of the wash machine. And then there's a separation that occurs. This goes into this load, that goes into that load.

[5 : 30] And at the end of the washing and drying cycle, there's another separation, isn't it? These are dad's clothes. These are mom's clothes. These are my clothes.

And everything gets separated again. Maybe you're cleaning your room. And all of your stuff is scrambled on the floor of your room.

And it's just a big mess. And then, little by little, you begin to pick things up. The books go on the shelf, right? The Legos go in this bin. The dress-up clothes go in to that basket.

And the books go on the shelf. In today's parable, Jesus describes people going separate ways. But it is not based on having an upgraded ticket. It is not based on whether you've purchased your ticket before you arrive at the stadium or whether you need to go to the box office.

[6 : 31] It's not about how you get home from school. It's not even about whether you've ever ruined a shirt by washing it with the wrong load of laundry.

The separation that Jesus describes is based on something that is so surprising and so countercultural that I suspect when those first hearers heard Jesus tell this parable, they must have gasped.

And if we have ears to hear, I wonder if this parable might surprise us as well. Listen to the words of Jesus beginning at verse 31 of Matthew 25.

And when the Son of Man comes in His glory and all the angels with Him, then He will sit on His glorious throne.

Before Him will be gathered all the nations and He will separate people from one another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.

[7 : 54] And He will place the sheep on His right but the goats on the left. Now, when Jesus introduces this parable and He says, He is not just picking some random title.

He is reaching back and grabbing hold of a very well-known Old Testament vision and He is activating it in the minds, in the imaginations of His hearers.

Listen to these words from Daniel chapter 7 and verse 13 because we need to get this in our minds because they would have immediately understood what He was saying.

Here's Daniel 7 verse 13. I saw in the night visions and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man and He came to the ancient of days and was presented before Him and to Him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve Him.

His dominion is an everlasting kingdom which shall not pass away and His kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.

[9 : 22] This is what Jesus activates in the imaginations of His hearers. This scene from the book of Daniel, the Son of Man coming in His glory.

Who is this Son of Man? Well, this is Jesus. He's telling the story about Himself.

He's coming in His glory. He is surrounded by angels. He is seated on a glorious throne and before Him, in front of Him, a huge crowd has been summoned.

All nations. All people. No one is missing. And then comes the moment of separation.

Like one baseball fan goes into the stadium while the other goes and waits in line at the box office. Like whites go into one laundry load and darks go into another laundry load.

[10 : 34] Like a shepherd knows the difference between sheep and goats and sheep go to one side and goats go to the other side. Jesus separates humanity into two groups.

Notice as He continues speaking how Jesus subtly but clearly signals His authority. Notice what He does. He changes His title. Look at verse 34.

See if you spot it. Then the King 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.

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. I was naked and you clothed me.

I was sick and you visited me. I was in prison and you came to me. Then the righteous will answer Him saying Lord when did we see you hungry and feed you or thirsty and give you drink?

[12:02] And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you? 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.

I'm fascinated that this first group of people is surprised. They are not surprised by being welcomed into the kingdom.

They're surprised about why they're welcomed into the kingdom. They seem bewildered that the kindness that they showed to people counts as kindness towards Jesus Himself.

You can hear it in their question. Lord when When? When? When? When did we see you hungry or thirsty or lonely or needy?

And the King answers As you did it to one of the least of these you did it to me.

[13:38] God measures your love for Him by your kindness to people.

One group is welcomed into the kingdom. What about the other group? Verse 41 Then He will say to those on His left Depart from me You cursed into the fire the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels For I was hungry and you gave me no food I was thirsty and you gave me no drink 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 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 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 Why is this second group rejected?

It is not because they held incorrect beliefs it is not because they went to the wrong church It's not because they committed worse sins than the people in the first group They are not rejected because of what they did at all They are rejected because of what they did not do They saw people in need and they did not help them They ignored hungry thirsty lonely needy people and Jesus counts their failure to serve those in need as a failure to serve Him This is astonishing to me notice as you read through it this second group seems completely oblivious to the peril that they are in They skip right past the sentence that Jesus has pronounced over them and they question whether he has the evidence to back up such a verdict Lord when when when did we see you hungry hungry or thirsty or lonely or needy we don't remember seeing you and the king answers them as you did not do it to one of the least of these you did not do it to me God measures your love for him by your kindness to people the first group is welcomed with the word come but the second is banished with the word depart the first group is blessed by the father the second is called cursed the first inherits the kingdom the second faces a judgment of eternal fire verse 46 and these will go away into eternal punishment but the righteous into eternal life at a baseball game whether you brought your ticket with you or whether you have to purchase one at the box office eventually everyone ends up watching the game on a plane whether you board first or whether you have to squeeze into the back row and kind of make your way all the way to the back of the plane and find your seat back there everyone arrives at the same destination even laundry that is separated for the purpose of washing and drying and being put away eventually ends up where dirty again in front of the wash machine all in one big jumbled pile but the separation that

