

Actions Have Consequences

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24 | Psalm 95:1-7 | Ephesians 1:15-23 | Matthew 25:31-46

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 the throne of his glory. ³² All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, ³³ and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. ³⁴ Then the king will say to those at his right hand, “Come, you that 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 something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶ I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.” ³⁷ Then the righteous will answer him, “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? ³⁸ And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? ³⁹ And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?” ⁴⁰ And the king will answer them, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” ⁴¹ Then he will say to those at his left hand, “You that are accursed, depart from me 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 nothing to drink, ⁴³ I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.” ⁴⁴ Then they also will answer, “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?” ⁴⁵ Then he will answer them, “Truly I tell you, just 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.’

INTRODUCTION

They say in heaven, love comes first.
We’ll make heaven a place on earth.
Ooh, heaven is a place on earth.¹

Those are lyrics from a 1987 song by former Go-Go’s vocalist, Belinda Carlisle. Even though I am eclectic in my musical tastes, as most of you know, my interest in this song is definitely more the lyrics than the music—80s pop music being a normal place to look for theological insight, of course. These lyrics are fascinating to me. Having no confidence in heaven as a distinct place, Carlisle suggests that the advancement of love in the present means we can create heaven here. It’s not an uncommon thought. In the late modern world, belief in a real heaven and a real hell, a real physical afterlife apart from this world, has fallen out of fashion. As I studied for our workshop on Christian death a couple weeks ago, it became clear to me that even post-Enlightenment Christianity is embarrassed to speak of heaven and hell as anything other than philosophical ideas—wincing at the notion of Puritanical sermons on fire and brimstone. Like the poet William Blake, in his *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, they are two sides of the same coin, joined together, and only relevant in the abstract.²

¹ Belinda Carlisle, “Heaven Is a Place on Earth,” from *Heaven on Earth*, 1987.

² A worthy response to Blake’s proposal is found in C.S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce*, 1945.

But that's not quite what Jesus is suggesting in our Gospel reading. Indeed, for Jesus, heaven and hell are real places, real states of being, and really quite relevant to us. And here's his point: What you do while waiting for eternity, is a pretty good indicator of where you will spend eternity. Or to put it more succinctly, present actions have eternal consequences. To see this, we will need to consider the picture of Jesus as judge found in our text as well as what it means to live in a righteous way in the present. But it all comes back to this: what we do while waiting for eternity, is a good indicator of where we will spend eternity. So, let's take a look.

1. THE ROYAL JUDGE

The entire text before us is a relatively short discourse from Jesus, unpacking the *Parable of the Talents* that precedes it (and which we heard last week).³ In it, Jesus first answers the question of who judges, unapologetically claiming to be the Son of Man, the king, commanding armies of angels, gloriously enthroned in heaven above. This is Christ Jesus the victor, the Christ we celebrate today, the Feast of Christ the King. And with that rule, he executes judgment. The nations appear before him, and yet, he separates individual people—notice the language there, “*one from another*”—one-by-one, he assesses and separates people. The picture is that of the final judgment, when the Son of Man brings about the end of time as we know it, determining where each person will spend eternity.

And there are just two options. The first is what we often call heaven, here described as inheriting the kingdom in a state of blessedness, or simply as “*eternal life*” in the last verse.⁴ The other is what we call hell, as state of cursedness, “*eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels*” or darkness and “*eternal punishment*.”⁵ These two pictures are completely consistent throughout the Bible, though pictures. Whether we talk about *Sheol* as the dark place apart from God's presence or the lake of fire (not unlike the waiting room at the MA35), it is a real place of eternal torment for those who are cursed, who fall outside of the grace of God.⁶ The bible never treats it as something merely abstract. Likewise, the righteous inherit a kingdom made up of a new creation, a new earth, a house prepared by God.⁷ Likewise, the bible never treats this eternal paradise as merely abstract. Heaven and hell are real and Christ Jesus is the righteous judge who determines who spends eternity where.

2. THE RIGHTEOUS LIFE

This brings us to the second question, on what basis does Jesus judge people? Actions have consequences. And the standard put forth here is righteousness. Twice, those who receive blessing are referred to as the righteous.⁸ And their righteousness is described with six distinct acts of mercy, all to the least of society: offering food, drink, welcome, clothing, care for the sick, and visiting the prisoner. That is, the righteous act righteously, and for this their blessing is secure. But to be clear, this list is illustrative and representative, not exhaustive. Righteousness is far more than these six simple acts. But even more importantly, we must also be clear on the context here, lest you think I am telling you that you can act righteously enough to earn a place in God's favour by doing these six things. ‘But isn't that what the text says? Those who act

³ Matt 25:14-30.

⁴ Matt 25:34, 46.

⁵ Matt 25:41, 46.

⁶ See Job 10:21, for example, or Rev 20:15 or Rev 21:8.

