

## The End-Time Life, Part 2: The Orthodox Life

Last Sun. of Church Year – 11/26/23 – Mt. Calvary Luth.  
Text: Matthew 25:31-46 Pastor Keith Besel

v. 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.’”**

### **Introduction**

✘ I want to ask that you trust me here at the beginning as I ask you to close your eyes just for a few minutes and use your imagination to see a picture.

→ Imagine, if you can, a world in which people actually do what Jesus teaches us to do in our Gospel Reading here this morning. “I was hungry and you gave Me food” (v.35). Can you see a world in which right-wing, flag-waving, ultra-nationalists provide food and drink to illegal aliens as they sneak across the border into this country?

→ “I was sick and you visited Me” (v.36). Can you see a world in which radical LGBTQ+ activists visit social conservatives who reject same-sex marriage in the hospital; actually caring for them when they are ill and in pain?

→ “I was in prison and you came to Me” (v.36). Can you imagine a world in which true-blue, gun-toting, passionate law-and-order types leave their weapons at home and go into jails to encourage and help those convicted “law-breakers” imprisoned there?

✘ If you can, then your imagination is better than mine. For what you are seeing there in your imagination right now is a place that does not exist in this world. (You can open your eyes now.)

→ In fact what I just asked you to imagine is a world that fits with an interpretation of today’s text that has only actually existed for the last 100 years or so. It’s what faithful theologians today call the “Social-Ministry Interpretation” of Jesus’ words. It imagines Jesus urging us to live in a kind of social utopia where everyone loves everyone else; where there is no sin or selfishness and all people – regardless of what they believe about Jesus and salvation, end up in heaven eventually.

→ But this is not what the orthodox Christian church has believed or taught for the last 2000 years since Jesus gave us this teaching here in Matthew, chapter 25.

### **I. The “Orthodox” Teaching**

✘ Yes, I used the word “orthodox” to describe the true Christian Church and her people. I know that we’re probably all more familiar with that word being used as the name of an actual branch of the Church – like the Eastern Orthodox or Russian Orthodox or Greek Orthodox churches.

→ But the term itself is not a name. It is actually the combination of two Greek words; “orthos”, which means “true, right, or straight” and “doxa”, which means “way, opinion or praise”. So something that is “orthodox” is that which is regarded as being the “true way” or the “right opinion” or “true praise” of what God has always intended and taught it to be.

✘ So the “orthodox” teaching and understanding of this text before us today is not the “Social-Ministry Interpretation” that many of us have likely heard and possibly even understood up to this day. Though Jesus and the Bible do absolutely teach that we Christians are to “love our enemies” (Mat. 5:44) and help and care for all people who are in need (Lk. 10:27-37) no matter their beliefs; no matter their ethnicity or political persuasion, that is not Jesus’ intended purpose for the teaching He has for us in this text today.

→ This particular text concludes Jesus’ specific teaching about His promised return; also known as The Last Day or Judgment Day. He starts out in verse 31, “When the Son of Man comes in

His glory, and all the angels with Him, then He will sit on His glorious throne.” That means that the illustrations Jesus uses about the sheep and the goats; about giving or not giving food and drink and clothing and care to the hungry, thirsty, naked and sick, etc. – all of this is a part of the lesson Jesus wants us to learn and apply into our current lives in an “orthodox” manner; that is, according to His intention and truth.

- ✘ So the challenge for our 21<sup>st</sup> century minds is to put aside the agendas that we have heard over the last 100 years that have taken over this text; that have so pervasively tried to tell us that what makes a person a sheep or a goat on The Last Day is all about whether or not we’ve done enough social and charitable giving and service to get our way into heaven. Instead we must look more directly at the text of God’s Word to actually hear what He wants us to learn about Jesus’ coming; about our place in the events of that Day of Judgment and about our lives today as The Last Day approaches.

## II. When the Son of Man Comes

- ✘ So, what does Jesus say here about The Day when He comes “in His glory” with “all the angels” to “sit on His glorious throne” (v.31)? To begin with it says that He is “coming” to us here on earth. The final Judgment is going to take place here, where the bodies of “all the nations” will be raised from death, reunited with their souls and according to verse 32 “be gathered” by Him before His throne.

→ Earlier in Matthew 19:28, Jesus gave this promise to Peter and His 12 Disciples, “Truly, I say to you, in the new world, when the Son of Man will sit on His glorious throne (same throne), you who have followed Me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.” This will be an important point to remember in just a bit.

- ✘ But first Jesus says that the results of His judgement that day will be that all of mankind will be separated into two different groups.

→ On His right side will be “the sheep” who are also identified in verse 37 as “the righteous”. It’s important to note that each sheep’s state of being “righteous” came about before they were doing the acts of charity and care that are a part of the “orthodox” or “right way” of living that Jesus applauds in this text. Paul teaches us in Ephesians 2:8-10 that we Christians are justified and proclaimed to be “right with God” by grace alone, through faith alone in Jesus’ saving work – “not a result of works, so that no one may boast”. In fact, Ephesians 2:10 is clear that “we are...created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.”

→ See how that fits with the declaration that Jesus, the King says to those on His right in verse 34? “Come, you who are blessed by My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.” You see, to be “righteous”; to be “blessed by the Father”; to “inherit the reign (of Christ)” today and on Judgment Day has all been God’s plan and intention for the people of His Creation even before He founded and created this world.