[19:08] Jesus describes here is different it's permanent there are no second chances there are no do overs there are only two groups and these two groups go their separate ways one is welcomed into eternal life and the other is sentenced to eternal punishment God measures your love for him by your kindness to people now if you were a faithful Jew hearing Jesus deliver this parable I don't imagine that you would be surprised by the idea of a final judgment the Jews expected to be judged and they understood that there were two standards for that judgment first if you kept the law if you obeyed its regulations if you followed the

Ten Commandments then you would feel pretty secure about this judgment but there's a second standard if you were a Jew you expected preferential treatment you would assume that God would judge all of the nations with one standard and the Jews God's people with a different standard but now the Jews listening to Jesus tell this parable they are confronted with this shocking new reality there's one crowd of people and they are all judged by the same standard a single standard for all people your eternal destiny depends on how you respond to the needs of others if you have spent time in the evangelical church then

I suspect that you also carry some assumptions about the judgment into this parable beginning in the mid 1960s so for those of you who were born with a 2000 in your birth date this is only about 70 years ago but I know when I say 1960s that sounds like it was hundreds of years ago it was not 70 or so years ago since then Christians have been trained to ask a question like this if you were to die tonight and stand before God and he were to ask you why should I let you into my heaven what would you say to him have you heard that question or something like it I am sure that those who developed this evangelistic technique had good intentions but this approach frames salvation as depending on your ability to correctly answer

God's question when Jesus describes the judgment did you hear anyone get asked why should I let you in without any question without any investigation at all Jesus the son of man the judge the king he separates people into two groups this judgment is not an interrogation it's a revelation your eternal destiny depends on how you respond to the needs of others now you say hold on there whoa there preacher hold on for just a minute pump the brakes a little bit are you saying that salvation can be earned by good works because it starts to sound like that's exactly what you're saying can

I really secure my eternal destiny just by being a very kind person and the answer to that question of course is no no we are saved by grace alone through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone we have to remember this parables are not intended to be full systems of theology in fact it's probably not wise at all to form a lot of doctrinal positions based on the parables we will interpret them correctly only when we stay within the story if we choose to press the metaphor too far we will take it beyond Jesus intent notice in this parable there is no tally of good deeds no weighing of bad against your good deeds the issue is not how much you've done as though you could earn it the issue is what type of person are you salvation cannot be earned by kindness but salvation always results in kindness you cannot truly receive

[25 : 27] God's love without giving God's love to others you cannot claim the name of Jesus without also moving towards those in need with the compassion and mercy of Jesus if you are not yet a follower of Jesus or if you are not sure whether you are a Christian please talk to me or someone that you trust today would you do that if you're not sure if you're a Christian I hope that this story shakes you up a little bit if you're not sure whether you believe in Jesus this parable should be like a warning to you there are two groups of people and you will face a judgment there are only two destinations and you will certainly arrive in one of them don't wait come to

Jesus today receive God's mercy and grace today believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved kids young people if you are a Christian if you have been born again if you're a follower of Jesus don't just say I love Jesus don't just say I know a whole bunch of things about Jesus show it share your snack say hi first sit with someone who looks lonely reach out to those who seem to need a friend these are simple ways that you can show kindness to those around you sisters and brothers I am struck by the question in this parable when did we see you when did we see you I wonder if this uncovers our selfish motives if I knew that person was you I would have treated them differently I would have treated you better if I had only known it was you the kindness that Jesus describes has no hidden agenda no self serving motive it springs from knowing him becoming like him and doing the things that he did love for Jesus always shows up as love for others and hear this please

Jesus is closer than you think you will find him in your stressed out co-worker you'll find him in the friend who's wrestling with addiction you'll find him in the couple whose marriage seems to be on the rocks you'll find him in the neighbor who is lonely you will find Jesus in your exhausted spouse you will even find him in the kids who keep making more dirty laundry you will find him in the widow who is grieving in the immigrant who is disoriented in the one fighting depression who is not even able today to make eye contact with you but needs the love and the kindness and the grace of

Jesus to flow from you to someone else I love that Jesus doesn't expect great newsworthy accomplishments he calls us just a simple kindness to those in need serving them is serving him caring for them is caring for him giving to them is giving to him loving them is loving him maybe you squirm at the thought of judgment being based on what you did not do I feel that that feels squirm worthy this parable is not meant to make us comfortable it's meant to move us towards real faith authentic faith and a real relationship with

[31 : 06] God that changes your life parables after all are the stories that Jesus told to make people think they challenge they challenge our assumptions!

They shake up our expectations they press us to consider what do I really believe about God and his kingdom and his call on my life!

So let's see Jesus in the least of these in the people that we encounter every single day let's treat acts of kindness not as burdensome duties but as joyful overflows of God's love mercy and grace that are being poured abundantly into your life let's embrace this truth God measures my love for him by my kindness to people let anyone who has ears to hear listen let's pray