⁷ See John 14:1-3 or Rev 21:1-4, 22-27.

⁸ Matt 25:37, 46.

righteously inherit the kingdom and those who neglect to take care of those in need get eternal punishment? Right? Yes. Actions have consequences. 'But doesn't this conflict with our Protestant theology of grace and faith?' No. 'Then how then do we sort this out?' Three things we need to keep in mind:

First, the context here is waiting. This entire sermon of Jesus in chapters 24-25 of Matthew, his fifth discourse in the Gospel—the parables we've seen the last couple weeks plus this section—is addressing the question of the end, the final judgment, and particularly what people are to do while waiting for the end. Between the Ascension and the Second Coming (which we will consider during Advent), people are waiting (also not unlike at the MA35). And what are we meant to be doing while we wait? The parable last week showed us that we are to be faithful. "*Well done, good and faithful servant.*"⁹ And what is faithfulness? Jesus explains it here. It is living righteously. In other words, this is not righteousness apart from faithfulness.

Second, faith and righteousness have always gone together. Faith requires righteousness, that is, good works. The Epistle of James lays this out plainly. If you have genuine faith, the kind of faith that means salvation, it will produce good works, such as those depicted here. And in fact, in that section, James cites some of the same behaviour, including feeding and clothing those in need. So certain is this righteous behaviour following genuine faith, that James can describe faith without such works, as *dead faith*.¹⁰ Back in our passage, we should note that the righteous were not surprised to be being blessed and inheriting the kingdom. They were not surprised to be rewarded for acting righteously. They were surprised that acting righteously toward those in need was the same as acting righteously toward the king. Their relationship to the king existed apart from these good deeds. Righteousness followed the relationship.

Third, the language of this section—*blessing, inherit, kingdom*, and especially *righteousness*—should remind us of something. This is all language from the first discourse in Matthew, the Sermon on the Mount.¹¹ There, Jesus lays out a picture, not of how to earn salvation, but of what life in the kingdom, for those who already believe in and follow Christ Jesus, is like. For those who have faith, those who have been saved through grace, they are to live in a particular way. And while the Sermon on the Mount lays it out more exhaustively than this passage, even it is not comprehensive. Living righteously is more than just doing some good sometimes. It is running from sin. It is piety. It is doing good and living wisely. It is striving "*first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.*"¹²

When we take these three points together, it is clear: What we do while waiting for eternity, is a pretty good indicator of where we will spend eternity. Actions have consequences. Heaven is not a place on earth, but a place for those who have faith, the kind of faith that produces righteousness, so much so that Christ can judge on this basis.

CONCLUSION

⁹ Matt 25:23.

¹⁰ Jas 2:14-26.

¹¹ See Matt 5:3-12, 17-20, and 6:1, for example.

¹² Matt 6:33.

And yet, righteousness without such faith, perfect righteousness, is beyond our capability. That's why faith is so important. You and I, apart from faith in Christ, cannot actually behave righteously. Even our good works are tainted by the sin, the evil, the selfish hearts, the opposition to God that plagues us all. The 1662 *Book of Common Prayer* uses vivid imagery to describe this reality: "We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy Table."¹³ Think about it this way: Christ Jesus, the king, did exactly as he described here—he made himself even lower than those in need of food, drink, clothing, care—he was the divine king who denied his own divinity. In the words of Paul in his letter to the Philippian church: "*though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself...*"¹⁴ Only, humanity did not feed him and clothe him and treat him with respect. We failed. We hung him on a cross. The only truly righteous man to live, died for us, that we might have his righteousness through faith. This, by the way, is why he is the king. Having defeated sin and death, he was exalted by God to the eternal throne, so that: "*every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth.*"¹⁵ Ours is simply to believe this, and then to—and don't miss this, it's the point of this passage—live righteously in a way that reflects and honours his sacrifice. Do good works, the result of truly believing in Christ our King, whose death and resurrection gives him the right to judge. He used that right to save us. Actions have consequences.

That's a song worth listening to. Much more than any ridiculous 80s pop song, that's a song worth singing. "They say in heaven, love comes first."¹⁶ Love did come first. He loved us. He saved us. So let us live in a way that honours him, that does bring a taste of the eternal blessing, the kingdom of Christ our King, yes, even what we might call heaven, into our world.

Let me pray. *Heavenly Father, thank you for saving us, that we might walk in the good works you have set before us, that we may enjoy eternity with you, our king. May we grow in our desire to know you, to love what you love, and to live in a way that reflects your glory. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

¹³ Thomas Cranmer, *Book of Common Prayer* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1662), 313.

¹⁴ Phil 2:6-8a.

¹⁵ Phil 2:10.

¹⁶ Belinda Carlisle, "Heaven Is a Place on Earth," from *Heaven on Earth*, 1987.