- ✘ He knew we would all sin and undo His perfect desire, but He had a plan to deal with that. And that plan is about His Son Jesus who is “the way, the truth, and the life” (Jn. 14:6). He is the only orthodox or “true way” back to the Father.

→ Since Jesus came in human flesh, sacrificed that flesh on the cross in payment for the guilt of all human sin, and then conquered sin’s penalty of death by rising back to life for our salvation and eternal inheritance with Jesus as our King, then it is only those who receive this inheritance and saving work in faith that are deemed “righteous”; that are ready for “eternal life” (v.46) in heaven.

✘ But as Jesus says, not every resurrected body and soul ends up on His right, for there are those who He identifies in His illustration as “goats” whom He places on His left. In verse 41 Jesus’ judgment for them is this: “Depart from Me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.” This is clearly not a place where anyone in their “right mind” would ever want to be.

→ In verse 46, Jesus says, “these will go away into eternal punishment”, which shows us that this is not just some random judgment Jesus makes on whim. These souls have clearly done something dramatically wrong; something so grievous that even Jesus’ saving work on the cross cannot cover or undo it!

### III. What Distinguishes Sheep from the Goats?

✘ So what is it that distinguishes the Sheep from the Goats? It’s got to be something more significant than just failing to do charity work like feeding the hungry or helping the sick or visiting those in prison. I mean everyone who has ever lived on this planet has fallen short in the “good works” department, right? That’s the whole point of Jesus’ death and resurrection in our place.

✘ Well, guess what? The orthodox understanding of Jesus’ teaching here in this text is what helps us finally understand this crucially important distinction. And Jesus’ words in verse 40 are the lynch pin to His true meaning.

→ Before that Jesus tells the “righteous” sheep that the reason they are on His right is because “...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 You a stranger and welcome You, or naked and clothe You? And when did we see You sick or in prison and visit You?’” (vv. 35-39).

→ And now here it is literally from the Greek, verse 40: “And the King will answer and say to them, ‘Truly, I say to you, as much as you did [it] for one of these least brothers of Mine, you did it for Me.’”

→ “These least brothers of mine” – who is Jesus pointing to and describing with these words? It’s important to understand that, in Matthew, Jesus only uses the term “brothers” for two very specific groups of people. One is His biological brothers or blood relatives and the other group is specifically His disciples; the ones that He directly called and sent out to the nations as His messengers to proclaim Him as the promised Messiah and Savior of all mankind.

→ Now remember, that Jesus promised “these” same disciples a place on thrones at His side on Judgment Day.

✘ All of this should make it clear that the ones who were being cared for and visited when they were ill or in prison, are not just any general member of the population. Dr. Jeffrey Gibbs, now a retired professor from our seminary in St. Louis, says in his commentary on this text, “Jesus...reminds us that the Good News comes to us through human means, that is, through messengers who are sent to proclaim it. ... God always sent prophets and messengers, apostles and evangelists, pastors and teachers, laymen and laywomen to the world and to His people. This is His way, and it is a gift for which God’s people are thankful. We need those human voices who, because they speak the Word faithfully, become Christ’s own external, certain Word to us” (*Matthew 21:1-28:20*, Jeffrey Gibbs, CPH, © 2018, pg. 1360). This also explains the role of Jesus’ disciples on the Last Day. He wanted them there so He could point to them as the

examples when He said, "...as much as you did [it] for one of these least brothers of Mine, you did it for Me."

→ So Jesus describes the "sheep" on His right as those who received His messengers, yes, even caring for their physical needs and supporting them in Jesus' Gospel work, but far more importantly, the sheep received the message of Jesus Christ in faith. This faith in Jesus as their Savior, this is what makes them "righteous" inheritors of God's gift of eternal life.

→ And the "goats" on Jesus' left, they are the ones who heard the message of Jesus from His proclaimers, and rejected it in unbelief, as well as refusing to support Jesus' proclaimers both in their work and in their various physical needs. Those who reject the message of Jesus, reject Jesus Himself as the Son of God and the Savior of their souls. Therefore they have rejected Jesus' blood on the cross and their sins remain unforgiven.

## **Conclusion**

✘ So what does all of this have to do with you and me here today? Clearly Jesus wants us all, proclaimers and supporters of His Gospel truth, to live and walk in the way of His truth every day; that is the "orthodox" life.

→ Dr. Gibbs describes it like this, "Christians are at all times to remember Christ's messengers of the Gospel and care for them. Whether it is a congregation joyfully shouldering its responsibility to care for its pastor...or...keep an eye out for missionaries or retired church workers in need.... This is not an optional duty for Christians who hear and receive the Good News," he says. "And it is not about the personality or individual giftedness of the messengers. It is about the message that they have brought to us. We care for them because they bring the Word of Christ to us." (ibid. pgs. 1360-61) As Romans 10:17 says, "Faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the Word of Christ."

✘ This is how we sheep live and follow Jesus, who is our "Good Shepherd (that) lays down His life for the sheep" (Jn. 10:11). He's the one who describes His relationship with us in John 10:27-30, "My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand. I and the Father are one."

→ Now that's the very definition of eternal security. We are truly blessed, aren't we? To be Jesus' sheep; made "righteous" by His blood and living the orthodox life. Amen.